

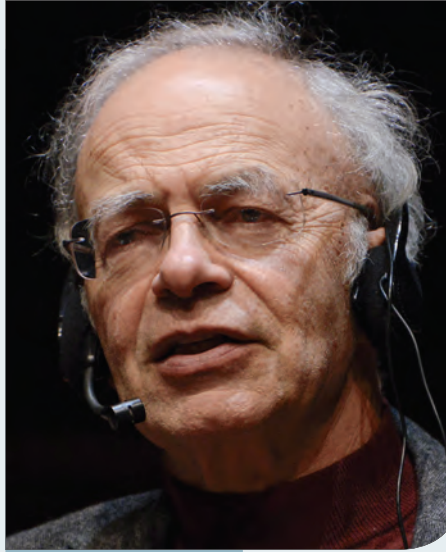
# Reviews

author review: Peter Singer

1975 was the year that the Vietnam War ended; the year *Jaws* was released in cinemas worldwide; and the year the animal rights movement was brought to the forefront of philosophical and ethical debate when Australian born philosopher Peter Singer released his book *Animal Liberation*, in which he popularised the term 'speciesism'. The term is defined as the practice of treating members of one species as morally more important than members of another species when their interests are the same.<sup>1</sup> Singer argued against the concept that membership of the human race gives human interests an inherent increased value over the rest of the animal kingdom.

Four years on, Singer released his philosophical text, *Practical Ethics*, where he explored concepts of utilitarianism, and somewhat shockingly, argued not just for abortion but also infanticide in certain circumstances.

To form such conclusions, Singer drew a distinction between the terms 'human being' and 'person', one commonly made by abortion advocates. His conclusion was that what constitutes a human being is biologically determined by examination of our chromosomes and that our membership of species *Homo sapiens* should never be in doubt.<sup>2</sup> Being a person however, requires the presence of the 'indicators of humanhood'. Developed by bioethicist Joseph Fletcher, this includes a minimum IQ, sense of the past, communication ability, self-awareness and self-control.<sup>3</sup>



Peter Singer

Singer places responsibility for the idea that killing a human being is inherently more wrong than killing a chicken, for example, squarely at the feet of Christian doctrine. He also suggests that the sanctity of human life entrenched in Western belief needs to be re-examined.<sup>4</sup> His position is that arguing that the killing of human beings (as defined above) being more wrong than any other sentient life

is akin to *species discrimination*, and that there is no justification for such a position. He explains his ethical theory of preference utilitarianism, which can be summarised as *an action is right if it maximally furthers the interests of those affected by it*.<sup>5</sup>

From this then, Singer draws that there are two distinct types of argument against the killing of persons, neither of which he believes count in the case of abortion and infanticide. First, he suggests that an indirect anxiety would be caused by a policy of killing persons, and it would be wrong to create such anxiety. Yet a foetus or newborn is unable to comprehend such, and therefore cannot be affected.<sup>6</sup> Second, that the conditions of personhood give us cause to have a preference to plan for the future and go on living, and killing a person thwarts that desire and is therefore wrong.<sup>7</sup> Infants and foetuses, Singer argues, do not possess Fletcher's required indicators, so do not have these same desires, and are therefore not persons.

Whilst not looking to immediately compare abortion and infanticide, Singer acknowledges that his position essentially requires him to do so<sup>8</sup> in order to remain philosophically consistent, as his conclusions logically extend that far.



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Furthering this line of argument, since his reasoning around killing cannot apply to infants, then the only way to define whether killing an infant is wrong or not is consequentialist, that is to say where the weighing of positive and negative effects is balanced to provide a summative outcome.<sup>9</sup> As anyone who has worked on a labour ward can attest to, the birth of a child is generally a joyous affair, and one that would be hoped and expected to lead to a reasonable quality of life, therefore on balance the killing of such a child would be negative. However, were the child born severely handicapped, he reasons that the child may be expected to have a very poor quality of life, and that 'parents may, with good reason, regret that a disabled child was ever born. In those circumstances, the effect that the death of that child will have on its (sic) parents can be a reason for, rather than against, killing it'.<sup>10</sup>

Andrew Sloane, a medical doctor and theologian at Ridley College, details several critiques of Singer in his 1999 paper entitled *Singer, Preference Utilitarianism and Infanticide*<sup>11</sup> some of which I shall attempt to summarise below.

Singer's account of the development of ethics in human society is at odds with a *moral order* theory, which he would be unable to adopt as it would undermine the purpose of his study, however his conclusions are largely hypothetical and do not carry more weight than other explanations which can be used with equal (or in the case of altruism, possibly greater) weight to explain the same moral developments.

Then there is the question of justice. In Singer's view, if an action maximally furthers the interests of those affected by it, it is a right action. This does not mean however, that all parties must be positively affected by such action, meaning that particular forms of oppression such as slavery may appear to be right under this viewpoint. Yet actions

such as slavery are generally considered to be wrong, regardless of their maximum utility. Their majority views are no doubt the product of key ethical institutions and intuitions, and despite conflicting with utilitarian thinking that certainly does not mean one is unjustified in holding them.

Finally, if we are to be concerned with the preferences of 'persons' and whether or not they are harmed, the inherent question remains as to why? If there is no inherent meaning, why does progress, or the progression of society, or possible future personal fulfilment matter to begin with? How can Singer claim that any choice or way of living is better than any other?

As Christians, we believe that we are made in the image of God.<sup>12</sup> We are called to 'Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute' (Proverbs 31:8). The question that rings within my heart when I read Singer and others like him, is how do we value those who are most vulnerable? Does their vulnerability and lack of voice make them disposable, for us to do with as we like and destroy for our own convenience? Or does it demand compassion and protection for those who cannot yet speak for themselves? We need advocates in a world that forgets that we were all once the same – too young to speak, but that our Father knew us even in our mother's womb.<sup>14</sup> ■

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