Peter Singer Under Fire: The Moral Iconoclast Faces His Critics
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As Judith Lichtenberg notes at the beginning of her fine piece "Famine, Affluence, and Psychology," "I doubt that any essay has been assigned more often in introductory ethics courses over the last thirty years than Singer's 'Famine, Affluence, and Morality.'" (229)[1] We might add that no contemporary ethicist is as widely read, discussed, disputed, admired, and loathed as Peter Singer. He is the rare philosopher who has mass appeal and is also taken seriously by academic philosophers.

This fact is nicely reflected in *Peter Singer Under Fire: The Moral Iconoclast Faces His Critics*, edited by Jeffrey A. Schaler. The book contains fifteen essays—three of which have been published previously[2]—on various aspects of Singer's thought written by philosophers, economists, journalists, and disability rights activists. In addition, there are replies to each essay from Singer, as well as an excellent intellectual autobiography which I could easily imagining assigning to students as an alternative view (a genetic view as it were) of how Singer came to his controversial beliefs.

The collection as a whole, however, is uneven. Singer's writing is an exemplar of philosophical lucidity and charity, and several authors in this volume (including some well known philosophers) would do well to emulate Singer stylistically, if not philosophically. A few pieces display a basic misunderstanding of Singer's views, offer mere assertions or rhetorical questions in the place of arguments, or are remarkably uncharitable. Stephen Drake's hatchet job deserves special mention in this regard—it could actually serve as a useful pedagogical tool for teaching students how *not* to engage with the views of someone you disagree with.

Nonetheless, there are a number of strong and, in some cases, very strong pieces which, when combined with Singer's replies, offer substantial insight not only into Singer's views but, naturally, into the issues themselves. One of the greatest strengths of the collection is that it covers more or less all of the areas where Singer has made a major contribution,[3] as reflected by the book's four sections: "The Moral Status of Animals," "The Sanctity of Life," "Global Ethics," and "Ethical Theory." In what follows, I briefly discuss what I think are the seven strongest papers. In most cases, though not all, the papers I highlight are too difficult to assign to students in lower-level classes, although they would be appropriate for more senior students. In all cases, however, the papers enhanced my understanding of Singer's views and the issues they discuss.

"The Human Prejudice," by Bernard Williams, takes on Singer's claim that to accord special status to human beings *simply because* they are human beings constitutes a kind of prejudice in principle no different from other kinds of prejudice (based on race or nationality for example). Williams's argument

consists of two broad claims: first that the human prejudice does not commit us to the view that humans, as such, are more valuable "from the point of view of universe" than other living creatures; and second that, if taken seriously, the Ideal Observer theory that Singer favors is unable to make sense of the Utilitarian commitment to the badness of suffering. As in much of his other work, Williams wants to show that when we talk about what matters, all we have to go on are our actual, human attachments and that any moral theory that sees those attachments as (unjustifiably) prejudiced is not a theory that can speak to us. This paper is extremely interesting, containing all kinds of fascinating discussions and asides, while also being somewhat frustrating. As with much of Williams's work, I found myself wishing for more explicit argument and a little less suggestive gesturing.

Don Marquis' "Singer on Abortion and Infanticide" is a wonderfully lucid piece which does an excellent job of (a) explaining Singer's views on abortion and infanticide, (b) criticizing those views, and (c) sketching Marquis' own view of the matter. Marquis argues that even if we accept Singer's arguments against the "sanctity of life doctrine" (according to which humans, *as such*, have a right to life), it does not follow that abortion is, in general, permissible, since a view like Singer's has unacceptable consequences. Instead, Marquis gestures at his own view—the "future of value" account—which, without relying on the sanctity of life doctrine, purports to show that abortion and infanticide are, in general, wrong. Singer, of course, denies that the consequences of his view are unacceptable and maintains that Marquis' own view depends on a highly controversial conception of when life begins. Singer's response to Marquis is especially helpful inasmuch as it contains a very clear and succinct account of what Singer takes the correct formulation of his preference utilitarianism to be.[4] Overall, then, the Marquis-Singer papers offer an excellent and easy-to-follow overview of where each thinker stands on not only the matter of abortion/infanticide, but also what principles should govern our moral theory in the first place.

An entirely different kind of perspective on Singer's views on the (purported) sanctity of life is found in Harriet McBryde Johnson's touching, perceptive, and important account of her meeting with Singer. This piece is from Singer's 2002 debate at Princeton with Johnson, a well-known lawyer, author, and disability rights activist, who had a congenital neuromuscular disease. Johnson does a remarkable job giving the reader a glimpse of what life with a severe disability looks like, how many people in the disability rights community view Singer, and, in a particularly vivid way, precisely what is at stake in the issues concerning the sanctity of life. Once again, Singer's response is particularly valuable inasmuch it offers him a chance to offer a succinct statement of views and to clear up some popular misconceptions. Johnson's and Singer's papers also serve as a wonderful example of how two people who profoundly disagree on important matters can nonetheless respectfully engage with each other, even when one of the participants has a very substantial stake in the issues at hand.

The two strongest papers in the "Global Ethics" section come from Judith Lichtenberg and Richard J. Arneson, both of whom focus on Singer's concep-

tion of the demands of morality given in "Famine, Affluence, and Morality" (henceforth, "FAM"). Arneson's paper offers a sustained defense of what Arneson calls Singer's "Principle of Sacrifice."[5] Arneson offers his own, weaker version of the Principle of Sacrifice but ultimately concludes that it is not clear why one should find it more compelling than Singer's principle and that "the vise that Singer has clamped on us still binds tightly" (293). Arneson's paper is long and presupposes some familiarity with moral theory. As such, it is almost certainly too difficult to assign in an introductory ethics class where one is most likely to assign FAM. Nonetheless, it ought to be required reading for those of us who regularly teach FAM.

Judith Lichtenberg's paper, like Arneson's, has the virtue of taking the challenge Singer presents in FAM very seriously. But whereas Arneson's concerns are entirely philosophical, Lichtenberg's are more psychological or social. Lichtenberg maintains that the debate surrounding Singer's argument about what we owe to the distantly needy "has reached an impasse and is no longer fruitful" (239) partly because the arguments involved fail to take into account the cultural, social, and what we might call "natural," factors that, as a matter of fact, prevent people from meeting the demands of morality as Singer conceives of them. Lichtenberg's main task, then, is to ask what we can learn from psychology about what influences our behavior, with the hopes of using these lessons to get people to give more. In this way, Lichtenberg's piece serves as a nice compliment to FAM inasmuch as it at least begins to give us the resources to answer the question, "Where might we go after we have read FAM?"

The final section of the book is devoted to Ethical Theory and contains two very nice papers. Michael Huemer's "Singer's Unstable Meta-Ethics" is exceptionally clear and easy-to-follow. Huemer argues that Singer's commitment to non-cognitivism and Humeanism about reasons is at odds with Singer's substantive normative commitments; leaves Singer unable to give an account of why we should be moral; and clashes with Singer's ethical methodology, which relies on an appeal to intuitions despite Singer's general disdain for testing philosophical theories against intuitions. In addition to its intrinsic merits, Huemer's paper is valuable for the lengthy reply it prompts from Singer. Singer gives an especially clear statement of his metaethical commitments (including his "ambivalence" regarding non-cognitivism [380]). His discussion of what he sees as the proper role of intuition mongering in moral theorizing is particularly valuable and interesting.[6] Should I ever cover Singer's metaethics in class, or indeed offer a more sustained overview of Singer's views than I currently do, I will most certainly assign Huemer's paper and Singer's response.

David Schmitdz's "Separateness, Suffering, and Moral Theory" uses Singer's "strong principle" from FAM (what Arneson called the "Principle of Sacrifice") as the starting point for a series of reflections, not all obviously related, on act-utilitarianism and the nature of moral theorizing. With regard to the first, Schmidtz argues that the act-utilitarian focus on particular cases, rather than policies, leads its proponents horribly astray. Rather, Schmidtz

claims, we should favor something more like rule-utilitarianism, or what Schmidtz calls a "reflective consequentialist morality" (439).

Schmidtz makes many specific arguments about the Strong Principle as well as some grander meta-philosophical arguments about what it is we do when we do moral theory, which are very interesting if not entirely perspicuous. I could imagine assigning parts of this long paper to students, particularly the section where Schmidtz imagines what would happen if we took the Strong Principle seriously, since his reasoning here is, I think, a very sophisticated version of what many students think when they encounter FAM. The entire paper, however, is well worth reading in preparation for teaching Singer, both FAM in particular and issues concerning Singer's act-utilitarianism, the latter of which Singer takes up in his usual clear and helpful way in responding to Schmidtz.

As is perhaps clear from my review to this point, what might be most valuable about this collection is the opportunity it gives Singer to respond to strong criticisms and to clear up misconceptions in the face of poor or uncharitable criticisms. As a result, the attentive reader walks away with a very firm understanding of Singer's views on the wide array of issues he has discussed and, in some cases, transformed over the last forty years. Although I would not assign the whole book in a course (except *perhaps* in a course entirely devoted to Singer and even then the unevenness of the collection combined with its price would give me pause), I certainly recommend it as a valuable resource for those of us that routinely teach Singer.

Notes

1. This is only half of the quotation. She goes on to say, "with the possible exception of Judith Jarvis Thomson's 'A Defense of Abortion'" (230).

2. Williams's "The Human Prejudice," Schmidtz's "Separateness, Suffering, and Moral Theory" and McBryde Johnson's "Unspeakable Conversations, or, How I Spent One Day as a Token Cripple." The last is an excerpt of a longer piece of the same name.

3. Unlike the otherwise excellent *Singer and his Critics*, which has no essays primarily about Singer's views on the (supposed) sanctity of life and killing at the beginning/end of life.

4. "We should satisfy, to the greatest extent possible, the preferences a being has, except that we should not satisfy a preference that results from errors of reasoning or errors about matters of fact" (156).

5. "If it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, we ought, morally, to do it" (FAM). This is the moderate version of the moral principle Singer articulates in FAM.

6. Although he notes that a fullest statement of his views on these matters is in "Ethics and Intuitions, " *Journal of Ethics* 9:3–4 (October 2005), pp. 331–352.

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