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# Response to Todd Bindig's "Confusion about Speciesism And Moral Status"

by

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Todd Bindig takes a provocative position in his essay "Confusion about Speciesism and Moral Status". He proposes that we, as Catholic believers, can find some common ground with the position taken by Peter Singer against "speciesism". Bindig offers some tweaking to the meaning of the term "species" to create grounds for agreement. He argues that Singer is correct; species is morally irrelevant if it is founded merely on one's reproductive community and historical origin. Bindig offers some very imaginative scenarios for recategorizing human beings in a plurality of species possibilities, i.e. the existence of another planet where beings exactly like human beings exist, but from diverse origins and within a separate reproductive community. Unfortunately, the supposed confusion over the acceptable definition of the term "species" is irrelevant to Singer's arguments. Singer is not confused about his understanding of speciesism. Speciesism is a "morally indefensible preference for members of our own species" (53), that is, human beings over non-human animals. He proposes that the moral status of "persons" cannot be limited to human beings alone, but must include non-human animals as well, if we are not to be accused of the sin of "speciesism".

According to Singer, ethical decision making must be based on equal consideration of interests. These interests cannot be limited to such irrelevant criteria as intelligence or rationality, as these would be "as arbitrary as skin color". He maintains that, instead, we base ethical decisions on *sentience*, that is, a balance of pain vs. pleasure: classical utilitarianism, he claims. Hence, since pigs, horses, and chickens are as likely to experience pain as adult humans there can be no moral justification for not weighing their interests equally. Personhood achieves meaning based on a being's capacity to feel pain. Hence, according to Singer, most of us are regularly

feasting on the flesh of persons! Only a speciesist could justify his own taste for another being's flesh as sufficient reason to slaughter innocent chickens. Singer repeatedly likens this to the southern slave owner of times past who wantonly scourged other beings merely because they had skin color not like his own. Speciesists are no different than racists.

Bindig places himself among strange bedfellows here, since he seems to accept a Singeresque premise, that, while infants and retarded human beings do not actually possess characteristically human traits, apes, dogs and several other animals "seem to have the ability to utilize rational thought and to will." Traditional western philosophy reserves rationality and free will as exclusive to human beings.

Singer posits the chance that human beings, since they have mental capacities, can possibly suffer more than animals when they are threatened with anticipated pain or death. This mental suffering must be accounted for when weighing interests. However, it is precisely this possibility of mental suffering which the newborn infant or mentally retarded adult does not experience, which, for Singer, may make them better candidates for experimentation than, say, a dog which may indeed suffer anxiety and terror at being confined in a strange place. "Sometimes animals may suffer *more* because of their more limited understanding." Even with no intention of harm on the part of its captors, "we cannot explain (to an animal) that we are not threatening its life... an animal cannot distinguish an attempt to overpower and confine from an attempt to kill: the one causes as much terror as the other." Newborn infants and mentally retarded adults, on the other hand, probably don't recognize differences in their surroundings so cannot be said to be suffering any mental anguish. This line of argumentation gives Singer reasons for preferring the use of human infants, "orphans perhaps", or retarded humans for experimentation, to the use of animals "since infants and retarded humans would have no idea of what was going to happen to them." (*Practical Ethics*, 52-53)

Bindig makes the mistake of assuming that by "intuition" most of us are rightly reluctant to call other things, such as higher mammals, "persons". This is precisely the point which Singer exploits: "intuition" has become so obscured in our modern culture that many are *not* reluctant to call non-human beings "persons". It is not uncommon to find terms such as "vegetable" applied to human life, or "blob of cells", or "potential human", while at the same time "Cats are people too" reads a familiar bumper sticker. Divine design is put forth by Bindig to account for human beings being set apart from everything else in creation. And rightly so, Divine design is the reason. Unfortunately, Singer rejects the entire Judeo-Christian tradition along with any notion of "Divine design". According to Singer, the ethical tradition of the sanctity of human life is a "farce" based on a now outdated religious authority. This tradition appears valid "only while we are intimidated into

uncritically accepting that all human life has some special dignity or worth. Once challenged, the traditional ethic crumples" (*Writings*, 168). The "rise of better understanding" in modern thought promises a better ethic, one "that does not need to be propped up by transparent fictions no one can really believe; an ethic that is more compassionate and more responsive to what people decide for themselves" (*ibid*).

The term "person" as it is used today has a distinctly Christian history. In the early Church the Christian understanding of a Triune God was challenged by claims defending monotheism against multiple (three) gods. In order to explain the doctrine of the Trinity, Church fathers employed the language of the theater. "Prosopon" and "persona" were terms which referred to a mask worn by an actor in the theater. The actor's character was recognized by the mask that he donned. One actor could play many parts using different masks, or prosopon/personae. One God, three Persons.

The evolution of the meaning of "person" is unique to western philosophy and specifically Christian history. Even today United Nations documenters will avoid the use of the word "person" in favor of "individual" because Eastern non-Christian cultures do not share our understanding of the term. It is the Christian tradition alone which has brought the term into useful meaning. Hence, Peter Singer's reinvention of the term is related to his a-historical viewpoint.

Only human beings are persons, that is, beings of rational nature with an immortal spiritual soul. Only they are creatures capable of seeking and knowing both their Creator and, through Him, themselves. Only human beings belong to the species of rational substance, and therefore the genus of Persons. Their status as persons renders their lives of infinite value, over that of every other creature. This value is related to their capacity for rational thought, even if, by defect, that capacity will never be fully developed or has ceased to be operative. The person is destined to live forever by reason of that which is most perfect of him; his spiritual soul (of a rational nature). That which is spiritual cannot be destroyed. "The truth of the immortality of the soul is simultaneously the truth of the indestructibility of the person."<sup>1</sup>

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## Reference

1. Karol Wojtyla, "*Catholic Thought from Lublin: Person and Community*," translated by Theresa Sandok, OSM, (Peter Lang: New York, 1993), p. 175.

## Bibliography:

Singer, Peter "Practical Ethics" Cambridge University Press. Melbourne, 1979.  
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