

Who lives? Who dies? The utility of Peter Singer: The utility of Peter Singer

by [Mark Oppenheimer](#) in the [July 3, 2002](#) issue

You could make the case that Peter Singer has done more good than anyone else alive. A professor of ethics at Princeton University, Singer is the author of *Animal Liberation* (1975), which instigated the modern animal rights movement. Singer didn't give us cruelty-free cosmetic production or vegetarian restaurants, but he has done more than anyone else to popularize such ideas. What's more, by writing persuasive articles about people's moral obligation to give away money, Singer has caused tens, maybe hundreds of thousands of dollars to be donated to famine relief organizations. Yet Singer also believes that it is OK to kill babies.

These may strike you as contradictory beliefs, but they make sense once you understand that Singer is a utilitarian. For utilitarians, the moral task is to create utility—to increase the amount of happiness in the world, or at least decrease the amount of pain. If curing cancer requires doing research that requires the death of ten infants, then the infants should be sacrificed for the cause.

For people whose ethical views are based in a religious tradition, that choice seems monstrous. The medical victory would seem tainted. We would be haunted by the ghosts of dead babies. Even though countless people might be able to live longer and more fully because of the cancer research, the world would be less godly.

Monotheistic traditions hold to a few main assertions: that suffering can be redemptive; that people may be called to unexpected and unusual tasks; that a lone human life can have inviolable worth; and that there is something greater than humankind that deserves to be worshiped. So believers in God bear children, make art or worship God because they feel called to do so—even if they realize they could be spending their time more “usefully” fighting hunger or building houses for the poor. Of course, many religious people do fight hunger and build houses for the

poor. But they don't believe that that's all human beings are called to do. The religious world also values cathedrals, scriptural study, and time spent in contemplation. That too is part of godliness.

This article is about the most famous living philosopher who would say that there is no such thing as godliness.

Singer is a 55-year-old, lanky, balding Australian, soft-spoken and indifferent to fashion. He is the son of Jewish refugees from Europe, and three of his four grandparents died in the Holocaust. In college he studied utilitarian philosophers such as Jeremy Bentham, John Stuart Mill and Henry Sidgwick. With them, he decided that ethical action cannot be inferred from a set of rules, like the Ten Commandments, or Hammurabi's code, or Kant's categorical imperative to "act in such a way that the maxim of your action could be universally applied." The utilitarian takes account only of the amount of human happiness, or utility, that a given action will produce. The fact that utilitarianism does not involve political or religious convictions, or a list of commandments, appealed to the irreligious Singer, who as a child had refused to have a Bar Mitzvah ceremony.

At Oxford, where he studied with R. M. Hare, and then as a professor at Melbourne's Monash University, Singer slightly modified his philosophy into what he calls preference utilitarianism. The preference utilitarian is concerned not so much with pain and pleasure as with allowing people to satisfy as many of their preferences as possible.

In *Practical Ethics* (1993), Singer declares that "an action contrary to the preference of any being is, unless this preference is outweighed by contrary preferences, wrong. Killing a person who prefers to continue living is therefore wrong, other things being equal . . . For preference utilitarians, taking the life of a person would normally be worse than taking the life of some other being, since persons are highly future-oriented in their preferences. To kill a person is therefore, normally, to violate not just one, but a wide range of the most central and significant preferences a being can have." And the more preferences satisfied in the world, the better.

This means that rules like "Thou shalt not kill" are poor guides to action. If killing one person—say, Hitler—would save the lives of many others, then one ought to begin oiling one's pistol. Yes, that dead person will not be able to fulfill any of his preferences. But others will be able to lead lives in which thousands, even millions,

of preferences will be fulfilled.

Utilitarians find talk of rights somewhat beside the point. If a policy of affirmative action violates white people's rights to equal treatment but produces beneficial results for the world in the long run, such as increasing the number of black doctors and lawyers or reducing poverty on Indian reservations, then there's no reason to worry about rights. If one white person's preference to go to Stanford is thwarted, but the disadvantaged black girl who goes instead is likely to bring pride to a community and serve as a desperately needed black role model, one must conclude that more preferences will be satisfied by admitting the black student.

Utilitarian conclusions can make a lot of sense. If two Siamese twins are both going to die, and separating them would kill one twin while possibly saving the other, most of us think it is better to save one rather than watch both die. Religious or natural-law notions about the sanctity of life, according to which a doctor may never take a life, even to salvage another life, can seem needlessly strict. The utilitarian can confidently say, "Better to save one life than none at all"; no abstract rules about justice or fairness should count more than increasing the utility in the world.

Utilitarian views matter in these technological days, when religious ethics often seem insufficient. We can do so much now. We can keep a brain-dead baby alive while harvesting its organs for transplant; we can annihilate a country's population in a matter of hours, or we can airlift it food. It's not always apparent how best to apportion our money or our wisdom. Utilitarians have provocative, sometimes compelling answers to moral questions.

Singer argues, for example, that since \$1,000 can keep several children alive for years, each of us is obligated not to spend it on a nice audio system but to donate the money to Oxfam or the Red Cross—and to keep donating as much as we can. "That's right," Singer told the *New York Times Magazine*. "I'm saying that you shouldn't buy that new car, take that cruise, redecorate the house or get that expensive new suit. After all, a \$1,000 suit could save three children's lives."

There are many utilitarian philosophers, but Singer is the only one to receive death threats. Philosophical conferences, not usually of much interest to the public, have occasionally been canceled because of the controversy that Singer ignites. After Princeton hired him in 1999, a graduate wrote to the *Princeton Alumni Weekly*, "Nothing I have seen or heard epitomizes the decline of Western civilization so much

as the hiring of Peter Singer.”

Singer is loathed in part because he writes lucidly, and for a wide audience. His books have a clarity that few scholars can achieve. He once ran as a Green Party candidate for Parliament, and he lectures frequently. His essays have appeared for 30 years in the *New York Review of Books*. And Singer is drawn to the difficult, sometimes sensational cases in applied ethics. He happily leaps from the philosophical mountain into the muck below, where he coolly follows his principles to their logical ends.

Two of his conclusions are especially startling. He argues that some animals have higher moral status than some humans. His argument begins with the observation that many animals prefer to avoid pain. We know this the same way we know that people prefer to avoid pain: we see dogs and cats and dolphins and rats recoiling from pain, we see them whimper when beaten, and we see them playful when they are pain-free. (We also know that their nervous systems closely resemble ours.) They have other preferences, too. They couple, and they become visibly depressed when separated from their mates and families. They prefer to move freely rather than be confined in cages. And so forth.

Therefore, Singer says, causing these animals pain—killing them for food, caging them while they produce eggs, shackling them and kidnapping them for exhibition in a zoo—subverts their preferences and is wrong. The fact that animals are nonhuman makes no difference. In fact, an intelligent adult ape has more conscious interests than a newborn human infant. Therefore, faced with the choice of rescuing from a fire either a severely retarded infant, who is unlikely to develop many preferences in the future, and an ape, we should rescue the ape. To think otherwise is simple bigotry, an example of speciesism. We should no more be speciesists than racists or sexists. Singer quotes Jeremy Bentham’s 1781 dictum about animals: “The question is not, Can they *reason*? nor Can they *talk*? But, *Can they suffer*?”

In *Animal Liberation*, which has sold half a million copies, Singer preaches against eating meat, consuming eggs or milk produced by maltreated birds, and wearing leather or fur. Today’s commonplaces of animal rights discourse—concern about the factory farms, the unnecessary lab experiments on monkeys, the cosmetics tested on rabbits—are familiar because of Singer and the tremendous influence of his book. Many of us are kinder people because we, or people we know, have read that book. Singer is one of the few thinkers, like Darwin and Freud, who within their own

lifetimes have changed the way people think.

So it's preferences, rather than human life, that we ought to value, and this means that animals fall within our sphere of moral obligations. But if we have rights only insofar as we have preferences, then what about those humans, like the severely retarded, who lack preferences? What about newborn infants, who prefer to eat, excrete, and avoid pain, but prefer little else?

This brings us to Singer's second startling conclusion: doctors and parents should be permitted in some circumstances to kill humans. Singer notes that doctors often withhold medical treatment or nourishment from crippled or prematurely born infants, or from elderly people who have asked that no extraordinary measures be taken to save them. Letting people die, Singer says, is often crueler than a humane form of euthanasia would be.

Many people are inclined to agree that the distinction between passive and active euthanasia is an ethical fiction: why let an anencephalic infant, born without a brain, starve to death, prolonging the parents' agony, when the baby could be painlessly killed? These anencephalics, like some elderly Alzheimer's patients, are simply not persons in the sense of being rational, self-conscious beings. They can't decide for themselves, and it may be compassionate to decide for them. (In the case of persons with preferences, Singer is opposed to any kind of forced, involuntary euthanasia.) But Singer then takes his argument further:

If the fetus does not have the same claim to life as a person, it appears that the newborn baby does not either, and the life of a newborn baby is of less value to it than the life of a pig, a dog, or a chimpanzee is to the nonhuman animal.

If we can put aside these emotionally moving but strictly irrelevant aspects of the killing of a baby we can see that the grounds for not killing persons do not apply to newborn infants. (*Practical Ethics*)

Fetuses have no preferences before they can feel pain. Even after they can feel pain, they still have very few preferences; unlike, say, a six-year-old, fetuses can't make future plans, don't prefer green Legos to blue, don't want to lie in Mommy's bed at night. So while advanced fetuses have very few preferences, those may easily be outweighed, for all sorts of reasons, by the preferences of parents to abort.

And whatever can be said of an advanced fetus may also be said of a newborn baby, which in its earliest stages has very, very few preferences. If parents may abort a fetus with Down's syndrome—whether to make room for another baby, to spare it a life of possible frustration, or simply to avoid the expense and fatigue of caring for a retarded child—then they may also painlessly kill an infant. Nothing about the mere fact that the infant is human, and born, should make a difference. We ought, Singer writes, to replace the old dictum that all human life has equal worth with a First New Commandment: Recognize that the worth of human life varies.

To Singer, this is only common sense. If we didn't think some lives were better than others, then why would we try to prevent birth defects? Why would we try to help blind people see?

Many disagree, including most of Singer's fellow philosophers. "It's the height of epistemic arrogance," says Adrienne Asch, an ethicist at Wellesley College, of Singer's approach. "Saying that because you have a disability means your quality of life is lower—I think that's just wrong. The only thing I'll say if you can't walk is that you can't walk, and people who like walking will feel sorry for you."

Singer would reply that he doesn't favor mandatory euthanasia of anyone. He wants to leave it to parents to decide if a child they don't want, and who has few prospects for being adopted, should live. He would remind us that those same parents might replace it with a much healthier child, or they might give the thousands of dollars they would have spent on physical therapy and round-the-clock nursing to UNICEF instead. Wouldn't it be rather heroic, the thinking goes, to save scores of healthy lives, with bright futures of romance and productive careers, at the expense of one quite damaged life?

While Singer believes that killing a three-day-old is no worse than killing a late-term fetus, he does believe in drawing the line somewhere. He used to suggest 28 days after birth. "I now think a 28-day cutoff is impracticably precise," he told me. "But the point remains you need cutoffs." I asked him whether he would extend the "cutoff" for euthanasia to, say, three years old, an age when children still have rather few preferences. "A three-year-old is a gray case," he said.

Before getting outraged, we ought to recognize that Singer's views are, perhaps more often than we'd like, our own. Many of us have read about people languishing in vegetative states, restrained in wheelchairs or totally unconscious, and have

thought, “What a waste of money.” If we also note that the money could be doing real good, curing malaria or feeding a hungry child, and if we further grant that it wouldn’t be so hard to spend the money one place instead of the other, then we have to acknowledge Singer for having the courage to say publicly what most of us can hardly admit to ourselves.

Many philosophers, like Brown’s Dan Brock and Tufts’s Norman Daniels, agree in good part with Singer. The philosopher James Rachels made many of Singer’s points before he did. And Bentham got there before everybody, even on seemingly modern issues like animal rights.

“As a theoretical contributor, he’s not the most philosophically significant,” says Shelly Kagan of Yale, who often agrees with Singer. “But he moves the reader, shows the reader what’s already inherent in the reader’s own beliefs. Compare the gobs of money given to charity because of his article ‘Famine, Affluence, and Morality’ to the three dollars given because of my book.

“I think Singer is very admired among professional philosophers, whether or not you’re a utilitarian,” said Kagan. He said that while his wife was reading a *New York Times* piece about the controversy at Princeton over Singer, “she looked up and said, ‘These are the same views as you have—why aren’t they picketing your classes?’ It’s because he defends his views to the popular press. And more power to him. He’s fighting the good fight.”

The philosophers who don’t think Singer is fighting the good fight fall into several camps. Some, like Asch, wonder how Singer can be so confident about assigning preferences and guessing at people’s happiness. Religious philosophers like Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff would wonder how Singer can be so sure that there is no God. And many ethicists remain committed to rule-based systems of ethics. From Abraham to Jesus to Kant, adhering to certain rules, whether from religious obligation or abstract duty, has been the core of the ethical life. If you have an ethical or religious commitment to pacifism, for example, you won’t accept the utilitarian’s willingness sometimes to kill. And if you have an unshakable belief that even severely handicapped children have an equal claim on our time and money, then you won’t like the utilitarian’s favoring of healthy, conscious, rational persons.

Still others, like the Aristotelian virtue ethicists Alasdair MacIntyre and Stanley Hauerwas, worry that human beings who do unpleasant deeds are more likely to do

them again. Good people are those who practice being good people, who assiduously work to acquire such virtues as hope, patience and sacrifice. We can only be peaceful by practicing being peaceful. If we get used to killing retarded babies, even for humane reasons, aren't we just a bit more likely to kill again? The best people, it would seem, don't kill for expediency. In fact, they don't kill at all.

Ethicists who concede some of Singer's points still challenge his narrowing of the moral sphere. Is it really possible that only conscious, rational, wishful persons have the highest moral claims on us? "Peter's proposals regarding infanticide are among the weakest points in his philosophy," says Tony Coady, an Australian philosopher who has known Singer for many years. "Human infants are already part of our moral universe—the universe of persons. I think they are already palpable, though immature, persons." According to Bonnie Steinbock of Albany University, "Somebody's being a blood relative matters. Morality is a network of relations. If rats invade our houses and bite our children, we can't have moral arguments. We have to exterminate them."

And some people just cannot abide a person who thinks in such calculating terms.

When I posed some of these objections to Singer, he answered swiftly: "The notion of what makes a better person is secondary to the notion of the right thing to do." That is, we may believe that the best possible person is a soft-hearted nun who cares for orphaned pigeons, but in Singer's eyes, the rather disagreeable cur who cheats at checkers, ignores his children, and is rude to waitresses may be the more ethical person if by giving away lots of money he saves lives. Singer, by the same argument, may seem like a monster, but he is the one whose philosophy saves both animals and malnourished children. While you are congratulating yourself on buying your crippled daughter an expensive operation, or paying for nursing care for your senescent uncle, Singer has let them die and now is writing checks that will save hundreds of lives. Who is being more just? Who is more virtuous? Who is—if we want to introduce religious language—doing more for God's children?

That way of posing the question may offend both sides. Singer never objects to people's devoting time and money to their close relations. While unnecessary luxuries may be unethical, spending money to help sick relatives is not unethical in his view. And he sees the gray areas. When his own mother was diagnosed with Alzheimer's, he did not put her down. Rather, he bought her expensive nursing care. Almost every critic of Singer mentions this fact, implying that he is a hypocrite.

That's not entirely fair. His books make clear that even when the ailing person has no preferences left, the family that loves her still might.

But Singer could be right about ethical actions without being right about whether those actions are always desirable. Perhaps being ethically perfect is not the most worthwhile way to live. In her article "Moral Saints" (collected in *The Virtues*), Susan Wolf of Johns Hopkins University suggests that the ethically perfect person would in fact be dreary. Always trying to alleviate pain, create joy or allow people to fulfill their preferences, he or she would never do anything fun. "In other words," Wolf writes, "if the moral saint is devoting all his time to feeding the hungry or healing the sick or raising money for Oxfam, then necessarily he is not reading Victorian novels, playing the oboe, or improving his backhand." Always trying to be kind, he would never have an ironic or sarcastic wit; it follows that he would be unlikely to direct a good movie. A world filled with such people would be positively unbearable. We'd all be well fed and sheltered—and bored out of our skulls. The real world has misery, yes, but it also has gorgeous peaks of achievement. It has cathedrals. The utilitarian world, in which everybody must first be fed, would be bleak.

Kagan is not impressed by this argument. If everybody were a utilitarian, he points out, then we'd each have to give up only a little bit of money or time in order to cure the world's ills. And if only a few of us were utilitarians, then we could confidently give away everything without worrying that the frivolous pursuits might die off. We'd have plenty of resources left over to help us be interesting, joyous people. The philosopher Robert Adams has another objection to Wolf: actual saints, like Jesus and St. Francis, are really quite interesting people, hardly bores.

We might well finally admit, however, that utilitarian values—utility, pleasure, preferences—seem peculiarly barren. Most of us, religious or otherwise, believe, as Asch puts it, "there are things other than 'happiness' that matter: peace, justice, equality, wisdom. When the utilitarians want to say everything reduces to happiness, they're making a claim broader than happiness."

The utilitarians' claim is, in fact, quite metaphysical. It's a belief about what we're here for. A religious person would say we live to glorify God; an artist might say we're here to create lasting beauty; a libertarian would choose freedom above all else; and the utilitarian would say we're here for pleasure or the fulfillment of preferences. There's still a leap of faith involved—though it's one that excludes the grand religious narratives, as well as the wondrous examples of human

contemplation, like Thomas Merton and the Buddha, or connoisseurship, like Nabokov with his butterflies.

For reasons utilitarians might wish to explain, many of the people who create the most utility are deeply religious. The religious life would therefore seem to merit more consideration than Singer gives it. When I asked him about religion, he said: "I think religion has created some wonderful works of architecture. It's inspired some beautiful music. I can't think of a lot more good to say about it. I can't think much of taking consolation in an illusion."

Yet when Singer asks what exactly life is for, in a book called *How Are We to Live?*, his answer sounds religious. "If we regard time as a fourth dimension, then we can think of the universe, throughout all the times at which it contains sentient life, as a four-dimension entity. We can then make that four-dimensional world a better place by causing there to be less pointless suffering in one particular place, at one particular time, than there otherwise would have been. . . . Sisyphus might find meaning in his life, if, instead of rolling the same stone endlessly up the hill, he could roll many stones to the top and build a beautiful temple with them."

That phrase about building "a beautiful temple" suggests that there is a transcendent goal of sorts in utilitarianism. As the Berkeley philosopher R. Jay Wallace writes in an unpublished paper:

Utilitarianism is often thought of as the paradigmatic secular moral theory. . . . In light of this it is a matter of considerable irony that utilitarianism itself should implicitly rely, in its ideal of the goodness of a life, on the idea that the moral personality has an essentially religious structure: the utilitarian agent must be sufficiently devoted to a transcendent value outside the self that contribution to that end makes their own life good itself.

Singer's aversion to questions of transcendent value, even as he asks us to view morality as the building of a "temple" in a "four-dimensional world," reveals a philosophic blindness. We should still read Singer. His honesty about tough questions befits the philosopher, who is supposed to say what others will not. But deep down, we don't want to live with Singer because we can't live with ourselves that way. Singer can't understand why Hindu vegetarians, Catholic paupers and Jewish scribes—some of the best people there are—are rarely built of utilitarian

principles. Animal lovers, Singer's biggest fans, usually love animals, not utility. And that's true of lovers of humans too.

Singer wants the best for all humankind, a distant arrival in the Elysian Fields of preference fulfillment. But if, by some chance, he's found the way to get us there, it's despite not understanding us at all.