

Jeffrey A. Schaler, ed.

Peter Singer Under Fire: The Moral Iconoclast Faces His Critics.

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Peter Singer is arguably the world's most influential philosopher. Indeed, he was named by *Time* magazine in 2009 as one of the 100 most influential people in the world, the only philosopher to make the list. Singer's more than forty books include two international best sellers, *Animal Liberation* (1975; 2nd ed. 1990) and *Practical Ethics* (1979; 2nd ed. 1993), which have been translated into twenty languages and taught in hundreds of ethics courses. His work has played an important role in shaping the contemporary animal rights movement, and has prompted thousands of people to become vegetarians or at least 'conscientious omnivores'. Singer's seminal 1972 article 'Famine, Affluence, and Morality', which argued the moral obligation of people who are well off to help those in dire need, has been reprinted more than a hundred times and has probably been read by more students of moral philosophy than any other text, ancient or modern. In addition, he is a leading scholar in the field of bioethics, where probably no one has done more to challenge long-standing views about life and death.

It is therefore no accident that Singer is also one of today's most controversial thinkers. While his views on animals and famine relief have not always been taken seriously, the same is not true of his views on others matters. Singer denies the sanctity of human life, according to which all human beings, whatever the range of their abilities, have a value that no other creatures have, and should thus always be kept alive and (above all) never killed. He holds that human beings without at least some awareness of their own existence, such as most fetuses and some newborns, have no interest in not being killed. Singer thus defends not only abortion, but also the killing of irreversibly comatose patients, and even of infanticide for severely disabled infants, along with suicide and assisted suicide for people who no longer find life worth living. As a result, he has been shouted down in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland (47-51, 398-402), and was the subject of intense debate and protest in the United States over his appointment to a prestigious chair in bioethics at Princeton University's Center for Human Values (61-7). Sylvia Nasar, author of *A Beautiful Mind*, wrote in a column for the *New York Times* that not since 1940, when New York University tried to hire the atheist and sexual libertine Bertrand Russell, has the world witnessed such a furor over an academic appointment. Princeton president Harold Shapiro defended the choice to appoint Singer, but a wide array of organizations denounced him as a 'Nazi', a 'eugenicist' and an 'enemy of the disabled'. As seen by Diane Coleman, the president of Not Dead Yet, 'Peter Singer is attempting to establish a philosophical foundation for denying disabled people equal protection under the law and killing us for his version of the greater good.' Not mincing

words, one disabled rights activist called him simply ‘the most dangerous man in the world’ (220).

Not surprisingly, Singer insists that he is often misread and misunderstood, vehemently rejects any comparisons between his views and those of the Nazis, and declares that his overriding moral concern has always been to reduce needless suffering in the world. So just who is Peter Singer? *Singer Under Fire* is a good place to go for help in answering this question. (Another is Dale Jamieson, ed., *Singer and His Critics*, Oxford: OUP, 1999, especially Singer’s ‘A Response,’ pp. 269-335.) This is the third volume in the ‘Under Fire Series’ published by Open Court under the general editorship of Jeffrey Schaler, a psychologist and professor at American University’s School of Public Affairs in Washington D.C. The volumes follow a common format. Thus, in the case of Singer, readers will find a helpful introduction by the editor, a substantial (74-page) intellectual autobiography, which describes Singer’s philosophical development and how he arrived at his many controversial viewpoints, and fifteen essays on a variety of subjects from prominent critics, with replies from Singer to each of them. ‘The beauty of the format of this series,’ Singer tells us, ‘is that you, the reader, hear from both the author and his critics, and then get to make up your own mind on the issues’ (74). With that, I could not agree more. Singer can sometimes be testy, as when he thinks that he is being intentionally misrepresented or falsely accused of dishonesty—an unflattering comparison with Jack Kevorkian (215) is an example—but usually he is calmly, almost cerebrally reasonable. The volume concludes with a comprehensive (50-page) bibliography of Singer’s writings and an extensive index.

The essays in the book are divided into four sections reflecting the main themes of Singer’s work: ‘The Moral Status of Animals’, ‘The Sanctity of Life’, ‘Global Ethics’, and ‘Ethical Theory’ (73-4). The essays are uneven in quality. The most interesting ones, which prompt the most interesting responses from Singer, are those by 1) Bernard Williams, who challenges Singer’s claim that the preferential treatment of humans involves a ‘speciesism’ that is no more defensible than other prejudices such as racism and sexism; 2) Don Marquis on abortion and infanticide; 3) Judith Lichtenberg on moral motivation and the alleged duty of those in the affluent world to make large sacrifices of time and money to reduce global poverty; 4) Richard Arneson on the stringency of morality’s demands; and 5) Michael Huemer on meta-ethics, that is, on Singer’s conception of the meaning of ethical claims and the grounds of their correctness. The last of these topics brings together many of the concerns expressed in other essays, and poses some of the most difficult philosophical questions for Singer’s position. Thus, in the remainder of this review, I shall briefly comment on Huemer’s essay.

Huemer thinks that Singer’s metaethics is ‘unstable’, perhaps incoherent. How so? Singer is a utilitarian. More precisely, he defends an act version of preference utilitarianism (APU). Act utilitarianism says that the right thing to do on any particular occasion is what will bring about the best overall results, i.e. have the best overall

consequences, for all those individuals likely to be affected (176-83; 192-3). Preference utilitarianism adds that the good results to be maximized are the preferences—desires, wants, interest satisfactions—of the sentient beings affected, with all preferences weighted according to strength (172-6, 190-92, 362). Other features of Singer's meta-ethics are what Huemer calls his 'non-cognitivism' (or, better, his 'non-objectivism'), the view that moral judgments do not make factual claims, but express attitudes or issue imperatives, and his attraction to a Humean view of reasons (359-61). Hume famously argued that 'reason is ever the slave of passion', so that no consideration can function as a reason for action unless it is properly connected to an agent's desires, since all our reasons for action depend on our desires and the desires themselves are neither rational nor irrational (383-6).

Whence arises the instability in this position? To answer this, we must note that Singer's normative conclusions are (as he admits) revisionary and demanding (363-4). According to Singer, many of our commonsense moral beliefs are wrong. We are wrong about our obligations to distant strangers and non-human animals and about the impermissibility of infanticide. However, Huemer claims, Singer's non-cognitivism does not allow for this sort of error, because non-cognitivism does not recognize an objective morality to which common moral beliefs can fail to correspond. Moreover, on the Humean account of the power of reason, trying to live up to Singer's moral demands seems irrational. If reason works only in the service of desire, and is incapable of altering it, how could people ever have reason to make the sacrifices that Singer's demanding moral perspective requires? Singer replies to both criticisms, but not consistently or effectively. In his response to Huemer, he writes that 'if some people prefer to follow my arguments and give almost all of their money to aiding those in great need, there is nothing at all irrational about this.' But, he adds, 'Equally, giving away money to those in great need is not rationally required' (386).

This response is doubly odd. On the one hand, most people do not, in fact, prefer to give away most of their money to charitable causes. Can they be motivated to do so? In some places (360-61, 384-5), Singer seems to think they can, since living by principles of radical impartiality will make us individually happy by giving meaning to our lives—something we presumably desire and already care about. This has the advantage of linking moral motivation to desire and self interest. But given Singer's 'thin' conception of happiness as general contentment, Huemer rightly argues that this route to happiness is hugely implausible. Given the severity of morality's demands, it is a route to frustration, not contentment (368-9). The other side of Singer's reply—that not giving if one can is not irrational—is equally odd, since it seems to imply that living a moral life is rationally optional. So, in other places, Singer has argued that being strictly impartial is a requirement of reason. From the APU standpoint, this involves always putting oneself in the position of everyone, both donor and beneficiary, who is likely to be affected by what one is thinking of doing and of asking, 'What would I prefer (want, desire) in this situation?', and of then acting in accordance with an impartial and equal concern for the

interests of all.

But why should I do that? Of course, if I were starving I would want wealthy people to contribute to famine relief; but if I were not starving and just didn't care about what I would want everyone to do in parallel circumstances, then an appeal to impartiality would have no motivational grip on me. Nor would being told that I'm being unreasonable if I don't adopt an impartial and equal concern for the like interests of all sentient beings. A Humean need not be fazed by this charge. And this seems to be the reason that, in places (e.g., 386-7), Singer doubts that an appeal to reason can serve as a basis for morality, since if someone doesn't care about the interests of others, being told that he has an objective reason to care won't get him to act any differently.

The problem is that this skeptical conclusion is at odds with the arguments of Singer's writings on practical ethics on a wide range of issues. True, he does sometimes work on our feelings (as any reader of his vivid accounts of factory farming knows), but the main thrust of these works is a call to transcend by rational thought the motivational habits of nature and culture, leading to a truer (because more objective) understanding of how we ought to live (because we have good reason to do so). That call rests on the implicit belief that there are moral facts, that reason can help us determine what they are, and that it can motivate us to act in accordance with them. It also rests on the implicit conviction that our motives, as well as our factual beliefs, are subject to rational requirements; in particular, it rests on the conviction that reason can motivate us to refuse to act on certain desires and to change some of the most basic ones. Often this takes the form of an appeal to consistency: it is inconsistent for humans to be very concerned about human pain and very little concerned about similar pain in non-human animals; it is inconsistent to care about the drowning child in front of you but not about the starving child in a distant country; and so on. If, in response to Singer's arguments, someone becomes a vegetarian or a major contributor to UNICEF for reasons of consistency, then her desires, as well as her behavior, have been changed by reasoning. And one has the sense, from reading and listening to him, that Singer is convinced that if enough changes of this sort occurred in individuals, they could transform the world, making it a more just and humane place. This is not a view of the promise of morality or of its pull on us, that sits well with non-cognitivism and a Humean understanding of the power of reason.

Having said that, I nevertheless confess to being a great admirer of Peter Singer. As editor Schaler writes, Singer confronts the big issues that most people think are vital but shy away from (xvii). And he always does so in a way that is clear, honest, and thoughtful. Whether you wind up agreeing with Singer or not, what more could ask of a practical ethicist?

Robert J. Deltete
Seattle University