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BOOK REVIEWS

The Philosophical Review, XCII, No. 2 (April 1983)

PRACTICAL ETHICS. By PETER SINGER. London, Cambridge University Press, 1980. Pp. viii, 237.

Peter Singer's *Practical Ethics* would be an excellent text for an introductory ethics course. Singer makes certain assumptions about the nature of ethics which yield, broadly speaking, a utilitarian normative ethical theory. He then proceeds to apply this theory to a wide range of practical problems—racial and sexual discrimination, the treatment of animals, abortion, euthanasia, distribution of income, overseas aid, etc. Singer treats these problems in the light of his utilitarian approach, but he is not excessively tendentious or doctrinaire; a consistent, lucid line of analysis is developed throughout the book.

The greatest strength of the book consists in showing how a fairly explicit ethical theory can yield reasonable answers to a broad variety of practical problems. Singer shows how plausible answers to a number of questions can be derived from a single basic principle: the principle of equal consideration of interests. It is not the purpose of the book extensively to explore the foundations of ethics. That is, Singer does not attempt to argue for his version of utilitarianism from 'first principles'. He does not argue that his theory is the only plausible ethical theory. Rather, Singer accepts certain assumptions, offers reasons to think that they are plausible, and derives consequences from them. Whereas this isn't the only kind of enterprise in ethics, and perhaps not the fundamental one, it is certainly interesting and useful.

Singer claims that someone who takes the ethical viewpoint, rather than, say, the viewpoint of prudence, will realize that his own interests shouldn't be given special weight simply because they are *his*. Reflection on the universal aspect of ethics may lead one to adopt the principle of equal consideration of interests. Adoption of this sort of principle rules out racial and sexual discrimination. Singer argues that it also militates against certain kinds of behavior toward animals.

Singer says that some nonhuman animals are *persons*—they are rational and self-conscious beings, aware of themselves as entities with a past and a future. Insofar as there are reasons to avoid inflicting pain on and killing persons, these reasons will apply to nonhuman persons as well human persons. Also, even those nonhuman animals which are *not* persons have interests, and we should apply the principle of equal consideration of interests to them. To the extent that these creatures are capable of experiencing pleasures and pains, we should treat these pleasures and pains on a

par with similar pleasures and pains of humans. Every conscious creature has an interest in avoiding pain.

But the reasons not to inflict pain needn't be the same as the reasons not to kill. And the reasons not to kill a person are not identical to the reasons for refraining from killing a nonperson. Other things equal, it is worse to kill a person, on Singer's view, since a person can have desires and preferences about his future, whereas a nonperson can't. Singer believes that, in terms of the acts themselves (and not side-effects), it would be worse to kill a normal chimpanzee than a gravely defective human 'who' is not a person (p. 97).

Singer agrees with Michael Tooley's well-known claim that, although a new-born infant is not (yet) a person, an adult cow might be (pp. 84, 98). Singer applies his case against killing persons to the killing of apes, whales, dolphins, and perhaps also to monkeys, dogs and cats, pigs, seals, and bears. Singer concedes that the argument against killing persons cannot be applied in an uncontroversial way to the killing of, say, chickens or ducks. His view about the killing of such animals is as follows. If we raise a chicken in cruel circumstances (in a 'factory farm'), we violate the principle of equal consideration of interests—we don't respect the chicken's important interest in not having pain inflicted on it (in order to satisfy a human's minor interest in gastronomic titillation). However, if we raise the chicken in humane circumstances and we assume that it is not a person, then it might be permissible to kill the chicken for its meat—so long as we 'replace' the chicken with another. The replacement constraint arises from Singer's utilitarianism; when we kill the chicken, we need to replace it with another pleasure-experiencer in order to maintain the total balance of pleasure over pain. On this view, if we kill a wild animal such as a duck without replacing it, then we have done the wrong thing "on straightforward utilitarian grounds" (p. 105).

On a broad range of issues, the utilitarian approach which Singer develops yields plausible results. But I think that the discussion of the killing of animals points to some of the unattractive features of utilitarianism. Why exactly should replacement be required, in order to kill and eat the chicken? Why isn't the pleasure of the eater enough to compensate for the pleasure lost by the chicken? Suppose, for instance, that the chicken is to be consumed by a gourmand who will savor the bird in many dishes over a number of days; would it now be permissible to kill the bird (even without replacement)?

It is hard to see how to compare quantitatively the long-term pleasures (rather feeble, I should think) of the chicken with the gourmand's pleasures. Perhaps Singer would appeal here to his distinction between 'more

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important' and 'less important' interests. But this distinction, which is similar to Mill's distinction between higher and lower pleasures, may be difficult for a utilitarian to maintain. In any case, Singer doesn't say much about how to go about distinguishing more important from less important interests.

Further, it just seems highly unintuitive to think that the morality of killing the chicken depends on replacement. I would submit that, whether or not we think killing a chicken in order to eat it is morally acceptable, our decision will not rest on the issue of replacement. The underlying picture—that it is the central concern of our moral lives so to act that we maintain a certain balance of pleasure over pain experienced by (among others) chickens—is a distinctive feature of utilitarianism, and an unattractive one.

Singer applies utilitarianism to the problem of income distribution, concluding that we are morally criticizable for not doing more to alleviate poverty. He suggests that it would be reasonable to claim that each of us (who is not himself poor) should donate, say, ten percent of his salary to those who live in 'absolute poverty' (p. 181). Though the poor may not have a right to this aid, the requirement of aid is more, for Singer, than supererogation; when we fail to donate ten percent of our salary, we are not doing what we ought to do.

It clearly is a consequence of utilitarianism that we often do less than we ought to do, and it is a virtue of Singer's book that it brings out this consequence explicitly. Everyone agrees that we are not saints; further, even the most optimistic among us confesses that we are often at fault. One might, however, resist the claim that, in not dispatching to Bangladesh a check for ten percent of one's salary, one is acting wrongly. But if this is correct—that one is not acting wrongly in keeping one's salary—then the challenge, presented admirably by Singer's book, is to explain why.

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ART AND PHILOSOPHY: CONCEPTUAL ISSUES IN AESTHETICS. By JOSEPH MARGOLIS. Atlantic Highlands, N.J., Humanities Press, 1980. Pp. vi, 350. \$17.50.

Margolis describes the "essential themes" that unify his views as "a sympathy for the widest application of a moderate relativism . . . and a com-