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Other People's Mothers The utilitarian horrors of Peter Singer by Peter Berkowitz

A review of A Darwinian Left: Politics, Evolution, and Cooperation by Peter Singer (Yale University Press, 64 pp., $9.95) and Practical Ethics, Second Edition, by Peter Singer (Cambridge University Press, 395 pp., $18.95).

I.

In early September, The New York Times Sunday Magazine featured a brief article on the solution to world poverty, which in a few short, snappy steps argued to the astonishing conclusion that middle-class American households have a moral obligation to contribute more than one-third of their income (and all households every cent earned above $30,000) to the hungry and disadvantaged around the globe. The editors at the paper seemed to see no irony in the appearance of such an argument in the same magazine whose style and fashion pages regularly promote some of the most conspicuous consumption of the day.

Introducing the author of the article, the Times proclaimed the Australian- born and Oxford-trained philosophy professor Peter Singer to be "perhaps the world's most controversial ethicist." And a week before, Singer, who had been recently appointed amid much (and continuing) furor to a new chair in bioethics at Princeton's University Center for Human Values, was the subject of a long and largely flattering profile in The New Yorker, whose front flap declared him "the most influential living philosopher." Since celebrity is anything but the ordinary reward for a life devoted to teaching and philosophical reflection on ethics, the case of Peter Singer endows the obvious questions --- why the controversy? whence the influence? --- with special interest.

To the obvious questions, there are obvious answers. Singer is controversial for certain remarkable views that he holds: that infanticide and euthanasia (and of course abortion) are not only permissible in certain circumstances, they are sometimes also morally obligatory. And the major part of his influence stems from certain other views, in particular his argument that many non-human animals are, in truth, persons, possessing the same " special claim to be protected" usually thought to be the peculiar privilege of human beings. But controversy and influence do not a philosopher make. Singer's acclaim as well his notoriety are owed to the intellectual respectability he gives to his views in his accessible, engaging, and voluminous writings. His opinions have a reputation for being rigorous. He seems to be a genuinely rational man, a true creature of logic.

Given his reputation as a crafter of arguments, Singer's recent debut in the Times magazine was a puzzling performance. One would think that to reach his dramatic conclusion --- to live a "morally decent life," households must eschew all luxuries and donate that part of their income in excess of what is necessary for their bare necessities to the world's poor --- Singer would need to summon heavy logical and moral artillery. After all, he does not merely suggest that households ought to contribute more money than is customary to charitable causes, or that they should sacrifice some luxuries on behalf of perfect strangers. No, he equates moral decency with an almost monkish renunciation of material goods, popular entertainment, cultivated pleasures, and devotion to the special care of one's friends and family. "The formula," Singer declares, "is simple: whatever money you're spending on luxuries, not necessities, should be given away." A total mortification of the consumerist soul.

To be sure, Singer acknowledges that weakness and selfishness will prevent most of us from coming close to complying with his --- excuse me, with morality's --- minimum imperatives. Yet to justify the moral life as the abstemious life, he makes no appeal to theological categories, to God or sin or redemption. Nor do natural rights, or natural law, or any notion of universal principles of justice, enter into the argument for his simple formula. Instead Singer hangs his radical revision of our common conception of moral decency on a single, surreal, hypothetical dilemma.

Singer's "imaginary example," whose purported purpose is to "probe our intuitions," is in its way strong and ingenious:

> Bob is close to retirement. He has invested most of his savings in a very rare and valuable old car, a Bugatti, which he has not been able to insure. The Bugatti is his pride and joy. In addition to the pleasure he gets from driving and caring for his car, Bob knows that its rising market value means that he will always be able to sell it and live comfortably after retirement. One day when Bob is out for a drive, he parks the Bugatti near the end of a railway siding and goes for a walk up the track. As he does so, he sees that a runaway train, with no one aboard, is running down the railway track. Looking farther down the track, he sees the small figure of a child very likely to be killed by the runaway train. He can't stop the train and the child is too far away to warn of the danger, but he can throw a switch that will divert the train down the siding where his Bugatti is parked. Then nobody will be killed --- but the train will destroy his Bugatti. Thinking of his joy in owning the car and the financial security it represents, Bob decides not to throw the switch. The child is killed. For many years to come, Bob enjoys owning his Bugatti and the financial security it represents.

Most people will immediately respond, Singer contends, that Bob's conduct is "gravely wrong." Suppose that Singer is correct about his readers' typical response. It is worth noting that, though he regularly scolds others for failing to address empirical questions empirically, Singer provides no evidence to support this empirical claim. More importantly, what follows from the moral intuition that Bob ought to sacrifice his pride and joy and the source of his

financial security to save the innocent child's life? What follows, Singer asserts, is the inflexible and unqualified duty, regardless of variations in personal circumstances, to give to the poor, beyond a certain austere minimum, all one's income and wealth.

Bob's dilemma may at first glance seem contrived and outlandish, and wildly remote from ordinary experience; but in the morally relevant respects it is, Singer argues, no different from the challenge we all confront every day: " When Bob first grasped the dilemma that faced him as he stood by that railway switch, he must have thought how extraordinarily unlucky he was to be placed in a situation in which he must choose between the life of an innocent child and the sacrifice of most of his savings. But he was not unlucky at all. We are all in that situation." Are we? One reason to doubt that any moral formula --- much less a simple universal formula that mandates a major transformation in how we live our lives --- can be derived from Bob's dilemma is the powerful lack of similarity between Bob's situation and our own.

Singer's imaginary example radically simplifies matters. Bob appears to be wifeless, childless, parentless, and friendless. And Bob appears to have only two choices: he can save his prized possession and personal fortune, which will allow the child to die, or, saving the child, Bob can allow his financial security to be wiped out. In deciding how much of our income we ought to give away, however, surely we face a smooth spectrum of possibilities. We can give a few dollars, or a few hundred dollars, or a few thousand dollars. We can give to the poor ten percent of our income, as do many pious Christians and observant Jews (who, on Singer's account, fall considerably short of their obligations and therefore live morally indecent lives). We can give away one fifth of our income, as does Singer (and very admirably, though he stands condemned as morally indecent by his own simple formula). To replicate the situation in which we actually find ourselves, Singer's example would not only have to allow degrees of generosity or selfless giving, it would also have to incorporate a variety of factors and recognize a range of tradeoffs. For in our lives we must balance sacrifices in personal wealth against, among other things, the kind of injuries that we can practicably prevent, the number of innocent sufferers involved, the proximity of those in need to us, and the cost of our benevolence to those whom we love and with whom we share our lives.

Reflection on the many textures and myriad colors of the moral life suggests that Singer's use of the imaginary example also distorts our situation as citizens and human beings by focusing on a single moral intuition to the exclusion of all others. In fact, a good part of the drama of the moral life arises from the clash between competing moral intuitions. While it may be true that many have an intuition that we should sacrifice considerable personal wealth to save innocent human lives, some of these same are likely also to possess the intuition that we have stronger obligations to care for the personal happiness of our family and friends than to tend to the basic needs of passing acquaintances and perfect strangers. And no doubt individuals could be found who, while appreciating the distinctive duties owed strangers and intimates, also intuit that the perfection of their talents, which requires wealth and leisure, stands as an obligation that they owe to both themselves and others.

Having casually invested intuition with moral authority, Singer overlooks that in living the moral life we find ourselves subject to the authority of multiple and competing intuitions. And even if we had but a single relevant intuition concerning our duty to give, or if all our relevant intuitions sang in harmonious unison, what is the philosophical basis for investing intuitions with moral authority? Singer himself observes that "most people could be wrong; we can't decide moral issues by taking opinion polls." But the argument he offers for viewing massive worldwide redistribution of wealth as a moral imperative rests on an even flimsier basis than opinion polls, and that is his own armchair speculation about people's moral intuitions as inferred from their imagined response to a single philosophical thought experiment.

Singer argues that if you think person X should do act Y in situation Z, then, in order to be consistent, you should do act A in situation B. But he has nothing to say about the goodness or rightness of Y, other than the (falsifiable) contingency that many people believe person X should do it in situation Z. No doubt it belongs among the tasks of philosophy to identify our basic intuitions and to clarify their implications. But another of philosophy's task is to assess the soundness of our intuitions, to sift out what is owed to ignorance, bias, sentimentality, and confusion, and to refine what remains into principles that are sturdy, flexible, and just.

On examination, it appears that Singer's imaginary example is designed less to "probe our intuitions" than it is carefully constructed to serve a single solitary intuition, and to vindicate a peculiarly extreme and one-sided interpretation of the moral life. It also appears that Singer's "penchant for provocation," as the Times breathlessly put it, can be nourished by a rather energetic inclination to obfuscation. Of course, one can only demand so much, even from an eminent philosophy professor, when he writes in the pages of a daily newspaper. And Singer performs a valuable service by impelling readers to confront, and make moral sense of, the great gap between our prosperity and the desperate poverty in which large portions of the world's population live. Yet the careful consideration of his most controversial views and his most influential arguments reveals that the obfuscation evident in the Times article is not a mere lapse from customary rigor for the sake of reaching a popular audience. It is, rather, part and parcel of Singer's characteristic approach to the problems of ethics.

II.

Singer has developed his ideas in numerous articles and books, some of which are scholarly, some of which are popular, and some of which blur the genres. He dealt with political themes at the beginning of his career in Democracy and Disobedience, has published short synoptic volumes on Hegel and Marx, and recently completed a biography of the American animal rights activist Henry Spira; but the preponderance of his writings concentrate on sensitive and high-profile moral issues involving decisions about life and death: animal rights, reproduction, abortion, infanticide, euthanasia, famine relief, and refugees. His best known book is Animal Liberation. Since its appearance in 1975, it has sold more than 500,000

copies, and cannot but provoke fair-minded readers to examine their views about the myriad uses --- some clearly brutal --- to which we put animals for our convenience, health, and pleasure.

Singer's tiny new book is another story. A Darwinian Left is not devoid of useful admonitions about the dangers of utopian visions, and the aspirations to remake human nature, and the dreams of the perfectibility of humankind; but it features a central line of argument that manages to be both unexceptionable and incoherent. Singer does not argue, as his title might seem to imply, that what follows from Darwin is a progressive politics; he himself emphatically endorses the view that values cannot be deduced from facts, including the facts of evolution. Rather, he contends that if the left wishes to effectively pursue its primary goal --- which Singer understands to be the creation of an egalitarian society through the aggressive redistribution of wealth --- it must face up to the truths about our descent from and kinship with non-human animals. To feed the hungry, and care for the sick, and emancipate the oppressed, and lift up the poor, the left must devise programs based on a realistic understanding of the facts of human nature; and the best guide to human nature, according to Singer, is "Darwinian thinking."

Singer casually assumes that a politics of the left is synonymous with justice. And he writes as if the theory of evolution, unsupplemented by the study of history, literature, religion, and philosophy, provides the left with more or less all that it needs to know concerning human nature. His book also glosses over contemporary disputes that rage in and outside of biology about the scope of sociobiological theory, which Singer treats as the authoritative interpretation of Darwin. But what is most devastating to Singer's thesis that the left should ground itself in the theory of evolution is that the sociobiological interpretation of Darwin favored by Singer subverts the extreme egalitarian aspirations in the defense of which Singer writes.

According to Singer, the longstanding aversion to Darwin on the left derives from the view that evolutionary theory teaches that man is by nature selfish. Singer does not deny that Darwin teaches this, or that it is true. But he argues that it constitutes at most half the truth. As Darwinian thinking has developed, Singer writes, it has come to the conclusion that human beings are also hard-wired for cooperation. Early forms of Darwinism were unable to explain the fact of cooperation and the reality of human sociality; but sociobiology, of the sort best-known from the work of E.O. Wilson, argues that it makes evolutionary sense to rein in our desires and to make sacrifices, even of our lives, for the sake of those who are related to us --- it makes evolutionary sense, that is, when human life is understood in terms of the drive to pass along our genes. Life is indeed a struggle for survival, but of genes, not of individuals or nations; and in this struggle of the "selfish gene," unfolding over millennia, individuals with a propensity to cooperate with kin were naturally selected.

On the basis of this currently popular interpretation of Darwin --- this greening of Darwin, you might say --- Singer suggests that altruism, including " genuine altruism," which he defines as "an impartial concern for all of our fellow humans, or, better still, for all sentient beings," is grounded in our genes. Accordingly, the left must learn to take account of our dual nature, channeling the propensity for selfishness into productive activities that advance the public interest, and institutionalizing incentives to encourage the expressions of our propensity for altruism. Given the extent of the biological determinism that he embraces and the degree of social engineering he envisages, it seems as if, on Singer's account, the left would do well to forget about ethics, at least any ethics that supposes that human beings are rational and free and can act otherwise than they are programmed, and can arrive at responsible judgments that differ from the message that society sends them.

In dividing human nature between narrow selfishness and impartial concern for others, Singer wishes to acknowledge a certain complexity. In reality, he not only uncritically reduces the panoply of human passions and interests to two basic propensities, but actually also obscures sociobiology's own central insight about altruism and the challenge that it poses to the universal benevolence that underlies many leftist hopes. For the altruism that sociobiology teaches is built into our nature is not primarily the "genuine altruism" that inspires Singer's cross-species egalitarianism. It is, rather, "kin altruism," which is directed toward those who possess a portion of our genetic make-up. In practice, this means that the drive to ensure the survival of our genes will lead us to act selflessly on behalf of children, siblings, and other close relatives, but it will move us only very weakly if at all on behalf of perfect strangers. Indeed, "kin altruism" powerfully discourages sacrifice on behalf of total strangers, because such sacrifice reduces the time, energy, and wealth we can devote to family and kin group, who alone share some of our genes. Thus it is not only our natural selfishness but also our natural altruism --- which makes us partial to our near and dear, at least according to the form of Darwinian thinking Singer embraces --- that undercuts the politics of universal benevolence. So much for a Darwinian left.

III.

It is not this recent ill-conceived foray into politics, but Practical Ethics, which was first published in 1979, and then revised and reissued in 1993, and which by now has sold more than 120,000 copies, that is most representative of Singer's thought. The book gathers together in one place and restates the arguments that have earned him fame and influence. It has been assigned as a textbook for ethics courses across the United States and in Europe; it has been translated into German, Italian, Spanish, and Swedish, as well as Japanese; and it is used by Singer in his own class on ethics at Princeton. It aims to be both academic and practical, to instruct students and to advance public debate. It provides an excellent opportunity to assess Singer's philosophical achievement.

Singer begins his book by stating what he believes ethics is not. It is not, as Singer says "traditional moralists" believe, "a set of prohibitions particularly concerned with sex" (a charge, it must immediately be noted, that is patently false, at least if one numbers Aristotle, Augustine, Maimonides, and Aquinas among traditional moralists), since "sex raises no unique moral issues at all." Nor is ethics, as Singer suggests that realists and cynics think, "an ideal system that is noble in theory but no good in practice," since "the whole point of ethical judgments is to guide practice." Nor is ethics, as Singer maintains that rights theorists hold, "a system of short and simple rules," since simple rules often conflict and sometimes an apparently sound rule, when scrupulously followed, can lead to disaster. Nor is ethics, as many religious believers and some free-thinking nonbelievers contend, "something intelligible only in the context of religion," because we properly define the good independently of God's judgment and "our everyday observation of our fellow human beings clearly shows that ethical behaviour does not require belief in heaven and hell." Nor is ethics "relative or subjective" in the sense that it reflects our culture's point of view or our own personal judgments, because then we could have no rational basis for moral praise or blame, thereby "making nonsense of the valiant efforts of would-be moral reformers."

Many objections could be raised to Singer's catalogue of misconceptions about ethics. Proponents of the conceptions he rejects are likely to protest the crudity with which their views are introduced and then summarily dispatched. Those who have studied Mill's account, in On Liberty, of the many- sidedness of morals and politics, or have learned (as Mill did) from Plato's dialogues to appreciate the partiality and the vulnerability of our opinions about justice, or who have simply taken the time to listen closely to the give and take of ordinary people arguing about the issues of the day, will be taken aback by Singer's categorical and complete rejection of ideas with which he disagrees, and by his inability to find in other perspectives and approaches any power or plausibility or part of the truth.

Since his intention in beginning his book with an examination of the nature and the scope of ethics is to provide a preliminary overview of his subject matter, perhaps the most serious objection to Singer's bundle of errors concerns what he leaves out. Among the opinions that he apparently deems unworthy of even criticism and refutation is the oldest understanding of ethics, the one developed by Aristotle (the founder of ethics as an independent philosophical subject) and since elaborated in countless works of literature and history, namely, that ethics in essence is about character. Aristotle taught that ethics --- which derives from ethos, the ancient Greek word for character --- is the branch of philosophy that studies the virtues, the exercise of which enable human beings to act well and flourish, to live the kind of life that makes a human being truly happy, just, and good.

Though he recognizes no intellectual need or philosophical obligation to consider on the merits the view that ethics is essentially about character, Singer in practice rejects it in favor of the opinion, quite common in universities today, that the essence of ethics is reason. "The notion of living according to ethical standards," he innocuously observes, "is tied up with the

notion of defending the way one is living, of giving a reason for it, of justifying it." But in practice, for Singer, the giving of reasons is not merely tied up with ethics, it is the very heart and soul of ethics.

And the right kind of reason-giving occurs from the perspective of "a universal point of view." On this, Singer implies, the Western philosophical tradition is in all but complete and unbroken agreement. "From ancient times," he asserts, "philosophers and moralists have expressed the idea that ethical conduct is acceptable from a point of view that is somehow universal." Singer's "somehow" might indicate a certain tentativeness, a recognition that his thesis is in fact somehow open to question; but he immediately proceeds to suggest that it is not really debatable at all. Gesturing on its behalf to an overwhelming array of teachers and teachings --- Moses and Jesus, Stoic natural law, Kant's categorical imperative, Adam Smith's impartial spectator, Bentham's utilitarianism, Rawls's procedural liberalism, Sartre's existentialism, and Habermas's discourse ethics --- Singer implies that in philosophy and religion support for the identity of the universal point of view with the ethical point of view is, well, universal. And this universal point of view, Singer suggests, goes beyond the merely formal: it not only takes into account all people, it also has built into it the substantive idea that all persons must be taken account of equally.

As in the case of his effort to say what ethics is not, however, Singer's preliminary attempt to say what ethics is quickly falters before certain immediate and imposing difficulties. In equating the ethical point of view with the universal point of view and the universal point of view with the idea of equality, Singer does not note that from ancient times many distinguished philosophers have also rejected the notion that a single rule or standard governs all individuals and applies to all conduct. In his long list of eminent thinkers he somehow does not manage to mention among classic thinkers the names of Plato, Aristotle, Epicurus, Machiavelli, or Burke, and among contemporary thinkers Hannah Arendt and Alasdair MacIntyre, who all reject the equation of ethics with an abstract principle of human equality. Nor does Singer distinguish the variety of ways in which a rule or a standard might apply universally.

What Singer means by universality is a substantive claim about equal worth regardless of excellence or merit. But it is obvious, or it should be obvious, that universality by no means implies equality. Nietzsche may be wrong on the merits, but there is no internal contradiction in his claim, fervently argued in Beyond Good and Evil, that free spirits and the philosophers of the future possess special rights and privileges. It is a claim that is at once resolutely aristocratic and resolutely universal: wherever and whenever they arise, declares Nietzsche, rare human types are entitled to liberties that ought to be absolutely off-limits to the ordinary run of men and women.

Unfazed by these and related difficulties, Singer proceeds to suggest that not only is there a natural affinity between the ethical point of view and the school of ethics known as utilitarianism, but that utilitarianism and practical ethics are for all intents and purposes one

and the same. In 1789, in Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation, the English rationalist and progressive reformer Jeremy Bentham provided a classic statement of utilitarianism's core idea: "By the principle of utility is meant that principle which approves or disapproves of every action whatsoever, according to the tendency which it appears to have to augment or diminish the happiness of the party whose interest is in question: or, what is the same thing in other words, to promote or to oppose that happiness." A form of what moral philosophers call consequentialism, utilitarianism does seem to give expression to the common sense idea (it is to common sense that Singer is explicitly appealing) that in determining the morality of an action, we must look to its results, whether and to what extent the action in question brings benefit or harm.

But this common sense idea does not exhaust what common sense has to say about ethics. For there is also a natural affinity between the common sense view of ethics and the great rival to consequentialism in modern philosophy. That school, whose towering figure is Kant, and which sometimes goes by the daunting name of deontology, argues that the relevant factor in determining the morality of an action is not its foreseen consequences but the rational intentions that motivate and guide it. If it is a staple of common sense that consequences matter in morals, it is no less a staple of common sense that in morality intentions matter, that sometimes we must seek to do the right thing come what may, that evil must not be done even for the sake of good consequences.

Common sense would have us tend to both consequences and intentions. Just as it is a mistake to suppose that consequences are irrelevant to moral conduct, so, too, it is a mistake to imagine that right and wrong can be determined by a utilitarian calculation of consequences alone. Some things --- the framing of innocents, rape, slavery, murder --- are wrong in themselves, and cannot be justified on the grounds that, in this circumstance or that circumstance, the overall social good will be served. This is the great idea captured in Kant's third formulation of the Categorical Imperative: "Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end."

It is the appeal to common sense that suggests that it is a mistake to identify the ethical point of view either with the calculation of consequences, in the manner of the utilitarians, or with purity of intentions, in the manner the Kantians think correct. Surely the moral life is best and most responsibly construed as consisting in the effort to heed and to harmonize the competing claims of both these ideals. But Singer, under the guise of elaborating the allegedly irreducible features of the ethical point of view, reads this fundamental tension in the moral life right out of existence.

IV.

Singer wishes to read into utilitarianism a substantive and universal doctrine concerning human equality: that the happiness with which one ought to be concerned is everybody's happiness, rather than some people's happiness --- one's nation's, or community's, or family's happiness --- or one's own happiness. Among the more disconcerting implications of this doctrine is that the happiness of your spouse, or child, or mother is to you, morally speaking, of no greater significance than the happiness of a distant stranger.

Although they are compatible with it, Singer's interpretations of universality and equality are certainly not entailed by, and they are certainly very far from the only orientations consistent with, the principle of utility. In its classical formulation, it is worth noting, the principle of utility refers to "the happiness of the party whose interest is in question." It does not, by itself, specify the parties or the range of parties whose interests are relevant to the calculation of consequences. To be sure, most utilitarians follow Mill in supposing that in calculating "the greatest good for the greatest number" it is only reasonable and fair for " everybody to count for one, nobody for more than one." But this is an entirely separate matter which requires an independent argument. That neither Bentham nor any of his successors have supplied the argument lends force to the claim advanced by Charles Taylor, Hilary Putnam, and others that the principle that the happiness of each should be given equal weight is a secularized version of the Christian doctrine of the sanctity of human life. Ironically, to the extent that utilitarians such as Singer, under the guise of the logic of utility, succeed in smuggling in their preferences for universal equality, it is because their readers continue to presuppose at a deep and inarticulate level the very doctrine of the dignity of man that Singer's utilitarianism aims to overthrow.

As Henry Sidgwick concluded in his great work The Methods of Ethics, which appeared in 1874, one cannot on utilitarian grounds demonstrate that equal concern for all is superior to rational egoism. Why, then, shouldn't looking out for Number One be seen as a rival teaching about ethics rather than, as Singer attempts to argue, a rival to ethics? After all, putting oneself first --- whether understood from a mundane perspective as the business of self-preservation, or in more exalted terms as the pursuit of self-perfection --- can be formulated as a principle and understood either in terms of maximizing happiness or protecting individual rights; and it can can govern universally; and it requires the cultivation and exercise of specific virtues.

What accounts for the long trail of objections, difficulties, and doubts created by Singer's preliminary efforts to dissolve difficulties and silence doubts is his determination to present one particular opinion about the nature of ethics as if it were necessitated by or identical to the ethical point of view. What accounts for the failure of so many of his colleagues to be disturbed by this act of intellectual imperialism is perhaps the extent to which they share his prejudice that the principal task of ethics is to derive from fixed and unquestionable principles the implications of human equality for moral and political life.

Singer contends that the equation of ethics with equality is not willful or partisan but a necessary inference from the ethical point of view. "Equality," he declares, "is a basic ethical principle, not an assertion of fact," which is his way of saying that equality inheres in the very logical structure of the idea of ethics. All arguments that instead attempt to find the basis for human equality in some empirical quality of human nature --- intelligence, rationality, moral personality --- are doomed, according to Singer, because these qualities can always be seen to be unequally distributed. Never mind that thinkers such as Hobbes, Locke, and Kant argued that equality can be derived from human nature or our nature as rational beings on the grounds that it is the capacities, which are essential, that are morally relevant, while the differences in capacity among members of the species are too slight to be of moral significance.

In any case, Singer is certainly correct to argue that differences in talents and abilities do not in themselves justify an inegalitarian political order, because "there is no logically compelling reason for assuming that a difference in ability between two people justifies any difference in the amount of consideration we give to their interests." Yet Singer is quite wrong to proceed as if this observation provided an argument in favor of egalitarian political arrangements. For what Singer fails to point out is that there is also no logically compelling reason for assuming that a difference in ability between two people can under no circumstances justify differences in the amount of consideration we give to their interests. On the question of human equality, logic is strictly neutral.

Nevertheless, a partisan interpretation of equality lies at the core of Singer's understanding of ethics:

The essence of the principle of equal consideration of interests is that we give equal weight in our moral deliberations to the like interests of all those affected by our actions. This means that if only X and Y would be affected by a possible act, and if X stands to lose more than Y stands to gain, it is better not to do the act. We cannot, if we accept the principle of equal consideration of interests, say that doing the act is better, despite the facts described, because we are more concerned about Y than we are about X. What the principle really amounts to is this: an interest is an interest, whoever's interest it may be.

It is of course difficult to quarrel with the proposition "an interest is an interest." But this having been established, Singer leaves open and scarcely addressed several sizeable questions.

Call the first question the Aristotelian question. What are the relevant respects in which interests ought to be judged like, and what are the relevant respects in which they should be judged unlike? If X is my child and Y is a perfect stranger, and if my child and the stranger are similarly hungry, poorly clothed, and in need of a roof over their heads, then X and Y may have a like interest in obtaining food, clothes, and shelter. But can they be said to have a like interest in having me provide for them food, clothes, and shelter? Can I be said to have a like

interest in caring for my child and for a perfect stranger? It depends in large measure on the answers we give to substantive questions about the nature of interests and the texture of relations, questions which the laws of logic cannot answer, the principle of utility cannot resolve, and the principle of equal consideration of interests cannot adjudicate.

Call the second question the Millian question. At what point, if any, does the influence of an action on someone else's interest become so indirect, so remote, and so slight as to cease to affect that interest in a morally relevant sense? We ordinarily tell others to mind their own business when we feel them to be meddling in our affairs, and when we receive unwanted advice we reproach our would be benefactors by reminding them that our actions do not concern them. But like the teaspoon of water which, when dropped into the ocean eventually spreads through all parts of the ocean equally, every individual action can be said eventually, if only indirectly, remotely, and slightly, to affect every last person's interests. Hence it is not sufficient, in determining the morality of an action, to consider only whether an action affects an interest; one must consider also the directness, the quality, and the extent of the action's impact on the other's interest.

Call the third question the Kantian question. Why should interests be accorded any moral worth at all? Inasmuch as many (if not all) interests are not under our control, but are formed by forces external to our will, perhaps interests are only equal in the trivial sense that they equally lack moral worth. If my interests are not the expression of deliberation and choice, but rather reflect the cold promptings of biological impulse, or the mechanical operations of the physical laws of cause and effect, or the indoctrination by the established authorities into the values shared by my community, perhaps they are morally worthless. Without a plausible account of human freedom, all of our interests might reasonably be seen to be morally irrelevant, equally so.

Singer should not be faulted for failing to provide definitive answers to these enduring questions. No one else has answered them adequately either. They are essentially controversial questions; and the controversy over them was set in motion whenever human beings first began wondering what we owe each other and ourselves, and worrying about how we can be sure that our considered judgments really are correct. Precious knowledge has been gained and brilliant light has been shed, but in these matters no definitive conclusions are in sight; and this intellectual inconclusiveness is itself a measure of our moral vitality.

If you allowed Singer's preliminaries to guide your understanding of ethics, however, you would never guess that any serious issues about human nature, the status of justice, or the claims of divine authority remain unresolved. Singer's grave fault is to proceed as if the fundamental controversies about the nature of ethics have not only been solved, but solved to the advantage of his theory; as if the basic philosophical questions concerning the roots and reach of the moral life not only have all been answered, but answered in his favor.

V.

Perhaps the most egregious example of Singer's bad habit of treating as a settled matter issues over which reasonable people disagree --- and certainly the most significant such misrepresentation for his own theory --- is his grandiose repudiation of the doctrine of "the sanctity of human life." Singer argues that the doctrine of the sanctity of human life is a form of "speciesism," an irrational prejudice rooted in discredited medieval religious ideas that gives priority to human beings while sanctioning discrimination against and oppression of non-human animals.

We know, Singer explains, as if he were reciting the obvious for the umpteenth time, that men and women are not created in God's image, because . . . well, as a matter of fact Singer never does say how it is we do know for sure, how rationally and in good faith we can conclude once and for all that the truths of faith are altogether empty and untrue. Proceeding as if atheism --- which may be true, but certainly requires argument --- were a self-evident truth, an unrebuttable presumption, Singer contends that in the absence of divine sanction there is no reason to regard human life, just because it is human, as worth more than animal life.

On the basis of his atheistic premise, coupled with Singer's contention that "the claim to equality does not rest on the possession of intelligence, moral personality, rationality, or similar matters of fact," one might wonder what obstacle remains to the conclusion that might makes right, or what resources could be called upon to justify treating any form of animal life, human or non-human, as deserving of respect. Singer has an answer, naturally; but the answer hurls his theory into incoherence.

What counts in determining whether respect is owed, says Singer, is whether the being in question is a person. Astonishingly, though they are the fathers of the rights-based moral philosophy that Bentham derided as "nonsense on stilts," Singer follows Locke and Kant in defining a person as "a rational and self-conscious being." But he goes beyond them in two distinctive ways. First, he contends that a considerable variety of non-human animals are capable of reasoning, remembering, and recognizing others, and so they are persons in the relevant sense of the term. Second, he maintains that insofar as particular human beings are incapable of reasoning, remembering, and recognizing others, they cannot be considered persons. Some of the extraordinary implications of Singer's scheme are immediately obvious: dogs and dolphins are persons, while fetuses, newborns, and victims of Alzheimer's disease are not.

Singer wishes to have the reader believe that his moral theory is of a piece, the essential elements elicited from common sense, self-evident truths, and the rationally irresistible judgments of history, and then seamlessly bound together by the unerring and uncompromising laws of logic. Yet the principle of utility, the principle of equal consideration of interests, and the definition of a person, are not obvious, or necessary, or conceptually

connected. And considered apart from the causes for which Singer enlists them, moreover, Singer's leading principles produce some rather startling conclusions, though not always the startling conclusions in behalf of which Singer enlists them.

Singer consistently reaches egalitarian and liberationist conclusions, but his basic ideas lay the groundwork for a regime of savage inequality. For Singer himself maintains that equality cannot be grounded in human intelligence, moral personality, or rationality, because such qualities or capacities are unequally distributed among human beings. If rationality and self-consciousness nevertheless define the morally significant person --- as Singer insists that they do, in his case for animal rights, euthanasia, infanticide, and abortion --- then why shouldn't greater rationality make you more of a person, or a more valuable person, an individual entitled to a greater proportion of society's scarce resources?

Since it only tells you to treat like interests equally, and it does not tell you which interests are in the relevant respects alike, no violation of the principle of equal consideration of interests would appear to be involved in determining that the interests of the artistically and intellectually gifted differ qualitatively from, and are superior to, the interests of the ordinary and below-ordinary person, and therefore should count for more. And since it only tells you to approve or to disapprove of an act according to its tendency to augment or to diminish the happiness of the party whose interest is in question, but it does not identify the nature of happiness or specify the parties whose interests are appropriately taken into account, the principle of utility would seem to leave the artistically and the intellectually gifted free to give binding reasons for the maximization of their own happiness, and, insofar as they attain positions of power, to govern so as to advance their own superior interests. Singer thinks himself a great egalitarian, and he wishes to lead a philosophically reconstituted left; but his confused thinking leads in the opposite direction. Radically aristocratic arrangements appear to be not only consistent with his principles, they seem to be even encouraged by his principles.

VI.

Singer's practical conclusions, when they are understood to be animated by the irredentist impulse to push forward the boundaries of equality and individual autonomy into new realms, relations, and species, are rather predictable. They can be neatly summarized, as follows.

Since all animals are sentient beings, their pleasure and pain should be incorporated into our calculations about which actions to perform and which to avoid. Since many non-human animals are persons in the technical sense of the term, they should enjoy protections and privileges normally reserved for human beings alone. We should probably not eat any animals, and we certainly should cease to breed them in cramped, squalid conditions in which their lives are nothing but misery and wretchedness; and owing to the suffering that they must endure, we should also re-think the use of animals in medical and psychological

research. Since the fetus or the unborn child is not a person in the technical sense of the term, abortion is morally permissible; indeed, it poses no unique moral issues at all, and if killing the fetus is likely to increase the overall happiness in the world, then abortion is an unambiguous moral good. In consultation with their physician, parents rightly choose infanticide when their newborn is "severely disabled" --- a class of unfortunates that Singer understands expansively to include those afflicted with Down's syndrome and hemophilia --- and killing their child will permit the parents to try again to bring a healthy baby into the world. Adults suffering from diseases that cause severe and unending pain should be allowed to choose euthanasia. There is a universal moral obligation to relieve poverty and to aid refugees, certainly to an extent substantially greater than now recognized by any country and by all but the most extraordinary individuals. And we have a moral obligation to protect the environment to advance the interests of all the persons in the world, human and non-human alike.

Those are Singer's teachings. It must be acknowledged, notwithstanding the flawed and incomplete arguments by which he arrives at many or even all of these conclusions, that he often impels one to think where thought had seemed no longer necessary. It is useful to be reminded that important principles are at stake in apparently unimportant occasions. The fact is that the new cashmere sweater for your sweetheart that you have been saving up for all summer, or the night on the town at the end of the long week that you tell yourself makes the idiocies at the office seem endurable, to say nothing of the splurge on the Caribbean vacation that promises to restore both your humanity and your tan, all involve outlays of money that could easily have been used to feed the hungry, house the homeless, and educate the ignorant.

So where does one draw a principled line? How does one respond to one's conscience conscientiously? The attempt to answer Singer often leaves one uneasy, in part because there are no easy answers to the hard questions that he poses. And his own easy answers leave one uneasier still.

One of the reasons for the unease is that in far too many cases the reasoning by which Singer moves from his premises to his conclusions turns out to be as badly flawed as the reasoning that he uses to establish his premises' validity. He consistently employs several rather disreputable rhetorical maneuvers, all of which come down to the self-congratulatory imposition of extremely stringent demands on arguments of others accompanied by the quiet relaxation of the demands for evidence and precision on arguments of his own.

Thus Singer insists on the moral irrelevance of the fact that a view is "widely accepted" when the view is opposed to his own; but when they support his position, Singer shows little compunction about appealing to "widely accepted views." Similarly, Singer frequently attempts to discredit the views of his opponents by taking their arguments to a logical extreme, while ignoring the extreme implications that inhere in the logic of his own doctrine.

And while Singer takes his opponents to task for failing to supply relevant empirical evidence, he glosses over the empirically questionable claims on which his own arguments rely.

These obfuscatory maneuvers perform heavy labor in Singer's notorious defense of infanticide. First, there is Singer's flip-flop on the moral relevance of "widely accepted views." According to Singer, since there is no morally relevant difference between a fetus and a newborn infant --- like a three-month old fetus, a newborn is sentient, but like a three-month old fetus, the newborn is neither rational nor self-conscious --- infanticide, like abortion, is not morally wrong. To support this, Singer adduces widely accepted views from other times and places. He notes approvingly that infanticide was once common, and he suggests that its demise, in which he finds nothing to be thankful for, should be understood as a result of a certain lamentable Christian idiosyncracy. (This is somewhat unfair to Christianity, which must proudly share the blame with Judaism, which took an earlier stand in the ancient world against child sacrifice and infanticide). In this connection, Singer notes that Plato and Aristotle endorsed infanticide, though he neglects to explore the significance of the fact that the assumptions underlying their endorsement of infanticide were at work in their calm and considered justification of slavery. But the plain fact that many adults in modern western liberal democracies are horrified by the thought of infanticide, on the grounds of "the widely accepted obligation to protect the sanctity of human life," counts for little in Singer's analysis.

Then there is Singer's consistently inconsistent concern with pursuing the logic of an idea all the way to the end. To show how silly the opposition to abortion is, Singer suggests that if pro-lifers took their views seriously they would find that they have a moral obligation to protect calves, pigs, and chickens, "for on any fair comparison of morally relevant characteristics, like rationality, self-consciousness, awareness, autonomy, pleasure and pain, and so on, the calf, the pig and the much derided chicken come out well ahead of the fetus at any stage of pregnancy --- while if we make the comparison with a fetus of less than three months, a fish would show more signs of consciousness."

In the process of inviting a fair comparison, Singer has unfairly omitted a crucial and morally relevant characteristic: the capacity to develop. Unlike a fish, which is incapable of ever becoming different from what it already is --- there is only one way to be a fish, and all members of the species exemplify it --- there is no telling the unique person into which the unborn child might develop. But put aside Singer's defective effort to reduce the pro-life position to absurdity. Of greater interest is the full range of intriguing implications of Singer's pro-infanticide position.

Consider his restriction of infanticide to newborns who are "severely disabled." This restriction, already expansive enough to include hemophiliacs, derives no support from the logic of his position. Singer is right that on the basis of his premises there is no relevant difference between abortion and the killing of "severely disabled infants." But why does he confine the comparison to newborn infants who are severely disabled? He certainly does not

confine abortion to severely disabled fetuses. If newborns, like unborn children, are not persons, and it is permissible to abort unborn children regardless of whether they are afflicted or healthy, then newborns, afflicted or healthy, should be subject to killing too, provided of course that "on balance, and taking account the interests of everyone affected," their killing will increase the total amount of happiness or satisfied preferences in the world. Singer certainly offers no good utilitarian reason to confine the killing to severely disabled newborns.

And yet it is tolerably clear why Singer blinks. Call it an old fashioned sense of the dignity of human life. Nagged by such a scruple, he dodges the logical implications of his newfangled utilitarian calculus, and seeks to build a fence around the sweeping license to take newborn human life so obviously authorized by his ethical outlook. Yet Singer cannot articulate the actual justifications for the restrictions that he would impose, for to do so would make manifest a certain philosophical faintness of heart. He would be forced to acknowledge the dependence of his own ethical conclusions on the doctrine of the dignity of man that his ethical theory is designed rigorously to replace.

Singer, it should also be said, does wrestle with the question of killing for the sake of promoting a greater good: a classic stumbling block for utilitarian ethics. One solution that he suggests is that whatever benefits could be expected to flow from permitting human beings to be killed on the basis of calculations about the greatest good would be offset by the general anxiety in the population that would be produced by making, in the interest of the good of the whole, each individual subject to having his or her life cut short at any moment --- a sort of utilitarian terror. Of course, this argument cannot apply to newborns, since newborns do not feel anxiety about the laws under which they live, nor are any who do feel such anxiety in danger of becoming newborns for a second time.

According to singer's utilitarian reasoning, severely disabled infants often face a life of low quality and unending suffering that will also only bring misery to their parents and those around them. Perhaps. But surely the same argument could be made, in some cases at least, about only somewhat disabled infants and their parents, especially if the parents are short-tempered and self-centered. And the day may not be far off when science enables us to make immediate predictions about our children's life prospects. What, then, of the especially ambitious parents of newborns of merely ordinary physical abilities and average intelligence who have their hearts set on their son becoming a dashing quarterback or their daughter becoming a high-powered Fortune Five Hundred CEO? Such parents (surely no less imaginable than Bob and his Bugatti) may suffer terribly from raising a son whose averageness will likely prevent him from starring on the football field or a daughter whose intellect is probably not up to competing at the highest levels of commerce. Indeed, the experience of raising merely ordinary children may disappoint and distress especially ambitious parents to such an extent that "on balance, and taking account the interests of

everyone affected," their suffering will outweigh whatever happiness their newborn can reasonably be expected to find in life and add to the world. For such parents, from Singer's perspective at least, infanticide would seem to be a moral alternative.

Finally, Singer tacks between the scholar's insistence on reliable empirical evidence and his own unscholarly indifference to empirical evidence. He complains, on the one hand, that opponents of infanticide and euthanasia ignore the harsh facts about the lives of the severely disabled; but he casually posits, on the other hand, that on balance an ordinary human life contains more happiness than sadness. "The infant exists: His life can be expected to contain a positive balance of happiness over misery." Really? Plausible or implausible, this is an empirical claim for which Singer offers no evidence. It is certainly far from a self-evident truth or unrebuttable presumption. Many are the thoughtful men and women who have come to a pessimistic conclusion about life, or whose bitter experience has persuaded them that the Greek god Silenus was right and the best for man is to have never been born, and the next best to die quickly. And if one reduces the moral life to the summing of pains and pleasures, how can one rule out that all is not "vanity of vanities," because "all things are full of weariness: man cannot utter it: the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing"?

Perhaps, on balance, many or most or all human lives contain more suffering than happiness. This is an empirical question, and within a utilitarian framework how it is answered is of considerable significance. Given his repudiation of natural rights and the doctrine of the sanctity of human life, for example, Singer's practical ethics would seem to open the door to calculations concerning the status of the sensitive and the thoughtful --- those peculiarly alive to, and prone to suffer from, the absurdities, tragedies, and horrors in which our existence abounds.

Here, as elsewhere, though he places the giving of reasons at the center of ethics, Singer fails to notice many dramatic consequences that flow from the potent and peculiar combination of the principle of utility, the principle of equal consideration of interests, and the repudiation of the doctrine of the sanctity of human life. The list of oversights is lengthened by the long appendix to Practical Ethics, called "On Being Silenced in Germany," in which he deplores the attempt in Germany in the early 1990s to bar him from giving public talks about his views on euthanasia and animal rights.

Those Germans who organized against him no doubt went too far in likening his views to those of the Nazis; but their exaggeration, especially given the nightmare that had unfolded in their country, is slight compared to the grotesque exaggeration that Singer commits in reporting their conduct. For in the quiet of his scholar's study, Singer, in an act of obscene indulgence, reverses the charge, and likens those who sought to silence him to the Nazis, and by extension himself to the Nazis' Jewish victims, as if the essence of Nazism were restrictions on freedom of speech. One would have thought that, from Singer's point of view, the salient issue raised by his adamant insistence on his right to express his views in

Germany concerns the utilitarian reasoning that justifies the sanctity and inviolability he apparently attaches to his own rights. In all his indignant account of being silenced, however, he remains silent about this crucial question.

In the end, Singer cannot even say whether it is reasonable to be moral. Or rather, he concludes that it is not reasonable. In the final pages of his final chapter, he casually confesses that it is not given to us to be able to assert rationally that a moral life is better or worse than (these are his incredible examples) a life of crime or a life of stamp collecting. Morality, in Singer's view, makes maximal demands, but it is not even minimally obliging. While the moral life requires a radical revision in how we think and act, living morally is no more reasonable than living immorally or amorally. The least one might observe is that this muddle of moralism and laxity, extreme rigor and casual permissiveness, arduous altruism and nonchalant selfishness, has consequences. For one thing, it could scarcely be better calculated to ensure the unprincipled application of moral principles and their hectoring, high-handed, and ham-fisted dissemination.

At the leading universities, the teaching of ethics and the research in ethics has become a booming business. The university ethics programs are supported by hefty gifts from alumni and corporate donors (who seek the services of "ethicists"); they sponsor numerous undergraduate classes; they offer substantial fellowships to graduate students and faculty; and they provide generous honoraria to bring to campuses a steady stream of eminent scholars to deliver open lectures and participate in public symposia. The ethics programs also share a view about the essence of ethics. What links, say, Princeton's University Center for Human Values, Harvard's Program on Ethics and the Professions and the Moral Reasoning division of its Core Curriculum, Yale's Program for Ethics, Politics, and Economics, and Brown University's new Stephen Robert Initiative for the Study of Values is the underlying conviction that the major part of morality consists in reasoning rigorously about moral dilemmas.

But does it? Perhaps it is not surprising that professors, whose job it is to draw fine distinctions, and construct intricate arguments, and infer general laws from particular instances and subsume concrete cases under general rules, should come to the conclusion that what especially makes men and women moral is the refinement of their rational capacities. Yet it remains an inconvenient fact, too little examined by courses in and conferences on ethics, that refined rational capacities can be used for ill as well as for good. As Socrates points out in Book I of the Republic, the outstanding doctor, by virtue of his technical knowledge of medicine and the human body, also makes the best poisoner. Knowing all the arguments may help you discern the right and persuade others to do justice. But ratiocinative cleverness or technical proficiency in reasoning about morals may assist you in dazzling and disarming the defenders of common sense and ordinary decency, and in justifying in the name of lofty principles gross violations of personal trust and the public interest. In ethics, as in most walks of life, character makes the difference.

It is not only on the theoretical level that Singer provides a cautionary example about the professional expertise in practical ethics. The concluding paragraphs of the genial profile of Singer in The New Yorker revealed that he has hired, at considerable expense, health care workers to tend to his mother, who is suffering from Alzheimer's disease. He is a good son, and his ideas about morality have made him also a prosperous son; but what makes this otherwise common act of filial piety noteworthy is that it flagrantly violates the son's own moral theory.

After all, Singer's mother has lost her ability to reason, and to remember, and to recognize others. She has ceased to be a person in her son's technical sense of the term. In these circumstances, Singer's principles surely require him to take the substantial sums of money that he uses to maintain her in comfort and in dignity and spend them instead to feed the poor and save the lives of innocent children. And early in Practical Ethics, Singer declares that the true test of an ethics is its ability to guide life: "Ethics is not an ideal system that is noble in theory but no good in practice. The reverse of this is closer to the truth: an ethical judgment that is no good in practice must suffer from a theoretical defect as well, for the whole point of ethical judgment is to guide practice." Although he strenuously denies that from the ethical point of view we ought to treat friends and family differently, Singer's actions seems to proclaim that what is right and what is rigorous applies only to other people's mothers.

Is this a failure of logic or a failure of nerve? Has love conquered utility? "I think this has made me see how the issues of someone with these kinds of problems are really very difficult," he remarked to The New Yorker about the trials of his mother's illness. "Perhaps it is more difficult than I thought before, because it is different when it's your mother." The son's love for his mother is affecting. And the professor's acknowledgment, in the light of the glaring contradiction between his principles and his practice, of the need to rethink views to the development and promulgation of which he has devoted his professional life displays a certain intellectual integrity. But the ethicist's innocence, at this late date in his career, of the most elemental features of his subject matter boggles the mind.

Indeed, it is hard to imagine a more stunning rebuke to the well-heeled and well-ensconced academic discipline of practical ethics than that its most controversial and influential star, at the peak of his discipline, after an Oxford education, after twenty five years as a university professor, and after the publication of thousands of pages laying down clear cut rules on life-and-death issues, should reveal, only as the result of a reporter's prodding, and only in the battle with his own elderly mother's suffering, that he has just begun to appreciate that the moral life is complex.

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