

Harry Gensler's Response to Peter Singer  
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Before raising three objections, I'd like to say that we're honored to have Dr. Singer speak to us. Singer is an important thinker, and perhaps the most controversial philosopher in the world today. I think he's right about many things and has helped to make important changes in our treatment of animals. Those of us who disagree with him about the sanctity of human life can be grateful for his questions, since these encourage us to think things through more deeply. If Singer didn't exist, we'd have to invent him.

The traditional ethic says it's seriously wrong, either always or with very few exceptions, to kill an innocent human being – even a young infant. Singer's originality lies, not in his arguing for more exceptions for the sick, but rather in the radical and innovative way he wants to repaint the whole moral landscape. I'll here focus on his broader moral perspective – about killing and infants and animals – parts of which are only implicit in his paper.

My first objection is that Singer's perspective is impractical because it makes the moral status of killing your children too vague. According to Singer, infants and fetuses have very little right to life. Let's imagine you have a healthy infant called Laurie. Killing little Laurie isn't seriously wrong in itself. Killing her is

seriously wrong if it brings misery to older folks who *want* her – but not otherwise.

Laurie will merit a strong right to life, on Singer's view, when she develops rationality – more specifically, when she develops self-awareness and strong desires about her future. But she'll develop such things gradually. Is Laurie's "sense of self" at age 1 developed enough to give her a strong right to life? Or must we wait until an age-3 or age-5 "sense of self"? Singer's view leaves it unclear when, in Laurie's first five or more years of life, it becomes seriously wrong in itself to kill her. So the rule, "You can kill your *unwanted* children until they become *rational*," is objectionably vague; a society that adopted this rule wouldn't prosper.

Singer once suggested, as a practical rule, that you be permitted to kill your handicapped children until they are 28 days old. Now he realizes that *28 days* is too arbitrary. I'd also object that the restriction to *handicapped* children is inconsistent – since Singer doesn't similarly restrict abortion, which he sees as morally equivalent. On Singer's principles, there's little moral objection to killing *any unwanted* infant or fetus, healthy or not, since such beings lack self-awareness and thus have no significant right to life.

If you think it right for her parents to kill Laurie before she achieves self-awareness, but wrong afterwards, let me ask you a question. Would it have been right for your parents to have killed you before this point, but wrong afterwards? To be consistent, you must answer YES; but that's a difficult answer to give.

Let's return to handicapped infants. Instead of killing them, I suggest that we love and nurture them. Most with extreme handicaps will die off naturally; in the meantime we can help ease their pain. Those who survive will tend to live satisfying lives; studies show that the handicapped have roughly the same life-satisfaction as the non-handicapped – and families with handicapped children often develop a special love and concern for each other. If you want to hear the other side of the story further, [www.catholic.net](http://www.catholic.net) has useful information about handicapped infants and how to contact loving couples who want to adopt such infants. It also talks about euthanasia, and gives statistics and horror stories about its legalization in the Netherlands.

By the way, I agree with Singer that it's a moral issue which definition of death we assume in our rules against killing. But he overstates how much of a problem this is for the traditional view.

My second objection is that Singer's underlying ethical principle, utilitarianism, leads to absurdities. In this paper, Singer talks about suffering and interests, and then draws conclusions about what we ought to do; he doesn't tell us what moral principle he uses to draw these conclusions. But it's clear from his other works that this principle is utilitarianism.

On Singer's utilitarianism, we ought to do whatever maximizes the sum total of the interests of every sentient being. I'm unclear what he means by "interests." When discussing animals, he interprets "interests" in terms of pleasure and the absence of pain. When dis-

cussing humans, he defines “interests” sometimes in terms of satisfying actual desires – and sometimes in terms of satisfying what we’d prefer “after reflection on all the relevant facts.” This latter notion is difficult to apply to animals; does it make sense to ask what a goldfish would desire if it reflected on all the relevant facts? I won’t worry about the difference here, since all three forms of utilitarianism lead to well-known absurdities. While I express my objections in terms of *pleasure*, I could equally phrase them in terms of satisfying *actual or ideal desires*.

Here’s an example that I call the “lynching is fun” case. Imagine a town where the racist lynch mob so enjoys hangings that it maximizes pleasure if they hang you, who are of a different race. Utilitarianism approves of this act, since it maximizes the pleasure total – since the racist mob gets so much pleasure from your lynching. If you were a consistent utilitarian, you’d have to desire that if you were in this situation then you be hanged. Since almost no one can desire this, almost no one can be a consistent utilitarian.

My objection addresses the critical level of moral thinking; it appeals, not to moral intuitions (which utilitarians might not care about), but to consistency. If utilitarians are to hold their view rationally, they must hold it consistently – which is difficult to do in my example and many similar cases. The problem with utilitarianism isn’t that it permits killing in a few exceptional cases; the problem is rather that it leads to bizarre results – about killing and other things – in lots

of cases – especially ones where you maximize good results at the expense of someone’s basic rights. Utilitarians have tried to respond to such criticisms, but I think not successfully.

A corollary of Singer’s utilitarianism is that our moral concern should extend equally to all beings capable of pleasure or pain. So the pleasure or pain of your dog is equally important as the pleasure or pain of your daughter. And a mouse has the same right to life as little Laurie, if both have the same mental level. This is truly a weird view – even after Singer adds various qualifications! Most of us would take the dog’s interests into account but regard the daughter’s interests as more important – even when the daughter is very young and not more mentally developed than the dog.

Singer would call me a speciesist – since I count the interests of humans as more precious than those of animals. I contend that any human – or any member of a rational species – has a higher dignity than that of animals – even if the human is very young, or is physically or mentally handicapped. I contend that it’s seriously wrong to kill an innocent human.

But *why* is it that *every* human life deserves such respect? Perhaps just because *all* humans are members of a rational species; intelligent Martians would deserve similar respect. Or perhaps for rule-utilitarian reasons: it maximizes good results if, instead of arbitrarily drawing lines, we respect *all* human life. Or perhaps for religious reasons: we are *all* made in

God's image and likeness, have a special role in creation, and are destined to eternal life with God.

In deciding between Singer's radical perspective and my more traditional one, I'd stress consistency. I've argued here that we'd find it hard to hold Singer's utilitarianism consistently, once we see its bizarre implications. And I've argued elsewhere that consistency requires that we follow the golden rule, and that this would lead us to reject both infanticide and abortion; for details, see my last book.

Another strategy might mirror Singer's defense of vegetarianism. Singer, even though he regards some meat-eating as justifiable in theory, in practice advocates the simple rule "Don't eat meat" – because of the usefulness of having a simple rule that reinforces important attitudes. Similarly, one might prefer a simple rule "Don't kill your children" over a complex and vague one like "You can kill your unwanted children until they become rational" – because it's useful for society to have simple rules against killing that reinforce respect for human life.

My third objection is to how quickly Singer dismisses religion. He recognizes that religious views are partly responsible for the idea that human life has a special sanctity. But he doesn't take religious views seriously; he dismisses them in several of his works by saying that they're no longer as widely accepted as they once were. Religious beliefs are, however, still widely accepted. By recent polls, 94% of Americans believe in God – and a large majority believe in the afterlife. I contend that religious beliefs are very de-

fensible; students who want the details should take my philosophy of religion course.

Religious beliefs make a big difference to end-of-life issues. I was reminded of this last year as I reviewed a book by Singer for the *London Times*. Singer's book was on Henry Spira, a disciple of Singer's and the main activist behind the animal liberation movement. Spira made a big difference in the world; because of Spira, for example, Revlon and other companies no longer test cosmetics by putting toxic chemicals on the eyes of rabbits. Most of Spira's actions can be justified by a principle that we moderate speciesists can accept: namely, "It's wrong to sacrifice important interests of animals for trivial interests of humans." Singer's book is very good; it's especially a good book to study if you want to change the world – for example, make it more pro-life.

Henry Spira at the end of his life got cancer; to avoid a painful death, he got pills to poison himself. This perhaps made sense on his world view: no God, no afterlife, humanity is an accident in a meaningless universe. On a Christian view, things look different: life is a gift from God and a journey toward God, and how we die is an important part of that journey (remember the cross).

To sum up, I have three objections to Singer's views on the sanctity of human life. Singer's views are impractical (since they make the moral status of killing your children too vague); they rest on a questionable utilitarian moral philosophy; and they rest on an overly quick dismissal of religion.