

Gordon Preece, "The Unthinkable and Unlivable Singer" in *Rethinking Peter Singer. A Christian Critique* (ed. Gordon Preece; Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2002)

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Peter Singer has been called the high priest of applied ethics. This book presents a series of critiques of Singer from a specifically Christian perspective. Preece offers the first critique and this can be summarized as follows:

1. Singer has failed to put forward good reasons for setting aside human reactions of shock and shame to certain 'unthinkable' aspects of his philosophy, for example, his advocacy of infanticide and bestiality.
2. Singer's ethics fail the test of practicality as evidenced by Singer's unwillingness to euthanize his mother after she contracted Alzheimer's disease.
3. Singer's theory is crudely reductionistic and does not adequately take account of the roles of intuition, social location and power, tradition and revelation. His utilitarianism "at crucial points...abstracts from the basic realities of human relationships from which all ethics emerges."

There are 5 criticisms Preece makes of some of Singer's key ideas:

1. Morally unthinkable
2. Morally outrageous ("yucky")
3. Inconsistent
4. Impractical/unlivable
5. Involve a reductionist model of humanity, ecology, rationality, and morality.

#### *1. Morally Unthinkable*

Singer believes it is morally defensible to kill a newborn baby (certain disabled babies up to 4 weeks/28 days of age) if allowing it to live would result in the parents' lifestyle being damaged. Singer believes that it is not possible to wrong such a newborn baby.

Singer also defends bestiality, having sex with animals. At the root of this thinking Preece identifies Singer's view of individual humans and animals as "mere units of total utility."

Preece also criticizes Singer for having a "political-pollster approach to ethics" because he cites highly suspect statistical data or claims to defend his approach to bestiality as conforming with a not too uncommon practice.

Preece also criticizes the way in which Singer stereotypes Christian opponents "as absolutely against quality of life or pleasure, in favor of an absolute sanctity of (human) life and procreation ethic based on an unfathomable gulf between humans and animals." The irony is that it is Singer's own universal utilitarianism which "is much more opposed to individual pleasure and almost infinitely guilt-inducing."

#### *2. Morally outrageous (The 'Yuck' Factor)*

The term "the 'yuck' factor" is one coined by philosopher Mary Midgely. It is a prerational but not irrational 'sense of disgust and outrage.' Incorporation of the yuck factor is more holistic than Singer's rationalism. Midgely points out, "Whenever we

seriously judge something to be wrong, strong feeling necessarily accompanies the judgment."

Singer claims to stand in the Enlightenment tradition. But Midgely shows that this tradition involves the development of enlightened feelings against judicial torture, abuse of animals and slavery as "monstrous, unnatural, and inhuman."

Singer defends bestiality because he is opposed to exalting humans over animals. However, bestiality is monstrous merely because it transgresses species boundaries.

Preece, adapting an image used by Midgely, describes Singer's ethic as "hammerlike consequentialism." Midgely makes the point that consequentialism is useful as a hammer to break down prejudice. However, Midgely also points out that consequentialism cannot simply be put in the place of taboos.

Preece makes the important statement: "only God can really be a consequentialist or utilitarian, because only God knows the future."

### *3. Inconsistent*

Singer's attempts to live out his philosophy:

- Gives 10-20% of his income to animal, environmental and poverty relief.
- Has participated in demonstrations re animal mistreatment, human infanticide and euthanasia. He has had his glasses smashed.

"the Singer cat, fed on a vegetarian diet, is a champion mouse hunter" (Preece summarizing Robert C. Solomon).

### Singer's Treatment of his Mother

- Hired healthcare workers at considerable cost to look after his mother afflicted with Alzheimer's disease.
- His mother was a member of the Voluntary Euthanasia Society.
- Because her condition was that of Alzheimers (contrast cancer) she lost her capacity gradually and never seemed fully aware of what was happening so there was no opportunity to ask what she wanted.
- She wasn't suffering greatly.
- Not prepared to risk jail.

Peter Berkowitz notes that Singer's mother in losing her ability to reason, remember and recognize others ceased to be a person in Singer's definition of this term.

Singer admitted, "Perhaps it is more difficult than I had thought before, because it is different when it's your mother."

### *4. Singer's Impractical Impartiality*

Singer claims unclarity about his mother's wishes. This shows the impracticality of euthanasia. As far as Singer's ethics go her euthanasia would not be against her interests because she has none. He decided it was against his and his sister's interests for him to euthanize his mother and risk being jailed. One interviewer concluded: "the nub of the issue is that life can't really be lived in an abstract way." Singer's response was to question the words "can't really", claiming that a more "saintly" person would

have been able to go through with what in his mind needed to be done - euthanizing his mother. Preece suggests that Singer's own response is actually the natural human response whereas his ideal 'saintly' response leaves humanity behind.

The impractical idealism of Singer's ethic is also illustrated by Singer's concession that he would be unable to sacrifice his own children if it came to a point where, from a utilitarian standpoint, a greater number of interests would be served by saving say 40 strangers from a fire rather than one's own 3 children.

Singer argues that people should identify with the "point of view of the universe" which Richard Neuhaus calls a "view from nowhere" because nobody lives nowhere or everywhere. As Neuhaus points out "we are situated creatures." Blackford challenges Singer's view that it is more rational to act from "the point of view of the universe" rather than live our own lives with projects and commitments of our own.

It is the impracticality of Singer's ethic which forces him to adopt a two-level view. This in turn leads to logical inconsistency and personal, schizophrenic inconsistency. According to Singer's two-level view apart from the need to adopt "the point of view of the universe", a position of pure impartiality (in Singer's view), it is also permissible to show some partiality at the everyday decision-making level, as he showed himself in the case of his own mother.

At this point I will insert a quotation from Singer himself:

Our ability to reason can be a factor in leading us away from both arbitrary subjectivism and an uncritical acceptance of the values of our community. Reason makes it possible to see ourselves in this way because, by thinking about my place in the world, I am able to see that I am just one being among others, with interests and desires like others. I have a personal perspective on the world, from which my interests are at the front and center of the stage, the interests of my family and friends are close behind, and the interests of strangers are pushed to the back and sides. But reason enables me to see that others have similarly subjective perspectives, and that from "the point of view of the universe" my perspective is no more privileged than theirs. Thus my ability to reason shows me the possibility of detaching myself from my own perspective and shows me what the universe might look like if I had no personal perspective. (*The Escalator of Reason*)

Singer even argues that the golden rule is parallel to what he calls the purely rational 'point of view of the universe':

Consistent with the idea of taking the point of view of the universe, the major ethical traditions all accept, in some form or other, a version of the golden rule that encourages equal consideration of interests. "Love your neighbor as yourself," said Jesus. "What is hateful to you do not do to your neighbor," says Rabbi Hillel. Confucius summed up his teaching in very similar terms: "What you do not want done to yourself, do not do to others." The "Mahabharata," the great Indian epic, says: "Let no man do to another that which would be repugnant to himself." The parallels are striking.

Singer believes that the two main values that arise from human life are:

- (1) Our own well-being. By this he means "pleasurable states of consciousness."
- (2) Autonomy or self-determination.

Preece points out that “this is very much a value judgment that needs to be argued for, not assumed.” Singer has no time for the notion that virtue should be valued more highly.

Singer allows for “a small degree of preference for family and community.” For him “the personal and relational is still instrumental, a means to total, rational interest or utility.”

For Singer acts and omissions are equivalent. Accordingly, failure to live at near the level of a Bengali beggar is an act of murder, even mass murder. Singer recommends the donation of 10% of one’s income for the relief of absolute poverty, making a concession to moderation and intuition. But this is a grudging, guilt-laced concession. Bernard Williams critiques Singer for failing to provide an adequate theoretical basis for this position while nevertheless seeking to increase a sense of indeterminate guilt, as other utilitarian writers have done. Midgely notes, “Infinite guilt is a most impractical concept.”

Anthony Daniels points out that logically Singer should withdraw his books from the market since “to buy a Singer book is to murder a baby in Bolivia who might have been saved by the diversion of its cost to medical treatment there.” By selling hundreds of thousands of books Singer has been responsible for untold numbers of deaths, according to Singer’s logic.

While Singer in practice does not forbid people having fun or enjoying food and wine it is this very fact that proves the impracticality and logical inconsistency of his ethic.

“Singer secularizes and universalizes the parable of the good Samaritan.” The tension is between the neediest and the nearest. In reality Singer’s treatment of his own suffering mother underscored that Singer’s ethic simply does not work and that his mother “is not merely a universalized unit of utility or a nonperson.” Singer’s ethic leaves people with “a schizophrenic motivation, torn between head and heart. The clash between the infinite universal demands of his consequentialist equation of acts and omissions and the daily demands of particular persons makes for infinite guilt and a lack of joy in life. This shows that it is impractical and unlivable.”

##### *5. Reductionistic Ecological Rationalism*

###### **1) Singer’s consequentialism rejects the intrinsic value of creatures, whether human, animals or biosphere.**

Nel Noddings: “We are no longer considering how we shall meet the particular other but how we shall treat a vast group of interchangeable entities.” For Singer all creatures “are only empty, replaceable vessels for holding the abstract value of interests in pleasure over pain.”

###### **2) Singer’s program uncritically adopts utilitarianism founder Jeremy Bentham’s metaphysical assumption that the key criterion of the moral importance of a creature is ‘Can it suffer?’**

###### **3) Singer’s consequentialism, allied to his metaphysics of suffering, makes some humans mere means to other’s ends, mere carriers of consequences, as long as they suffer no pain.**

"The (born or unborn) child's right to life is not in the kind of creature they are but in their parents' mind or preferences."

"Singer's reasoning 'makes it difficult to justify a plausible response to child abuse.'" Preece adds in a footnote: "Singer's most recent advocacy of consenting sex between humans and animals would, if applied consistently, be likely to justify child sexual abuse as similarly consensual and nonharmful."

Also in the same footnote: "Richard J. Neuhaus rightly asks, 'why, in the absence of *clear* consent on the animal's part, such intercourse is not a form of rape.'"

**4) In the name of universal equality of interest/desire, Singer attacks speciesism - the automatic discounting of the desires of animals compared to humans.**

Singer is guilty of 'sentientism' because the capacity to suffer is not a necessary ground for moral significance since a beech tree, while incapable of experiencing pain, shouldn't be chopped down indiscriminately. Further, Singer's indifference toward the intrinsic worth of nonsuffering creatures shows he is on his own grounds sentientist.

Singer's rhetorical argument: "If we assert that to have rights one must be a member of the human race, and that is all there is to it, then what are we to say to the racist who contends that to have rights you have to be a member of the Caucasian race, and that is all there is to it?" This is a specious argument. Racism has been rejected on other grounds than Singer's equality of consideration principle. The most basic criticism of racism is that it rejects our commonness of species or common humanity. The fact of the matter is that people are different from animals as the only species capable of genuinely moral behaviour.

**5) Singer wrongly personalizes some animals, like chimpanzees or pigs, and depersonalizes some humans, such as unborn children and newborns.**

Singer: "Pigs are highly intelligent animals... Are we turning persons into bacon?"

Singer: "There will surely be some nonhuman animals whose lives, by any standard, are more valuable than the lives of some humans. A chimpanzee, a dog, or pig, for instance, will have a higher degree of self-awareness and a greater capacity for meaningful relations with others than a severely retarded infant or someone in a state of advanced senility." Here Singer parts company with utilitarian John Stuart Mill but follows suit with Bentham.

Singer ranks animals (including humans) on a sliding scale of self-awareness.

For Singer "the greater interest human beings have in living connects to the greater value human lives have (or normally have)." He cannot satisfactorily explain why.

"Singer's claims or guesses for the rationality, linguistic ability and personhood of pigs and chimps are controversial, to say the least."

"Singer's argument for infanticide, based on newborn humans' not beating chimps and pigs to the title person, exchanges one 'ism,' speciesism, for another, variously labeled 'adultism,' 'personism' and 'I.Q.ism.'"

Singer makes a too easy dismissal of potential. He claims: "differences in potential do not justify any difference in treatment." Singer's argument against the significance of

the potentiality of young human beings confuses their humanhood and their personhood.

But Singer can't avoid using arguments of potentiality himself. So, for example, he does not place those who sleep or are anesthetized in the same class as those eligible for infanticide or euthanasia. The distinction? People who sleep or are anesthetized have the *potential* to return to rational personhood. As Laing puts out, when Singer argues that 'euthanasia' might be the best thing for 'defective infants' it is clear he presupposes that non-disabled infants have the potentiality to develop in the ordinary way to be of moral significance.

Charles Moore states: "The 'species *Homo sapien*' is not an exclusive enough club for the Singers. Beyond 'mere membership' you need a sort of Gold American Express card which shows you have attained the required physical development, moral maturity, high net worth,.... or whatever other criterion the arbiters may choose."

Preece points out that for all the disclaimers and the irony of the fact that Singer's family lost members to the Nazis, there is in fact an extremely strong parallel between Singer's position on euthanasia and the eugenics movement.

**6) Singer displays a very male form of ecological rationalism or 'moral Thatcherism.'**

Feminists (e.g., Gilligan, Noddings) regard abstract male reasoning as "male" and expressions of ethical responsibility which are more personal and relational as "female." Though Singer knocks the stereotyping of such feminists, with some justification, nevertheless he "does not succeed in deflecting their basic point that abstract rational and utilitarian ethical theories are far from universally valid, at least for 50 percent of the human race."

**7) Singer is inconsistent in his treatment of moral intuitions. He seeks sometimes to undermine them, for example in relation to infanticide, and at other times to use them, for example against animal cruelty.**

Singer: "We should put aside feelings based on the small, helpless and - sometimes - cute appearance of human infants... 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." The key thing here is that Singer has no place for basic intuitions, "feelings." Yet clearly "moral emotions like sympathy, resentment, indignation, and compassion, are important to rationality and ethics." Singer believes to the company of "men without chests" (C.S. Lewis' depiction of those who are marked out be a defect of fertile and generous emotion).

Singer attacks the doctrine of the sanctity of life as being a legacy which is so "very deeply embedded in people's moral intuitions" that a "softening-up operation" is needed to expunge it. As Preece says "this is really an encouragement for people to harden their hearts."

In reality Singer is not consistent in his thinking. Elsewhere he speaks of conventional intuitive principles as leading in the long term to the best consequences, like "percentage tennis", Singer's own image. For example, honesty is the best policy. He compares the critical level to the "freak shot". He thus creates two contradictory

utilitarian principles, “an everyday and an exceptional, elite one. The critical level is left to elite thinkers, like Singer, who can cope with ‘complicated issues.’” Ironically, when Singer has been confronted with complexity in his own life in the case of his mother, he resorted to more conventional action. The other great inconsistency is Singer showing photos of suffering animals in his book *Animal Liberation* to rouse supporters for anti-speciesism. Yet, hypocritically, Singer would give short shrift to anti-abortionists who showed unmistakable babylike photos of fetuses.

Singer is caught out here with respect to his words of caution concerning growing ‘human beings for use as spare parts in transplant surgery.’ Note the gross inconsistency of his argument against this, that such a practice “would do violence to **our basic attitude** of care and protection for infant human beings” (my emphasis). As Preece rejoins, “If our basic attitude of care and protection matters morally even where non-persons [non-self-conscious beings on Singer’s view] are concerned, then they matter where the lives of the embryonic, the unborn, the disabled, the suffering, comatose and elderly are at issue.”

8) **Singer’s strategy is to marginalize Christians (and representatives of other religions) from public rational debate and stereotype them as yesterday’s people overtaken by the inevitable progress of reason.**

“Postmodernists like Michel Foucault, for all their extremes, have demonstrated that knowledge is not disinterested but is socially and politically constructed, justifying one’s particular position in the world and projecting it onto a universal screen as pure rationality or ‘the way things are.’”

Singer stands “in the Viennese and Oxford tradition of analytical philosophy, known as logical positivism, dominant between the two world wars, which rejected the meaningfulness or possibility of empirical verification of religious language. It is now largely discredited as one of the last gasps of overconfident modernity.”

“He makes a breathtaking, unjustified generalization that ‘once we admit that Darwin was right when he argued that human ethics evolved from the social instincts that we inherited from our non-human ancestors, we can put aside the hypothesis of a divine origin for ethics.’ This assumes (along with fundamentalist Christians) that Darwinians must be anti-Christian and Christians must oppose Darwinian evolution. It is logically (given the possibility of theistic evolution) and empirically (given that there are many theistic evolutionists, including many scientists) mistaken. It is also a massive jump from the more strict scientific sense of Darwinism to social or ethical Darwinism; such a jump in fact is a form of the famous naturalistic fallacy (making *is* equal to *ought*, or *description* equal to *prescription*).”

Singer “uses liberalism to cover over the totalitarian implications of his utilitarianism and to banish the main alternative, Christianity, from the public realm of reason.”

9) **Singer’s preeminence in practical ethics is an expression of utilitarianism’s strategic retreat or movement sideways into practical ethics after its metaphysical and moral inadequacies in philosophical ethics were widely recognized.**

10) Singer, more than anyone, sees how high the stakes are in the debate between consequentialism and Christianity.

**Conclusion**

Stresses importance of moral intuitions, the impracticality and reductionism of Singer's utilitarianism.