

**Book Review**

# Review of Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics, 3rd Edition*<sup>1</sup>

Reviewed by Mylan Engel Jr., Northern Illinois University

Peter Singer's *Practical Ethics* is must reading for anyone interested in living an ethical life. It addresses some of the most significant moral issues facing humanity today: equality for humans, equality for animals, ethical vegetarianism, killing versus letting die, embryonic and stem cell research, abortion, infanticide, euthanasia, global justice and duties to the poor, global warming, environmental ethics, civil disobedience, violence, and terrorism. It teaches readers how to think clearly, carefully, and fruitfully about ethical issues. And it develops a secular ethic that, if universally followed, would dramatically reduce the amount of unnecessary suffering in the world.

The book has a number of virtues that make it especially suitable as a textbook for both introductory and advanced ethics courses. It is written in clear, straightforward prose that is readily accessible to students. It is carefully and rigorously argued. And perhaps most important from a pedagogical point of view, it provides a model of how to do moral philosophy. *Doing* moral philosophy (as opposed to merely reading about it) involves questioning one's fundamental moral beliefs in an open-minded, dispassionate way, and it requires the intellectual courage to revise one's beliefs (and one's practices!) in light of theory and under pressure of argument. It is with such impartiality, open-mindedness, and intellectual courage that Singer approaches every moral issue in the book.

Every chapter in the new edition has been extensively revised and updated. Revisions include providing responses to criticisms of views defended in the earlier editions, examining high-profile cases like the Terri Schiavo case, discussing controversial figures like Jack Kevorkian, and attending to the writings of popular contemporary authors like Michael Pollan (*The Omnivore's Dilemma*). The most substantive change is a new chapter on climate change, which replaces the chapter on refugees. The notes and references have been updated to reflect the current state of the art. These changes make the new edition as fresh, timely, and relevant as the earlier editions.

What haven't changed are the clear writing style, the meticulous attention to detail, the careful reasoning and

argumentation, the up-to-date empirical (social, biological, medical, environmental) information, and the overall argumentative structure of the book.

Singer begins with a brief chapter on ethical theory. After providing succinct refutations of divine command theory, ethical relativism, and subjectivism, Singer argues that ethics, properly understood, must be undertaken from the *universal* point of view—the point of view of an impartial spectator where each individual counts as one and no more than one, and where the interests of others are given the same weight as one's own interests. Singer then argues that once one adopts the universal point of view, one quickly arrives at preference utilitarianism—the view that an action is right if and only if it has a better balance of preference satisfaction for all affected than any other action available. The rest of the book is an attempt to work out and defend a consistent preference-utilitarian ethic.

Chapter 2 explores the notion of equality. Here Singer argues that the claim "All humans are equal" is not a *factual claim* describing an alleged factual equality among all people. Rather, it is a *moral claim* prescribing how we ought to treat all humans, namely, that we ought to give all humans *equal consideration of interests*. Equal consideration does not require equal treatment (what sort of treatment an individual deserves depends on what interests that individual possesses), but it does require that everyone's interests be taken into account and that like interests be given equal weight.

Chapter 3 remains one of the most important chapters of the book. In it, Singer argues that the fundamental principle of equality must be extended to include all sentient<sup>2</sup> animals. The fundamental principle of equality—equal consideration of interests—is neutral with respect to whose interests are in question. The interests of males do not deserve greater consideration than the like interests of females. The interests of whites do not deserve greater consideration than the like interests of blacks. The interests of human beings do not deserve greater consideration than the like interests of nonhuman animals. An unbiased application of the basic principle of equality requires that we give all sentient

1. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011. xiii + 337 pp. Softcover.

2. Singer uses the term "sentience" and its derivatives to refer to the capacity to suffer and/or experience pleasure and pain.

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animals equal consideration of interests. Since all sentient animals have an interest in avoiding pain, we must not cause them pain that is not outweighed by other more significant interests.

Singer then makes the case for ethical vegetarianism. Raising animals in inhumane factory farms because we like the way they taste sacrifices their most significant interests for trivial interests of our own, in direct violation of the principle of equal consideration of interests. Giving animals the moral consideration they deserve requires that we stop supporting factory farms with our purchases and adopt plant-based diets instead.

In Chapters 4 and 5, Singer distinguishes *persons*—rational, self-aware beings—from “merely conscious” beings and argues that it is worse to kill persons than it is to kill merely conscious beings on the grounds that persons have a desire/preference to continue living that will be frustrated if they are killed (80). Killing merely conscious beings, if wrong at all, is only wrong because it results in the loss of an enjoyable life (120). Where the life taken would not, on balance, be enjoyable, no wrong is done in taking the life (120). Even when the merely conscious being would have lived a pleasant life, Singer thinks it arguable that no wrong is done if the killed animal will be “replaced” by another animal living an equally pleasant life (120).

Chapter 6 examines the moral status of the embryo and fetus. Having argued, in Chapter 3, that sentience is both necessary and sufficient for possessing interests, Singer reasons as follows: Since pre-conscious fetuses are not sentient, they lack interests. Since pre-conscious fetuses have no interests to consider, Singer concludes that aborting them raises no moral issue at all. Once the fetus becomes conscious (18–25 weeks into the pregnancy), it has an interest in avoiding suffering, and so, if an abortion is to be performed after the fetus is conscious, steps should be taken to avoid causing the fetus pain during the procedure (137). Singer contends that neither fetuses nor newborn infants are persons, because neither fetuses nor newborns are rational, self-aware beings. Since they are not persons, based on consistent application of the principles defended in chapters 4 and 5, Singer concludes that it is permissible to kill defective fetuses and newborns, when their lives can reasonably be judged to be not worth living (162) and also when they will be “replaced” by healthier, happier future humans (162–167).

Chapter 7 defends active voluntary and nonvoluntary euthanasia, but rejects involuntary euthanasia. Passive euthanasia— withholding of treatment with the intent of facilitating death—is regularly practiced in hospitals throughout the United States and Europe. Since passive forms of euthanasia often result in prolonged painful deaths, Singer argues that swift painless active euthanasia is morally preferable, whenever passive euthanasia is justified (186).

Chapter 8 challenges us to reflect seriously on our duties to the poor. Singer argues that affluent and moderately affluent people are morally required to provide financial as-

sistance to those living in extreme poverty. The argument is straightforward:

1. If we can prevent something bad from happening without sacrificing anything of comparable moral significance, we ought to do so.
2. Extreme poverty is bad. It is directly responsible for the deaths of 8.8 million children under the age of 5 every year (192).
3. There is some extreme poverty we can prevent without sacrificing anything of comparable moral significance (by donating money to a reputable aid organization).

Therefore:

4. We ought to prevent some extreme poverty (200).

The argument is powerful in its simplicity. Since most of the material possessions with which we surround ourselves pale in significance compared to an innocent child’s life, we ought to forego such luxuries and save children instead. How much should we give? In both previous editions, Singer argued that we should give 10% of our income—the equivalent of a traditional tithe—to assist those in absolute poverty. In the new edition, Singer has revised his view. He now proposes that we give on the basis of a progressive sliding scale: Based on one’s level of affluence, most of us should give somewhere between 1% and 5% of our income to famine relief.<sup>3</sup>

Chapter 9 presents the scientific case for anthropogenic global warming and points out some of the dire consequences that scientists are predicting if average temperatures rise 2.0–3.3°C. Not only would such temperature increases result in extinctions on a massive scale, they would negatively impact the water resources of 1–3 billion humans (217). Given the greenhouse gases already present in the atmosphere, the world would likely continue to warm even if greenhouse gas emissions were cut to zero today (218). The chapter serves as a powerful wake-up call to both governments and individuals that we must do all we can to curb greenhouse gas emissions. Governments should impose carbon and methane taxes, or carbon trading schemes, to create financial incentives for avoiding products that require the emission of greenhouse gases (236). Individuals can significantly reduce their carbon footprint by switching to mostly plant-based foods, improving home insulation, installing solar water heaters and electricity generators, vacationing closer to home, and taking public transportation or riding bicycles to work (231).

Chapter 10 rejects biocentric, ecocentric, and holistic approaches to environmental ethics and defends, instead, an environmental ethic that fosters consideration for the interests of all sentient beings, including subsequent generations far into the future (254). Such an environmental ethic encourages us to live simply so that others might simply live.

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3. For more details about the sliding scale that Singer now advocates, see: <http://www.thelifeyoucanlive.com>

Chapter 11 defends the use of civil disobedience—intentional lawbreaking—to bring about moral change and to prevent a serious moral wrong, provided doing so is likely to be successful. However, Singer makes clear: “If the means used involve undeniable harm to innocent people, and hold no promise of gaining their ends, it is wrong to use them” (274), and thus, “terrorism is never justified” (274).

Singer has argued that morality often requires us to sacrifice our own interests for the greater interests of others. If morality is so demanding, why act morally? The final chapter addresses this question. After clarifying the question, Singer gives what is perhaps the best answer that can be given: Living one’s life in accordance with one’s fundamental moral beliefs and values is one of the most meaningful ways one can live.

Outspoken critics have objected vehemently to Singer’s views on abortion and infanticide. But far more important than what one might find objectionable in the book is what one can learn from the book. If readers were to follow the recommendations of chapter 8 and donate 1–5% of their income to famine relief, there would be far fewer children living in extreme poverty and far fewer children dying of hunger and hunger-related disease—a state of affairs that pro-life critics of Singer’s position on abortion should be actively working to bring about. If readers were to take seriously Singer’s compelling arguments for extending moral consideration to animals and make the conscious choice to stop eating them, as many of his readers have, there would be significantly fewer animals suffering unnecessarily in factory farms. Important lessons, indeed!

## **Review of *Brain, Body and Mind: Neuroethics with a Human Face* by Walter Glannon<sup>1</sup>**

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Among the many challenging conceptual and empirical puzzles in neurophilosophy, perhaps the most vexing are the brain-body-mind-environment relationships and interactions affecting individual persons. Although an avalanche of articles and books probe various aspects of this complex cluster of issues, conflict and controversy is rampant in the literature. Walter Glannon’s new book, *Brain, Body and Mind: Neuroethics with a Human Face*, Oxford University Press, 2011, is an admirable effort to clarify and explain both the neuroscientific literature about how brains function and practical implications of new neuroscientific research for understanding consciousness, brain treatment and research, as well as ethics and law. Glannon holds the Canada Research Chair in Biomedical Ethics and Ethical Theory at the University of Calgary in Alberta. Although Glannon is a philosopher, he writes for an interdisciplinary audience. He addresses neurophilosophical problems (rather than philosophical theories) with critical and analytical precision. He draws from current neuroscience as well as contemporary philosophical and psychological literature about brain-body-mind-environment connections. Glannon’s book deserves the enthusiastic and effusive praise it receives on the dust jacket from highly regarded

scholars from philosophy, law, medicine and neuroscience. The book will be extremely valuable to anyone seriously interested in the field of neuroethics. Scholars from other disciplines will appreciate Glannon’s clearly written and well-documented scholarship as well as the absence of traditional metaphysical theory. (For readers who want a more philosophical approach, I recommend Glannon’s earlier book, *Bioethics and the Brain*, Oxford University Press, 2007.)

The extremely important first chapter entitled “Our Brains Are Not Us” lays out Glannon’s general position about brain-body-mind-environment interaction. Unlike those who argue that mental states such as intentions, beliefs or desires are reducible to or just are brain states, Glannon is explicitly an antireductionist. He believes that mental states are higher order but irreducible emergent properties of our brains. Brains, and thus our minds, are affected by our bodies as well as the external environment. He views the human brain as a complex system of interconnected and interacting components subject to internal and external forces. He rejects not only brain reductionism but also strict localization of brain function. He also believes that mental states that emerge from the interaction of brains, bodies and environment also can have an impact on our brains, bodies and

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1. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2011 272pp. \$45.00.

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