

Singer, Peter (1946–)

Anthony Skelton

Peter Singer was born in Melbourne, Australia on July 6, 1946. He has degrees from the University of Melbourne and from Oxford University. He has taught at, among others, Monash University, Princeton University, and the University of Melbourne. His research is devoted primarily to moral philosophy and to practical ethics. His most significant works to date are *Animal Liberation* (2002), *Practical Ethics* (2011), *Rethinking Life and Death* (1994), and *The Life You Can Save* (2009). This work has pushed Singer into public life where he has waged a political campaign for social and moral reform. The *New Yorker* has dubbed him “The Dangerous Philosopher.”

Singer defends preference utilitarianism, the view that an agent’s action is right insofar as it produces at least as much preference satisfaction on balance as any other action she could have performed in the situation (Singer 1988, 2011). This view involves a number of commitments. The first is to the idea that the only thing that matters morally is the satisfaction of preferences. The second is to a radical form of impartiality. Everyone’s preferences matter and equal preferences are to be given equal weight: my preference to avoid suffering is of no greater moral importance than your similar preference. The third is to the idea that we ought to produce the greatest amount of surplus preference satisfaction possible in the situations in which we find ourselves. On the basis of utilitarianism Singer advocates controversial positions regarding abortion, euthanasia, and infanticide (Singer 2011). His most powerful arguments are those attacking our treatment of nonhuman animals in agriculture and in research and of the world’s most impoverished people (Singer 1972, 2002, 2009, 2011).

The first argument is this. Suffering due to poisoning, electrical shock, social deprivation, drug addiction, and so on is very bad. Animals regularly endure this suffering in laboratories in North America (2002: 25–94). The laboratories that conduct this research produce only trivial knowledge, e.g., that when restrained and given the ability to consume unlimited amounts of cocaine, rhesus monkeys become addicted and eventually die from drug overdoses (Singer 2002: 66–7). Suffering due to forced confinement, suffocation, force feeding, tail-docking, genital mutilation, debeaking, and so on is very bad. Animals regularly endure this suffering on factory farms (Singer 2002: 95–157). The farms employing these practices satisfy only a trivial preference for nutritionally unnecessary but cheap, tasty meat (Singer 2011: 54). Animals strongly prefer not to suffer on factory farms and in research laboratories. This preference is as morally important as a similar human preference. Discounting animal suffering because it is animal suffering is a form of prejudice akin to sexism or racism, which Singer calls “speciesism.” It involves devaluing the suffering of a being on the basis of species membership alone, which is an arbitrary basis for doing so (Singer 2002: 6–9; 2011: 48–53). It is wrong to sacrifice an important preference in order to produce trivial knowledge or to satisfy a trivial preference. Therefore, it is wrong to pursue this scientific research and to factory farm.

This argument in part targets research that does not produce net benefits for animals or for humans. It is, of course, possible for there to be an experiment using only one animal in a very painful way, but producing great net benefits for humans. Many think it justified to perform this experiment. In reply, Singer argues that if it is justified, so is an experiment causing one irreversibly brain-damaged orphan infant serious suffering, but producing great net

benefits for humans. But no one accepts this. Therefore, no one should accept that the first experiment is justified (Singer 2002: 81–3; 2011: 57–8).

The argument attacking our treatment of the world's most impoverished people goes as follows. Premise 1: suffering due to lack of food, shelter, and basic medical care is very bad. This is the sort of suffering endured daily by the 1.4 billion people who live each day on what \$1.29 can buy in New York City. Premise 2: if it is in our power to prevent something very bad from happening without sacrificing anything of comparable moral significance, then we ought to do it (Singer 1972: 231; 2011: 200). Premise 3: it is in our power to prevent some suffering due to lack of food, shelter, and basic medical care by giving greater sums of aid to the most needy without sacrificing anything of comparable moral significance. Even very modest amounts of aid – 5 percent of one's income – can make a great impact (Singer 2009). Donating this amount involves the frustration of only trivial preferences for consumer goods (e.g., fancy shoes and expensive scotch) (Singer 1972: 235; 2011: 202). Conclusion: therefore, we should give greater sums of aid to the most needy. Rich nations do wrong by giving only very small amounts in the form of official development assistance to the desperately poor. Canadians give only about 0.32 percent of GDP; Americans give less.

The second premise of this argument is the most controversial. Singer suggests that it may require one to give to the poor until the harm one does to oneself is greater than the benefit one produces (Singer 1972: 234, 241). This is hard to accept. He notes that there is a modest version of the principle. It says that if it is in our power to prevent something very bad from happening without sacrificing anything of moral significance, then we ought to do it. He claims that he has no good reason to

choose this principle over the stronger one outlined above. He does, however, say that the more modest version is “undeniable” (Singer 1972: 241). This speaks strongly in its favor. Singer sometimes provides utilitarian reasoning for adopting more modest principles (Singer 2009: 152; 2011: 214). These reasons seem weaker than the appeal to what no one could reasonably deny, especially in light of the problems with utilitarianism (Singer 1988; Skelton 2011). Whatever the case may be, even this more modest principle gets Singer the conclusion he most wants. Frivolous consumer items are not morally significant; therefore, they cannot justify failing to prevent suffering due to lack of food, shelter, and basic medical care.

SEE ALSO: Animal Rights; Poverty; Utilitarianism

References

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Further Reading

- Jamieson, D. (Ed.) (1999) *Singer and His Critics*. Oxford: Blackwell.