

Innate value: Utility is not an adequate ethical foundation

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [July 3, 2002](#) issue

I have a dim recollection of Jeremy Bentham's utilitarian philosophy from a course in college. Utilitarianism appealed to me at a time when I was more certain of myself intellectually and more academically confident than I have been since. It had something to do with being a sophomore, I believe. For utilitarians, moral behavior is that which increases happiness and reduces human suffering. Who can argue with that?

Peter Singer of Princeton University brings the common sense of utilitarianism to the ethical dilemmas of the 21st century with ruthless consistency. The worth of a single human life is not in the equation for utilitarians if that life gets in the way of increasing the well-being and happiness or reducing the suffering of the community. As Mark Oppenheimer [notes](#), for Singer this means it can sometimes be "OK to kill babies." I have a problem with that.

Clergy confront the ethical dilemmas raised by Singer and his disciples every time we visit elderly patients who are victims of advanced Alzheimer's disease and who are being sustained at great expense. Utilitarians suggest that money could be used to reduce suffering elsewhere. Clergy also know what it's like to stand by the bedside and pray for patients whose surgery was incredibly sophisticated and expensive. At times we may find ourselves wondering about the investment of limited resources.

I'm glad that some of our ablest philosophers are engaging Singer's utilitarianism from a faith perspective. There is something at the heart of our belief in God that is expressed in our sense of the innate value of each human life. Utility simply isn't an adequate ethical foundation.

Though it might not hold up in the midst of a strenuously intellectual conversation, my ethical bottom line on this topic is drawn by Rachel. Rachel rescues me from philosophic abstraction by her utter joy in being alive and her absolute delight in her

piano lessons, in her backyard swing, and in seeing her grandparents. Her father, coincidentally, is a Princeton graduate, and his disagreements with Professor Singer are more than philosophical. Rachel has Down Syndrome. She is my granddaughter, and I cannot imagine the world without her.