

# Twenty Questions

PETER SINGER

*Princeton University and Melbourne University*

In the first of this new series for the journal, Peter Singer responds to questions from the editors and Theron Pummer.

---

## HISTORY AND OTHERS

*Compared to most other moral theories, utilitarianism is a fairly simple view that doesn't rely on any particularly complex or elaborate argument. Yet despite being around for a couple of centuries, utilitarianism is only endorsed by a tiny minority, and even this minority arguably fails to fully live up to what utilitarianism requires. At the same time, utilitarianism is rejected by many highly intelligent and sophisticated people who appear to have carefully reflected on its core claims and the arguments in its favour, including various attempts to debunk or discount opposing intuitions. Do these points affect how confident you are about your commitment to utilitarianism? Do you think you will be happy if your version of utilitarianism persuades everyone and no one is left to defend an alternative ethical theory, say in 100 years? Or does the prospect somehow frighten you?*

When you say “utilitarianism is only endorsed by a tiny minority” do you mean a tiny minority of the population as a whole, or a tiny minority of philosophers? If you mean the former, then that is true of any theory—Kantianism, Contractualism, Natural Law Ethics, you name it... most people don't think about ethical theories very much, let alone endorse them. If you mean the latter, then I don't think it's true—utilitarianism may be endorsed only by a minority of philosophers, but it's a sizable minority, and larger in some countries than others. And I don't think any ethical theory commands the support of a majority of philosophers.

Why do many intelligent and sophisticated people reject utilitarianism? Some people give more weight to their intuitions than I do—and less weight to arguments for debunking intuitions. Does that reduce my confidence in utilitarianism? Yes, to some extent, but I still remain reasonably confident that it is the most defensible view of ethics. I don't know if everyone will accept utilitarianism in 100 years, but I don't find the prospect frightening. It would only be frightening if people misapplied it, and I do not assume that they will.

*Who do you think has been the most serious critic of your work? Is there any particular line of criticism to which you think you have been unable to respond?*

There is no single critic to whom I would give that label. Different critics have focused on different aspects of my work. The most devastating criticism I ever received came from Derek Parfit. It was directed at my attempt to defend a solution to Parfit's population problem that did not lead to his famous Repugnant Conclusion. He convinced me that my proposal was indefensible. (See Michael Bayles (ed.), *Ethics and Population* (Schenkman, Cambridge, 1976). On the other hand, I'm still not sure what the right answer to Parfit's population problem is, although I lean towards the Total View, which means I have to swallow the Repugnant Conclusion.

Parfit has also influenced my views on metaethics. For many years I was Humean about practical reason, holding that reason must start from a desire; and I was a non-cognitivist about ethical judgments, holding a view similar to that of R.M.Hare's universal prescriptivism. But I had long felt that Hare's reliance on the meanings of the moral terms was too thin a basis for the views I wanted to defend. Parfit's arguments in *On What Matters* against Hume's view of practical reason helped to persuade me that there are objective normative reasons.

On animals, I've yet to see a plausible defense of speciesism, despite the efforts of Bernard Williams and, more recently, Shelly Kagan. So I regard the case against speciesism as settled. On the other hand, I take seriously critics like Tatjana Visak, who argues, in *Killing Happy Animals*, that I am too permissive regarding the killing of animals who live happy lives and will, if killed, be replaced by other animals who will live equally happy lives.

There have been many critics of my views about euthanasia for severely disabled infants. I had some good discussions with the late Harriet McBryde Johnson, who was not a philosopher but a lawyer who had a rich and full life despite being born

with a very disabling condition. As long as she was alive, when I wrote anything on that topic, I wrote with her potentially critical response in mind.

As far as normative ethical theory is concerned, I don't find criticisms of utilitarianism persuasive, but there remains the question of the kind of utilitarianism that is most defensible. When Katarzyna de Lazari-Radek and I began work on *The Point of View of the Universe* I still considered myself a preference utilitarian, although I already had doubts about it. But de Lazari-Radek's criticism of preference utilitarianism (which drew on her understanding of Sidgwick on this question) and her response to Nozick's experience machine example, was the final push that led me to abandon preference utilitarianism in favour of hedonistic utilitarianism.

*Who do you think was the greatest moral philosopher of the twentieth century, and why?*

Can I rephrase that to "the greatest moral philosopher of the past 100 years"? Then I think the answer is Derek Parfit. I might give the same answer to the question as you originally formulated it, but *On What Matters*, which I think removes any doubt about him being the greatest moral philosopher since Sidgwick, appeared in the 21st century. I should add that I have had the benefit of reading, not only Volumes One and Two of that work, but the forthcoming Volume Three (on metaethics) and several draft chapters, on consequentialism, which I expect will be part of a future Volume Four, and these works reinforce my opinion.

## THEORY

Do you still think that the best argument for utilitarianism is based on the principle of equality understood as equal consideration of interests?

There's more to the argument than that. In *The Point of View of the Universe* we start with Sidgwick's argument for utilitarianism. His principle of universal benevolence is equivalent to the principle of equal consideration of interests, so defending that principle is an important step in the argument, but it is not enough. Sidgwick himself remained deeply troubled by his inability to demonstrate that egoism is irrational. That led him to speak of a "dualism of practical reason"—two opposing viewpoints, utilitarianism and egoism, seemed both to be rational. We use an evolutionary debunking argument to reject egoism, leaving utilitarianism as the sole survivor.

*Do you think it matters, for any practical decision I might face, whether moral judgements can be 'objectively' true?*

I do. You could just say “these are my normative views, and I’m going to treat them as if they were true, without thinking about whether moral judgments really can be objectively true.” If you do that, then in practice your decisions will be the same whether or not moral judgments can be objectively true. But given that I think morality is highly demanding, it becomes easier to say that, since morality is so highly demanding, and there is nothing irrational about not doing what morality demands, I’m not going to bother doing what I know to be right. If there are objective reasons for doing what morality demands, it’s more troubling to go against them.

*Many people object to you by noting utilitarianism implies that sometimes one should perform a morally repugnant act (e.g. torture a child) in order to promote the good. But this same trap (more or less) would “work” on pretty much all contemporary moral philosophers, as there are very few absolutists nowadays. What’s your take on this?*

There are still absolutists. Some are proponents of the “new natural law” tradition, which has its roots in Catholic moral theology, even though it is presented as a secular position. Others are Kantians, many of them outside English-speaking philosophy. In Germany, for example, you would find wide support for the idea that we should not torture a child, even if (as in Dostoevsky’s example in *The Brothers Karamazov*) that would produce peace on earth forever. To me it seems obvious that if by torturing one child you could prevent a vast number of children (and adults) suffering as much or more than the child you have to torture, it would be wrong *not* to torture that child. Our intuitions tell us that to torture a child is always wrong, and because cases in which torturing a child would be right are so extraordinarily improbable, it is good that we have such intuitions. Hare’s two-level view of moral thinking explains this point well.

*Have your views about the role of moral intuitions in ethics changed over the years? You were once famous for rejecting any such role, but in more recent work you defend utilitarianism itself by appeal to (a kind of) intuition, and many arguments supporting utilitarianism appeal to intuitions about the moral irrelevance of e.g. mere*

*distance. And it seems that if we want to fully flesh out a utilitarian theory, there is no way of avoiding appeal to intuitions, including to intuitions about particular cases. For how else could we settle on a specific theory of well-being or address questions about, for example, population ethics or the non-identity problem?*

I haven't changed my views about our everyday moral intuitions. In fact my readiness to reject them has, if anything, increased. It is a mistake to judge normative theories by the extent to which they match our everyday moral judgments. I used to argue against many of our intuitions (for example, the intuition that the killing of a newborn infant is just as wrong as the killing of an older person who wants to go on living) on the grounds that they were based on religious beliefs and specific to Western culture. That's still my view, but during the past twenty years we have learned a lot more from work in moral psychology by Josh Greene and others. We now know that many of our moral intuitions have an evolved biological basis. So even when moral intuitions are universally held, that doesn't show them to be a reliable guide to what we ought to do—a point that Sharon Street has made convincingly.

On the other hand, in *The Point of View of the Universe*, de Lazari-Radek and I follow Sidgwick in arguing that there are some moral truths, or axioms, that we can see, on reflection, to be self-evident. Sidgwick calls these intuitions, and we follow him in that terminology. Perhaps we would have been wiser to use a different term. We are talking about careful, reflective judgments that, we argue, are based on reason, whereas our everyday moral intuitions tend to have an emotional basis. This fits with the fact that it is hard to see how Sidgwick's principle of universal benevolence could be selected for by evolution, except in so far as it came as part of a larger, advantageous package. We suggest that that package is the capacity to reason.

## WELL-BEING, VALUE OF LIFE AND MORAL STATUS

*It appears that you now accept a hedonistic rather than preference-based account of human well-being. What implications does this have for your views on the wrongness of killing persons? Do you think all pleasures are equal? Bentham said the pleasure of playing pushpin (pinball) was the same value as the pleasure of reading poetry, but Mill explicitly divided pleasures into higher and lower pleasures. What is your view? For example, is the pleasure some derive from watching pornogra-*

*phy (assuming no actors are harmed, such as cartoon pornography) the same as the pleasure of watching a beautiful sunset or having achieved one's life work?*

I am currently inclined to accept happiness or pleasure as the ultimate good, rather than preference satisfaction. This eliminates the direct significance of the distinction between persons—defined as self-conscious beings who are aware of their existence over time—and sentient beings who are not persons, but a related distinction may still have indirect weight, because beings who can know that others like them are being killed will then fear that they too may be killed, whereas beings not capable of such knowledge will not.

If your question about whether I think that all pleasures are equal is asking whether I accept something like Mill's distinction between higher and lower pleasures, then the answer is that I do not. In that sense I think that all pleasures are equal. But your account of Bentham's view on the pushpin versus poetry issue needs to be more precisely stated. Pleasures differ, as Bentham pointed out, in intensity, duration, certainty or uncertainty, propinquity or remoteness, fecundity, and purity. What Bentham said is that "quantity of pleasure being equal, pushpin is as good as poetry." Bentham could have defended a taste for poetry on the grounds that, whereas one tires of mere games, the pleasures of a true appreciation of poetry have no limit; thus the quantities of pleasure obtained by poetry are likely to be greater than those obtained by pushpin, and we are right to encourage people to acquire a taste for poetry. The same seems likely to be true for many other examples. Pornography, for instance, is likely to pall and so bring decreasing amounts of pleasure over time, whereas setting oneself the goal of achieving something truly worthwhile seems likely to be increasingly rewarding over time.

## PRACTICE

*Frances Kamm once said (in an interview with Alex Voorhoeve) that utilitarians who believe in very demanding duties to aid and that not aiding is the same as harming, but nevertheless don't live up to these demands, don't really believe their own arguments. She points out that justifying this by claiming that one is weak willed doesn't make sense: it would be very odd to say that one is weak if one saw a drowning child and did nothing. She concludes that 'either something is wrong with that theory, or there is something wrong with its proponents'. What do you*

*think about this argument? Why haven't you given a kidney to someone who needs it now? You have two and you only need one. They have none that are working - it would make a huge difference to their life at very little cost to you.*

The view that I take in *Practical Ethics* and some other writings is not that not aiding is the same as harming in all respects. Especially from the perspective of our attitude to the agent, there are some differences, but the differences are nowhere near as significant as our ordinary moral judgments.

I'm not sure that the cost to me of donating a kidney would be "very little" but I agree that it would harm me much less than it would benefit someone who is on dialysis. I also agree that for that reason my failure to donate a kidney is not ethically defensible. But I don't agree with Frances that this case is parallel to the drowning child case—that is, the case I described in which the rescuer runs no risk at all of serious harm. Donating a kidney does involve a small risk of serious complications. Zell Kravinsky suggests that the risk is 1 in 4000. I don't think I'm weak-willed, but I do give greater weight to my own interests, and to those of my family and others close to me, than I should. Most people do that, in fact they do it to a greater extent than I do (because they do not give as much money to good causes as I do). That fact makes me feel less bad about my failure to give a kidney than I otherwise would. But I know that I am not doing what I ought to do.

*You said in an interview with Andrew Denton that if you and your wife had a child with Down syndrome, you would adopt the baby out. Could you explain the ethics of this and isn't it a selfish decision? Could you elaborate on your views about disability, in particular why you think a life with disability is of less value and what you think the implications of that are?*

I was assuming that there are other couples who are unable to have their own child, and who would be happy to adopt a child with Down syndrome. If that is the situation, I don't see why it is selfish to enable a couple to have a child they want to have, and for my wife and myself to conceive another child, who would be very unlikely to have Down syndrome, and so would give us the child we want to have. For me, the knowledge that my child would not be likely to develop into a person whom I could treat as an equal, in every sense of the word, who would never be able to have children of his or her own, who I could not expect to grow up to be a fully independ-

dent adult, and with whom I could expect to have conversations about only a limited range of topics would greatly reduce my joy in raising my child and watching him or her develop.

“Disability” is a very broad term, and I would not say that, in general, “a life with disability” is of less value than one without disability. Much will depend on the nature of the disability. But let’s turn the question around, and ask why someone would deny that the life of a profoundly intellectually disabled human being is of less value than the life of a normal human being. Most people think that the life of a dog or a pig is of less value than the life of a normal human being. On what basis, then, could they hold that the life of a profoundly intellectually disabled human being with intellectual capacities inferior to those of a dog or a pig is of equal value to the life of a normal human being? This sounds like speciesism to me, and as I said earlier, I have yet to see a plausible defence of speciesism. After looking for more than forty years, I doubt that there is one.

## CONTROVERSY

*You have written and commented on topics that have attracted considerable negative attention (eg bestiality, infanticide), and potentially distract from other things that you are focused on. Do you regret commenting on those topics? Are there topics that philosophers should not tackle?*

With the benefit of hindsight, perhaps it would have been wiser for me not to agree to review *Dearest Pet*. Many people have attacked me because of what I wrote in reviewing it; but it was only a book review, for goodness sake! Anyway, I stand by what I wrote there (which basically just raises the question why it should be a criminal offense to have sexual contact with animals in a way that does not harm them). A psychotherapist who works with people troubled by their sexual feelings for animals told me that he gives my book review to his patients, and some of them find it helpful to see that the topic can be discussed in a calm and rational way. So I’m not even sure that, with hindsight, I regret having written it.

As for the issue of infanticide, anyone thinking hard about what makes killing wrong will need to consider that issue. I’m certainly not the only philosopher to suggest that killing an infant is different, ethically, from killing an older human being who wants to go on living. So I don’t regret discussing that topic either.

I don't put forward provocative views for the sake of doing so. I put them forward where I think they have a basis in sound argument, and where it serves a purpose to have them discussed. I hope that other philosophers will do the same.

## CONTEMPORARY ISSUES

*Do you think drugs should be legalised?*

Yes. Prohibition has not been a success, and the costs of criminalization are huge. We see that cost in the lost lives of people who die from overdoses; we see it in the crimes committed by drug addicts to pay for their drugs; and we see it in the vast amounts of money funneled into organized crime, and in the resulting corruption of police and higher government officials, in some cases going to the very top, in many different countries.

*What is your view on the war on terror? Do you think that Islamic fundamentalism is a grave threat to our society and what do you think we should do about it?*

Any form of religious fundamentalism is a threat to the values I hold, but recently Islamic fundamentalism has posed the greatest danger. I have no expertise on how to combat it, though, so I am not going to comment on that part of the question.

*Do you think it is wrong for individuals in the developed world to have children, when they know that this will make them more partial and contribute less to the overall good?*

No, I don't. I worry that if people who think a lot about others and act altruistically decide not to have children, while those who do not care about others continue to have children, the future isn't going to be good.

*Do you think people who can't bring up their children properly, like drug addicts, should be encouraged not to have children? Should we pay them to take long term contraceptives?*

Some forms of encouragement would be justifiable.

*Do you agree with Richard Dawkins that we would be better off without religion?*

That's such a big counterfactual that it's really hard to answer. Would the violence and cruelty perpetrated in the name of religion continue, but in a different guise? Would Christian concern for the poor (shown by at least some Christians, although of course far from all of them) remain, to be expressed as part of a secular humanitarian ethic? Would there be less superstition and more appreciation of scientific method as the most reliable way of discovering the truth? On balance, I'm inclined to agree with Dawkins on this question, but the nature of the question means that I don't have a great deal of confidence in my answer.

*You have written extensively on our duties to help distant people in extreme poverty, but it seems quite clear to many that, if total utilitarianism (or arguably any view that takes seriously the interests of possible future people) is true, our top priority should be reducing existential risks. Do you agree? If not, why not?*

I certainly think that we should give equal consideration to present and future lives, discounting for uncertainty. But there is a huge amount of uncertainty involved in some of the strategies that have been proposed for reducing the risk of extinction. It's good that some very bright people are working on this issue, trying to reduce that risk as best they can. That's an important thing to do. But if you are suggesting that it should be the top priority of everyone concerned about effective altruism, I think that would be counterproductive. Human helping behaviour tends to be triggered by the needs of specific, identifiable individuals. That makes it hard enough to get most people motivated to give to the most effective charities that are helping people in extreme poverty today, because when you distribute bednets, you can't identify the children who would have contracted malaria and died if you had not done so. If it is hard to motivate people to help others who exist now, it would be much harder still to motivate people to give so that there will be humans living good lives many millennia into the future.

*How should we regulate migration?*

I presume you are referring to the problems posed by large numbers of refugees trying to travel to another country in order to seek asylum. This has become a global

problem and it needs a global solution. On the one hand, the definition of “refugee” in international law is too narrow, because it applies only to someone who has “a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion.” Why do not people who have to leave their country because of drought or famine count equally when it comes to granting asylum? Especially in the light of what we know about climate change, such refugees seem to me to be equally deserving of resettlement. On the other hand, why should we assume that because someone manages to get to a particular country, that country has an obligation to permit them to stay that is more pressing than the obligation the country has to accept refugees who are currently in a refugee camp in a third country? I think the idea that there is a “right of asylum” needs to be reconsidered, and perhaps it should be replaced by an equitable system of obligations on affluent countries to accept their fair share of refugees.

*A recent neuroimaging study of extreme altruists by Marsh et al. reported that the neural anatomy of such altruists is distinctive, and may in fact be the reverse of the brain abnormalities associated with psychopathy. You often argue that utilitarianism, and generally a more inclusive and altruistic morality, is the product of reason. Do such results challenge this assumption?*

Yes, they do, to some extent, but it’s too early to reach any definite conclusion. Marsh et al. studied people who donate kidneys to strangers. They may be different from other altruists who donate large proportions of their income to altruistic causes. I’m not yet ready to give up on the link between altruism, or utilitarianism, and reason.

*What is your position on human bioenhancement, including moral bioenhancement?*

I have some practical concerns: will it work? Will there be unexpected negative side-effects? But suppose that we can put aside those worries and can be highly confident that the proposed bioenhancement will reduce suffering and increase happiness for all affected—then I have no problem with human bioenhancement. Indeed, it would be a very positive thing. As for moral bioenhancement specifically, I doubt that it will happen quickly enough, or spread widely enough, to solve the global moral

problems like climate change that we face right now. But once again, if we could do it, that would be very good.