



INTERVIEW

Interview with Pr. Peter Singer

	Peter Singer ¹
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Pr. Peter Singer
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INTERVIEW

Julien Delord (J.D.) : -“ Pr. Singer, what is the overarching goal of your thought beyond the defense of utilitarianism, *i.e.* the reduction of pain and the maximization of pleasure in the world? Is there a theory behind your choice of causes to which you apply your ethics or is it just a matter of subjective inclination?”

Peter Singer (P.S.) : -“ This is a strange question, because you state what the ultimate goal is, and then you ask what is beyond it. But first, let’s state the goal more accurately. Since I’m a preference utilitarian, my goal is not exactly the reduction of pain and the maximization of pleasure, but rather the maximization of the satisfaction of preferences. The goal, in other words, is that beings with conscious preferences should, as far as possible, have what they prefer. Stronger, or more intense preferences, of course, get more weight in this calculation than weaker ones.

That is the goal of my form of utilitarianism. But your question seeks some goal beyond that. No, there is nothing beyond it. Why should there be anything beyond it?

You also inquire about my choice of causes to which I apply my ethics. My choice isn’t a matter of subjective inclination, but on the other hand there is nothing so deep

¹ A short biography fo Pr. Singer follows the interview.

behind it that I would use the term “theory” either. It’s simply a matter of where I think I may be able to do some good, by persuading people to take a different view. So it is partly how important the topic is, partly whether I feel I have something new to say that has not already been said, and of course partly whether I feel that my particular philosophical skills have anything to contribute to the issue.”

J.D.: -“ In an autobiography you made reference to the history of your Viennese Jewish grandparents who were deported and murdered by the Nazis. You reveal the shock you experienced when confronted by this painful family history as well as the absurdities of the religious teaching influenced you deeply in your philosophical preferences for ethics and utilitarianism. Several times, you mention that even in the worst conditions, there are still humans who help others, just for the sake of doing Good. However, can the example of these “ordinary heroes” who helped your parents and the Jews be generalized? Isn’t in this respect your ethics too heroic and reserved to a small human elite? Isn’t Hannah Arendt’s analysis of the Shoah as the consequence of the negation of individual responsibility in modern bureaucratic and political institutions a more reliable analysis in order to avoid such a tragedy in the future?”

P.S.: -“ First, I don’t believe I have ever said as confidently as you put it here that the tragic history of my family influenced me towards studying ethics or becoming a utilitarian. Maybe it did, but it is impossible to sort out the different influences. If circumstances had been a little different when I went to university, I might, with the same family history, have become a lawyer and never studied ethics seriously. And I think my family background is compatible with a variety of ethical views, not just utilitarianism. What I do think is probable is that my family background made me feel strongly that oppressive, authoritarian governments are wrong, and that the use of force has to be a last resort. I also think my reading of holocaust history gave me a strong sense of empathy with the weak and the oppressed, the victims of unchecked power and brutality. But, again, that does not entail utilitarianism.

I don’t have a religious temperament, and my parents were not really religious even before the holocaust. But the existence of the holocaust does seem to me a powerful argument against the traditional Christian view that there is an omniscient, omnipotent, omnibenevolent deity. If there is a deity who is omniscient and omnipotent, he or she must be a monster to allow things like the holocaust to happen. Even the claim that the holocaust happened because god gave humans free will – which seems to me a feeble excuse to make on behalf of an omniscient being, who would have seen the consequences of this grant of free will – does not apply to the slow agonizing deaths of beings, human or nonhuman, caught in a drought.

Now to the issues of the heroic people who rescued Jews in the holocaust. I never said that they were typical of human beings, or that their actions are generalizable. I made no quantitative estimates. I simply indicated that such people exist, and they

prove the possibility of human altruism, that is, that we are not genetically programmed or determined to be vicious or purely self-interested. The existence of these heroes does not prove that humans are typically altruistic, let alone heroic. It is true to say that the holocaust was only possible because most people are *not* like those heroes. Most people do not want to stand out from the crowd, so they will follow the leader. Some people are actively malevolent to their fellow humans, especially their fellow humans from a different race or ethnic group.

That doesn't mean that I agree with Arendt that the holocaust was the "consequence of the negation of individual responsibility in modern bureaucratic and political institutions." The negation of individual responsibility is nothing new, and the holocaust needed a bureaucracy only because of its vast scale and because the Germans, typically, wanted to do it as thoroughly as possible. The potential for humans to commit genocide against other peoples goes back far beyond bureaucracy. Just look at what, according to the Hebrew bible, the ancient Israelites did to the Midianites. (*Numbers*, Chapter 31.)"

J.D.: -“ Against people who caricature utilitarianism as a “pig philosophy” or pure hedonistic selfishness, you reply according to your hierarchical axiology of sentient beings that we must put the emphasis on higher level virtues like artistic and moral emotions, reason and intelligence. However, it seems that you don't give really credit to the idea that some of your opponents might really feel an acute moral pain at seeing for instance severely disabled babies killed and the sanctity of human life violated. To impose a law based on your rational universalist utilitarianism in a society which is not ready to accept it might indeed cause more pain than pleasure. Don't utilitarians practice a kind of double standard in appealing to higher moral satisfaction, like pure altruism, only when it strengthens their argument and discard these feelings when they come from other moral or religious sources?”

P.S.: -“ What exactly is the caricature of utilitarianism we are considering here? We need to separate the objection, already discussed by John Stuart Mill, that utilitarianism is a philosophy for pigs, from the objection that it is a philosophy of selfishness, or egoism. The latter objection can only be based on ignorance, because there is nothing at all selfish about utilitarianism – in fact, the more serious objection is precisely the opposite, that it is too demanding for beings like us, because it is impartial in its concerns. “Each to count for one and none for more than one” does not allow the agent to give any more weight to his or her own interests than to the interests of strangers.

The former objection is that utilitarianism is a philosophy for pigs, because it allows the pleasures of pigs the same weight as the pleasures of human beings. Bentham did not shy away from this implication when he said that “quantities of pleasure being equal, pushpin [a simple game played in pubs in Bentham's day] is as good as poetry.” Your question suggests that I take a different view, that I hold that “we must put the emphasis on higher level virtues like artistic and moral emotions, reason and

intelligence.” But I am puzzled as to why you think so, because I’ve never said such a thing. I give no preference to artistic interests over simple interests in physical pleasure. As I have said, it is the strength of the interest that matters. It is only when I discuss issues of life and death that I think reason and intelligence make a difference, because they make it possible for beings to have an interest in the future that other beings, lacking any self-awareness cannot have. So when we kill a being with the capacity for understanding that it has a future, we can be thwarting an interest that is different from any interest we can thwart if we kill a being not capable of understanding that it has a future. But we should distinguish questions about the wrongness of taking life, from questions about what weight should be given to the interests of beings while they are alive.

Since your question misstates my position, the objection you mention at the end of the question does not apply. I do not give any special weight to the emotion of pure altruism, and I do give weight to the feelings of people who would be disturbed to know that severely disabled babies are being killed. But we have to be careful, in general, about giving too much weight to the opinions of those who are not directly affected by something. If we had given too much weight to the views of whites in the American south in the 1950s, we would not have gone ahead with racial integration, because these white racists were deeply disturbed at the prospect of having to sit next to an African American on a bus, or at a lunch counter. That was a terrible situation for African Americans, and as they were most directly affected, it was right to give their views the most weight. Now the whites have adjusted, and most of them accept that racism is wrong. Similarly, in the case of euthanasia for severely disabled infants, it is the families and the infant itself – plus, I would add, although this is a philosophically difficult and disputed point, the interests of any future child that the parents might have if the disabled one dies but would not have if the disabled child lives - who are most affected by it, and whose interests should be given the most weight.

J.D.: -“ I would like to discuss your position in favor of the use of biotechnologies and genetic modifications. The first example will concern cloned and/or transgenic domestic animals: because of the high frequency of severe gestation abnormalities in these experiments, the production of such animals often implies to consider the balance between foetal suffering and suffering of the recipient mother, particularly among bovine. The main decision criteria if it is worth or not to let the pregnancy continue is, from a scientific point of view, firstly to save the foetus life if possible because of the value of such animals, and secondly to take into account the cow suffering. Would you approve this particular analysis from an utilitarian point of view? If not, why? Are there better ways of considering this issue?

P.S.: -“ I’m not sure if the bovine foetus can actually suffer, at least until very late in pregnancy. (Just as I doubt that human foetuses can feel pain, at least until very late in pregnancy.) But we should certainly take into account the suffering of the cow, and of the calf if it is born and has abnormalities.

I have no objection to the analysis you mention, as long as the suffering of the animals is given its full weight, and not discounted, as it so often is, because they are “not human”. Also when you refer to “the value of such animals” we should make it clear that we are talking of possible benefits to everyone, for example through the production of pharmaceutical substances in the milk, and not simply economic benefit to the owner.

I don't know any better ways of considering the issue.”

J.D.: -“ The second example deals with the possibility given to parents by genetic counseling and engineering to have children safe of genetic defects and even positively enhanced, what Jürgen Habermas call “private eugenics”. You say that you don't think that it is intrinsically wrong to use genetic selection if “in each particular case, a particular kind of genetic selection is not wrong because of the bad consequences it will have for the child or for society.” Insofar as we can't predict the consequences of such genetic changes, especially on psychological, social and even moral levels, it seems that we touch the limits of a consequentialist ethic like utilitarianism. Therefore, should we allow this kind of eugenics until we have some evidence to weigh its benefits, to hold on our judgement or to invoke a superior principle (precautionary principle for instance)?”

P.S.: -“ It is true that we can't predict the benefits of the genetic changes for which parents might select in the future. That is why we should proceed slowly and cautiously in this area. But I don't think this is a case for the precautionary principle. If that principle should be invoked at all, it is only in cases of potential disaster. Allowing more and more greenhouse gases to be put into the atmosphere is an example – the risks of unpredictable climate change are huge, and it is not justified to incur such risks if we can avoid doing so with, at most, only small sacrifices to our standard of living. But if we create a small number of human beings who will suffer some adverse psychological or social consequences, that is not an irreversible disaster on a large scale, serious as it may be for the people who suffer these consequences.

The greater concern with “private eugenics” is that it will introduce a two-tier society, in which the rich can pay for genetic selection that will lead them to have enhanced children – perhaps more intelligent, or more athletic, or healthier – while the poor cannot afford such assistance. Then the class division will, over generations, be underpinned by a sharp genetic divide. I would not like to see such a society. But it isn't clear how it will be possible to prohibit the rich from taking advantage of genetic selection for enhancement. Even if this is banned in some countries, they will be able to travel to others. (I doubt that it will be possible to persuade all governments to ban genetic enhancement, because different governments have different attitudes to it.) Think how much parents will do now to get the best possible education for their children. Many of them would do at least as much to ensure that their children have the best genetic advantages, especially if that proves efficacious at getting them into elite educational institutions. The best solution may be for the

state to actually provide financial assistance for those who would like to use genetic selection to enhance their children, but cannot afford to do so.”

J.D.: -“ Recently, the Spanish parliament discussed the proposition “Gran Simio Proyecto” which intended to give human rights to four species: cheetahs, bonobos, gorillas and orang-outangs. It is a great success for you as president of the *Great Ape Project* organization. However, aren’t you guilty of some sort of “speciesism” for spending time and money for this cause, which concerns only a few thousand animals, when there are billions of animals (humans included) unjustly suffering throughout the World (that I confess you also defend through other actions and books)? Or, do ecological threats necessitate more rights to certain species than to others?”

P.S.: -“ When Paola Cavalieri and I founded the Great Ape Project, it was not because apes are endangered, but because they are so close to us in their intelligence and rich emotional life, that we thought the case for giving them some basic rights would be more difficult to resist. Also we were conscious of the fact that there is no major industry built on the exploitation of great apes – as there is with pigs or chickens, for example – and so that there might be less opposition to such an idea. But we never thought of the Great Ape Project as a project that would only benefit great apes. On the contrary, we saw it, and still see it, as a way of bridging the gap between humans and other animals. (The initials of Great Ape Project spell “gap,” a nice touch, we thought, when we coined the name.)

At present we think of humans as one category, and animals as another, as if we are more distinct from a chimpanzee than a chimpanzee is from a mouse. But in genetic terms that is ridiculous – in fact we are the chimpanzee’s closest relative, closer to chimpanzees than they are to gorillas, let alone other animals. This dichotomous way of thinking is also reflected in the thought that only humans have moral status, and all animals are just “things”, with no rights at all. If the Great Ape Project succeeds in gaining recognition for the rights of great apes, it will become easier to recognize that other animals are also not mere things, and deserve some rights too.”

J.D.: -“ Utilitarianism was seen in the 18th and 19th centuries as a philosophy supporting social progress, a liberal stance against monarchic, totalitarian, religious oppression. However, though your political action is clearly left and green oriented, one can ask if your theory of utilitarianism does not confirm today’s liberal capitalist system by just amending it slightly. Instead of promoting charity for the poorest, or discussing the rights of some disabled persons, don’t you think that a true reformist would encourage the development of the poor’s *capabilities* to improve by themselves their own economic situation or to promote values that will encourage the acceptance and care of disabled persons?”

P.S.: -“ You seem to think that I do *not* encourage the development of the poor’s capabilities to improve by themselves their own economic situation, or encourage the acceptance and care of disabled persons. But I do – the best development aid does encourage the

poor's capabilities to improve their own economic situation. I have always particularly supported members of the international Oxfam group, which do exactly this.

You also seem to think that my view about the justifiability of killing severely disabled infants somehow implies that I do not think we should accept and care for disabled persons. But that is another error. My view is specifically about infants, or those who do not have, and never have had, the capacity to express a view about whether they wish to continue to live. Those people with disabilities who are living in our community should be fully accepted, with laws to prohibit discrimination against them in areas like employment, where their disabilities are not relevant to their ability to do the job in question. I also think that nations should, within the limits of their resources, provide the best possible care for people with disabilities.

So there is nothing contrary to my views, or to utilitarianism, in your suggestions. Utilitarianism is always open to new factual information, about what is the best way to bring about improvements. In that sense it is neither capitalist nor socialist, nor anarchist, nor anything else. If it turns out that capitalism is the best way of satisfying preferences, then the utilitarian will be for capitalism. If it turns out that socialism is the best, the utilitarian will be for socialism. If it turns out that anarchism is, then the utilitarian will be for anarchism. Or perhaps there will be other options. The utilitarian will remain open to them too."

J.D.: -“ The last question about economics. Even if one considers your vision of *cosmopolitan charity* not revolutionary enough, one can concede that it may give a sense of duty and life to people who give their money to the poor, and create a sense of global cooperation among humans which is good in itself. However, isn't this solution condemned to be marginal? Indeed, it is as if you wanted to correct the world economy's inequalities by a concept of world “charity market”, which does not guarantee justice or a clear change, as we already see in the USA, where private charity does not prevent the richest country from having a large proportion of poor citizens, and even to suffer from child hunger. From the perspective of a rational individual, if one spends too much money in charity business, one will quickly become worse than his competitors and the less generous people eventually manage to dry up the potential of generous donors.

In contrast, we have recently seen Warren Buffet giving 30 billion dollars to a charity fund, which appears ethically sound and potentially very effective when we learn that he did that for *meritocratic egalitarianism*, *i.e.* in order to contest the privilege given to the “heirs” in general and his in particular. Every human being should mainly rely on the money he gets by her own work and merits. Couldn't this principle be more effectively generalized, in order to banish fortune heritage and spend the money collected to alleviate poverty?”

P.S.: -“ Since the dominant ethical view in the United States is based on rights, rather than utility, and both philosophical and popular thinking is generally hostile to utilitarian ways of thinking, it is not possible to take the United States as a test case of a utilitarian solution to the question of poverty. In contrast, Sweden, where utilitarian thinking is much more widely accepted, has a strong social welfare system and virtually no poverty. If the U.S. government were utilitarian, it would behave more like the Swedish government and – putting aside the issue of foreign aid - allocate far more of its budget to supporting the poorest people in the country.

Warren Buffet’s principle is a good one, but it is good because it is likely to have good consequences, both in terms of the money that is given away – as long as it is given to the right causes, as Buffet’s own donation was – and in terms of the inculcation of the virtues of independence in the children of the wealthy. So it is, once again, not an alternative to utilitarianism, but, if these factual assumptions are correct, an implication of utilitarianism. It is also, I should add, complementary too, rather than in competition with, my suggestion that people should give away a lot of their income all through their lives. There is no need to save all the giving for near the end, as Buffet has done. Of course, he happens to have been a superb investor, and so by retaining it and investing it, was able to give away more in the end. But most of us are not as good at doing that as Buffet was. And what if he had been hit by a bus before he had given it away? Would his heirs have given it away, as he did? We can never know what will happen after our death, which is an important reason for giving money away while we are alive.”

Peter Singer is *Ira W. DeCamp* Professor of Bioethics at the University of Princeton and Laureate Professor at the University of Melbourne. He was born in Australia in 1946 and received his diploma in moral philosophy at the University of Oxford in 1971. Pr. Singer has published more than thirty books and is best known for his book *Animal Liberation* which became the manifesto of an international movement. Many of his books are considered as reference in ethical theory (*Practical Ethics*, 1979) and in applied ethics on subjects such as vegetarianism (*The Way We Eat*, 2006), world poverty (*One World: Ethics and Globalization*, 2002), the defense of apes (*The Great Ape Project*, 1993). His application of utilitarian principles to bioethics and euthanasia (*Rethinking Life and Death*, 1994) has also raised highly controversial critics and debate. He is today one of the most well known and discussed contemporary philosophers.

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