**Penultimate Draft**

**Encyclopedia of Global Justice**

**Peter Singer (b. 1946)**

The work of Peter Singer spans the entirety of major applied ethics topics. It is no coincidence that the development of Singer’s career runs parallel to the development and growing prominence of the aforementioned discipline. Singer’s work both helped to define the range of concerns in applied ethics, as well as to elevate the standard of intellectual rigor in the field. Singer has made major and lasting contributions on issues of bioethics, environmental ethics, and global poverty. Part of Singer’s effectiveness as a philosopher, as well as his influence outside of the academy, rests on the fact that his most powerful arguments require only that one accept a seemingly innocuous set of premises, most of which his readers are likely to hold implicitly (e.g. suffering and death from lack of proper nutrition and medical care is bad; if one can prevent something bad from happening without compromising something of similar moral significance, then one ought to do so). Following from these established premises, Singer then leads his readers through their logical and practical implications, to a conclusion he hopes will impact their behavior. All of Singer’s principal insights are consistently grounded in utilitarian considerations.

**Universality and Preference Utilitarianism**

The form of utilitarianism that Singer adopts, following his Oxford mentor R. M. Hare, is preference utilitarianism. In Practical Ethics (1979; 3rd edition, 2011), Singer argues that thinking ethically implies endeavoring to take a universal stance. In so doing, one accepts that one’s interests count for no more than anyone else’s; thus, in thinking ethically, one implicitly takes into consideration the interests of others. Likewise, when considering alternative courses of action, such ethical thinking leads one to favor those which, all things being equal, tend to satisfy the greatest number of interests among ethically relevant beings (i.e. those capable of having interests). Therefore, on Singer’s account, the universalizing nature of ethical thinking implies a baseline form of utilitarianism. It is this initial and minimalistic form of utilitarianism that Singer associates with preference satisfactions. Preference utilitarianism, as opposed to classical utilitarianism, does not assume that any one prefatory interest (e.g. hedonic pleasure satisfaction) can be consistently universalized. Instead, the preference utilitarian judges that, given due diligence, our actions ought to be consistent with the various, maximal preference satisfactions of ethically relevant beings. Put negatively, this means that insofar as our actions unjustifiably thwart otherwise benign preferences held by others with moral interests, our actions are wrong. Singer applies this approach unswervingly in his writings on applied ethical issues, with profound implications for global justice.

**Equal Consideration of Interests and the Welfare of Non-Human Animals**

In order to have an interest, Singer argues, one must have a capacity to feel pain and to suffer. Objects without the capacity to suffer, say a slab of tofu or a shoe, have no interests. The fact that something has an interest in not suffering is enough to give it ethical relevance, consistent with the preference utilitarian model discussed above. A sentient being, if taken to mean a being with the capacity to feel pain, or more broadly to feel pain and pleasure, has interests, and therefore is an ethically relevant being. This standard applies to non-human animals with a capacity to feel pain and to suffer. Accordingly, equal consideration of interests must extend to non-human animals and human beings alike. To many critics, this proposition is inherently problematic, as it is taken to belittle the ethical significance of human beings. Such a response is a misreading of Singer’s thought, for this approach does not imply any degradation of human interests, but an elevation of non-human interests, as is consistent with the insight that having the ability to suffer is ethically significant. Singer argues that if one is to maintain that human suffering is inherently of greater ethical significance than non-human suffering, simply because it is human suffering, then one is guilty of speciesism. In Animal Liberation (1975; reprinted with a new preface, 2009), his central work on animal welfare, Singer uses the term “speciesism” to convey a bigotry parallel in logical form to racism. Singer argues that the sentient status of non-human animals demands that most of us reconsider the nature of our interaction with animals and our dietary habits. Given an abundance of other nutritionally wholesome options, our gustatory pleasure in eating meat does not outweigh the great suffering that most non-human animals experience as they are raised and slaughtered for consumption. Singer is acutely critical of modern factory farming techniques, which keep animals in densely populated confinement areas and squalid conditions. Singer has been less critical about more humane forms of animal husbandry and slaughter. Still, he advocates vegetarianism or veganism as the easiest method of avoiding unethically produced animal products.

Concerning animal experimentation, Singer opposes experiments that cannot be shown to have tangible benefits which outweigh the suffering of the animals used in experimentation. Indeed, in cases of human and animal experimentation alike, the amount of suffering should be weighed against relative gains for sentient beings as a whole. As a utilitarian, Singer does not argue for the traditional sense of “rights,” nevertheless Animal Liberation is widely credited with prompting the modern animal rights movement, and thus promoting global justice concerns that expand beyond confinement to the human sphere.

**The Embryo, the Fetus, and the Infant**

The term “human” can be used to identify any member of the species Homo sapiens, and the term “person” is commonly used in the same sense. Singer, following a trend among philosophers that dates to John Locke, uses “person” exclusively to identify a self-aware, future-oriented rational being. This means that human beings need not be persons, and that a person need not be a human being. Singer accepts the view that persons, by virtue of their self-awareness, complex social relationships, and future plans, have a potential to suffer greater psychological stress than non-human animals or human beings lacking personhood. The implications of this view are clearly demonstrated when he addresses the topic of abortion. An embryo without a fully developed central nervous system and associated ability to feel pain is without interests, and therefore, no morally significant harm is done in aborting an embryo, nor is there harm done in destroying embryos in the process of stem-cell research or other forms of embryonic research. To the degree that a fetus may feel pain (a matter which remains uncertain), fetuses have interests like those of non-human animals; however, their interests do not outweigh the interest of the mother with personhood. Therefore, Singer has a completely permissive view on abortion and birth control. Singer argues that no sharp distinction can be drawn between the fetus and the newborn infant. Prior to the development of personhood, a newborn infant has ethical interests similar to those of non-human animals lacking personhood.

**End of Life Issues**

Consistent with the dictates of preference utilitarianism Singer holds a permissive view regarding physician assisted suicide. Because of the consequentialist nature of preference utilitarianism, there is no reason to draw a moral distinction between the identical result achieved when a patient is helped to die, and when a patient is allowed to die in the absence of life sustaining treatment. If a terminally ill person holds an accurately informed and reasoned understanding of his or her medical prognosis, and based on such an understanding wishes to be helped to die, it is wrong not to provide such assistance. This conclusion is made all the more obvious when passively allowing a patient to die prolongs suffering. In Practical Ethics (1993), Singer argues that in cases involving a patient born or rendered incapable of having interests (or in the latter case, having communicated previously held preferences), non-voluntary euthanasia is a permissible means of ending suffering. Controversially, but not alone among philosophers, Singer recognizes that this view includes terminally ill and disabled infants, and others who have profound disabilities rendering them intellectually equivalent to an infant. Such a view is consistent with Singer’s general views on euthanasia and abortion. The age of the patient in these cases is less important than the patient’s suffering coupled with the patient’s lack of personhood, although if the patient was once a person, his or her prior wishes are relevant. It is worth noting that Singer’s views on this issue have garnered condemnation, especially from religious conservatives. Singer is also criticized by those on the political left, in particular among a subset of disabled activists who mistakenly take Singer to be arguing against the value of their lives. To the contrary, Singer’s position derives from his egalitarian views regarding suffering, and is consistent with his considerations regarding other non-human animals (including the human fetus), which lack personhood. Such critics oppose Singer on the alleged grounds of social justice, but their expressed position is too often undermined by a blatant, if not deliberate, disregard for his actual writings. Unfortunately, and not without relevance to free speech as an issue of global justice, Singer’s more militant critics achieved a measure of success in 1989, when several academic venues in Germany were intimidated into cancelling his speaking engagements. Contrary to the claims of the aforementioned antagonists, Singer does not condone the killing of persons who wish to continue living.

**The Great Ape Project**

In 1993 The Great Ape Project: Equality Beyond Humanity was published. The book, which Singer co-edited with Paola Cavalieri, brings together a diverse collection of essays promoting the extension of human rights to all non-human Great Apes (Chimpanzees, Gorillas, and Orangutans). The work contains a declaration calling for protections that extend, but are not limited to, a right to life, liberty, and freedom from torture. As a result of the ideas contained in the book, the Great Ape Project (GAP) was founded in 1994, as an international campaign to extend human rights to our closest evolutionary relatives. The extension of human rights to great apes is consistent with Singer’s concern for animal suffering in general, and with the distinction he advocates between being a member of the human species on one hand, and the possession of personhood on the other. Great apes demonstrate self-awareness, a capacity for symbolic language, and rich emotional lives. It is apparent that non-human great apes have, or in varying degrees exceed, the intellectual capabilities of young human children or severely intellectually disabled adults. To extend basic human rights to one group and not the other, it is argued, can only be the outcome of unjustified speciesism.

**Ethics and Sociobiology**

In The Expanding Circle: Ethics and Sociobiology (1983; reprinted with a new Afterword, 2011), Singer explores the evolutionary foundations of ethics and speculates on the role reason plays in the development of altruism. The evolutionary advantage in recognizing kin relationships and engaging in ethical reciprocity is obvious; acting altruistically toward those outside of one’s tribe or kin group is more difficult to reconcile. Singer argues that altruism remains part of human behavior because it is rooted in the development of higher reasoning, which is of evident advantage. Singer argues that if one recognizes the need to evoke the neutral ethical standards necessary for peaceful existence among one’s kin and community, then it is a matter of logical extension to recognize relevant similarities among others outside of one’s communal circle. Thus, Singer’s support of the Great Ape Project and preference utilitarianism is itself consistent with his understanding of how ethics evolved. This is not to imply that Singer attempts to derive an “ought” from an “is.” Staking a claim as to how altruism arises is distinct from making value claims about altruism itself, or normative claims about how impartial approaches to ethics should be developed and implemented. Nevertheless, any normative approach to ethics must conform to the realities of evolutionary aptitudes if it is to have any real bearing on behavior. Singer develops this theme further in A Darwinian Left: Politics, Evolution, and Cooperation (2000). In that work, Singer argues that leftist values can best be served by taking a realistic and scientifically grounded view of human nature as rooted in our evolutionary past.

**Global Poverty**

In 1972, Singer’s article “Famine, Affluence, Morality” appeared in the journal Philosophy and Public Affairs. The article was written in part as a response to a hunger crisis in India created by refugees fleeing what is currently Bangladesh. In the article, Singer posits a now famous thought experiment involving a drowning child. He asks the reader to imagine coming across a child drowning in a small pond. Under the circumstances it is easy to wade in and rescue the child but in doing so you must sacrifice a pair of new shoes and ruin your suit. Given that most readers recognize a duty to save the child’s life regardless of their clothing, Singer draws out the logical implication that not acting to save a child who is dying of poverty is similar to not acting to save a child who is drowning in front of you. Singer supports this conclusion on the premises that there is no morally relevant distinction between someone who is suffering nearby and someone who is suffering on the other side of the world, insofar as we are equally able to help them without sacrificing something of moral equivalence. Singer defends the distinction between relative and absolute poverty, arguing that those who are well off in affluent nations ought to do far more to help those suffering in absolute poverty elsewhere in the world. Singer argues that in the modern world, it is as easy to donate money to those suffering more at great distances as it is to donate to those suffering less nearby. This, and the fact that many charitable NGO’s are able to make effective use of donations received, removes two common objections to donating financial support to end global poverty. Singer does not downplay the need for governments of affluent nations to provide more aid against global poverty, but emphasizes the responsibility of each individual to act on his or her own. Singer’s thoughts on the topic are further developed in a 1999 New York Times piece titled “The Singer Solution to Poverty” and the 2002 One World: Ethics and Globalization. Singer advocates giving as much as one can without placing oneself in an equally bad circumstance. He encourages giving luxury income away after the cost of necessities. Yet Singer is cognizant that a moral argument advocating such high standards of altruism runs counter to what may be expected of most people, given human psychology. For that reason, Singer suggests that reasonably well off members of affluent nations give five percent of their income to reduce global poverty, while very rich members of such nations should give more. This compromise is an acknowledgment that sometimes a moral “ought” exceeds what can be expected given what “is” the present case. Singer addresses numerous objections to his position and refines his view further in the 2009 book The Life You Can Save.

**Globalization and Ethics**

The responsibility affluent members of the globe have to those in absolute poverty is, as aforementioned, taken up in One World. As well, the book addresses global climate change and legal, economic, and political issues surrounding globalization. Singer presents each issue in its most ethical terms. Regarding climate change, the fact is that affluent nations of the world are most responsible per capita for carbon emissions. This fact underscores a further sense in which affluent nations have ethical responsibility to those in less affluent societies; the poorest of the world are the least responsible for, yet the most vulnerable to, the impacts of climate change. One World also argues for more internationally minded approaches to law, the economy, and politics in general. Singer advocates strengthening the global authority of the United Nations, and he argues for an international criminal court system. Singer maintains that the realities of globalization demand an ethical point of view that takes into account the entire global community. Once again, Singer’s case for ethical approaches to globalization is consistent with his other writings in its utilitarian concern for equal consideration of interests.

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**See Also**

Absolute Poverty; Animal Rights; Climate Change; Foreign Aid; Global Poverty; Global Warming; Globalization; International Criminal Court; International Humanitarian Aid; Killing and Letting Die; Oxfam International; Poverty; Preference Satisfaction; Relative Poverty; Utilitarianism; Vegetarianism; The World Bank

**Further Reading**

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