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PETER SINGER ON EXPENDABILITY

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Many of Peter Singer's ideas runs contrary to commonly accepted viewpoints. This, of course, is no reason to criticize any thinker, but it does encourage others to carefully investigate how such conclusions have been reached. In this article I examine Singer's utilitarian views on the expendability of life, noting apparent flaws in Singer's "replaceability argument."

Before we explore "replaceability," we must examine inherent value and expendability, which are important to the conclusion Singer ultimately draws.

Singer argues that the lives of self-conscious beings have inherent value but are not automatically guaranteed protection:

...utilitarians and others who are prepared to harm individuals... will view those they are harming, along with those they are benefiting, as equally possessing inherent value. [But] they prefer to maximize benefits to individuals, rather than to restrict such benefits by requirement that no individual may be harmed...

The principle of equal consideration of interests, which is the foundation of utilitarianism as well as of many other ethical views, fully satisfies the demand that we recognize the inherent value of subjects-of-a-life. (Singer, "Animal" 11, 13)

Singer's utilitarian theory ascribes an instrumental value to life. He weighs pleasures and pains to determine which action will bring about the best consequences for all effected. If the life of an ibis must hang in the balance while we determine which actions will bring about the best consequences for all effected, how can the ibis be said to have inherent value?

Singer might argue that the best outcome for the ibis is as relevant as the best

outcome for all other individuals. If her interests are given equal consideration, the ibis is granted inherent value—but not absolute inherent value. Absolute value protects the lives of individuals first and foremost, all things being equal. But in Singer’s theory each life is valued in relative proportion to all other sentient beings. Each individual is viewed as a member of a larger group, where tradeoffs for the greater good are permissible and even desirable. Singer’s theory acknowledges the “value” of sentient entities by focusing on the reduction of their pain. Why would one wish to increase happiness, or reduce suffering, if individuals have no value? Singer’s theory does not overtly ascribe inherent value to any one entity, yet by seeking the best consequences for all affected, Singer offers each individual a measure of *de facto* inherent value, because each entity’s interests are considered.

Individuals are expendable in Singer’s work. In this sense Singer’s theory fails to value life in and of itself; he accepts the destruction of life as a means to an end. Singer’s theory indicates that it would “be justifiable to experiment on a brain-damaged human. If it really were possible to save several lives by an experiment that would take just one life, and there were no other way those lives could be saved (Animal 85). For utilitarians like Singer, who focus on the satisfaction of interests, individuals can be sacrificed for the greater good.

Singer’s utilitarian tendency to trade lives off, one against another, is epitomized in his “replaceability” argument. In order to maximize utility, Singer asserts that certain individuals ought to be replaced by entities that are better able, or more likely, to satisfy interests and increase overall happiness. The “replaceability argument” permits killing animals (human or otherwise) that have no conception of themselves as existing in the future, provided such individuals lead a pleasant life beforehand, are killed painlessly, and are *replaced* by beings that will have equally pleasant lives. *Singer notes that this view seems counterintuitive* (especially since children and severely retarded individuals fall into this “replaceable” category). Yet he concludes that such replacements maximize satisfaction of interests, and utilitarian expedience allows killing comparatively less happy or less successful individuals in order to maximize overall satisfaction of interests.

Dale Jamieson, questioning the expendability of life, provides fodder for pondering replaceability with an example consisting of two parents who plan to have

only a certain number of children, and who have one exceptionally miserable child. He asks: Would not their chances of bringing more happiness into the world be higher if they were to eliminate the misery-child, and conceived another in its place? If one entity can be replaced with another that is happier, is not a moral utilitarian compelled to sacrifice the less-happy for the sake of the happier (Jamieson 142-145)? (Singer would factor in any anxiety such a moral imperative brings to parents of unhappy children; no doubt parents would have to be allowed to *choose* to eliminate unhappy children for such a morality to yield utilitarian value.) Does Singer's theory not only permit but require the death of such a misery-child?

Michael Lockwood offers another challenge to Singer's "replaceability argument" via the creation of a company he calls "Disposapup." This hypothetical company breeds pups to provide pets for families. "Disposapup" also takes dogs back and disposes of them, by putting them painlessly to death, whether because the family wishes to go on vacation, because their pup has grown beyond the cute and cuddly stage, or because the family has altogether lost interest in having a dog. In the future, if the family wants a dog "Disposapup" can give them a fresh start with a cute and cuddly puppy (168). As Lockwood and Jamieson point out, Singer's utilitarian theory opens the door to morally repugnant possibilities.

But utilitarianism is not necessarily to blame; at least some of these surprising outcomes appear to stem from errors in Singer's work. In "Killing Humans and Killing Animals" Singer examines two utilitarian outlooks: The "total view" indicates that ethical actions will always "increase the total surplus of pleasure over pain, irrespective of whether this is done by increasing the pleasure of existing beings, or increasing the number of beings who exist" (147). In contrast, the "prior existence view" considers the pleasure and pains only of beings that already exist (Singer, "Killing" 148). Singer opts for the "total view" because he finds an inconsistency in the "prior existence view:" "if the pleasure a possible child will experience is not a reason for bringing it into the world, why is the pain a possible child will experience a reason against bringing it into the world?" ("Killing" 148). Singer discounts the "prior-existence" view based on this suspicious asymmetry, and opts for the "total" view. This leads to the "replaceability argument."

The asymmetry Singer notes seems to result from Singer's wording of the question, rather than from any problem in the "prior existence" view. In his discussion of the "total" view, Singer assumes that any given life generally counts as a "pleasant life," unless otherwise described:

[I]t does not seem wrong for the government of an underpopulated country to encourage its people to have more children so that the population will rise by, say, one million. Yet of this million, we can be sure that at least one will be thoroughly miserable. If it is not wrong to create the million, but would be wrong to create the single miserable being, the obvious explanation is that there is value in the creation of the 999,999—or however many it will be—whose lives are happy. ("Killing" 150)

Singer assumes that lives—except the minuscule quantity that are undeniably miserable—are correctly assumed to be "happy," and are therefore rightly brought into the world in order to bring about net utilitarian gain. Bernard Rollin comments: "Most of us probably will have more suffering in our lives than pleasure" (34). Singer assesses existence for the vast majority of human beings, certainly for the average human, to be an undisputed positive/pleasure. Are not the myriad sentiments of life more complicated?

It seems more reasonable to assign a neutral or mixed value to life. A not-yet-conceived entity is necessarily an unknown, but will most likely find a mixture of both pleasure and pain throughout life. Some beings, born with diseases or mental defects, are likely to experience increased suffering from medical treatments, torment of peers, exclusion from activities, and uncertain futures. Concurrently, the anguish of parents, extended family, and friends is usually heightened by the birth and life of a child that is physically or mentally abnormal. This is not to say that there is *no* pleasure in the life of one born outside the norm, only that it is reasonable to assume that the pain ratio will be higher in the birth of an abnormal child—for the child, the parents, and all involved.

If we rewrite Singer's conundrum, eliminating his assessment of most lives as an automatic (and it would seem exclusive) pleasure, the question looks very different: if the pleasure and pain a normal child is apt to experience is not a reason *for* bringing it into the world, why is the certain increased pain of a defective child a reason *against* bringing it into the world? The question no longer appears asymmetrical or perplexing. If the anticipated mix of pleasure and pain is altered so that increased pain is expected, one

might reasonably choose not to parent.

If we do not calculate the average life as exclusively “pleasure,” Singer’s reason for rejecting the “prior existence” view (an asymmetry created by a fallacious assumption) evaporates. In this case Singer probably would have opted for the “prior-existence” view, thereby avoiding the counterintuitive conclusions of the “replaceability argument” highlighted by Jamieson and Lockwood.

Singer’s view on painless death seems equally problematic. Michael Allen Fox attacks Singer’s assumption that an individual with no sensation has no interests and need not be treated with any consideration. Fox brings to light a

rare but thoroughly documented condition called “congenital universal indifference (or insensitivity) to pain,” which is characterized by complete absence, throughout life, of any pain-sensing capability. But if the capacity to experience pain is missing, any rights predicated on it must vanish as well. In addition, completely anesthetized, hypnotized, or deeply comatose human beings lack the capacity in question and hence, too, any corresponding rights. (110)

Fox misrepresents Singer’s utilitarian theory as a theory based on rights, and he neglects to consider the more complex aspects of Singer’s theory (he takes mental suffering, and the suffering of relatives and friends into account). Nonetheless, Fox’s argument is worth exploring. Fox’s point holds true for Singer with regard to beings that have no sensation, if no one else is affected, and so long as there is no mental anguish involved. However unlikely this scenario may be, the philosophical point is plain: most of us would not think it right to do whatever we wish to such an individual.

Singer’s “replaceability argument” permits painless death, where I find a second problem in Singer’s work. “When animals lead pleasant lives, are killed painlessly, their deaths do not cause suffering to other animals, and the killing of one animal makes possible its replacement by another who would not otherwise have lived—the killing of non-self-conscious animals may not be wrong.” In short, “the wrongness of killing amounts to no more than the reduction of pleasure it involves” (Practical 104). If the extant pleasure is not reduced, no wrong is done.

Singer’s argument seems to ignore several important issues. First, his conclusion ignores the likely possibility that sentient beings have an interest in staying alive. All

living entities are “psychologically oriented to escape death and to pursue the goals appropriate to their kind—which speaks against the idea that it is normally acceptable to painlessly kill healthy sentient beings lacking a high degree of self-awareness” (Taylor 252). Does thwarting of an animal’s preference to survive constitute harm? On what grounds can thwarted preference *not* constitute a valid harm in Singer’s preference utilitarianism?

Second, not only do some individuals fail to increase overall happiness, some individuals may be a significant *detriment* to the overall happiness. Singer fails to consider situations in which the death of an individual would bring great *pleasure* to others. If a man beats his wife, cat, kids, and dog; if he steals from his relatives, threatens coworkers, goes hunting every weekend, and eats his neighbors (he lives between a hog-farm and a cattle ranch), would not his elimination be *preferable*? If so, Singer’s utilitarian equation indicates that unrepentant flesh-eaters, fur-wearers, hunters, and other ruthless exploiters of sentient beings *ought to be eliminated* in order to raise overall happiness or pleasure, in order to satisfy more interests (namely those of exploited nonhumans). When does an individual cause so much pain and suffering to others that the utilitarian scales vote against her or his existence?

In Singer’s view killing is acceptable so long as death is painless, the individual is replaced, and no other creatures are affected (through loss of a mate, offspring, or a member of their social group). Singer asserts that if these conditions are met there is no reason to oppose killing. He writes, “an infant who is ‘allowed to die’ ends up just as dead as one who is killed” (In Defense 8). This brings me to my third point: Singer fails to consider the effects of killing, both on the one who makes the kill and on the community in which such a killer lives. Singer might argue that killing leads to no ill effects if one feels she is doing the right thing—that killing is what ought to be done under the circumstances, and that engaging in a just act of destruction prevents ill effects. Such an assertion flies in the face of evidence gathered from war-veterans, those who experiment on animals, and even slaughterhouse workers.

Evidence indicates that killing—even rubber-stamped, institutionalized killing for the “benefit of humanity”—has a negative effect on those who the deed (Eisnitz). An employee at Biosearch Laboratories, where animals are exploited in hopes of human

gain, is reported to have said, “Once you’ve been here a few days, you lose respect for all living things” (Orlans 132). Educators in human and veterinary medicine, while requiring a heavy dose of animal experimentation from their students, repeatedly ask why students arrive “sensitive, concerned, idealistic, morally aware, and suffused with a desire to promote health and alleviate illness and suffering, yet emerge four years later cynical, hardened, brutalized, and rigid, their ideals and enthusiasm forgotten” (Rollin 110). Could it be, at least in part, that their moral sensibilities have been breached by experimenting on the very kinds of animals they hoped to heal?

Statistics from slaughterhouse employees reveal a similar but more dramatic “hardening” of moral sensibilities. Gail Eisnitz conducted an extensive survey of slaughterhouse workers; her subjects admitted to excessive, unnecessary cruelty toward the animals they perpetually kill. A fairly typical slaughterhouse employee reported:

The worst thing, worse than the physical danger, is the emotional toll. If you work in that stick pit for any period of time [killing pigs], you develop an attitude that lets you kill things but doesn’t let you care. You may look a hog in the eye that’s walking around down in the blood pit with you and think, God, that really isn’t a bad-looking animal. You may want to pet it. Pigs down on the kill floor have come up and nuzzled me like a puppy. Two minutes later I had to kill them—beat them to death with a pipe. I can’t care...

Every sticker [slaughterhouse killer] I know carries a gun, and every one of them would shoot you. Most stickers I know have been arrested for assault. A lot of them have problems with alcohol. They have to drink, they have no other way of dealing with killing life, kicking animals all day long. If you stop to think about it, you’re killing several thousand beings a day. (Eisnitz 87)

Even when killing is considered “legitimate,” “necessary,” and is condoned by the vast majority, those who kill are affected by the deaths they cause. In turn, the societies they live in suffer. Slaughterhouse employees are commonly in and out of prison, batter family members, and are able and willing to wield weapons, even against humans.

Slaughterhouse owners also reveal a moral numbness. Eisnitz found that it is not uncommon for workers to be crushed by cattle, burned by chemicals, stabbed by poking knives, or lose limbs and body parts in machinery. Workers are sometimes not even trained to use the dangerous machines they are required to operate. Eisnitz discovered that, “with nearly thirty-six injuries or illnesses for every one hundred workers, meat

packing is the most dangerous industry in the United States” (Eisnitz 271). She recorded the effects of long-term involvement in slaughterhouse work: “a system that places nearly as little value on human life as it does on animal life” (Eisnitz 273). Gail Eisnitz’s study indicates that the negative impact of killing is intense and extensive, even when killing is socially acceptable.

Her conclusion is not unexpected. For centuries philosophers have assumed that cruelty toward animals begets cruelty toward people (Hoff 63-64). Kant believed:

If a man shoots his dog because the animal is no longer capable of service, he does not fail in his duty to the dog, for the dog cannot judge, but his act is inhuman and damages in himself that humanity which it is his duty to show towards mankind. If he is not to stifle his human feelings, he must practice kindness toward animals, for he who is cruel to animals becomes hard also in his treatment of men.
(Kant 240)

Indeed, recent research indicates that a lack of respect for *any* living being is associated with a lack of respect for life in general. In 1983 a study linked animal abuse to child abuse, revealing that “88% of the families in which physical abuse took place also had animals that were abused” (DeViney, 311). Those who were insensitive to dogs and cats were also insensitive to their own children. An ever-increasing body of evidence links violence toward other-than-human animals with violence toward humans. The following quote, from Canadian Veterinary Journal, was first published in 1992:

Research documented: ...a triad of symptoms, closely associating cruelty to animals, physical abuse by one or both parents, and violence toward people...

Spectacular anecdotal incidents among serial killers enhanced this research. Mass murderer Theodore Bundy claimed he had spent his early years with a grandfather who assaulted people and tormented animals; circumstantial evidence linked him to animals’ graves. Albert DeSalvo, the “Boston Strangler,” in his youth shot arrows into dogs and cats trapped in orange crates... Carroll Edward Cole, executed in 1985 for five of the 35 murders of which he was accused, said his first act of violence as a child was to strangle a puppy. James Huberty, who killed 21 at a McDonald’s restaurant in San Ysidro, California, had been accused of shooting his neighbor’s dog with an airgun. Earl Shriener... sexually mutilating a seven-year-old boy in Tacoma, Washington, had a juvenile history of stringing up cats, sticking firecrackers up the anuses of dogs, and slaughtering chickens. In 1975, neighbors photographed the skulls of animals impaled in the yard of Jeffrey Dahmer, imprisoned this

year for dismembering of 17 men in Milwaukee. None of these early incidents were reported to authorities. (Arkow 409-410)

Though we humans tend to be proud of our brain-power, most would agree that intelligence does not, and cannot, make us truly human. (Presumably there is a reason why the word “human” looks very much like the word “humane.”) What most would consider classically “human” is somewhat illusive, but we tend to agree that whatever it is, it is likely to be damaged or demeaned by willfully causing suffering or the unnecessary destruction of life. To destroy life, even for the sake of aggregate happiness, threatens something more fundamental than pleasure: “people who cannot be trusted with animals often cannot be trusted with human beings either; a child who enjoys torturing small animals had better not be left alone with the baby” (Warren 51). A baby that dies because we cannot keep her alive will be just as dead as one overtly killed, but the emotional and social consequences are worlds apart. “Indeed, he who sows the seeds of murder and pain cannot reap joy and love” (Marshall 70).

Singer’s replaceability argument is flawed because he categorizes lives which are both happy and sad as singularly happy. His acceptance of painless death is problematic because Singer, a preference utilitarian, ignores the preference of almost every living being to maintain existence. Finally, Singer’s replaceability argument does not take into account the effect of killing on the one killed, or on their larger community.

Singer’s utilitarian philosophy often causes readers to give pause. While Singer usually offers the best in reasoned arguments, this does not appear to be the case with his replaceability argument. In this case we are right to pause, and our concerns have as much to do with Singer’s reasoning as they do with his conclusion.

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