

Peter Singer: Moral Claims and Moral Progress

Morality is interested in the reduction of suffering and the increase of well-being. All true moral theories revolve around attaining these altruistic goals, one way or another. Despite the historically controversial nature of claims such as these in the field of moral philosophy, some modern moral contemplatives are prepared to make them; specifically, they make the claim that if one action clearly has better consequences, all things considered, than those of any other possible action, it is epistemologically true that that action is the right thing to do. If we accept this interpretation of moral actions, we can then answer the following questions with authority: what is moral progress and how does it come about? How can we do more good ourselves and how can we influence others to do good? Australian philosopher and effective altruist Peter Singer is one of the thinkers who has been interested in exploring these questions throughout his career—doing so from this consequentialist perspective. Though the details of his perspective have changed, the idea that morality is within the realm of reason has not. Many believe that Singer, author of *Animal Liberation*, “the definitive classic of the animal movement”, was himself the catalyst for the beginning of a global moral shift: being the first to introduce hundreds of thousands of people to the ideas behind animals rights through this book alone. The animal rights movement is intent on greatly expanding the sphere of moral concern in modern cultures to include all sentient life, namely non-human animals. Singer has also been one of the first proponents of the effective altruism movement. How can an understanding of moral theory lead to ethical action in the world? In this paper, I will explore Singer’s life, his views, and how moral philosophy can shape our understanding of and help us invest in effective moral progress.

Singer was born in 1946 to Austrian Jewish parents who, following their country's annexation by Nazi Germany in 1938, fled Europe to live in Australia. After being taken by the Nazis to Łódź Ghetto, his paternal grandparents were never heard from again, and his maternal grandfather, David Ernst Oppenheim, died in a concentration camp. Oppenheim was a teacher, a member of the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society, and a peer of and collaborator with Sigmund Freud. This tragic family history had a permanent impact on Singer, "It led to strong support for racial equality, the rule of law, democratic government, a cosmopolitan outlook, and an abhorrence of violence and cruelty." (1) Singer is an atheist and was raised in a happy, non-religious household. He attended an experimental primary school, where the students were given more freedom, and later a private Christian all-boys secondary school—"The primary school taught me to think for myself, and the secondary school added some discipline and did, on the whole, give me a good education." (1) He later studied philosophy at the University of Melbourne and ultimately earned a master's degree for the thesis "Why should I be moral?" in 1969. Subsequently, Singer received a scholarship to study at Oxford, where he obtained a B.Phil degree with a thesis on civil disobedience in 1971.

At this point in his life, Singer was deeply invested in the philosophy of ethics, but he was not all the way there in terms of putting his ethics into action. At Oxford, an after class lunch-time discussion with fellow graduate student Richard Keshen drastically changed the course of Singer's life. Keshen declined to have spaghetti after learning that there was meat in the sauce, and opted for the salad. Singer questioned him on why he was avoiding meat, and Keshen offered his ethical¹ objections. Within a couple weeks following this transformative

¹ In this paper I am using the terms 'ethical' and 'moral' interchangeably

encounter, after meeting Keshen's vegetarian friends and reading the exposé on intensive farming "Animal Machines" by Ruth Harrison, Singer decided he had to change his diet. Singer's personal understanding of the importance of taking moral arguments seriously might have led him to this point where he was so quick to make such a life change, even when vegetarianism and veganism were just in their beginnings as a movement. This same kind of evidence of a connection between moral theory and action can be found in disproportionate numbers of vegetarians and vegans in philosophy compared to the general population. One poll of philosophy students and teachers, conducted by University of Chicago professor Brian Leiter in 2012, indicates philosophers to be vegan at 10-20 times higher than the general population and additionally about 8 times more vegetarian, combining to form about a third of respondents. (4,5)

One does not need to believe in an objective meta-ethical perspective—here meta-ethics is the branch of ethics relating to the nature of moral statements or judgements—in order to make or engage with convincing moral arguments. Despite his current objective consequentialist views, Peter Singer did not always adhere to this kind of grounding of morality. Throughout much of his philosophical career, including during his writing of *Animal Liberation*, Peter Singer's meta-ethics were subjective. He believed that objective moral values do not exist, given an apparent theoretical conflict between "rational egoism and universal benevolence" (here rational egoism is the principle that an action is rational if and only if it maximizes one's self-interest, while universal benevolence refers to equal consideration of interests); Singer believed that he could not convince others to hold the same fundamental values that he holds, from which the rest of his moral positions are derived. But in spite of this, he believed that we can prescribe certain things to be done, and we can prescribe them not just for ourselves or out of

our own interests but in a way that is universalizable. (2) The principle behind this is the demand for logical consistency in the making of one's moral assertions. If you claim it is fine for you to do something, you must accept that it would also then be fine for anyone in your situation to do so. Drawing on the most universal of moral claims, he constructed arguments for his normative claims regarding the ethical treatment of animals. This also describes my own views ever since I began contemplating the nature of morality. To truly justify killing and eating animals, one would have to name a relevant characteristic about the situation of animals, which, if present for humans, would justify their being killed and eaten. The downside here is that the requirement for logical consistency is as far as you can go with this kind of argument: it depends on a person's own inclinations and prescriptions, so there are ultimately no limits on what actions one can choose to deem acceptable or unacceptable as long as they are being consistent, and there is no objective truth to any set of values.

On the other hand, if moral values could be deemed right or wrong, we would not only know the qualities of what actions we should take but more persuasively make normative claims about them. It would put moral problems, and the ethical actions necessary to defeat and prevent them, under a straightforward empirical analytic lens. In the past decade, Singer has changed his views on the basis of morality. He has shifted to the position that objective moral values do exist, and they can be derived from fundamental moral axioms knowable by reason. In "The Objectivity of Ethics and the Unity of Practical Reason", Singer and Katarzyna de Lazari-Radek try to resolve the conflict between rational egoism and universal benevolence. "Evolutionary accounts of the origins of human morality may lead us to doubt the truth of our moral judgments." (2) In response to this, they argue that it is more rational to take a utilitarian point

of view, given that an inclination towards egoism is much more likely to have resulted from the processes of natural selection than that of a universal, impartial perspective which considers the interests of all conscious life. With this grounding in a consequentialist framing that takes into account the interests of all sentient beings—notably, this idea expands the sphere of moral concern to incorporate animals in just the way the animal movement looks to do so—we can more confidently make and analyze moral claims rather than debate their epistemic value: could these ideas bring about greater moral consensus and cooperation in the future?

An understanding of these developments in moral philosophy can influence what we believe to be the limits of our capacity to effectively persuade others, and can help us to spread the foundational ideas our moral cause. It can also help us reflect on our own decision-making. Singer has described how after he and his wife, Renata, whom he married in 1968, put their ethics into practice in such a practical way as becoming vegetarians, they also decided to start giving 10% of their income to Oxfam. In a way, this event can be viewed not just as the catalyst for Singer's animal rights interests, but also his interests in effective altruism, "...a conceptual approach and emerging social movement that uses data-driven reasoning to channel social economy resources toward philanthropic activities." (3) One way in which this movement is doing good is by utilizing the theory of consequentialism in an analysis of charitable organizations. Much research has since been done, such as that by GiveWell, a nonprofit dedicated to conducting in-depth research to determine just how much change, in terms of lives saved and/or improved, is affected per dollar donated: in other words, the consequences of each element of contribution. "We look for top charities that meet our criteria of being evidence-backed, cost-effective, transparent, and in need of additional funding... We thoroughly

vet promising charities working in these areas and assess whether they meet our criteria by speaking with charity staff, reviewing financial documents, and conducting site visits. We publish a shortlist of top charities based on these research investigations.” (6) The not-so-radical idea of investing in helping others with your money by living minimally is evidently several steps away from the harms of consumer culture and towards a better kind of society. But in the past, doing so with the comfort of knowing that your efforts are really bringing about change hasn’t been so simple. In the words of Peter Singer, “GiveWell has filled a huge gap.” (6) A significant portion of the effective altruism movement is also focused on animal factory farming as a primary problem, in acknowledgement of the fact that it offers the potential for massive reductions in global suffering. An interesting proposed method for combating this issue is the advancing of the development and future commercialization of lab meat. If the reduction of suffering is what matters, and not the theoretical consumption of meat, widespread in vitro animal products could be one of the most promising moral solutions of our time.

How can moral philosophy guide our life decisions? It can make us better. As consequentialists in a capitalist society, one thing many of us can do is “earning to give”: by living less extravagantly and investing in change. We can reduce our consumption of animal products, or aid in the development and acceptance of lab meat. Philosophy can help us make others better too. We can spread these powerful ideas, and use reason to combat unethical beliefs and practices. In an essay on moral progress in his “Ethics in the Real World”, Singer finds that the attitudes and ideas people claim to subscribe to around the world regarding sexism and racism appear to have, on the whole, changed for the better over time. Despite this, there are many countries in which gender and racial equality is far from the reality. “Nevertheless,

hypocrisy is the tribute that vice pays to virtue, and the fact that racists and sexists must pay this tribute is an indication of some progress. Words do have consequences, and what one generation says but does not really believe, the next generation may believe, and even act upon. Public acceptance of ideas is itself progress of a kind, but what really matters is that it provides leverage that can be used to bring about more concrete progress.” (7) Singer argues that the fact that there even is an overall reaction to give lip-service to equal rights is a positive thing. It is progress in that it sets the groundwork for coming generations of activists to close the gaps between what people say and what they do, making it easier to affect meaningful change. With this knowledge, whatever our cause, we can all help humanity work towards a common goal.

Works Cited

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