Indefensible Ethics: Debating Peter Singer

Father Richard John Neuhaus
President, Institute on Religion and Public Life

Editor’s Note: On June 7, 2002, CBHD Senior Fellow Nigel Cameron will debate Peter Singer on the topic of what it means to be human (for more information on this event, see the end of this article). In the February 2002 issue of “First Things,” Fr. Richard John Neuhaus reflects on his own recent debate with the man he has dubbed the “philosopher from nowhere.” The following material has been adapted from those reflections.

One could hardly imagine a more civilized setting. A crisply sunny November afternoon at Colgate University, its campus of handsome nineteenth-century buildings tucked into the cadenced hills of upstate New York, all covered with the last fine glow of autumn foliage. The four hundred bright-eyed students, along with faculty and townsfolk, filled the auditorium, with many standing and sitting in the aisles. The great attraction, I was well aware, was Peter Singer. “The controversial Peter Singer,” as he is routinely called, holder of a chair in bioethics at Princeton’s University Center for Human Values. He and I were to debate the question, “Who Should Live and Who Should Die?”

I had not met Professor Singer before, although I had of course read a good bit of his work. After all, the New Yorker declares him to be the world’s “most influential living philosopher,” and even in the guild of professional philosophers there are some who agree with that estimate. In addition to the two hours of public exchange, we spent several hours in conversation, and I confess that there is much about him that one cannot help but like. He is a bright, articulate, and very personable bloke, as they might say in his native Australia. For him philosophy is clearly not defined, as the classical authors would have it, by the love of wisdom but by, as he is prone to putting it, getting people to think for themselves. In his book Rethinking Life and Death, Singer states, “The views I put forward should be judged not by the extent to which they clash with accepted moral views but on the basis of the arguments by which they are defended.”

Central to Singer’s system of ethics is the principle that each person is to count as one and no person is to count as more than one. The ethical goal is to minimize pain and maximize pleasure. Utility, equality, universal-ity, and individual choice—these are the dogmatic points of reference in a scheme presented as the enemy of dogma. This is pretty conventional stuff in some circles of academic philosophy, but in the utilitarian tradition Professor Singer has gained fame and notoriety by drawing from it some unusual conclusions, or at least by promoting his conclusions with unusual candor.

Rights, Animal and Human

In our opposing positions, we were fairly pitted against one another. I defended the proposition that civilization is marked by an expansive definition of the human community for which we accept common responsibility, which requires, in turn, the uncompromisable rule that it is always and in every instance wrong intentionally to kill an innocent human being. I began with the rule that we are always to care and never to kill, and then considered “hard cases” in the light of that rule.

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Professor Singer began with the hard cases, contending that they discredit this rule and defending the proposition that a society's ethical goal is to reduce suffering and respect preferences, which may at times demand the 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 kindness.

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 newborn, the acentropic, and those in a vegetative state, for instance, do not count, or at least do not count fully, as human beings. The other qualifying prong of Singer's argument is that in no situation al 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 "specism." 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 normative content of Singer's argument is to shrivel the circle of those protected by virtue of human rights, and to expand the circle of beings 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 has led him to insist again and again that, from an ethical viewpoint, our duties to friends and family are not different from our duties to strangers. That is what he means when he says his ethical theory is universal. In practice, of course, people do more than owe their ancestors, he says, go on about a supposed slippery slope. Yet the Dutch are still a morally decent people; in his view, more decent since they abandon nondedicated religious duties against doing the rational thing. And so he is always sensitive from our teachings that the slippery slope is not so slippery. Slippery slope? What slippery slope? Happily sliding downward, he insists, those ethical principles, and so we were obviously asking that most insidious

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 a life of an unappeasable guilt. He is reported to give away one-fifth of his very 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 because he does not. The essence of his ethic is a form of "angelism," meaning the human aspiration to an angelic status that is unattainable and cannot be achieved, in sharp contrast to the view from nowhere, undertakes that we are "situated" with duties and obligations that are impossible in theory and impossible in practice. He says he is proposing an ethical theory, so he can tell the person he is advising of a "morally decent person," the person is delusional induced by moral hubris. He believes that his view from nowhere is a view from Everywhere, but just as nobody actually lives in nowhere, so nobody actually lives in Everywhere. In this version of a universal ethic, Everywhere and Everywhere are synonymous. Both result in an ethic for a world that does not exist.

When Singer defended his long-standing argument that it is sometimes permissible, even ethically required, to kill children after they have been born, his chief point was that neither he nor Fe. Neuhard nor any other holds to absolute parentals are best for their own children. Or to tell old wives' tales about "bouncing a baby" (spoken) but he, (although he added, such decisions should be made with medical advise). He most particularly admires the progressive attitudes and practices of the Netherlands, where euthanasia has been legalized 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 resistance always go on about a supposed slippery slope. Yet the Dutch are still a morally decent people; in his view, more decent since they abandon nondedicated religious duties against doing the rational thing. And so he is always sensitive from our teachings that the slippery slope is not so slippery. Slippery slope? What slippery slope? Happily sliding downward, he insists, those ethical principles, and so we were obviously asking that most insidious.

Editor's Note: The Cameron/Singer debate, produced by The Center for Bioethics and Ortho group, is a topic of the week's most national and international ethical implications. It is available for more information, contact the Center for Bioethics and Ortho group at (310) 59-9900.

Incarceration Debates on the Movie E.T.

Professor Daniel C. Peckham, Cultural Commentator, The Center for Bioethics and Human Dignity

On its 20th anniversary, the movie has returned to the big screen! Many a proud parent, I imagine, will feel it is a necessary obligation to introduce their children to the magical story of an alien stranded on earth by and being taken in by a family of 3, one of whom is an autistic boy. The film has been acclaimed as a high action and computer graphics of movies like X-Men, will likely Eric E.T. more spectacular than alien drama.

I often wonder why our society has such a fascination with extra-terrestrial life! Maybe we look at the same stars in the sky, and thought of the vast universe as "an awful lot of wasted space." I think our preoccupation started when the Italian astronaut Giovanni Spacapoli pointed his telescope at Mars in October of 1877 and discovered what he described as canals 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 no supernaturalism; this was a science based on hard fact with logical conclusions. The possibility of extraterrestrial life was something that could really sink their teeth into, and the beauty of it was that it allowed them to imagine the idea of something greater than themselves without embracing the notion of God. I believe that with the discovery of the canals on Mars, an early Greek paganism was born complete with a pantheon of gods called Marthians. The worship of these "gods" takes place through our use of technology to communicate with them in the same way that we would to more or less advanced and peaceful than we will listen and come see us. If this seems a bit dramatic, realize that in 2000 Microsoft pledged $12.5 million dollars to develop a telescope using an array of five satellite dishes set to come on-line in 2005 that "will" to a million stars a year with the sole purpose of finding other civilizations. During the 1996, 900,000 people in the U.S. alone have been created by one of the ethical arguments in the world. There is no serious fantasy, this is a serious political system.

What form will the "gods" take when you do finally visit us? Maybe we will come to destroy, like the aliens in the movie Independence Day, or to offer us platitude of wisdom about how best to co-operate with violence and misery, as is the movie The Matrix. Maybe, like the Greek gods, they will visit us and walk among us, offering earth's inhabitants a heavenly glimpse of good. After all, doesn't E.T. (seeing in Christian imagery, here in true Greek synthesis of cosmic philosophy) "die" to save Elio's life and then come back to life again? Cute movie and touching drama aside, E.T. is merely a modernization of an ancient Greek mythology reflecting man's hope for salvation from himself.

What does this have to do with bioethics? If we are to envision a truly human future, it seems to me that humanity does not need to be created by chance or without purpose. Growing sentiment suggests that the universe itself is arranged in such a way as to sustain human life. Seems to me that as far as we are concerned we are alone.

We must resist the temptation to think of humanity as an inconsequential blip on the map of the universe. The ancient Greeks believed humanity to be mere playthings of the gods. Christians contend that we are personally known by an eternal God. We are not alone.

We ought to recognize that our view of humanity should be much higher than it is. In a recent article published in the Parmenides of the Athenians in ancient Greece, we need to challenge our society's need to find significance in these "unknown gods" and point them to the person and work of Jesus Christ.