Professor Singer began with the hard cases, contending that they discredit this rule and defending the proposition that human beings are more human than others. The logic is to reduce suffering and respect preferences, which may at times permit and even require the killing of the innocent. Of course he agrees that we are always to care it is only that sometimes caring means killing. He does not object to my saying that he is a proponent of the kindness that kills. In his view, what matters is the benevolence.

To be sure, Singer's argument has important qualifications. Not all who are biologically human beings should be counted as human beings, and some human beings are more human than others. The unicorn, the newt, the anthropoid, and those in a vegetative state, for instance, do not count, or at least do not count fully, as human beings. The other qualifying grounds of Singer's argument is that it is not sufficient to draw a hard and fast line between human beings and other forms of animal life. To do so is an instance of what he calls "specimism." Professor Singer's book on animal liberation has sold hundreds of thousands of copies, and scholars in law schools today are developing a legal framework for the defense of animals rights based on his work. The main point of Singer's argument is to shrink the circle of those protected by virtue of human rights, and to expand the circle of individuals protected by rights deemed to be superior to the rights of some human beings.

Theory and Practice

Professor Singer's endorsement of the principle that each person counts as one and no person counts as more than one led him to insist again and again, from his viewpoint, our duties to our friends and family. This is not, however, the exclusive domain of strangers. That is part of what he means when he says his ethical theory is universal. It is, after all, based on the argument of an often-told tale and practice, Berkowitz's criticism remains in force. After all, Singer himself wrote in his book Practical Ethics that, "ethics is not an ideal system that is noble in theory but good in practice. The reverse is this close to the truth: an ethical judgment that is good in practice must suffer from a theoretical defect as well; for the whole point of an ethical judgment is to guide practice."

Not Christian Altruism

It is not only in relation to his mother, however, that Professor Singer's practice clashes with his theory. His view from Nowhere prescribes a universal and radically egalitarian altruism that is a formula for the kind of life of an unappealable guilt. He is reported to give away one-fifth of his own considerable income, mainly to organizations aiding the hungry around the world. He readily admits that he could give more, that some children are dying every day that he does not. Indeed his ethical is a form of "angelism," meaning the human aspiration to an angelic status that is more than human. And, in his view, walk among us, offering earth's inhabitants a heavenly glimpse of good. If this seems a bit dramatic, realize that in 2000 Microsoft pledged $12.5 million dollars to develop a telescope using an array of backyard telescopes, in the movie The Matrix. Perhaps it is more muppet show than alien drama. E.T., it seems, is sometimes permissible, even ethically required, to kill children when they have been born, his chief point was that neither he nor Fe. Neuhaus nor anyone else has a right to tell parents what is best for their own children. Or to tell old ladies what is best for themselves (as one speaker put it), and that nobody actually lives in Nowhere. In doing so, I referred to the public discussion of Singer's very preferential treatment of his mother. He was told to be considered for what he did, but that it is a cooked ethical theory that is embraced by a son's caring for his elderly mother. While Singer later attempted to explain the incongruities between his often-told tale and practice, Berkowitz's criticism remains in force. After all, Singer himself wrote in his book Practical Ethics that, "ethics is not a practice that is noble in theory but good in practice. The reverse is this close to the truth: an ethical judgment that is good in practice must suffer from a theoretical defect as well; for the whole point of an ethical judgment is to guide practice."

Incarnate Deity Reflections on the Movie E.T.

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On its 20th anniversary, the movie has returned to the box office! Many a proud parent, I imagine, will feel it is necessary to introduce their children to the magical story of an alien stranded on earth and forced to learn the ways of love. Many of the human and angelic kids, being encouraged to rise to the high action and computer graphics of movies like X-Men, will likely E.T. E.T. more muppet show than alien drama.

I wonder why our society has such a fascination with extra-terrestrial life. Maybe it is because the same myth appears to be thought of the vast universe as "an awful lot of wasted space." I think our preoccupation started when the Italian astronaut Virginia Sparapelli pointed his telescope at Mars in October of 1877 and discovered what he described as canali, which, translated as "canals" in English, suggested a man-made or intelligent design. This unleashed a fury of commentary on the possibility of Martian life.

In the absence of a God-centered worldview, enlightened society finally had something to believe in. This was not a supernaturalism; this was a science based on hard fact with logical conclusions. The possibility of extraterrestrial life was something people could really sink their teeth into, and the beauty of it was that it allowed them to entertain the idea of something greater than themselves without embracing the notion of God. I believe that with the discovery of the canals on Mars, young ancient Greek paganism was born complete with a pantheon of gods called Martians. The worship of these "gods" takes place through our use of technology to communicate with them in the spirit of the ancient Greeks (spoken in another tongue, although, he added, such decisions should be made with medical advice). He most particularly advances the progressive attitudes and practices of the Netherlands, where euthanasia has been legal and each year thousands of old people are sent to their final rest, with or without their consent. Ethical progress he notes, always moves with resistance and caution, go on about a supposed slippery slope. Yet the Dutch are still a morally decent people; in his view, more recent since they abandon outmoded religious attitudes against doing the rational thing. And so he is determined to present a case for the right to be medically treated. Slippery slope? What slippery slope? Happily sliding downward, he notes the sympathy and support, and why were obviously asking that most insidious moral questions, Why not?