

PETER SINGER AND
CHRISTIAN ETHICS

Beyond Polarization

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	<i>page</i>	vii
Introduction		I
Who is Peter Singer?		4
Thesis and method of this book		7
A note about my approach as a Christian		9
1 Abortion		11
Introduction		11
Issues on which Singer and the Church agree		13
The moral status of the fetus		18
A disagreement over potential		27
Objections to the argument from potential		29
Conclusion		39
2 Euthanasia and the end of life		41
Introduction		41
Moral status at the end of life		44
Medical treatment and care of persons at the end of life		57
From morality to public policy		68
Conclusion		81
3 Non-human animals		83
Introduction		83
Singer on how we treat non-human animals		85
Singer on reforming our practices and attitudes		93
The Church on non-human animals: current teaching		97
The Church on non-human animals: scripture and tradition		102
The Church on non-human animals: some modern approaches		114
Are some non-human animals persons?		120
Conclusion		133
4 Duties to the poor		137
Introduction		137

The arguments	141
Christian overlap with Singer	144
Responding to objections	146
Common objectives	158
Impartiality in duties to the poor?	162
The Church on partial preferences	166
A broader understanding of poverty?	172
How serious are our duties to the poor?	174
Conclusion	176
5 Ethical theory	178
Introduction	178
Consequence-based reasoning	182
Rules-based reasoning	184
A common consequentialist approach?	186
Christian utilitarianism?	192
The principle of double effect	195
The place of exceptionless moral norms	199
More on proportionate reasoning	205
Conclusion	213
6 Singer's shift?	215
Introduction	215
Objectivity and preference utilitarianism	217
Objectivity and Christian ethics	226
Singer on preferences, interests, and happiness	230
A Christian understanding: loving your neighbor as yourself	233
Teleology and the possibility of conversation	236
Conclusion	242
Conclusion	244
How Peter Singer helps push Christian ethics	244
How Christian ethics push Peter Singer	247
Moving forward together	249
Appendix	256
General moral principles	256
Abortion	257
Euthanasia and the end of life	258
Non-human animals	258
Duties to the poor	259
Ethical theory and method	260
<i>Bibliography</i>	261
<i>Index</i>	274

Introduction

The patching could go on, but it is hard to see a long and beneficial future for an ethic as paradoxical, incoherent and dependent on pretense as our conventional sanctity of life ethic has become . . . It is time for another Copernican revolution. It will be, once again, a revolution against a set of ideas we have inherited from the period in which the intellectual world was dominated by a religious outlook.

Peter Singer, *Rethinking Life and Death*

Singer's support of infanticide, euthanasia, and bestiality shows the consistency of an anti-Christian, ultimately antihuman philosophy. A true Christian humanism thus shines in stark relief, affirming the correct intuitions of others that all creatures have worth for their own and God's sake, not mere utility.

Gordon Preece, *Rethinking Peter Singer*

There is a time-honored strategy for young people at an academic conference: peruse the publishers' tables while hoping that a conversation breaks out with a really important thinker with whom you've always wanted to exchange. Not that long ago, I was fortunate enough to have this strategy pay off with one of my favorite distinguished Christian ethicists. I had read all of his books, and was anxious to get his reaction to a book I was writing on Peter Singer and to the fact that I was going to meet with Singer personally to discuss my project. He responded with a worried glance and said, "Be careful, Charlie, you're going to like him."

The more I have thought about this reaction, the more interesting and revealing it has become. Imbedded in it are several assumptions: (1) it would be surprising for a Christian ethicist to like Singer, (2) liking Singer might make one be more open to his ideas, and (3) being open to Singer's ideas is something about which we should "be careful." For some, this care might be about an academic disagreement or

worry.¹ But for other Christians there is a strong sense that, if they take Peter Singer at all seriously as a thinker, his views are more dangerous by an order of magnitude than the other thinkers to whom we might expose our students.² I know colleagues, for instance, who will refuse to assign him in classes, dismiss him as a ‘popularizer,’ and who will take just about any tactic possible to marginalize his point of view. To the extent they even engage his arguments at all, many do so without reading him carefully or broadly, and instead respond to caricatures of his views.

But in its 2000-year-old quest for moral wisdom, the Church³ has acknowledged both the historical point that its ethical theory has developed “in critical dialogue with the wisdom traditions that it encountered” and its continuing “desire to invite experts and the spokespersons of the great religious, sapiential and philosophical traditions of humanity”⁴ to dialogue on such matters. Given that Singer is probably the world’s most influential living philosopher,⁵ and the likelihood that at least some Christians were eventually going to examine his views in a way that is consistent with the Church’s intellectual tradition, it might not be surprising that some small cracks are starting to form in the intellectual wall separating Peter Singer and Christianity. The Christian ethicist Eric Gregory, Singer’s colleague at Princeton, has attempted to engage Singer charitably on our duties to the poor.⁶ Gerard Maguiness wrote a remarkable dissertation while at the Pontifical Lateran University’s Institute for Moral Theology, which charitably and carefully engaged Singer on the issue of assisted suicide.⁷ The distinguished Christian ethicist at Yale, John Hare, has also engaged Singer seriously in several contexts. And in an attempt to make this kind of engagement more systematic, Nigel

¹ Garth Hallett suggests that the “vogue of virtue-centered ethics among contemporary Christian ethicists” helps explain the neglect of approaches which have a Singer-like focus on casuistry, analytic reasoning, and utility. *Priorities and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge University Press, 1998), 13.

² This seems to be the motivating concern of the book quoted in the epigraph above. Gordon R. Preece, *Rethinking Peter Singer: A Christian Critique* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002).

³ This book will engage multiple Protestant authors, but I approach this project as a Roman Catholic theologian. More about my methodology follows below.

⁴ The International Theological Commission, “The Search of a Universal Ethic: a New Look at Natural Law,” 9, 116. Translation by Joseph Bolin, www.pathsoflove.com/universal-ethics-natural-law.html (Accessed March 27, 2011).

⁵ Consider that one of his many books, *Animal Liberation*, has been translated into more than twenty languages, including Chinese, Hebrew, Croatian, and Turkish.

⁶ Eric Gregory, “Agape and Special Relations in a Global Economy: Theological Sources,” in Douglas Hicks and Mark Valarie (eds.), *Global Neighbors: Christian Faith and Moral Obligation in Today’s Economy* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2008).

⁷ Gerard H. Maguiness, “Assisted Suicide, Self-Love, and a Life Worth Living,” Dissertation (Rome: 2002).

Biggar and John Perry invited Singer and several of his utilitarian students to engage with Christian ethicists like Gregory, Hare, and myself at *Christian Ethics Engages Peter Singer: Christians and Utilitarians in Dialogue*, a conference held at Oxford University's McDonald Centre for Theology, Ethics and Public Life in the spring of 2011.⁸

But perhaps some Christians can be forgiven for reacting to Peter Singer in a less than charitable way. After all, as we saw from the quote above, Singer's basic project claims to be one designed to undermine the foundations supporting our view of the world. It's not just that Singer can't imagine a God who allows all the suffering that exists on this earth,⁹ but he holds that our culture has a hangover in our ethics from a period, long past its prime, where we mistakenly took Christian religious belief seriously – and we need to purge this last remaining vestige of its religiosity from the way we think about how we should live our lives. At times Singer seems unable or unwilling to do anything other than dismiss Christian sources of scripture and tradition, and will also resort to sloppy caricature when critiquing Christian positions.¹⁰ Indeed, one might reasonably conclude that he simply has a dismissive skepticism toward religious belief itself as a *prima facie* reaction. In a recent debate he had with Singer, John Hare had the following response to such skepticism:

Why would we want to remove that power from people's lives, or spread skepticism about it? Especially for a utilitarian, a belief should be welcomed that makes people happy, unless it can be shown to be false or is itself productive of harm. Why can't Singer accept religious believers who have the same goals as he does, many of them? Why can't he accept them as allies and welcome the additional motivation that their faith gives them? I have noticed, recently, he is starting to be more generous in his appreciation. And I think that is to be welcomed.¹¹

Singer does claim that religious belief causes a lot of harm, but is that really the whole story here?¹² Especially in a postmodern world where

⁸ <http://mcdonaldcentre.org.uk/peter-singer-conference/> (Accessed July 31, 2011).

⁹ This, as we shall see below, is Singer's primary reason for rejecting belief in the Christian God.

¹⁰ We will see this take place several times in this book, but it happens in particular with his interpretation of scripture and of important intellectual figures like Thomas Aquinas.

¹¹ Dallas Willard (ed.), *A Place for Truth: Leading Thinkers Explore Life's Hardest Questions* (InterVarsity Press, 2010), 170–171, 182.

¹² His supporting example, though it really doesn't speak much to Christian ethics, is that of the Middle East. Willard, *A Place for Truth*, 187. Some might be tempted to suggest that religion in general, and Christianity in particular, is somehow especially prone to violence and war. But in a recent book that devastates this position, William Cavanaugh shows how such a view is historically inaccurate and philosophically imprecise. See William T. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 285.

academics are more aware than ever of the faith-filled traditions and narratives which undergird the meaning that even atheists like Peter Singer believe are present in our lives, my view is that his reasons for rejecting religious (and specifically Christian) ethics are far more complex. And to see the complexity we need to learn a bit more about him. There are several texts written on his background and that of his family, but in this context I am primarily interested in biographical information which impacts on his view of religion and specifically of Christianity.¹³

WHO IS PETER SINGER?

For someone whose views are constantly being compared to those of the Nazis, it might surprise some readers to learn that three of Singer's four grandparents were killed in the Holocaust.¹⁴ One of those to meet such a horrible fate – his maternal grandfather, David Ernst Oppenheim – was of such interest that Singer wrote a book about him.¹⁵ Remarkably, this particular line of Singer's family has at least seven Rabbis all by itself, including another David Oppenheim, who became the chief Rabbi of Prague in 1702. It is interesting to learn that Singer's maternal grandfather was also an academic who interacted with Sigmund Freud and Alfred Adler. And in a dramatic revelation that foreshadowed an important aspect of his grandson's academic career, we learn that David Ernst Oppenheim was careful to distinguish “between the ‘genuine philosopher’ who aims to integrate his teaching and his life, and the ‘theoretical professor’ who is concerned only with his professional standing and personal reputation.”¹⁶

Singer's parents escaped the Holocaust and moved from Vienna to Australia, the country in which he was raised. According to his own

¹³ Maguiness' dissertation, Preece's book, and Dale Jamieson, *Singer and His Critics*, Vol. 8 (Oxford; Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1999), 368, all have important biographical information. As we will soon see, Singer himself writes a detailed intellectual autobiography in the introduction to Jeffrey A. Schaler, *Peter Singer Under Fire: The Moral Iconoclast Faces His Critics*, Vol. 3 (Chicago, IL: Open Court, 2009), 571 and quite a lot on his family background in Peter Singer, *Pushing Time Away: My Grandfather and the Tragedy of Jewish Vienna*, 1st edn. (New York: Ecco, 2003), 254.

¹⁴ As we will see in Chapter 2, Singer has been banned from speaking in various German-speaking areas because his views are seen by some as Nazi-esque. Other times he has been shouted down such that he could not continue with his presentation. At one event, a protester ripped Singer's glasses from his face and stomped on them.

¹⁵ The previously cited *Pushing Time Away*. ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.

account, neither of his parents was religious (understandable given what they had just experienced), and both were eager to assimilate Peter and his sister Joan into Australian life.¹⁷ He refused a bar mitzvah at age 13 and apparently fitted well with what he describes as the Australian “independent spirit.” Singer’s secondary school was in the Presbyterian Christian tradition, but he claims that this “exposure to Christianity had an effect on me that was opposite of what the school’s founders presumably intended.” During morning assembly he would peruse the Bible and find passages (‘the cursing of the fig tree’ gets particular attention as problematic) that “seemed difficult to reconcile with the idea that this was a truthful account of the doings of a benevolent and omnipotent being.” Perhaps more importantly, after reading about Jesus’ claims that it was difficult for a rich man to get into heaven, the young Singer “wondered how that squared with the fact that the most expensive car in the school parking area was the chaplain’s shiny black Mercedes.”

While at university, Singer was exposed to Plato in a philosophy class, and from then on it was always ethics and political philosophy that most interested him. He joined the Rationalist Society and “was soon familiar with all the fallacies in all the usual arguments for the existence of God.” But one problem stood out for him in particular:

The real clincher, however, was the argument from evil. How could the kind of god Christians describe – omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent – have allowed something like the Holocaust to take place? . . . Wouldn’t an omnipotent and omnibenevolent god have at least given us a less erratic climate, and a more stable surface to build on? While one might have doubts about the existence or non-existence of different gods, variously defined, for me the fact of evil removed any reasonable possibility that the world could have been created by the kind of God Christians worship.¹⁸

While still an undergraduate, Singer also started an activist path from which he was never to stray – even as a chaired professor at Princeton. In

¹⁷ All biographical material from now until Singer’s graduate studies at Oxford will be taken from his own ‘intellectual autobiography’ in *Peter Singer Under Fire*, 1–9.

¹⁸ Much of Singer’s skepticism about belief in God seems to assume the kind of Platonic god for which the classic problem of evil does indeed seem to be a serious problem. Though the kind of evil Singer is concerned about is the source of real tension in the Christian tradition, it is perhaps less problematic when one attempts to look at it through the lens of Christian scripture and tradition purged of this Platonic influence. At any rate, both Singer and the Church share a dramatic concern for suffering, and the Church’s intellectual tradition is full of thousands of texts reflecting on it in serious ways.

response to the Vietnam War, he became president of an organization called Melbourne University Campaign Against Conscription. Despite abortion still being illegal in Australia, Singer became convinced that the law should change and served as the treasurer of the Abortion Law Reform Association of Victoria. He also relates a story which, as we will see in [Chapter 1](#), would foreshadow one of the most important philosophical moves of his career. When pressed during a public debate on why his support of abortion rights wouldn't also lead to support for the right to infanticide, he recalls how the question made him realize "how difficult it is to draw a sharp line at birth" when determining moral status at the beginning of human life.

Singer would do his graduate study in philosophy at the University of Oxford. Once there, he decided to work with R.M. Hare – an interesting and important ethicist who was at once a utilitarian and a Christian. As we will see in some detail in [Chapter 5](#), he would go on to incorporate his mentor's ethical theory, but not his explicit religious faith. This is not at all surprising given that nothing in Singer's background up to that point had exposed him to anything like a sophisticated take on theological method. Indeed, in the aforementioned debate with John Hare, and in response to moderator Eric Gregory's question probing his views about the life and teachings of Jesus, Singer said the following:

That is the incident of the Gaderene swine, when Jesus took out devils and cast them into a herd of swine, and the swine ran down the hill and drowned themselves. Why did he do that? If he could cast out devils, why couldn't he make them vanish into thin air rather than drowning the poor pigs, not to mention the people who presumably owned the pigs and were now bereft of a means of livelihood.

And in response to Gregory playfully teasing him by pointing out that in articulating this literalist view of scripture Singer shared much in common with the Protestant fundamentalist Jerry Falwell, he said:

You see, the questions is, if we don't take these as true accounts, then what do we take? Then we're in the business of distilling the essential message, while leaving out the little stories. It's hard, then, to work out what exactly the essential message is . . . If we're going to talk about some version which doesn't deal with these details, we obviously need a lengthy discussion as to what we do take from it, and I'm not even quite sure where we'd begin and end.¹⁹

¹⁹ Willard, *A Place for Truth*, 192–193.

Had Singer been around any sort of even mildly sophisticated scriptural analysis in his formative years, he might have known at least where to begin. From its beginnings, important figures like St Augustine have explained how Christians should interpret scripture in ways which go beyond the simplistic approach of Singer and Falwell. Indeed, innumerable texts have been written which interpret various biblical texts in light of history, sociology, psychology, feminism, and much more.

THESIS AND METHOD OF THIS BOOK

I want to argue that Singer's sweeping rejection of Christian ethics comes largely from the same place as does the Christian rejection of his point of view: a kind of ignorance which comes from defining oneself by opposition to another. This has led to misreadings and caricatures which have further limited serious engagement. And this book is a systematic attempt to break this unfortunate cycle. My basic thesis is that if Christians and those who take Peter Singer's approach engage each other in the spirit of intellectual solidarity, rather than defining by opposition, we will find (1) that our disagreements are actually quite narrow and interesting, and (2) that we can work together on many important issues of ethics and public policy.

The Roman Catholic ethicist David Hollenbach helpfully defines intellectual solidarity as an orientation of mind that regards differences among traditions as stimuli to intellectual engagement across religious and cultural boundaries. Such an orientation

leads one to view differences positively rather than with a mindset marked by suspicion or fear. It starts from a posture that welcomes foreign or strange understandings of the good life in a spirit of hospitality, rather than standing guard against them. This receptive orientation expects to be able to learn something valuable by listening to people who hold understandings of the good life different from one's own. It also expects to be able to teach something valuable to those who are different by speaking to them respectfully about one's own understanding of the human good . . . It is a disposition based on the hope that we can actually get somewhere if we decide to listen to what others think a good life looks like and in turn tell them why we see the good the way we do. Differences of vision are not so total that we are destined to remain eternal strangers to one another.²⁰

²⁰ David Hollenbach, *The Common Good and Christian Ethics*, Vol. 22 (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 269, 138.

And the teaching of the Church agrees, claiming that being in solidarity with our fellow human beings means that we are to seek “points of possible agreement where attitudes of separation and fragmentation prevail.”²¹ For some, and perhaps especially for those who see Christianity as closed-minded and not open to serious engagement with those who think differently, this might seem like a new thing for the Church. But for those who know the Church’s history, it will not be strange at all. Indeed, perhaps the most important Christian theologian in the Church’s history, Thomas Aquinas, spent his entire career in intellectual solidarity with the thought of the pagan philosopher Aristotle. And Christianity was forever changed as a result.²²

Peter Singer and the Church, in part because they share some similar lenses through which they look at the world,²³ have the possibility of interesting exchange on many ethical issues which, unfortunately, cannot receive sustained attention in this book: war, the death penalty, the role of international law and international organizations, ecological and environmental concerns, allocation of healthcare resources and healthcare reform, the moral and legal status of migrants and immigrants, and the practical nature of ethics. In the interest of drilling down into the complexity of some crucial ideas, I will limit sustained attention to the following topics: abortion, euthanasia and end-of-life issues, non-human animals, duties to the poor, and ethical method. For each topic I plan to (1) map out significant and non-trivial agreement, (2) map out the surprisingly narrow disagreement, and (3) make an argument about how Singer and/or the Church should push each other with regard to (2). What I hope will become obvious, however, is that this book is only the starting point for what must be a continuing discussion – with regard to both the topics it considers and those that must be saved for another time and context.

²¹ Catholic Church, Pontificium, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, 194. www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/justpeace/documents/rc_pc_justpeace_doc_20060526_compendio-dot-soc_en.html (Accessed February 27, 2011).

²² Indeed, some Christians criticize the significant influence that Thomas Aquinas has had on Christianity precisely because of how much Aristotle influenced both him and the Church that would come after him.

²³ Most striking is a common skepticism of our secular culture’s worship of autonomy and consumerism. Though it will be clear how this skepticism functions in several specific contexts throughout the text, more systematic reflection on this overlap will come in the conclusion to the book.

A NOTE ABOUT MY APPROACH AS A CHRISTIAN

When I refer to the views of ‘the Church’ throughout this book, though I hope it will be clear from the context, I will most often mean the current teaching of Roman Catholicism.²⁴ This might raise the eyebrows of some readers, and for different reasons, so let me be clear about two things up-front. First, this is merely a shorthand way of referring to a particular approach to Christian ethics, and not meant to be part of a larger argument that, say, other Christian churches do not count as real churches or that other Christians do not count as real Christians. Indeed, many Protestants (John Hare, Andrew Linzey, C.S. Lewis, Nigel Biggar, Stanley Hauerwas, Robert Wennberg, Joseph Fletcher, Eric Gregory, Gilbert Meilaender, David Clough, etc.) appear in these pages as important and at times essential representatives of Christian ethics, and Orthodox Christian thought does important work as well. Furthermore, many of the official documents I will cite are written to appeal to ‘all those of good will’ and not just Roman Catholics. But despite these considerations, it goes without saying that Roman Catholics are also Christians, and therefore Roman Catholic ethics are Christian ethics.

Second, this move is not meant to imply that the current teaching of the Church is the only legitimate answer for all Christians. Indeed, both Thomas Aquinas and the theologian Joseph Ratzinger (before becoming the current Pope) argue for the primacy of a well-formed Christian conscience in doing moral discernment and ultimately making moral choices. Roman Catholics do consider the current teaching to be normative, but what this means in any given situation (especially for the work of academic theologians) is difficult to describe in the abstract, and this book is certainly not making an argument about this complicated matter.

Let me also briefly address non-Christian and secular readers. You may come to this book skeptical of what the Church claims, simply because you do not share its theological presuppositions and foundations. This might be especially likely when it comes to doctrine – or tradition-specific theological principles about things like who Jesus was, what the Bible is, the nature of revelation in general, etc. However, I predict that many of you will be surprised to discover that you actually agree with many of

²⁴ Many Roman Catholic theologians are aware that there are tensions pulling in various directions throughout the tradition, and sometimes even within the current teaching, but it goes beyond the scope of this book to get into these nuanced and complex arguments. My method will simply highlight major aspects of the tradition and current teaching insofar as it aids an examination of Singer’s and Christian ethics.

the Church's 'thin' theological claims about the nature of human persons and the broader ecological world, avoiding violence, the pitfalls of consumerism, having a special concern for the most vulnerable, and more. This would not be surprising to Christians who believe that our God is a God of reason and love, and that both have been "written on the hearts" of every human person. Indeed, this belief forms the basis for the Church addressing many of its teachings not just to Christians, but also to all those of good will.

Armed with this good will, then, let us begin an exchange between Peter Singer and Christian ethics. And let us begin with perhaps the most difficult and complex issue of them all: abortion.