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"All of this book is full of clarity and charity."  
 - Peter Kreeft, Author, *Because God is Real*

### Peter Singer: Architect of the Culture of Death

**DONALD DEMARCO**

**The new tradition that Peter Singer welcomes is founded on a "quality-of-life" ethic. It allegedly replaces the outgoing morality that is based on the "sanctity-of-life."**

"After ruling our thoughts and our decisions about life and death for nearly two thousand years, the traditional Western ethic has collapsed."

On this triumphant note, Professor Peter Singer begins his milestone book, *Rethinking Life and Death*. It conveys an attitude of revolutionary confidence that brings to mind another atheistic iconoclast, Derek Humphry, who has said, "We are trying to overturn 2,000 years of Christian tradition."

The new tradition that Singer welcomes is founded on a "quality-of-life" ethic. It allegedly replaces the outgoing morality that is based on the "sanctity-of-life." Wesley J. Smith states that *Rethinking Life and Death* can fairly be called the *Mein Kampf* of the euthanasia movement, in that it drops many of the euphemisms common to pro-euthanasia writing and acknowledges euthanasia for what it is: killing." A disability advocacy group that calls itself "Not Dead Yet" has fiercely objected to Singer's views on euthanasia. Some refer to him as "Professor Death." Others have gone as far as to liken him to Josef Mengele. Troy McClure, an advocate for the disabled, calls him "the most dangerous man in the world today." There is indeed a bluntness to Singer's pronouncements that gives his thought a certain transparency. This makes his philosophy, comparatively speaking, easy to understand and to evaluate.


Despite the vehemence of some of his opponents, Professor Singer is regarded, in other circles, as an important and highly respected philosopher and bioethicist. His books are widely read, his articles frequently appear in anthologies, he is very much in demand throughout the world as a speaker, and has lectured at prestigious universities in different countries. He currently holds the Ira W. Decamp chair of Bioethics at Princeton University's Center for the Study of Human Values. And he has written a major article for *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

Singer's philosophy begins in a broad egalitarianism and culminates in a narrow preferentialism. His egalitarianism has won him many supporters; his preferentialism has earned him his detractors. Hence, he is both strongly admired and soundly vilified. In his widely read article, "All Animals Are Equal," Singer expresses his disdain for racism and sexism. Here he is on solid ground. From this beachhead, he invites his readers to conquer "the last remaining form of discrimination," which is discrimination against animals. He refers to this form of discrimination, borrowing the term from Richard Ryder, "speciesism." This latter form of discrimination rests on the wholly unwarranted assumption, in Singer's view, that one species is superior to another. "I am urging," he writes, "that we extend to other species the basic principle of equality that most of us recognize should be extended to all members of our own species." Here Singer endears himself to animal "rights" activists. In 1992, he devoted an entire book to the subject, *Animal Liberation: A New Ethic for Our Treatment of Animals*.

Singer rejects what he regards as non-philosophical ways of understanding human beings and non-human animals. He finds notions of "sanctity-of-life," "dignity," "created in the image of God," and so on to be spurious. "Fine phrases," he says, "are the last resource of those who have run out of argument." He also sees no moral or philosophical significance to traditional terms such as "being," "nature" and "essence." He takes pride in being a modern philosopher who has cast off such "metaphysical and religious shackles."

What is fundamentally relevant, for Singer, is the capacity of humans and non-human animals to *suffer*. Surely non-human animals, especially mammals, suffer. At this point, Singer adds to his egalitarian followers those who base their ethics on *compassion*. Singer deplores the fact that we cruelly and unconscionably oppress and misuse non-human animals by eating their flesh and experimenting on them. Thus he advocates a vegetarian diet for everyone and a greatly restricted use of animal experimentation.

By using a broad egalitarian base that elicits a compassionate response to the capacity of human and non-human animals to suffer, Singer thereby replaces the sanctity-of-life ethic with a quality-of-life ethic that, in his view, has a more solid and realistic foundation. In this way Singer appears to possess a myriad of modern virtues. He is broadminded, fair, non-discriminatory, compassionate, innovative, iconoclastic, and consistent. It

  
 Peter Singer

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is the quality of life that counts, not some abstract and gratuitous notion that cannot be validated or substantiated through rational inquiry.

Charles Darwin once conjectured that "animals, our fellow brethren in pain, disease, suffering and famine ... may partake of our origin in one common ancestor — we may all be melted together." Singer takes Darwin's "conjecture" and turns it into a *conviction*. Thus he adds to his coterie of adherents, Darwinists and assorted evolutionists.

Humans and non-human animals are fundamentally sufferers. They possess consciousness that gives them the capacity to suffer or to enjoy life, to be miserable or to be happy. This incontrovertible fact gives Singer a basis, ironically, for a new form of discrimination that is more invidious than the ones he roundly condemns. Singer identifies the suffering/enjoying status of all animals with their *quality of life*. It follows from this precept, then, that those who suffer more than others have less quality-of-life, and those who do not possess an insufficiently developed consciousness fall below the plane of personhood. He argues, for example, that where a baby has Down syndrome, and in other instances of "life that has begun very badly," parents should be free to kill the child within 28 days after birth. Here he is in fundamental agreement with Michael Tooley, a philosopher he admires, who states that "new-born humans are neither persons nor quasi-persons, and their destruction is in no way intrinsically wrong." Tooley believes that killing infants becomes wrong when they acquire "morally significant properties," an event he believes occurs about three months after their birth.

According to Singer, some humans are non-persons, while some non-human animals are persons. The key is not nature or species membership, but consciousness. A pre-conscious human cannot suffer as much as a conscious horse. In dealing with animals, we care only about their quality of life. We put a horse that has broken its leg out of its misery as quickly as possible. This merciful act spares the animal an untold amount of needless suffering. If we look upon human animals in the same fashion, our opposition to killing those who are suffering will begin to dissolve. The "quality-of-life" ethic has a tangible correlative when it relates to suffering; the "sanctity-of-life" seemingly relates to a mere vapor.

Here is where Singer picks up his detractors. According to this avant garde thinker, unborn babies or neonates, lacking the requisite consciousness to qualify as persons, have less right to continue to live than an adult gorilla. By the same token, a suffering or disabled child would have a weaker claim not to be killed than a mature pig. Singer writes, in *Rethinking Life and Death*:

Human babies are not born self-aware or capable of grasping their lives over time. They are not persons. Hence their lives would seem to be no more worthy of protection than the life of a fetus.

And writing specifically about Down syndrome babies, he advocates trading a disabled or defective child (one who is apparently doomed to too much suffering) for one who has better prospects for happiness:

We may not want a child to start on life's uncertain voyage if the prospects are clouded. When this can be known at a very early stage in the voyage, we may still have a chance to make a fresh start. This means detaching ourselves from the infant who has been born, cutting ourselves free before the ties that have already begun to bind us to our child have become irresistible. Instead of going forward and putting all our effort into making the best of the situation, we can still say no, and start again from the beginning.

Needless to say, we all begin our lives on an uncertain voyage. Life is full of surprises. A Helen Keller can enjoy a fulfilling life, despite her limitations; Loeb and Leopold can become hardened killers, despite the fact that they were darlings of fortune. Who can prognosticate? Human beings should not be subject to factory control criteria. Even in starting again, one still does not generate the same individual that was lost. Singer's concern for quality-of-life causes him to miss the reality and the value of the underlying life.

Ironically, the man who claimed to be conquering the last domain of discrimination was offending his readers precisely because of his penchant for discrimination (and even in failing to discriminate). A number of statements that appeared in the first edition of his *Practical Ethics* were expurgated from the second edition. They include his demeaning of persons with Down syndrome, reviling mentally challenged individuals as "vegetables," rating the mind of a one-year-old human below that of many brute animals, and stating that "not ... everything the Nazis did was horrendous; we cannot condemn euthanasia just because the Nazis did it."

For Peter Singer a human being is not a subject who suffers, but a sufferer. Singer's error here is to identify the subject with consciousness. This is an error that dates back to 17th Century Cartesianism — "I think therefore I am" (which is to identify being with *thinking*). Descartes defined man solely in terms of his consciousness as a thinking thing (*res cogitans*) rather than as a subject who possesses consciousness.

At the heart of Pope John Paul II's *personalism* (his philosophy of the person) is the recognition that it is the concrete individual person who is the subject of consciousness. The subject comes before consciousness. That subject may exist prior to consciousness (as in the case of the human embryo) or during lapses of consciousness (as in sleep or in a coma). But the existing subject is not to be identified with consciousness itself, which is an operation or activity of the subject. The Holy Father rejects what he calls the "hypostatization of the *cogito*" (the reification of consciousness) precisely because it ignores the fundamental reality of the subject of consciousness — the person — who is also the object of love. "Consciousness itself" is to be regarded "neither as an individual subject nor as an independent faculty."

John Paul refers to the elevation of consciousness to the equivalent of the person's being as "*the great anthropocentric shift in philosophy*." What he means by this "shift" is a movement away from existence to a kind of absolutization of consciousness. Referring to Saint Thomas Aquinas, the Holy Father reiterates that "it is not thought which determines existence, but existence, 'esse,' which determines thought!"



Singer, by trying to be more broadminded than is reasonable, has created a philosophy that actually dehumanizes people, reducing them to points of consciousness that are indistinguishable from those of many non-human animals. Therefore, what is of primary importance for the Princeton bioethicists is not the *existence* of the being in question, but its *quality* of life. But this process of dehumanization leads directly to discrimination against those whose quality of life is not sufficiently developed. Singer has little choice but to divide humanity into those who have a preferred state of life from those who do not. In this way, his broad egalitarianism decays into a narrow preferentialism:

When we reject belief in God we must give up the idea that life on this planet has some preordained meaning. Life as a whole has no meaning. Life began, as the best available theories tell us, in a chance combination of gasses; it then evolved through random mutation and natural selection. All this just happened; it did not happen to any overall purpose. Now that it has resulted in the existence of beings who prefer some states of affairs to others, however, it may be possible for particular lives to be meaningful. In this sense some atheists can find meaning in life.

Life can be meaningful for an atheist when he is able to spend his life in a "preferred state." The atheistic perspective here does not center on people, however, it centers on happiness. This curious preference for happiness over people engenders a rather chilling logic. It is not human life or the existing human being that is good, but the "preferred state." Human life is not sacrosanct, but a certain kind of life can be "meaningful." If one baby is disabled, does it not make sense to kill it and replace it with one who is not and "therefore" has a better chance for happiness? "When the death of the disabled infant," writes Singer, "will lead to the birth of another infant with better prospects of a happy life, the total amount of happiness will be greater if the disabled infant is killed."

Singer has a point, though perhaps marginal at best, that all other things being equal, it is better to be more happy than to be less happy. Yet this point hardly forms a basis for ending the life of a person who has less happiness than the hypothetically conceived greater happiness of his possible replacement. Ethics should center on the person, not the quantum of happiness a person may or may not enjoy. It is the subject who exists that has the right to life, and neither Peter Singer nor anyone else who employs a "relative happiness calculator" should expropriate that right.

Having neglected concrete existence, Singer inevitably wanders into abstractions. He is a humanist, one might say, because he wants people to enjoy better and happier states of life. But the more relevant point is that he is not particularly interested in the actual lives of those who are faced with states that he believes to be less than preferable. On the other hand, Pope John Paul II stresses that each human life is "inviolable, unrepeatable, and irreplaceable." In stating this, the Pontiff is implying that our first priority should be *loving human beings* rather than *preferring better states*.

In a 1995 article in the London *Spectator* entitled "Killing Babies Isn't Always Wrong," Singer said of the Pope, "I sometimes think that he and I at least share the virtue of seeing clearly what is at stake." The Culture of Life based on the sanctity-of-life ethic is at stake. The Pope and the Meister Singer are poles apart. "That day had to come," states Singer, "when Copernicus proved that the earth is not at the center of the universe. It is ridiculous to pretend that the old ethics make sense when plainly they do not. The notion that human life is sacred just because it's human is medieval."

There are a number of things that are "plain." One is that Copernicus did not "prove" that the earth is not at the center of the universe. He proposed a *theory* based on the erroneous assumption that planets travel in perfect circles and hypothesized that the sun was at the center, not of the universe, but of what we now refer to as the solar system. Another is that the sacredness of life is a Judaeo-Christian notion, not an arbitrary fabrication of the Middle Ages. Yet another is that it is unethical to kill disabled people just because they are disabled.

At a Princeton forum Professor Singer remarked that he would have supported the parents of his disabled protesters, if they had sought to kill their disabled offspring in infancy. This is the kind of unkind remark that will ensure that his disabled protesters will continue to protest.

An additional error in Singer's thinking is the assumption he makes that the suffering (or happiness) of individuals can somehow be added to each other and thus create "all this suffering in the world." C. S. Lewis explains that if you have a toothache of intensity  $x$  and another person in the room with you also has a toothache of intensity  $x$ , "You may, if you choose, say that the total amount of pain in the room is now  $2x$ . But you must remember that no one is suffering  $2x$ ." There is no composite pain in anyone's consciousness. There is no such thing as the sum of collective human suffering, because no one suffers it.

Yet another error in Singer's thinking is that philosophy should be built up solely on the basis of rational thinking, and that feelings and emotions should be distrusted, if not uprooted. Concerning the infant child, he advises us, in *Practical Ethics*, to "put aside feelings based on its small, helpless and — sometimes — cute appearance," so we can look at the more ethically relevant aspects, such as its quality of life. This coldly cerebral approach is radically incompatible with our ability to derive any enjoyment whatsoever from life. By "putting feelings aside," we would be putting enjoyment aside. It is not the mind that becomes filled with joy, but the heart. Thus the man (Peter Singer) who allegedly prizes happiness is eager to de-activate the very faculty that makes happiness possible. Dr. David Gend, who is a general practitioner and secretary of the Queensland, Australia, branch of the World Federation of Doctors who Respect Human Life, suggests that Singer's announcement of the collapse of the sanctity-of-life ethic is premature:

Nevertheless, Herod could not slaughter all the innocents, and Singer will not corrupt the love of innocence in every reader. As long as some hearts are softened by the image of an infant stirring in its sleep, or even by their baby's movements on ultrasound at sixteen weeks, Singer's call to

"put feelings aside" in killing babies will reek of decay."

Reason and emotion are not antagonistic to each other. This is the assumption intrinsic to Cartesian dualism in the integrated *person*, reason and emotion form an indissoluble unity. For a person to set aside his feelings, therefore, in order to view a situation "ethically" is tantamount to setting aside his *humanity*. It is precisely this utter detachment from one's moral feelings, particularly relevant in the case where an individual experiences no emotions whatsoever while holding an infant, that is suggestive of a moral disorder. Singer seems to view practical ethics the way one views practical mathematics. But this is to dehumanize ethics. Perceiving the ethical significance of things is not a specialized activity of reason. There is a "moral sense" (James Q. Wilson) and a "wisdom in disgust" (Leon Kass), a "knowledge through connaturality" (Jacques Maritain), and a "copresence" (Gabriel Marcel), that involves the harmonious integration of reason and emotion.

"The heart has reasons that reason knows nothing of," said Pascal. Neurobiologist Antonio Damasio, author of *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain*, finds scientific evidence that "Absence of emotion appears to be at least as pernicious for rationality as excessive emotion ... Emotion may well be the support system without which the edifice of reason cannot function properly and may even collapse." The ethic that is more likely to "collapse," therefore is not one that is based on the personal integration of reason and emotion, but the rational approach that is dissociated from emotion and thereby left one-sided, vulnerable, and counterproductive.

Professor Singer underscores the importance of reason, broadmindedness, and compassion. But his emphasis on reason displaces human feelings. His advocacy of broadmindedness causes him to lose sight of the distinctiveness of the human being (he does not object to sexual "relationships" between humans and non-human animals). And his sensitivity for compassion is exercised at the expense of failing to understand how suffering can have personal meaning. In the end, his philosophy is one-sided and distorted. It plays into the Culture of Death because it distrusts the province of the heart, fails to discern the true dignity of the human person, and elevates the killing of innocent human beings — young and old — to the level of a social therapeutic.

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