This chapter aims to show in five sections that despite Peter Singer’s commendable concern for the poor and animals, some of his key ideas are (1) unthinkable, (2) “yucky” or morally outrageous, (3) inconsistent, (4) impractical/unlivable and (5) based on a reductionistic model of humanity, ecology, rationality and morality. To unpack this a little, I argue, first, that infanticide and bestiality should not even be thought about or countenanced. Second, our inbuilt “yuck factor,” though not infallible, is not irrational either and should be respected. Third, for all his impartiality and consistency of logic and lifestyle, Singer himself could not euthanize his mother, Cora Singer, who was suffering from Alzheimer’s. Fourth, Singer’s rarefied rationalism of almost total impartiality is thus impossible to live out and fails his basic test of the practicality of ethics. Fifth, Singer’s theoretical abstraction is symptomatic of his blindness to the basic relational and ecological nature of human life and morality and to the intuitions that reflect this. It reduces the rich tapestry of relationships to a few threads of an allegedly transcendent reason. He is not without compassion or emotion, just inconsistent in his application of it, more to animals than to human unborns or newborns.

The “Morally Unthinkable”
Philosopher Raimond Gaita finds some of Singer’s ideas “morally unthinkable.”

It used to be unthinkable that we should kill children four weeks old or less merely because we didn’t want them. You might, for example, have been offered the job you had always desired and your newly born child stands in the way of accepting it. Rather
than pass up the opportunity you could kill it . . . without wronging it. Peter Singer believes that we would not seriously wrong the children if we did it. That belief is undisguised in his book, *Practical Ethics*, and he is right to believe that the extent to which people are now seriously prepared to consider his reasons for it marks a shift in the moral boundaries which partially define our culture. . . . It appears not to have troubled an intelligentsia which generally accords Singer untroubled esteem . . . because what he says are thought to be views that anyone should take morally seriously. Examples such as these show that in the cultural realm, . . . the morally unthinkable . . . is a barrier whose breach is not always dramatic. Singer breached it without much protest.¹

This should remind us of the well-known parable of the frogs in the kettle of hot water. If they were thrown into boiling water they would immediately jump out. But already immersed in the water while it was gradually heated up, they would slowly die.

Historian Paul Johnson’s antiacademic advice applies to Singer’s more unthinkable ideas.

One of the principal lessons of our tragic century, which has seen so many millions of innocent lives sacrificed in schemes to improve the lot of humanity, is—beware intellectuals. . . . Above all, we must at all times remember what intellectuals habitually forget: that people matter more than concepts and must come first. The worst of all tyrannies is the heartless tyranny of ideas.²

Having challenged society’s “unthinking” prescriptions against euthanasia and infanticide, Singer now wants us to think seriously about bestiality. He claims, like someone from *Star Trek*, to think where no one has thought before. Not content to defend one widely discredited Dutch experiment, euthanasia, Singer now defends a double Dutch experiment, Dutch pop naturalist Midas Deckers’s apologia for human-animal sex, *Dearest Pet.*³ It’s an ironic Midas touch indeed, turning the gold of human sexuality into the dross of animality. Even the *San Francisco Chronicle* proclaimed: “You could say Singer’s take on animal rights is: you can have sex with them, but don’t eat them.”⁴

Singer foresees the inevitable evolutionary passing of the last sexual taboo of bestiality. He attacks taboos as irrational, prejudiced leftovers of an outmoded Christian ethic. Singer’s assumption of a historically inevitable, progressive dismantling of

⁵Quoted without date in Gay Alcorn, “Singer Stirs up a Hornet’s Nest,” *The Age*, March 31, 2001, p. 3.
sanctity-of-life and sexual taboos and traditions falsely equates change with progress. It is a modern Western parochialism of the present.

Singer parades as a liberal champion of ethical consumers' and animals' interests in noncruel, cross-species sex. But his utilitarian pleasure maximization principle makes animals and humans mere instruments of instinct. True, positive freedom can be judged only by an entity's nature. Knives are free to cut, humans to love. Bestiality reduces our holistic, relational and sexual humanity to the sexuality of animals in heat. Not only the intrinsic dignity and uniqueness of individual humans but also the lesser but still substantial dignity of animals is undermined by Singer's seeing both as mere units of total utility.

Singer's apology for bestiality appeals to Albert Kinsey's findings that 8 percent of males and 3.5 percent of females have practiced bestiality. But many of Kinsey's conclusions were based on unethically and illegally obtained and massively skewed samples from sexually experimental subjects. Singer even cites Decker's urban myth that 50 percent of rural males have had sex with animals. Even if such figures were true, they represent a sociological form of the naturalistic fallacy. They are merely descriptive, not prescriptive; they do nothing to justify the logical jump from what is to what ought to be. If a majority of Germans in Hitler's time were anti-Semitic, does that make it right? This is typical of Singer's political-pollster approach to ethics. He reverses the normal procedure of making politics subject to ethics.

Christian opponents are stereotyped by Singer as absolutely against quality of life or pleasure, in favor of an absolute sanctity of (human) life and procreation ethic based on an unfathomable gulf between humans and animals. Yet most Christians incorporate some quality-of-life considerations into a sanctity-of-life ethic, do not suffer from pleasure phobia, do not reduce sexual satisfaction to procreation (though many do link the two), and oppose cruelty to animals. In fact Singer's demanding universal utilitarianism is much more opposed to individual pleasure and almost infinitely guilt-inducing compared to Christianity, as I shall show in the next section.

The Judeo-Christian creation accounts portray humans and animals as different “kinds” or species. Creation includes built-in boundaries between species. Yet while humans are kings and queens over animals, we are also kin with them. We have a common origin and destiny with the animals. “You are dust, and to dust you shall return,” God says to Adam in Genesis 3:19. We are part of creation, but also set apart from the rest of it as God's image-bearers, to rule over it responsibly and carefully (Gen 2:16-28; Gen 2). No animal but only the woman Eve can quench Adam's loneli-

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ness (Gen 2:18), as together they reflect God’s image in their sexual complementarity.

The “Yuck Factor”

Contrary to Singer’s attempt to present taboos against infanticide or bestiality as outmoded Christian traditions, these creation accounts reflect something more universal, what philosopher Mary Midgely (among others) calls “the ‘yuck factor,” a prerational but not irrational “sense of disgust and outrage” which ethical theories rationally reflect or reject. A taboo (an intuitive sense of moral boundaries or shame) should not be accepted uncritically, but neither should taboos be rejected out of hand. Christians believe they often (but not always) reflect our very nature as God’s creatures. Others see these moral feelings as reflecting our conscience, humanity or sense of the natural.

Midgely affirms the role of the yuck factor by outlining a moral perspective that is more holistic than Singer’s rationalism. She argues against emotional and ethical illiteracy:

Feeling is an essential part of our moral life, though of course not the whole of it. Heart and mind are not enemies or alternative tools. They are complementary aspects of a single process. Whenever we seriously judge something to be wrong, strong feeling necessarily accompanies the judgment. Someone who does not have such feelings—someone who has merely a theoretical interest in morals, who doesn’t feel any indignation or disgust and outrage about things like slavery and torture—has missed the point of morals altogether.7

Midgely’s both-and approach joins intuitive notions of intrinsic wrongness of acts (heart) and allegedly rational calculations of consequences (head). The heart’s yuck factor reflects deep, sometimes inarticulate moral intuitions that often take time to rise to the head and be thought and spoken out.

Feelings always incorporate thoughts—often ones that are not yet fully articulated—and reasons are always found in response to particular sorts of feelings. On both sides, we need to look for the hidden partners. We have to articulate the thoughts that underlie emotional objections and also note the emotional element in contentions that may claim to be purely rational. The best way to do this is often to start by taking the intrinsic objections more seriously. If we look below the surface of what seems to be mere feeling we may find thoughts that show how the two aspects are connected.8

7Ibid.
8Ibid., p. 8.
Feelings like the yuck factor are not infallible but often are intimate notions about the natural, and what is fitting or grotesquely unfitting, that should not be simply dismissed as irrational reactions to the unfamiliar. Their abuse does not necessarily deny their use.

Our gut reactions against infanticide and bestiality reflect a sense of the specialness of our species and also of the differences between species. Midgely shows how the best of the Enlightenment tradition (in which Singer claims to stand) through people like Montaigne—and I might add the evangelical Clapham sect of William Wilberforce and others, rather than being merely rationalist, developed enlightened feelings against judicial torture, abuse of animals and slavery as “monstrous, unnatural, and inhuman.” She defends these notions, particularly that of “the monstrous,” against the transgressing of species boundaries. Mad cow disease illustrates her point, as it arose through the feeding of sheep’s brains to cows—a violation of species boundaries with catastrophic consequences. While she doesn’t apply her argument to bestiality, it fits perfectly. It shows that bestiality would be speciesist—not in Singer’s sense of exalting humans over animals, but in a biblical and biological sense, of violating species’ differences and boundaries. In this way bestiality violates our sexual ecology.

Midgely rightly argues against easy dismissal of moral intuitions about the intrinsic wrongness of certain acts as emotional and subjective. Singer’s allegedly objective alternative—calculation of future consequences—is often too unclear to enable reasoned decisions. In fact only God can really be a consequentialist or utilitarian, because only God knows the future. Midgely therefore rejects Singer’s either-or.

Consequentialism is not the only alternative to blind taboo, and is certainly not the core that gives life to all our ordinary moral thinking. It cannot simply supersede it, and must therefore show its continuity with it, must show reasons why it should prevail. . . . It is useful as a hammer to break down prejudice, but not as a tool of construction. 9

I now turn to showing how Singer’s hammerlike consequentialism fails to show sufficient continuity with our ordinary moral thinking and feeling and fails its own test of practicality. Then to save its practicality it resorts to inconsistency.

Singer’s Consistency and Inconsistency
But we should first recognize Singer’s relative consistency and integrity. He practices

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what he preaches, from head to plastic (i.e., nonanimal product) shoe-covered toe. “Dis-
cussion is not enough,” he rightly says. “What is the point of relating philosophy to pub-
lic (and personal) affairs if we do not take our conclusions seriously? In this instance,
taking our conclusion seriously means acting upon it.” Or to quote Friedrich
Nietzsche: “The only critique of a philosophy that . . . proves something, mainly trying to
see whether one can live in accordance with it, has never been taught at universities:
all that has ever been taught is a critique of words by means of other words.”

Singer often lives up to his own test. He gives generously of his time and
money—10 to 20 percent of his income to animal, environmental and poverty
relief—but still feels that is not enough. He has been arrested and had his glasses
smashed at demonstrations—the former against animal mistreatment and the latter
against his views of human infanticide and euthanasia.13 He belies the notion of the
ivory-tower intellectual, being perhaps one of the last public intellectual activists. In
fact, Singer’s Animal Liberation was the only philosophy book ever to contain a vege-
tarian recipe for egg foo yong.14 Robert C. Solomon claims that “of all the moralists
and social reformers I know” Singer is least vulnerable to charges of inconsistence
between theory and practice, although he notes humorously that the Singer cat, fed
on a vegetarian diet, is a champion mouse hunter. Singer is Solomon’s best contem-
porary exemplar of Nietzsche’s “philosopher as example.”

While Singer is admirably consistent, in this book we argue that he is consistently
wrong on some key philosophical and practical issues. Not only are key ideas intrin-
sically wrong, they would have catastrophic consequences if put into practice,
judged by his own consequentialist standards. Midgely argues that

some consequences are not just a matter of chance. Acts that are bad in themselves can
be expected to have bad effects of a particular kind that is not just accidental . . . . There
is a rational, conceptual link between them and their results. These consequences are a
sign of what was wrong with the act in the first place. . . . Anyone who acts in this way
invites . . . getting what [they] asked for.”

11 Peter Singer, “Famine, Affluence and Morality,” Philosophy and Public Affairs 1, no. 3 (Spring
12 Friedrich Nietzsche, “Schopenhauer as Educator,” sec. 8, in The Complete Works of Friedrich
in Robert C. Solomon, “Peter Singer’s Expanding Circle: Compassion and the Liberation of Eth-
14 Peter Singer, Animal Liberation: A New Ethics for our Treatment of Animals (London: Jonathan
15 Solomon, “Peter Singer’s Expanding Circle,” p. 67.
A good example is the way regular lying destroys trust in human relationships. Singer stands in an intellectual tradition, consequentialism or utilitarianism, that prides itself on the practicality and concreteness of its basic idea of maximizing pleasure over pain. Singer’s ideas are the ammunition fired by activists in the animal liberation and voluntary euthanasia movements. The very practicality of his ideas makes them influential, for good and evil. Good consequences have flowed from Singer’s advocacy for animals and from his genuine concern to counter selfishness and help the poor, by advocating and practicing tithing (with its Judeo-Christian roots). However, his underlying philosophy is seriously flawed, and its practical implementation in relation to the unborn, newborn, disabled and vulnerable via infanticide and euthanasia would have catastrophic consequences for any society considering itself humane or civilized, not to say Christian. Singer’s philosophy, rather than the traditional sanctity-of-life ethic he caricatures in his *Rethinking Life and Death*, thus requires rethinking.

This rethinking could begin with Singer’s heavily criticized inconsistency in the case of his own mother. Singer and his sister hired healthcare workers at considerable cost to look after his mother, who was tragically ailing with Alzheimer’s disease. Singer said at the time, “I’m pretty clear that my mother would not have wanted to go on living the way she is.” After her death in August 2000, Singer said that her situation has made me realise how difficult it is, in some cases, to put into effect what you believe are the person’s wishes. My mother was a member of the Voluntary Euthanasia Society and, if she’d had cancer, was suffering and was mentally competent, there’s no doubt in my mind that there would have come a time when she said, “I’ve had enough. I want to die . . .” Because she lost her capacity gradually and never seemed fully aware of what was happening, there was no opportunity to ask what she wanted. It was much harder to carry out what I believed her wishes were. She wasn’t suffering greatly. I think that influenced my feelings a lot . . . As for my sister and I, well, we could cope with it. I wasn’t prepared—and I don’t think my sister would have wanted me to—to risk jail for her.\(^1\)

\(^1\)Quoted by Gay Alcorn, “U.S. Hostility Mounts As Professor’s University Postig Nears,” *The Age*, May 1, 1999. His mother’s no longer recognizing him freed Singer to leave for America. Presumably, in terms of units of utility or her current inability to have preferences, care by strangers as opposed to a son would make no difference. Chris Browning (“A Tale of Two Philosophers,” *News Weekly*, May 22, 1999, p. 5), contrasts Singer’s mother’s situation with that of the philosopher Iris Murdoch, also suffering from Alzheimer’s. While Murdoch was reduced to the most banal tasks and entertainments, watching *Teletubbies* on TV, her husband John Bayley, a fellow Oxford academic, devoted himself to her care, without considering her life not worth living, to the very end. See John Bayley, *Iris: A Memoir of Iris Murdoch* (London: Abacus, 1999), and the movie *Iris*.

But as Peter Berkowitz notes, Singer’s mother

has lost her ability to reason, and to remember, and to recognize others. She has ceased to be a person in her son’s technical sense of the term. In these circumstances, Singer’s principles surely require him to give the substantial sums of money that he uses to maintain her in comfort and in dignity to feed the poor.\(^9\)

Singer, the usually unsentimental rationalist, admits that from the perspective of utilitarian theory this is “probably not the best use you could make of my money.” “Despite Singer’s view that from the perspective of maximizing human utility universally we should treat friends and family no different to strangers, to his credit, he now honestly admits in a New Yorker interview that ‘Perhaps it is more difficult than I thought before, because it is different when it’s your mother.’ ”\(^20\)

Singer had claimed consistency by arguing, “My mother is not suffering pain from her condition, because she lacks the self-awareness that would lead her to suffer from it. So it’s not like the cases of euthanasia that I’ve written about.” But it is like those cases: because she was not self-aware, she had no interest or ability to live her life, as Singer says elsewhere, “from the inside, not just moment by moment but over a period of time. I see those [capacities] as significant for the wrongness of killing.”\(^21\)

**Singer’s Impractical Impartiality**

Further, “from a purely abstract point of view,” killing his mother would be consequentially advisable, for the money for her care could have been better used elsewhere. Singer also claims unclarity about his mother’s wishes; this seems to show the impracticality of euthanasia, even for a member of the Voluntary Euthanasia Society. On his grounds her euthanasia would not be against her interests, as she has none. He decided it was against his and his sister’s interests for him to euthanize his mother and risk being jailed. Overall, as one interviewer noted, “the nub of the issue [is] that life can’t really be lived in an abstract way.” To which Singer replies, “It depends what you mean by ‘can’t really.’ I . . . think it’s clearly possible to do it . . . if I were a more saintly person.”\(^22\) But “sainthood” and humanity seem to part here.

In supporting equality of consideration for the interests of loved ones and strangers,\(^23\) Singer argues, for instance, that if you faced the choice of saving your own three

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\(^{10}\)Ibid.


\(^{21}\)Singer, “Playing God,” p. 18.

\(^{22}\)Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 12-14, chap. 1. (All subsequent references are to this edition unless followed by 1979, indicating the first edition.)
children or forty strangers from fire, you should save the strangers and let your children die, because the total number of interests served would be greater. He says, “I think it becomes ethically dubious, but humanly understandable [to save your own children]. . . . I guess I would probably save my own children, but I don’t know that I would feel that I had done the right thing.” Singer’s elder sister, Joan Dwyer, agrees: “He would, too [save his own children], because he is real. . . . There’s another component that you can’t quite reduce to logic. . . . And I suppose that example . . . proves that when it comes to the bottom line, even he agrees.” Singer replies that his ethic “is a very demanding one. I think that I go a fair distance towards being that, but I certainly don’t go as far as I should. . . . It’s really too difficult to do everything that one could do that would have the best consequences in this world.” But that honest admission makes the total equality or impartiality of his utilitarianism another form of impractical idealism.

The problem begins with Singer’s quest for a rarefied rational ethic of pure objectivity or “REASON.” This moves “beyond our own personal point of view to a standpoint like that of the impartial spectator who takes a universal point of view.” Singer says we should identify with the “point of view of the universe.” But Richard Neuhaus aptly calls this a “view from nowhere,” because nobody lives nowhere or everywhere. “We are situated creatures.” Bernard Williams somewhere calls this

4“That the ethical and the humanly understandable are opposed for Singer is highlighted by a true example of the kind of society his equality principle seems to support. Some years ago a villager in China, when his village was being flooded, chose to save Comrade X, the local Communist Party chairman, rather than the villager’s wife and children. Most people would agree that “any system that would require such conduct as a moral duty is outrageous on the face of it. Similarly, we have our doubts about a system that implies—if it does—that whenever we buy a $100 dollhouse for our children, we do grave moral wrong, since we could, instead, have sent $99 to distant lands, thus saving the lives of several people. . . . Utilitarianism . . . looks on the face of it as though it should and at least could” (Jan Narveson, “Equality vs. Liberty: Advantage, Liberty,” 1985, quoted in Russel Blackford, “Singer’s Plea for Selflessness,” Quadrant, October 2001, p. 32). This is not to deny the general obligations of individuals to feed hungry strangers (e.g., through World Vision) but to say that it does not automatically outweigh particular obligations to show special care for family. See Mk 7:9-13; 1 Tim 5:8.


6Anne Maclean, The Elimination of Morality: Reflections on Utilitarianism and Bioethics (London: Routledge, 1993), sees Singer confusing “human reason” with an abstract Enlightenment “Equality Principle” which he identifies as the standard of “REASON” or what he calls “the autonomy of reasoning” (p. 63). As in Jonathan Swift’s Gulliver’s Travels, his ideal world is populated by “Houyhnhnms,” a race of “walking REASONS” (p. 66).


exalted Enlightenment claim to a God’s-eye view a “mid-air stance.” It forgets that we are earthly, finite creatures living in time and space with particular people and commitments, not disembodied rational angels or dualistic Gnostics. As Russel Blackford says, “There is no sense in which acting ‘from the point of view of the universe’ is more rational than living our own lives with projects and commitments of our own.”

Singer’s principle of universal equality of interests for all sentient beings, if “taken literally, . . . may sink the concept of equality in a sea of universality; if everything equally is our business, nothing is.”

Singer’s universalism and inhuman demands undermine our ability to invest in our own lives and those of our loved ones, enslaving us to universal utility or infinite interests. His equality principle turns unique individuals, ourselves and others, into replaceable items of total interest or benefit. This is incompatible with loving individuals for themselves. “A utilitarian must suppress the dispositions to show love or loyalty, or friendship or tenderness, if she ever believes they are detracting from the goal of maximizing utility. Yet, it is questionable whether someone who possessed these dispositions conditionally truly possessed them at all.”

Singer, however, qualifies his universalism at the abstract, critical level by arguing also for a bottom-level, more conventional, intuitive view. Indirectly, in the long term, it is best for total utility for people to normally take primary responsibility and give some preference to their next of kin over others. Singer believes his theory can be accepted in principle, at the critical level, without our necessarily being motivated by universal utility-maximizing considerations when we make everyday decisions. Singer argues for impartial justification of anyone’s having the right or duty to help their mother commit suicide, but for some partiality at the everyday decision-making level. He showed such partiality toward his own mother.

Singer makes similar concessions to personal relations in the second edition of Practical Ethics and How Are We to Live? But his principle of “equal consideration of equal interests” is not merely formally impartial at the higher philosophical, long-term level, but substantially impartial at the everyday decision-making level. “It is unclear . . . how the two-level strategy can work for Singer’s substantial impartiality requirement.” This is because Singer uses impartial and universal equivocally or in more than one sense. He misses “an important distinction between the scope of morality, formal impartiality, and substantive impartiality within moral

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The Unthinkable & Unlivable Singer

Samuel Scheffler argues rightly that “impartiality is sometimes represented merely by universalization; that is, the prerogative to act from a personal point of view must be granted to everyone.” For example, not only I but all people in general have special obligations to their dying parents. Singer correctly uses the terms in this sense to describe a formally consistent application of such rules or principles. He is right that simple self-interest by itself is not an ethical justification.

But Singer slips in a stronger sense of universal or impartial as selfless, giving our own particular interests and commitments no more weight than those of all strangers. Our interests are only a drop in the ocean of universal interests. If we assumed this stronger sense, utilitarianism might follow. Yet Singer never justifies it, he only assumes it, despite its implausibility. Singer is so focused on justice at a universal level that he can give value to care at a basic, personal level only as a means to the former. Despite his attraction to utilitarianism’s concreteness, Singer’s consequentialist theory in the end abstracts from the concrete caring relationships that are essential to our ethical development.

Besides this logical inconsistency, there is a personal inconsistency in Singer’s two-level view. As Michael Stoker notes, it “creates the ‘schizophrenic’ situation where our subjective motives are different from our ultimate reasons for our actions, as given by the theory.” Singer’s two-level view leads either to an ethical schizophrenia between our emotional/relational investments and our ethics or “a life deeply deficient in what is valuable.”

Singer’s two-level view appears to be humane only by being parasitic on other princi-
pleas, motivations or intuitions, often Christian ones encoded in our culture. It is a form of “impure utilitarianism” that “admits values or ideals which are independent of utility.” Singer’s “Equality Principle”—equal consideration for the interests of all persons affected—is one of these. It is separate from and cannot be reduced to utility. Yet it is so secularized and abstracted as to become impossibly demanding and inhuman, even causing inequality based on the extent to which one is a vehicle of utility or interest.19

Interests for Singer include our own well-being or “pleasurable states of consciousness” and autonomy or self-determination. These are “the two main values to which human life gives rise.”44 But this is very much a value judgment that needs to be argued for, not assumed. We could argue instead that “no amount of pleasure is equal to any amount of virtue, that in fact virtue belongs to a higher order of value,” incommensurable with it.45 As an example, what about sacrificial suffering for loved ones?

Singer makes a little room for loved ones:

The element of truth in the view that we should first take care of our own, lies in the advantage of a recognized system of responsibilities, with families looking after their own rather than big impersonal bureaucracies . . . . The breakdown of the system of family and community responsibility would be a factor to weigh in the balance of a small degree of preference for family and community.46

But imagine the scene:

Professor Singer is proposing to the woman whom he wishes to marry. “Darling,” he says, “I have decided that you are the person towards whom I should like it to be morally permissible to show a moderate degree of partiality.” What decent, upright woman could resist such an overture? Unfortunately, Singer fails to see that even this allowance completely destroys the basis of his philosophy.47

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19 Maclean, Elimination of Morality, p. 15. She notes, paradoxically, how Singer’s equality principle leads to some people’s being more equal than others as vehicles of greater value or utility (p. 67). So we should rescue the cancer specialist on the verge of a cure rather than our own mother.


21 W. D. Ross, The Right and the Good (Oxford: Clarendon, 1930), p. 150. The same lack of comparison applies to autonomy and certainly to knowledge, on which Singer also puts inordinate value. Ross rightly says that “moral goodness is infinitely better than knowledge” (p. 152).


Utilitarians like Singer, for all their grudging concessions to partiality in personal relationships, still fail to do justice to the “independence of the personal point of view” in marriage, parenthood, friendship, as an end in itself. For Singer, the personal and relational is still instrumental, a means to total, rational interest or utility.

Another aspect of the impracticality or unlivability of Singer’s moral theory already touched on is its often well-motivated tendency to produce infinite moral demands and guilt. Singer states that it is the duty of everyone to donate every cent above that needed for personal and family necessities to alleviate world hunger. Thus we would also live at very near the level of a Bengali beggar. Anything less, because acts and omissions are equivalent, would be an act of murder, even mass murder. Though rightly concerned to alleviate hunger and the massive discrepancy between rich and poor, Singer engages in literal overkill by his consequentialist equating of all acts and omissions (see chapter five in this book). Singer’s view that the person who helps their own family member rather than a complete stranger is selfish “is plausible only if ‘own’ is taken in a property sense” rather than in the nonproperty sense of our “own” elected representative or employer or church. However, Singer again makes a concession to moderation and intuition, settling for relief of absolute poverty and the donation of 10 percent of our income. Now the tithe suggestion makes much sense (though he hasn’t allowed for taxation). But this is a grudging, guilt-laced concession. One side of Singer feels guilty whenever he goes to a restaurant, or spends anything beyond bare necessities, not just on himself but on loved ones. Philosopher Bernard Williams says, “Some utilitarian writers aim to increase a sense of indeterminate guilt in their readers. Peter Singer is an example, and in his book Practical Ethics . . . (1980) he is evidently more interested in producing that effect than he is in the theoretical basis for it, which gets very cursory treatment.” As Midgely notes, “Infinite guilt is a most impractical concept,” highlighting what Marilyn Friedman calls “the

*Scheffler, Rejection of Consequentialism, chap. 3.
*Blackford, “Singer’s Plea,” p. 35. Cf. Berkowitz, “Other People’s Mothers,” p. 27, on Singer’s New York Times Sunday Magazine article in early September 1999 pushing the same form of secular monasticism, not for a few who are called but for all.
*Singer, Practical Ethics, pp. 222-29.
*Singer, Practical Ethics, p. 246.
*Midgely, “Consequentialism and Common Sense,” p. 44. Gruen refers to the “demandingess” of utilitarianism generally and asks, “When, if ever, can I as a utilitarian agent relax when there is more good to promote?” (“Must Utilitarians Be Impartial?” p. 148 n. 30). She cites John Cottingham’s example of a relaxing holiday weekend spoiled by my interest in maintaining my house by painting it. This is then extended because my interests are no more important than anyone else’s,
impracticality of impartiality."\(^{50}\)

Anthony Daniels pushes Singer’s view to its logical extreme:

No Bach cantatas or Sistine Chapel for Professor Singer; for him it is strictly grub first, then culture. To buy a Singer book is to murder a baby in Bolivia who might have been saved by the diversion of its cost to medical treatment there. Since Singer’s books have sold by the hundreds of thousands, he has clearly been responsible for untold numbers of deaths. He should withdraw his books from the market at once.\(^{50}\)

To be fair, however, Singer’s common sense again partly balances his consequentialism, while still rightly challenging our consumerism.

An ethical approach to life does not forbid having fun or enjoying food or wine, but it changes our sense of priorities. The effort and expense put into buying fashionable clothes, the endless search for more and more refined gastronomic pleasures, the astonishing additional expense that marks out the prestige car market . . . all these become disproportionate to people who can shift perspective long enough to take themselves, at least for a time, out of the spotlight.

But this is quite different to lowering our lifestyle to a Bengali refugee’s—and this shows again some real inconsistency between the two levels in Singer’s position.\(^{53}\)

Singer is right that the pursuit of personal happiness is self-defeating and that putting aside some of our interests for others’ is a major part of what makes life meaningful. He is also right to highlight hypocritical discrepancies in some of those advocating strong family values and absolutist sanctity-of-life ethics at the edges of life (abortion and euthanasia) while displaying indifference to deadly poverty in the midst of life. But that hypocrisy simply highlights a higher consistency in those advocating and acting against all threats to life, such as Ronald Sider, John Stott, Cardinal Bernadin, J. Everett Koop, Mother Teresa, and above all Jesus Christ, whom they imitate.

and so I should paint my neighbor’s house which is in more need (“Ethics and Impartiality,” Philosophical Studies 43 [1983]: 86). Without being complacent about others’ needs, utilitarianism’s strict works righteousness makes me grateful for Christian doctrines of grace, liberty and rest.

\(^{50}\)Marilyn Friedman, “The Impracticality of Impartiality,” Journal of Philosophy 86 (November 1989): 645-56. As an alternative she suggests that “our conceptual reference points should be particular forms of partiality, that is, named biases whose distorted effects on moral thinking we recognize . . . . The methods for eliminating recognizable biases from critical moral thinking” would stress “interpersonal and public dialogue” (p. 655).

\(^{53}\)Daniels, “Utilitarianism Undermines,” p. 19. Blackford is less colorful but equally dismissive of Singer’s position, which he paraphrases thus: “If we take the point of view of the universe, we can recognize the urgency of doing something about the pain and suffering of others, before we even consider promoting (for their own sake rather than as a means to reducing pain and suffering) other possible values like beauty, knowledge, autonomy, or happiness” (“Singer’s Plea,” p. 29).

\(^{55}\)Blackford, “Singer’s Plea,” p. 35.
Singer also minimizes the fact that charity begins at home. In opposing Singer’s overly strict stress on the universal, we do need his reminder that charity does not end at home. But it is charity or love, not abstract interests or utility, that we are talking about.

In effect, Singer secularizes and universalizes the parable of the good Samaritan (Lk 10:25-37). The Samaritan who helps the beaten Jew lying by the side of the road takes seriously the neighborly responsibility that nearness lays upon him. He is moved to compassionate action, unlike the Levite and priest, who walk by on the other side of the road, deliberately distancing themselves. Singer’s utilitarian and Promethean pursuit of an infinite, Godlike perspective does not take account of our finitude and creatureliness, and the difference that nearness, though not race or other differences, makes to the requirement of neighborliness.

“The parable of the good Samaritan works by extending the notion of neighborliness in a way already implicit in it—Christ’s hearers already know the answer when he asks ‘Who was that man’s neighbor?’ Traditional morality is not bankrupt here. But there really is a change in the world, making our business crop up in areas where it actually did not for our ancestors,” who may not have been aware of what was happening on the other side of the world as we do. This makes the tension between knowing about the neediest and personally knowing our nearest and dearest more difficult but not insurmountable.

The notion of nearer and farther neighbors returns us to Singer’s mother’s case. The “real” relational dimension of life that Singer’s sister and many women recognize...
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Rethining should not be regarded by him as a concession to conventional morality instead of the very heart of life. In a Judeo-Christian perspective the rational, though important, serves the relational and personal. Fortunately for his mother, Singer is a better son and person than ethicist. “Does this mean that Singer is a moral fraud who says one thing and does another? A kinder assessment would simply be that Singer, for all his tough-mindedness, is a bundle of contradictions—just like the rest of us.” Yet as Berkowitz says, despite Singer’s integrity in admitting the difficulty of the difference it makes when it’s your mother, 

the ethicist’s innocence, at this late date in his career, of the most elemental features of his subject matter boggles the mind. Indeed it is hard to imagine a more stunning rebuke to the well-heeled discipline of practical ethics than its most controversial and influential star, at the peak of his discipline, after an Oxford education, after 25 years as a university professor, and after the publication of thousands of pages laying down clear cut rules on life-and-death issues, should reveal, only as a result of a reporter’s prodding, and only in the battle with his own elderly mother’s suffering, that he has just begun to appreciate that the moral life is complex. Singer’s rarefied rationalism hit moral terra firma in the particular and personal moral claim of his mother’s suffering. She is not merely a universalized unit of utility or a nonperson.

The Singerian program is practical ethics applied to a range of life and death issues. Despite some welcome features of the applied ethics movement—for instance, its concern for objective truth—“the movement has been dominated by ideas which undermine and devalue the core intuition which is at the heart of any sound ethics: respect for, and cherishing of, other human beings whatever their age, their abilities, their health, their rationality.”  Thankfully, Singer seems to have gotten in touch with that intuition just in time for his memoryless mother. But even though we can commend Singer’s practical moral decency to his mother, it is disqualified by his own universal criteria of maximizing the interests of persons and minimizing the pain of sentients. His concession to conventional morality at the lower level of his theory leaves us with a schizophrenic motivation, torn between head and heart. The clash between the infinite universal demands of his consequentialist equation of acts and omissions and the daily demands of particular persons makes for infinite guilt and a lack of joy in life. This shows that it is impractical and unlivable. In Practical Ethics Singer rightly states that an ethical theory must be able

57Hugh Mackay, “So Professor Singer Is Just Like All of Us,” The Age, October 2, 1999, opinion page.
58Berkowitz, “Other People’s Mothers,” p. 27.
to guide us in practical life decisions, something his theory is unable to do:

Ethics is not an ideal system that is noble in theory but no good in practice. The reverse of this is closer to the truth: an ethical judgement that is no good in practice must suffer from a theoretical defect as well, for the whole point of ethical judgment is to guide practice. ⁶⁰

Reductionistic Ecological Rationalism

Besides the unthinkable nature of some of Singer's key ideas and the impracticality of his philosophy, we can more broadly challenge its reductionistic rationalism. Here I will do so in ten interrelated points demonstrating its lack of ecological wholeness and awareness of creation and humanity as ends in themselves and its inability to overcome utilitarianism's tendency toward counterintuitive and totalitarian conclusions.

1. Singer's consequentialism rejects the intrinsic value of creatures, whether humans, animals or biosphere. They are only empty, replaceable vessels for holding the abstract value of interests in pleasure over pain. If other (nonrational, nonpersonal) humans or animals could be reproduced with greater prospects of increasing the total amount, the existing ones are replaceable (if painlessly). Feminist scholar Nel Noddings spots the oddness of this. “We are no longer considering how we shall meet the particular other but how we shall treat a vast group of interchangeable entities.” ⁶¹ As animal rights advocate Tom Regan also says, “The grounds for finding unjust any practice that treats individuals who have inherent value as renewable resources are distinct from considerations about the consequences of such practices.” ⁶²

Despite Singer’s argument that Christianity has devalued animals, the doctrine of creation sees each part of creation as originally and intrinsically good (Gen 1), though it is after the creation of humanity that the whole creation is pronounced “very good” (Gen 1:31). In contrast, the utilitarian asks, “Good for what?” Where Christians have seen creation only in such utilitarian terms, they have failed to live up to the Bible’s teaching and been party to ecological destruction.

2. Singer’s program uncritically adopts utilitarianism founder Jeremy Bentham’s metaphysical assumption that the key criterion of the moral importance of a creature is “Can it suffer?” This abstracts one allegedly black or white element from the

⁶⁰Singer, Practical Ethics, p. 2.
great multicolored rainbow of existence. Even nonsentient (unfeeling) beings are still morally significant if they can flourish or be diminished according to their distinctive created end or purpose. All creatures and their purposes, especially humans, cannot be reduced to mere pleasure-over-pain machines. Bentham and Singer’s criterion for moral significance of suffering or pleasure and pain “has an attractive air of moral urgency,” but as the only criterion it suffers “ethical tunnel vision.”

Singer is like the man in the cartoon who says, “I’m an Idea man.” He develops it more subtly than anyone else, but it is still essentially one idea, one that is not good enough to explain everything. It’s “one size fits all” for all creatures. Daniels explains:

Starting from the premise that it was wrong to inflict suffering without good cause, he came too swiftly to the utilitarian conclusion that this was the only possible wrong. If a being were not capable of self-conscious suffering, it could be done no wrong. A newborn baby is not capable of such suffering, and therefore infanticide is possible.

For Singer, like Bentham,

capacity for suffering—for pleasures and pains—becomes the common measure for both animal and human lives. . . . A further consequence is that human lives, just like animal lives, are of value only according to the satisfactions they deliver. Any sense of inherent worth, or of duties of respect based on the dignity of personhood, must be subordinated to “quality of life” measures—to predictable satisfactions. All animals are equal; but no two lives are of equal value.

3. Singer’s consequentialism, allied to his metaphysics of suffering, makes some humans mere means to others’ ends, mere carriers of consequences, as long as they suffer no pain. Humans are no longer ends in themselves as in Christianity and Immanuel Kant’s secularized Christian philosophy. Singer wants to move beyond Jesus and Kant but takes us behind them, to Stoic and pagan ethics.

Nonrational humans (and also animals) become mere tools of Singer’s preference utilitarian principle. He proclaims nothing wrong with killing those whose lives “no-one has a preference to protect” and whose parents decide their parental, and consequently society’s, happiness will increase if they kill them and have other children. The (born or unborn) child’s right to life is not in the kind of creature they are

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64 Daniels, “Utilitarianism Undermines,” p. 19.
65 Stephen Bueke, “Peter Singer’s Ethics,” Bioethics Outlook, 12, no. 3 (September 2001): 2-3.
66 Singer, How Are We to Live? pp. 179-93.
but in their parents’ mind or preferences. This denies our most basic moral intuitions about the intrinsic value of human life, evident in our abhorrence of parents who abuse or kill their children and our displeasure with those who smoke, drink or do drugs in pregnancy. Singer’s reasoning “makes it difficult to justify a plausible response to child abuse.”

Singer describes “the end never justifies the means” as a “simplistic formula.” He claims that it “is easily breached,” for example in everyday trivial lies to save people’s feelings. How much more for important issues like animal liberation? But Singer misses the point of such trivial lies. They are trivial compared with the absoluteness of the end involved, the inviolability of the human person—the very end he loses sight of and that the means must accord with.

“The ends justifying the means” can justify many things on Singer’s view: animal liberationists’ theft, possible violence, research on living embryos at any time prior

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68 Singer, Practical Ethics, p. 292.

69 Richard Egan (“Herod’s Propaganda Chief,” News Weekly, October 21, 1995, p. 14) writes of “a series of burglaries, arson, vandalism (of researchers’ homes as well as offices and laboratories), bomb threats, harassment of blind people using guide dogs, contamination of food products and release of animals with infectious diseases carried out by the Animal Liberation Front and similar groups in the United States, Britain and elsewhere since 1976. . . . Singer supports ALF tactics in Practical Ethics 2nd ed., ch. 11 ‘Ends and Means,’ esp. 309: ”because they treated sentient creatures as mere things to be treated as research tools . . . to stop such experiments is seen as a desirable goal and if breaking in to Genarelli’s laboratory and stealing his videotapes was the only way to achieve it, then such action was justified.” Earlier Singer said, “After more than a century, . . . militant opponents of uncontrolled experimentation can plausibly claim that legal means have been tried and have failed” (Practical Ethics, 1979, p. 188). Singer sees such methods as ways of informing the democratic majority (193).

70 More seriously, Singer justifies violence in certain cases, though each case is different and thus subject to no general rules or prohibitions. Nonviolent civil disobedience is justifiable as a last resort, but Singer’s naiveté about human nature opens the door too wide. His purely consequentialist constraints against violence, equating acts and omissions, thus holding the nonviolent responsible for violence they omit to prevent by violence, are like a finger in a dyke against the tide of violence. Singer claims that ALF members have damaged property used against animals “but they avoid violent acts against any animal, human or nonhuman. There seems no risk that by their tactics they will harden themselves to the use of violence against people (or other animals)” (Practical Ethics, 1979, p. 199; cf. 2nd ed., pp. 307-13). The record shows, however, that some groups have become hardened, violating researchers and their families’ privacy and engaging in life-endangering acts such as car-bombing. Special legislation has been enacted in the United Kingdom, and at Cambridge alone, where I write this, police protection of researchers and their facilities cost over one million pounds annually, funds diverted from other needs. This shows the extraordinary
to the fetus’s alleged ability to feel pain—that is, eighteen weeks—wholesale abortion, declaring open season for a month on even mildly disabled newborns, and possible experimental use of brain-damaged humans. Many other morally unthinkable acts could also be justified on consequentialist grounds.

The justification of patently unjust acts such as torture in order to gain vital information has always been the Achilles’ heel of utilitarianism. It is no less so of Singer’s preference utilitarianism. This is alarming in the wake of post-September 11, 2001, calls for the use of torture on terrorists or suspected terrorists. Once the genie of ends-justifying-means consequentialism is let out of the bottle of basic moral constraints, it cannot be put back in, despite Singer’s confidence about our ability to control it.

4. In the name of universal equality of interest/desire, Singer attacks speciesism—the automatic discounting of the desires of animals compared to humans. Singer writes:

Taken in itself . . . membership of the human species is not morally relevant. Other creatures on our planet also have interests. We have always assumed that we are justified in overriding their interests, but this bald assumption is simply species-selfishness . . . Once we agree that race is not, in itself, morally significant, how can species be?

naïveté of Singer’s view that the means don’t develop a momentum of their own. Further, while Singer deplores animal rights activists’ mailing scientists razor blades, he does so only for strategic, utilitarian reasons. “It risks serious damage to the movement” (not to mention the scientists!) and risks being “seen simply as crazy terrorists trying to force their views on other people.” Instead the movement’s strength is its strong moral stand and case (Singer, “Only Human,” p. 35). Without supporting all animal experiments or denying a place for civil disobedience, nonutilitarians can argue that some acts, such as cruelty to animals and the above violent acts against humans, are simply wrong.

Singer, Practical Ethics, pp. 164-65. I say “alleged” because many researchers date fetal sentience much earlier than eighteen weeks. Peter McCallagh of the John Curtin School of Medical Research at the Australian National University, Canberra, concludes from “anatomical examination” and “observed foetal responses” that “the first trimester foetus has started to acquire sentient capacity perhaps as early as 6 weeks, certainly by 9 to 10 weeks of gestation” (quoted in Egan, “Herod’s Propaganda Chief,” p. 15).

Singer, Practical Ethics, pp. 183-91, on the replaceability of mildly disabled (e.g., hemophiliac) infants on total utility grounds by analogy with the replaceability society practices with abortion. Egan cites the month figure (see Rethinking Life and Death, p. 217) but says, “Singer actually suggests 2-3 years of age as the logical cut-off point and implies that any infant could be ethically disposed of in this manner provided that there were not others eager to adopt such a child” (“Herod’s Propaganda Chief,” p. 15).


See <www.nytimes.com/2001/11/05/business/media/05TORT.html>.

To unpack this, we should note that Singer’s regular refrain “in itself” in his attacks on speciesism hints that species may be deeply morally significant not just “in itself” but “more richly as an indicator of other features that are morally relevant.” In fact, Singer distinguishes between the irrelevance of facts about species to the question of equal consideration of their interests and their relevance to equal treatment of those with interests.\(^7^6\)

It does not mean that animals have the same rights as you and I have. Animal liberationists do not minimize the obvious differences between most members of our species and members of other species. The rights to vote, freedom of speech, freedom of worship—none of these can apply to other animals. Similarly, what harms humans may cause much less harm, or even no harm at all, to some animals.\(^7^7\)

Tony Coady comments that

in Singer’s own ethics . . . we have to consider every being in the universe, we have to turn our moral eye upon them, but how we judge and act will be determined by what we make of what sort of beings they are. At this point the trumpet call that species membership in itself is not relevant has begun to appear more like a gentle touch on the clavichord. Those of us still impressed by the moral pre-eminence of human beings may be excused for not hearing it.\(^7^8\)

Singer’s prophetic attack on the cruelty of modern intensive factory farming and much laboratory research is well taken. But in blaming Christianity for speciesism he falls for a form of genetic fallacy. His reasoning can be summarized thus:

Christian (and some humanist) perspectives about the special nature of humanity have been dominant in Western culture.

Modern Western culture is cruel to animals.

Therefore this cruelty is due to the Christian philosophy of humanity’s specialness.

This mistake is motivated by Singer’s animus toward Christianity, not Christianity’s animus toward animals. Animal cruelty is more simply explained first “from greed,” second “from megalomaniac scientism. . . . We need to . . . reassert the very traditional value that cruelty to animals is wrong—indeed, the very appeal of Singer’s work lies in the power of this traditional value, rather than in his ‘new ethic.’”\(^7^9\)

Ironically, Singer’s stress on sentience and not species has itself been critiqued as a form of discrimination. It reduces not-yet or previously rational humans to the level


\(^{78}\)Coady, “Morality and Species,” p. 10.

\(^{79}\)Buckle, “Peter Singer’s Ethics,” p. 12.
of other sentient creatures because of its fixation on the capacity to suffer. Yet while this capacity to suffer is possibly a sufficient ground for moral significance—that is, we should seek to minimize pain—it is not a necessary one. Though beech trees feel no pain, they may be morally significant; because of what they are created to be, they shouldn’t be chopped down indiscriminately.\textsuperscript{30}

The beech tree example and Singer’s indifference toward the intrinsic worth of nonsuffering creatures show that he is on his own grounds “sentientist,” making moral discriminations on the basis of kind. Also, his sentientism in the context of ecophilosophy sits uneasily with his personism in the context of human bioethics. He was, after all, director of the Centre for Human Bioethics. If we should confine ourselves to arguments on the basis of sentience in the case of non-human interests, why is the same not true of human interests? . . . By demonstrating that he is prepared to distinguish between non-human interests and human interests, Singer acknowledges that there is some morally significant distinction between humans (qua type) and non-humans.\textsuperscript{80}

“It is surely a ground-floor moral fact that if we are trying to work out how to respond to another being, we need to know what kind of being it is.”\textsuperscript{82} We need to know its nature to determine the distinctive conditions of flourishing or its opposite for that sort of being or species, to be aided or avoided respectively. So different treatments are morally appropriate to different species. Thus “the criterion of flourishing or well-being or its opposite supersedes the criterion of pleasure or its opposite because it subsumes it.”\textsuperscript{83} Pleasure as opposed to pain is part of flourishing but not the whole.

Further, each species has its “ecological niche,” but humans, as “(reverent) regulator[s]” of ecological niches, are the only ones who can balance inevitable conflicts. This ability gives us a unique “moral status, right and role” as the only “scientific animal” whose duty is to promote the natural world’s well-being and flourishing overall, including humans, not just individual species’ well-being.\textsuperscript{84} This neo-Aristotelian philosophical view, of the flourishing of species according to their kinds and ends (teloi), is a larger, deeper and more holistic understanding of human and species’

\textsuperscript{80}Chappell, “In Defence of Speciesism,” p. 98.
\textsuperscript{82}Goady, “Morbidity and Species,” p. 10.
\textsuperscript{83}Chappell, “In Defence of Speciesism,” p. 100.
\textsuperscript{84}Ibid., pp. 101-2, 107. Chappell illustrates the difference between humans and other creatures by arguing that we can cull deer because they cannot self-regulate their reproduction as rational humans can.
ends and interests/needs than Singer’s “matter-of-fact” or “superficial” view of present, primarily sentient desires. An Aristotelian teleological (purpose- or goal-oriented) ethic backs up the biblical view of the connection between human dominion and the flourishing of creation in our mutual end in God’s kingdom.

Therefore Damon Linker perceptively sees an irony in Singer’s advocacy of animal “rights” at the expense of human rights.

It is a curious fact that in virtually all of human history, only in liberal democracies—societies founded on the recognition of the innate dignity of all members of the human race—have animals enjoyed certain minimum protections codified in our own country in the Animal Welfare Act. It is a no less curious fact that these same liberal democracies have become infected with a corrosive self-doubt, giving rise in some circles to . . . anthuman enthusiasms. . . . Can anyone really doubt that, were the misanthropic agenda of the animal rights movement actually to succeed, the result would be an increase in man’s inhumanity, to man and animal alike? In the end, fostering our age-old “prejudice” in favor of human dignity may be the best thing we can do for animals, not to mention ourselves. . . . Until the day when a single animal stands up and, led by a love of justice and a sense of self-worth, insists that the world recognize and respect its dignity, all the philosophical gyrations of the activists will remain so much sophistry.

Singer draws an analogy between racism and speciesism, expressed in his rhetorical question: “If we assert that to have rights one must be a member of the human race, and that is all there is to it, then what are we to say to the racist who contends that to have rights you have to be a member of the Caucasian race, and that is all there is to it?”

But the analogy has more rhetorical than logical force. The answer is that racism has been rejected on other grounds than Singer’s equality of consideration principle, most commonly on the basis that racists reject our commonness of species or common humanity. Singer may reply that they were philosophically wrong to do so. “There is nothing about being human that can ground such a critique. But this can’t be right, since there are all sorts of things about being human which form the bases for moral judgment and critique.” Examples include the capacities to suffer, love, grieve, be free, live by one’s values. Some of these are uniquely human and contribute to distinctively human achievements.

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85Coady, “Morality and Species,” p. 11.
87See Singer, Practical Ethics, pp. 55-62.
89Coady, “Morality and Species,” p. 10.
Human beings have, for instance, achieved a developed understanding of their world through science, literature, philosophy, history and (some of us think) theology against which the purported successes of Washoe [the great ape] and his brethren pale into insignificance. And, as has often been remarked, we are the only species considering whether we should reform our attitudes and practices towards other species as a matter of principle. Although there are precursors and intimations of morality in other species, we are the only species considering who are capable of genuinely moral behaviour, both for good or ill, for nobility and, far too often, for wickedness.\(^90\)

In sum, Singer has achieved much for animal welfare, but his argument against speciesism is specious and dangerous, not only to humans, as we shall see next, but to the flourishing of creation/nature as a whole.

5. Singer wrongly personalizes some animals, like chimpanzees or pigs, and de-personalizes some humans, such as unborn children and newborns. It is Singer’s “guess” that “the pig is more self-aware, particularly if the infant has a brain disease and has no capacity to see itself as self-aware.” “The pig [therefore] has the greater claim” to life. This leads him to say, “Pigs are highly intelligent animals. . . . Are we turning persons into bacon?”\(^91\) Singer argues elsewhere that

whatever criteria [for the right to life or having a valuable life or personhood] we choose . . . we will have to admit that they do not follow precisely the boundary of our own species. . . . There will surely be some nonhuman animals whose lives, by any standard, are more valuable than the lives of some humans. A chimpanzee, a dog, or pig, for instance, will have a higher degree of self-awareness and a greater capacity for meaningful relations with others than a severely retarded infant or someone in a state of advanced senility.\(^92\)

Singer ranks animals (including humans) on a sliding scale of self-awareness. He normally ranks adult human persons higher than pigs and pigs higher than lizards.\(^93\)

\(^90\)Ibid. Cf. Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy,* pp. 118-19: “Before we get to the question about how to treat animals we need to recognize the nature of the question implies the difference between humans and other animals. This is why speciesism is falsely modelled on racism and sexism, which really are prejudices. To suppose that there is an ineliminable white or male understanding of the world, and to think that the only choice is whether blacks or women should benefit from ‘our’ (white, male) practices or be harmed by them: this is already to be prejudiced. But in the case of human relations to animals, the analogues to such thoughts are simply correct.”


“Somehow, . . . for Singer, the greater interest human beings have in living connects to the greater value human lives have (or normally have).” He cannot satisfactorily explain why. But a biblically based and intuitively recognized “relationship morality” can. Even if human beings are not the only persons, they are the preeminent examples of personal, relational presence we enter or experience in everyday ethical life. “We do not experience animals as persons” in themselves but by analogy to human persons. “As animals are like human persons, so they have an inherent value like that possessed by human persons.” So pigs or chimpanzees which are more like humans would have a similar, though not the same inherent value as humans. Lower animals like lizards, and plants and inanimate nature, have a lesser, though not negligible, intrinsic value.

Further, different values lead to different obligations. “The closer animals are to human persons in their character and capacities, the more our obligations toward them will be like the obligations we have toward human persons by virtue of the person/person relationship.” Still, “the responsibility we have toward a human infant is greater than that we have toward a fully grown higher nonhuman animal. . . . Our relationship to a human infant is the person/person relationship, while we have only an analogous relationship to even more developed nonhuman animals.” Relational morality can thus explain the basic moral intuition behind Singer’s view of the differing moral values of various animals. This intuition of a qualitative, not just quantitative, difference between humans and even higher animals is summed up splendidly by Singer’s utilitarian forebear John Stuart Mill: “It is better [morally?] to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied.”

Sadly, Singer follows Bentham’s cruder utilitarian claim that “a full-grown horse or dog is beyond comparison a more rational, as well as a more conversable animal than an infant of a day or a week or even a month old.” But as Tony Coady jokes, “The mind boggles at the conversations Bentham was prone to have with horses and dogs, but he appears, on the basis of this passage, to be in Dr. Dolittle’s class.”

Moreover, without denying the need to treat pigs humanely or foreclosing debate on the issue of vegetarianism, we must note that Singer’s claims or guesses for the rationality, linguistic ability and personhood of pigs and chimps are controversial, to say the least. Jane Goodall, an expert on the great apes, whom Singer cites concern-
ing their self-awareness, still recognizes substantial differences between humans and apes.

Man is aware of himself in a very different way to the dawning awareness of the chimpanzee. . . . Man’s awareness of Self supersedes the primitive awareness of a fleshly body. . . . Man demands an explanation of the mystery of his being and the wonder of the world around him and the cosmos above him. . . . [A] chimpanzee can recognize himself in a mirror. But what if a chimpanzee wept tears of joy when he heard Bach thundering from a cathedral organ?99

Empirically, the story Singer cites of Washoe the chimp’s using sign language as a form of self-awareness has been questioned in basic psychology texts, as Brian Scarlett notes. He proposes Lloyd Morgan’s psychological corollary of Occam’s Razor stressing simplicity and economy of explanation: “In no case may we interpret an action as the outcome of a higher psychical function if it can be interpreted as the outcome of one which stands lower in the psychological scale.”100 Brian Scarlett cites a considerable body of criticism of “the ape language hypothesis.” We can compare the nectar location of bees based on sophisticated data transfer. Should Singer then argue for equality for bees with humans? But all the bees do is transfer information. “They do not question, argue, make jokes, wonder whether it all matters.” Neither does Washoe the ape. Yet this does not stop Singer from including a whole, eccentric section on “Common Themes in Primate Ethics”—from chimpanzees to Jesus—in his anthology Ethics.102

Ironically again, for one set against discrimination, Singer’s argument for infanticide, based on newborn humans’ not beating chimps and pigs to the title person, exchanges one “ism,” speciesism, for another, variously labeled “adultism,” “personism” and “I.Q.ism.”103 Young and old ends of the human spectrum are “excluded from the range of a stern and parochial myopic focus on the middle years of life.” Singer’s “denigration of human infants” is based on their lack of self-consciousness

98Singer, Practical Ethics, pp. 116-17.
100Singer, Practical Ethics, pp. 111-15.
103For it is only adult preferences that in practice count. See Jenny Teichman, “What Is Sacred?” Quadrant, May 1994, p. 20, and Jenny Teichman, “Humanism and Personism: The False Philosophy of Peter Singer,” Quadrant, December 1992. Personism is the claim that a human has a right to life only as she or he shows certain characteristics of a “person” like rationality and self-consciousness. For “I.Q.ism” see Chappell, “In Defence of Speciesism,” p. 98.
The Unthinkable & Unlivable Singer

over time and a too easy dismissal of the moral significance of potential. This is not only logically but intuitively and empirically suspect. Psychologists confirm parents' intuitive knowledge that infants are much more aware than often assumed. They make predictions and act on them, experience a range of emotions, are sociable and are insatiable imitators. Also, despite Singer's claim that “differences in potential do not justify any difference in treatment,” we kill baby tiger snakes on playgrounds because they are potentially poisonous to children.104

Singer’s “moral actualism . . . values that which is actual and not that which is potential.” Yet he is mainly an actualist against young human beings’ right to life. Singer’s argument against the significance of their potentiality confuses their humanhood and their personhood.105 Young or unborn babies are actually, not just potentially, humans (unlike sperm and ova). They may not yet be rational persons with political rights, only potentially so, but they do have value and a right to life, and potentially other rights. Therefore humans “should give moral preference to the immature human person over the mature animal.”106

Singer himself uses arguments from potentiality to support his own favorite causes and to distinguish his advocacy of infanticide or euthanasia for the allegedly nonrational from treatment of those who merely sleep or are anesthetized but have the potential to return to rational personhood. That Singer argues so hard “that ‘euthanasia’ might be the best thing for ‘defective infants’ indicates precisely that he considers the potentiality of non-disabled infants to develop in the ordinary way to be of moral significance. . . . Accordingly, there is no need to suppose that unborn humans are for moral purposes just like snails, a favorite personist contention designed to erode respect for the immature.”107

105 Laing, “Innocence and Consequentialism,” pp. 204-7. Singer’s argument against the significance of potentiality for fetal or embryonic life is in Practical Ethics, pp. 152-63.
106 Coady (“Morality and Species,” p. 11) contrasts three interpretations of “the significance of species characteristics”:
1. Global: gives moral significance to all members of a species because of species characteristics whether the member possesses the characteristics or not
2. Partial: bestows moral significance to all species members possessing species characteristics “actually or potentially or . . . retrospectively . . . [or by] connection with other individuals of the kind”
3. Particular: only accords moral significance to species members “who actually possess the characteristics [e.g., consciousness] at the time of consideration”
Most people hold to 1 and 2; Singer seems to hold to 3.
More colloquially and theologically, we can say that Singer makes personhood a special prize, not a humanly universal gift:

The “species *Homo sapien*” is not an exclusive enough club for the Singers. Beyond “mere membership” you need a sort of Gold American Express card which shows you have attained the required physical development, moral maturity, high net worth, . . . or whatever other criterion the arbiters may choose.  

Ironically, as Bishop Rowan Williams notes:

It is now far easier and more fashionable to defend the moral otherness of animals, or even of the inanimate environment, than to persuade people of the appropriateness of defending unborn humans . . . although there is intense *clinical* pressure to identify the foetus as a quasi-child whose welfare the mother is obliged to foster. The *reductio ad absurdum* of would-be legal definitions of foetal rights only serves to pinpoint the bizarre confusion British and American society tolerates in this area, where the defenders of veal calves and rainforests seem to find no problem with the moral invisibility of embryonic humans.  

To heap irony upon irony, Singer’s non-speciesist world and use of “person” for pigs reminds us again of George Orwell’s totalitarian *Animal Farm*, where in the name of an abstract equality the pigs became indistinguishable from the humans, proclaiming, “Four legs good, two legs better,” and “All animals are equal, but some are more equal than others.” Singer’s linguistic gymnastics are also reminiscent of the “newspeak” of Orwell’s *1984*, where ordinary terms acquired extraordinary meanings. Rather than raising animals to the level of human persons as he claims, Singer lowers humans to their level by linguistic subterfuge. Our uneasy question won’t go away: “who will guard the guardians” or arbiters of personhood or a life worth living?  

Historical experience warns us against the guardians. German protests against Singer were partly based on the “similarities between Singer’s position on euthanasia and the . . . ideas of the eugenics movement.” These were

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*Laing, “Innocence and Consequentialism,” p. 219, quotes and then denies Singer’s claim (Practical Ethics, p. 347) due to his “personist assumptions.” Unlike some other views of animal rights, Singer is not merely extending our ordinary concern for humans to animals. He is asking us to disregard our common humanity in any decision making about the vulnerable, the very young and the disabled.*
that handicapped people are not persons in the full and usual sense, and that this lessens their claim to life. Critics warn that, once we accept that some human beings are separable from the rest via mere stipulative definitions (of “person” or “human being”) dependent on certain background theories, then we are on a dangerous road, since then all sorts of criteria for segregating groups of people can be developed. Why would some definitions be more justified than others, if we can reach no agreement about the underlying frameworks (something standard in a pluralistic society)?

The parallel between Singerite and Nazi policies is often dismissed due to the irony that the Jewish Singer himself lost family members to Hitler. Also, unlike Hitler, neither Singer nor euthanasia supporters are necessarily racist. But the eugenics movement for genetic purity was wider than just the Germans; between the two world wars it was widespread in Western societies, including my own Australia, where it was used to justify the separation of Aboriginal children from their families. In Germany the Nazi euthanasia policy “was ‘racial’ at this early stage only in the sense of aiming at creating a healthy population—an apparently worthy goal” like that of our own society, which can similarly slip into a form of “health fascism.”

In addition, some have noted that while Singer fights “speciesism,” or discrimination against animals, he forgets the discrimination disabled people face, and even worse, supports it through his views. “The only alternative, they stress, is a formal principle of equality extended to all human beings, as is common in democratic societies.”

Viewed as mere functions, or mere sensate vehicles of pleasure over pain, we are all—conscious or not, with preferences or not—replaceable. There is no room for

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Almond, *Exploring Ethics*, p. 161. She notes the Christmas party at which staff celebrated their thousandth euthanasia. “The Nazi philosophy was that some lives were unworthy of life. They tried to eradicate retarded children. This made it easier to move on to a hated race of people. Once you allow certain people to decide to kill on quality-of-life grounds, you have clambered onto a slippery slope where it is very difficult to apply a brake. Singerian Jonathan Glover (lecture at the Murdoch Institute, Royal Melbourne Children’s Hospital, July 18, 2000) argues against the Nazi analogy by claiming that today’s eugenics involves the choice of one or another fetus’s being born for the sake of the child’s own well-being, whereas Nazism focused on population elimination. Glover claims that the compassion (against Nietzsche) and individual autonomy (against the Nazi group perspective) and equality of respect involved in contemporary screening programs for Down syndrome, for example, make them very different from the Nazi program. Yet despite today’s alleged compassion, the paternalism of parents and doctors, and the genetic screening system’s coercion toward abortion, like Nazism combine to ensure that a whole class of people is being effectively eliminated. Cf. Michael Burleigh, *Death and Deliverance: “Euthanasia” in Germany, 1908-1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 298, on the likeness between Singer’s and Nazi intellectuals’ redefinitions of personhood and analogies between some humans and nonhumans. See also 342 n. 30 for his view of Singer as a dangerous political rhetorician rather than a humane philosopher.

complacency, as in Singer’s claim to German disabled protestors that they would not
now, having graduated to have preferences for life, fall under his executioner’s ax.” 116
On the basis of history they realized that Singer’s philosophy is a fundamental attack
on their worth and that of many others, even if they fortuitously happen to be alive
with preferences for life now. They did not succumb to the sheer insensitivity of
Singer’s appeal to individualistic selfishness to set aside their connection to other dis-
able humans. 117 As the great German pastor Martin Niemöller memorably said:
“First they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a
socialist. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out—because I
was not a trade unionist. Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—
because I was not a Jew. Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak
for me.” 118

6. Singer displays a very male form of ecological rationalism or “moral Thatcher-
ism.” 119 He has strange bedfellows among economic rationalists with whom he often
disagrees. One of them says, “Since he starts from the very same rationalist social cal-
culus . . . there is no difference between his Benthamite calculus of social choice
and that of the driest economist. . . . Modern economists . . . are simply Singer’s
philosophical cousins. But he takes his Benthamism far beyond the social sphere, by
extending it to non-humans.” 119 The fact that an economic rationalist sees him as a
fellow traveler should set off alarm bells for Singer, his supporters and his opponents.
As one critic said: “Singer is a Green candidate, and will in that guise argue against
. . . economic rationalism; yet in another sphere [euthanasia] he will be arguing for
the ‘rationality’ of death.” 120 It shows the same paradoxical dominance of instrumen-
tal, calculative reason in Singer (or the means of reason over the ends of human life
and relationship) that lies at the root of many of our ecological and social problems
about which he is correctly concerned.

Consequentialist cost-benefit language is the native language of technologists,
economists and policymakers. In bioethics this market language of measurable eco-

conic rationalism has changed patients to “customers” or “bed occupants.” It is a
dangerously dehumanizing language that challenges the integrity of the medical

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116 Singer, Practical Ethics, p. 345, in appendix “On Being Silenced in Germany.”
118 Quoted by Franklin H. Littell, foreword to Exile in the Fatherland: Martin Niemöller’s Letters from
119 Scarlett, “Moral Uniqueness,” p. 92, ironically after the former British prime minister, economic
rationalist “Iron Lady” Margaret Thatcher. The American equivalent would be Reaganomics.
120 Padraic McGuinness, “Senate Could Gain Benefits from the Fringe with Singer,” The Age, Febru-
121 Michael Jorgensen, letter to The Age, October 26, 1996, letters page.
profession and its distinctive language of care. Consequentialists have always been influenced by the pseudo-scientific quest for measurable morality, or a pleasure calculus, “or the increasingly popular ‘qalys’ (quality-assisted life years)” used to make life-and-death decisions. This runs “contrary to the Aristotelian dictum that ethics is only as precise as the subject matter allows and therefore contains more imprecision than, say, mathematics.”

Feminists such as Carol Gilligan and Nel Noddings have questioned the universal validity of Singer’s rather abstract male form of moral reasoning compared with more personal, relational and female forms of ethical responsibility. They advocate a warm ethics of care, intuition and feeling rather than cold consequences, and equal consideration of the interests of all sentient creatures. A feminist lecturer in social ecology aptly responds to Singer’s advocacy of infanticide:

I think [the newborn infant] does have a consciousness. Singer’s position is clearly that of an arch-masculinist, one which somehow misses out on the personal, emotional and social. These are dry decisions he takes about the nature of life, whereas any woman who has been pregnant or been through an abortion has a completely different perspective on what it means to create life.

Singer in turn accuses both Noddings and Gilligan of sexist stereotypes. (Thatcher was a woman, after all!) He claims, rather weakly, that evidence shows women are more universal and long-term in their ethical thinking than men. I would not defend all of Gilligan’s and Noddings’s arguments. However, Singer does not succeed in deflecting their basic point that abstract rational and utilitarian ethical theories are far from universally valid, at least for 50 percent of the human race. He admits that his “broader perspective must be able to recognize the central place that personal relationships have in human ethical life.”

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124 Carol Gilligan, In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women’s Development (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982); Noddings affirms a more female caring perspective of personal relationships with pets carrying obligations for the human party (Caring, pp. 153-59).
126 Singer merely cites rough observations of David Suzuki and membership calculations from the environmental and animal liberation movements (How Are We to Live? pp. 177-78).
127 For example, Noddings is wrong in denying our obligations toward animals whether they are our personal pets or not. She does, though, acknowledge the importance of not causing animals pain or treating them as mere means for humans (Caring, pp. 150, 158; see Kellenberger, Relationship Morality, pp. 375-76).
128 Noddings, Caring, pp. 150, 158.
what is central in human existence and ethics.

7. Singer is inconsistent in his treatment of moral intuitions. He seeks sometimes to undermine them, for example in relation to infanticide, and at other times to use them, for example against animal cruelty. Singer claims the higher ground of reason in contemplating infanticide: “We should put aside feelings based on the small, helpless and—sometimes—cute appearance of human infants. . . . If we can put aside these emotionally moving but strictly irrelevant aspects of the killing of a baby we can see that the grounds for not killing persons do not apply to newborn infants.”

His words trivialize profoundly positive human and parental emotions, the associated experiences of pregnancy and birth, and our instinctive reactions to them. These are basic to understanding the value of human life.

The refrain of “putting aside feelings” or basic intuitions recurs in Singer’s writings, as if he is afraid of them. This illustrates the way “consequentialism . . . obscures the habits of the heart or interpersonal perception and disposition that fuel moral judgment. . . . Consequentialism may lead us in a dangerous direction because it systematically devalues certain deep intuitions, such as those involved in the care and nurture of children . . . of fundamental significance in the constitution of a moral agent.”

Noddings agrees: “We cannot accept an ethic that depends upon a definition of personhood if that definition diminishes our obligation to human infants. An ethic that forces us to classify human infants with rats and pigs is unsettling.”

Contrary to Singer, James Kellenberger shows that unsettling intuitions can have good reasons behind them: “The basis for Noddings' intuition . . . is that humans, including infants, are persons, while rats and pigs are not.”

This objection to Singer’s abstract rationalism does not entail an endorsement of postmodern irrationalism or subjectivism. Reason is important, but not all-important. “Rationality requires us to attend to facts about human nature (and other natures) and . . . it involves our dispositions, needs and emotions.” “He quotes somewhere the Nazi, Göring, as saying ‘I think with my blood,’ and opposes rationality to this. But the moral emotions like sympathy, resentment, indignation, and compassion, are important to rationality and ethics.” Again, the abuse of emotions does not deny their use. “Reason can also be abused; indeed it is arguable that many of the

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\(^6\){\textit{Singer, Practical Ethics, pp. 170-71.}}

\(^7\){\textit{Coady, “Morality and Species,” p. 12. Singer’s inability to account for such “reactive attitudes,” as P. F. Strawson discusses in Freedom and Resentment and Other Essays (London: Methuen, 1974), is critical.}}

\(^8\){\textit{Gillett, “Young Human Beings,” p. 126.}}

\(^9\){\textit{Noddings, Caring, pp. 155-59.}}

\(^10\){\textit{Kellenberger, Relationship Morality, p. 375.}}}
Nazis were much more in thrall to their reason via a twisted and malicious ideology than they were to emotions. Himmler . . . writes somewhere of the difficulty he had in overcoming emotions like pity and compassion in favour of stern Nazi duties.”

Singer deplores such “rigid moral fanaticism” but defines it as Kantian duty for duty’s sake, not recognizing a similar danger in his own view. He wants an ethic “that builds on, instead of turning away from, our own nature as social beings,” but his form of utilitarianism is unable to deliver this.

Raimond Gaita sees in Singer “an impoverished understanding of reason and its relation to feeling, of the distinction between knowledge of the head and knowledge of the heart.” Humankind does not live by head alone. C. S. Lewis diagnosed the Singerian problem in his essay “Men Without Chests”: “It is not excess of thought but defect of fertile and generous emotion that marks them out. Their heads are no bigger than the ordinary: it is the atrophy of the chest beneath that makes them seem so.”

Singer is very honest about his anti-initiative strategy in one essay:

Unfortunately, when a doctrine is very deeply embedded in people’s moral intuitions, it is sometimes necessary to do more than refute the doctrine in order to convince people that it is false. . . . So the following historical excursion is intended to be a kind of softening-up operation on your intuitions, to persuade you that the doctrine of the sanctity of human life is a legacy of attitudes and beliefs that were once widespread, but which few people now would try to defend.

Singer’s softening-up operation is really an encouragement for people to harden their hearts and “by their wickedness suppress the truth” (Rom 1:18). Basic moral intuitions regarding such things as the intrinsic value of all human beings are not irrational but prerational, reflecting created and social reality, as I argued earlier concerning the yuck factor.

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135 Singer, How Are We to Live? pp. 185-86.
139 Appeal to intuition is often suspect because of its subjective and metaphysical connotations, i.e., “immediate evidence of objective values.” But many philosophers use intuition to refer to basic moral convictions forming the common basis of a society (therefore nonsubjective) which are internalized through socialization and which moral theories reflect. In this I believe there is often an echo of God’s creation order. See Pauer-Studer, “Peter Singer on Euthanasia,” p. 156 n. 40.
Singer is in a minority, with R. M. Hare his teacher, in rejecting the common idea that intuitions or “considered moral judgments can serve as 'the data' which moral theory is supposed to systematize. According to Singer, we should follow moral principles wherever they lead.” Yet “it seems implausible either that principles should always defer to intuitions or that intuitions should always defer to principles.” Both are needed.

Paradoxically, Singer’s two-level (critical and intuitive) form of utilitarian moral reasoning, following Hare, is an attempt to incorporate the intuitive in everyday decisions. Singer writes that our conventional intuitive principles built up from centuries of accrued experience—such as that honesty is the best policy—lead in the long term to the best consequences. This intuitive level is rather like “percentage tennis,” which pays off most of the time, compared to the critical level or exceptional “freak shot.” “In real life we usually cannot foresee all the complexities of our choices. It is simply not practical to try to calculate the consequences, in advance, of every choice we make.” However, Singer’s analogy is damaging to his theory, for if the critical level is like a “freak shot,” for exceptional circumstances or players, why should we use it in everyday life? It creates two contradictory utilitarian principles, an everyday and an exceptional, elite one. The critical level is left to elite thinkers, like Singer, who can cope with “complicated issues.” Yet we saw earlier that actual complexity, such as in his mother's case, may drive him back to a more conventional action. In the end, utilitarianism’s alleged practicality, crucial to its justification, is parasitic upon conventional, intuitive morality.

Rather than suggesting that Singer lacks all emotion, “as if some of the fuses marked 'emotion' have burned out in his brain,” let me qualify my earlier comments by suggesting that he is driven by and does appeal to compassion or intuition, but inconsistently, for some animals, not others; for unborn or newborn humans sometimes and not other times.

Robert C. Solomon argues that there is another “compassionate Peter Singer” who is “often at odds” with the “champion of reason [and] hard-headed utilitarian weighing up harms and benefits.” Singer agrees with David Hume that “sympathy” or compassion often declines with genetic distance from kin. Singer’s aim is that the circle of compassion, “reciprocal altruism” or kindness, expand beyond kin.

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141 Singer, Practical Ethics, pp. 92-93. For my critique see Laing, “Innocence and Consequentialism,” p. 217.

142 Macdonald, Sunday Magazine, p. 15.
and our own kind or species.\footnote{See Singer’s programmatic statement of his “expanding circle” in “Ethics and Animal Liberation,” pp. 9-10. However, Holmes Rolston III argues that while some animals engage in mutual bonding and grooming as a kind of “I’ll scratch your back, you scratch mine” (my terms), only humans love others for their own sakes and are able, though not always willing, to act as good Samaritans. “Naturalized” sociobiology neglects these unique capacities (Rolston, Genes, Genesis and God: Values and their Origins in Natural and Human History, Gifford Lectures 1997-1998 [New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999], pp. 222, 248, 252-56). While Singer partly attempts to stretch sociobiology beyond such theories as Richard Dawkins’s “selfish gene,” he remains somewhat stuck within its logic.}

But Solomon warns that impersonal reason can lose connection with the tacit, personal dimension that motivates ethical concern. We perceive others as feeling creatures not first because of rational principles but because of our “cultivated and expanded emotional awareness.” Hardheartedness therefore is unnatural and requires the defenses of an ideological “pathology of theory” to distance ourselves from our emotional responses.\footnote{Solomon, “Peter Singer’s Expanding Circle,” pp. 72-73, 76-77.} Solomon rightly notes that “utilitarianism and overly abstract calculations of the ‘greatest good for the greatest number’ can too easily serve as rationalizations for the most unethical practices and behavior. . . . Thinking about the ‘greatest good for the greatest number’—even apart from the infinity-grabbing polemics of the philosophers—can too easily dull one’s sensibilities.”\footnote{Ibid., pp. 76-78.}

Solomon believes, “despite, as well as because of [Singer’s] arguments,” that an “ethics of emotion,” not practical reason or theory, is primary in Singer. For Solomon “ethics is first of all a matter of emotion, to be cultivated from our natural inclinations of fellow feeling (‘kinship’) and moulded into a durable state of character.” This is shown by the effectiveness of the photos of suffering animals in Animal Liberation for gathering supporters rather than “the ethereally controversial utilitarian attack on ‘speciesism.’”

Solomon, however, rightly compares the use of unmistakably babylike photos of fetuses by antiabortionists.\footnote{Ibid., pp. 82-83.} Williams (Lost Icons, p. 45 n. 11) notes that the angry reactions against suggestions that women considering abortion see photos of an unborn child at their child’s stage, or that such photos be published in the U.K. paper The New Statesman, show awareness of the power of “animal recognition.”

As Rowan Williams states: if “moral otherness” depends on a form of quality control, a catego-
rizing and counting up of rational or biological characteristics, it will inevitably be counterintuitive. Against Singer’s counting of people as persons or moral others only if they are independent and share our interests, Williams sets “the significance of sheer instinctive recognition, ‘animal’ recognition we could almost say, in responding to something as a moral other.”

Singer’s questioning of this “animal” recognition is itself highly questionable, even on his own grounds of our affinity with animals. This recognition, not a rarified, rationalist definition, rests on a recognition of our animal and ecological dependence on others along a spectrum at different stages of life, in or out of the womb, but at no point is there a clear “transition from one kind of life to another.”

Yet even Singer cannot ignore this intuitive recognition, in his mother’s case, or in the case he examines of the possibility that we “grow human beings for use as spare parts in transplant surgery.” Singer rightly urges caution here, for this “would do violence to our basic attitude of care and protection for infant human beings.” Yet he is caught on the horns of a dilemma between his intuitive and critical levels. “If our basic attitude of care and protection matters morally even where non-persons [non-self-conscious beings on Singer’s view] are concerned, then they matter where the lives of the embryonic, the unborn, the disabled, the suffering, comatose and elderly are at issue. It is, after all, precisely this kind of argument that is often relied on to demonstrate the wrongness of killing vulnerable people.”

And yet such counterintuitive killing is just what the critical, total utilitarian level of Singer’s theory justifies. Singer justifies infanticide by challenging the arbitrary line of birth that distinguishes this from the wholesale abortion that our society practices. The main difference would seem to be “out of sight, out of mind”: we don’t have to see the face of the aborted. Because Singer has a remnant of recognition of this intuition, he recommends an even more arbitrary cutoff point of one month for decisions regarding infanticide, so that the parents don’t get too attached to their child. A far less arbitrary genetic and biological line is found when we work back from our birth intuitions into the womb to conception as the point where there is an onus of protection of the unborn.

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In an increasingly postmodern society suspicious of rationalism or overly simple consistency, the appeal to people’s basic moral intuitions is not without force. This is not to say that those intuitions are sufficient, just that they are necessary. An appropriate strategy for Christians in liberal and pluralistic postmodern cultures is to connect their Christian convictions concerning sanctity of life with those universal, creation-based and socially based intuitions. Otherwise the Creator’s design for the flourishing of mutually dependent human lives from womb to tomb may be marginalized as mere ecclesiastical etiquette.

8. Singer’s strategy is to marginalize Christians (and representatives of other religions) from public rational debate and stereotype them as yesterday’s people overtaken by the inevitable progress of reason. Such “chronological snobbery” (C. S. Lewis) can readily rebound against its practitioners. The former Anglican archbishop of Melbourne, Keith Rayner, recently reflected upon the former premier of Victoria, Jeff Kennett, whose policies he sometimes opposed. Kennett dismissed the church’s objections to gambling by describing them as “yesterday’s people.” The archbishop noted that “he is now yesterday’s Premier,” having lost an election.151 To confuse the later with the better or more truthful involves a category mistake. Claims of inevitable progress that leaves religion in its wake are also disputable on rational and empirical grounds. We might note the turning of the tide against “inevitable secularization” theories152 and against attempts to legalize euthanasia in some Western countries (the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia), and the 97 percent who rejected Singer in the 1996 Australian Senate elections.

Singer’s anti-Christian secularism represents the nadir of Enlightenment humanism, ending in an antihuman naturalism. Singer is also almost the last Enlightenment or modern man—as Dale Jamieson says, “at his core Singer is an Enlightenment progressive.”153 Yet claims of unbiased scientific objectivity and unlimited progress are increasingly questioned.

“Singer chooses to ignore the psychological and social influences of his background, preferring to believe that his philosophy sprang from logic alone.” He misses the postmodern irony in his old office poster “Knowledge is power, use it.”154 Postmodernists like Michel Foucault, for all their extremes, have demonstrated that knowledge is not disinterested but is socially and politically constructed, justifying

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151 Archbishop Keith Rayner, speech on receiving an honorary doctorate of Griffith University, Queensland, April 6, 2001, reported in The Melbourne Anglican, May 2001, p. 17.
154 Leser, “Man in the Black Plastic Shoes,” pp. 54-56; yet Leser misses the irony.
one’s particular position in the world and projecting it onto a universal screen as pure rationality or “the way things are.”

The greatest of American theologians, Jonathan Edwards, stood with one foot in the Augustinian tradition of “faith seeking understanding” and one in the Enlightenment. He argued that “all reason is disposed, that is, it is the embodied reasoning of some finite, historically located, human self which desires and loves, hates and loathes—and just so, inclines thought.” Rather than operating from some Olympian height with a privileged universal perspective, Singer stands in time and space in the Viennese and Oxford tradition of analytical philosophy, known as logical positivism, dominant between the two world wars, which rejected the meaningfulness or possibility of empirical verification of religious language. It is now largely discredited as one of the last gasps of overconfident modernity. Singer is also very much a child of the 1960s with its sexual revolution and its antiwar and early ecological movements.

Singer’s regular Enlightenment refrain is that through reason and cooperation we can deal with the problems facing humanity and creation, particularly those afflicting the weak and vulnerable, by promoting altruism. I do not question Singer’s motives, merely the realism of his reading of history, both natural and cultural. He again prefers an abstract, speculative theory of the development of altruism to a historical explanation near to hand taking account of the role of Christianity in promoting it. Singer resists Marxist utopianism with his own allegedly more realistic and

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155 Michel Foucault, Power/Knowledge, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon, 1980). Note that this is not necessarily the same as total relativism or a denial of truth.
157 On the social location of the Viennese school see Stephen Toulmin, Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1990), pp. 84, 151, 157. Singer’s teacher R. M. Hare was strongly influenced by it, and Singer is “a grand-child of Vienna.”
158 See Peter Singer, A Darwinian Left: Politics, Evolution and Cooperation (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1999), esp. pp. 60-62. Singer sees Darwinist views of self-interested human nature and genes as a useful reality check on abstract leftist ideals. But post-1960s Darwinism tracks the previously neglected “role of co-operation in improving an organism’s prospects of survival and reproductive success” (p. 19). However, as Andrew Cameron comments (in his significantly titled review article “The Politics of Peace: Two Political Theologies,” Kategoria 20 [Summer 2001]: 23-36), “perhaps we could ask whether this new move in evolutionary theory had less to do with the evidence of the fossil record than with the present-day existence of altruism and social co-operation demanding explanation in Darwinian terms. . . . If so, this would make it less a discovery than a supposition; and a supposition that might admit of other explanation. It is interesting, for example, that Singer’s prime example of the phenomenon of altruism . . . are the high rates of blood and bone marrow donation in the UK [see Darwinian Left, p. 57].” Singer wants to understand why this happens so that we can foster further altruism. “But in this enquiry, apparently it is inadmissible that
modest but ultimately utopian Darwinian-left advocacy of cooperation between human and nonhuman animals. Singer’s focus on self-awareness now includes self-awareness of our evolution and ability to engage in genetic manipulation toward a new age of universal animal altruism. Given the historical record, however, especially of the twentieth century with its world wars, nuclear bombs and Chernobyl, and the natural record “red in tooth and claw,” it is little more than a leap of faith. Perhaps Singer should read George Orwell’s prescient critique of an earlier left utopia, appropriately entitled Animal Farm.

Many of Singer’s critics wonder at his naive faith in systematic reason. He was quite surprised when Animal Liberation didn’t win the world over to vegetarianism. He is described as a neat systematizer influenced by his teacher Hare, one of the most systematic of contemporary thinkers. But the problem for such rationalists is the nonrationality of the world—the fact that, as Hare admitted, we’re not “archangels.”

Singer’s utopian faith in scientific reason and creaturely cooperation and his antagonism to Christianity, based on a mythical war between it and science, are easily illustrated. He makes a breathtaking, unjustified generalization that “once we admit that Darwin was right when he argued that human ethics evolved from the social instincts that we inherited from our non-human ancestors, we can put aside the hypothesis of a divine origin for ethics.” This assumes (along with fundamentalist Christians) that Darwinians must be anti-Christian and Christians must oppose Darwinian evolution. It is logically (given the possibility of theistic evolution) and empirically (given that there are many theistic evolutionists, including many scientists)
It is also a massive jump from the more strict scientific sense of Darwinism to social or ethical Darwinism; such a jump in fact is a form of the famous naturalistic fallacy (making is equal to ought, or description equal to prescription).

Compare Singer's overenthusiasm for education as the long-term solution to terrorism. In a series of logical leaps, Singer claims that such education would counter fundamentalism of all forms (Islamic and Christian). Fundamentalism is equated with belief in heavenly rewards—"about the only thing that could make it rational to fly into a building, killing yourself along with everyone else." Bible reading and faith are dismissed as "irrational beliefs" without argument, merely by association with fundamentalist literalism. Singer also seems blind to the fact that his own fundamentalist philosophy that denies the intrinsic dignity and sanctity of individual lives could be just as easily responsible for the evil events of September 11, 2001, as was a peculiar version of Islamic fundamentalism.

These are examples of Singer's illiberal liberalism and antireligious rationalism. Singer's preference utilitarianism parades as liberal, seeking to maximize people's autonomous choices. But he uses liberalism to cover over the totalitarian implications of his utilitarianism and to banish the main alternative, Christianity, from the public realm of reason. Singer uses John Stuart Mill's liberalism as the soft, appealingly thin edge of his philosophical wedge, catering to our individualistic "culture of choice." This justifies such practices as abortion, infanticide and voluntary euthanasia. However, like Mill, he is more utilitarian, even totalitarian (total utility being paramount), than liberal. Their "one very simple principle" that others' liberty can be constrained only for self-protection requires that everyone agree with their rational conclusions, thus ending political deliberation about social order. John Paul II describes this "thinly disguised totalitarianism," or liberalism against life, as due to "divorcing democracy from truth."

As Hans Reinders notes, in banishing believers' distinctive language from the public realm, Singer and Helga Kuhse use a kind of royal plural including them,

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64Peter Singer, "The Secret to Beating Fundamentalism," The Age, October 11, 2001, opinion page.
selves and “liberal believers” as an assumed moral consensus in Western society. This covers “the question-begging nature of their argument” and excludes alternative arguments of sanctity-of-life supporters from the community of liberal rational thinkers like themselves. It is a serious if not fatal drawback, given their constant appeal to reason.

In effect, they are preaching to the converted, those who share the royal plural with them. Such a “consensus” is empirically questionable. Singer and Kuhse’s argument against the sanctity of life can be paraphrased thus: “We—the authors of this book and the reader who shares our views—take X to be morally justified because it follows from what we—the authors . . . and the reader who shares our views—have already accepted as morally justified.” Singer (and Kuhse) makes the classic modern liberal mistake of universalizing his alleged rationality as that of everyone—“we”—and making voiceless and invisible anyone who disagrees.168

In the well-known joke, Tonto and the Lone Ranger find themselves surrounded by twenty thousand Sioux Indians. The Lone Ranger asks, “What do you think we ought to do, Tonto?”

Tonto replies, “What do you mean we, paleface?” Many of us would reply similarly to Singer.

Singer’s attempt to ban Christian reasons from public moral debate because not everyone in a pluralistic society can share them is inconsistent. First, it applies to all other views too. Moral positions are rational in terms of consistency with their internal premises and moral and nonmoral beliefs and convictions.169

Second, Singer’s attempted censorship of Christians is inconsistent with his recognition that debate about different foundations for morality is unfinished. If so, no view can make exclusive or privileged claims to rationality as Singer regularly does, or try to ban other theological and moral views like a secular sanctity-of-life view as irrational. “The truth about moral reasoning is that it is governed by ‘local rationalities.’ Even if some of the locations are more crowded than others, this fact does not provide anyone with a title upon which ‘we’ together with ‘many of us’ could claim the right to occupy all of the universe of moral rationality.”170

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170Reinders, “Debunking the Sanctity of Life,” p. 14. This is illustrated by the patronizing reactions of Singer to his German critics that “if the opponents only knew how to reason” they would agree with him. This is problematic when the contested situation of applied ethics is examined. It assumes we should apply rational principles to pressing social problems, but “there is no agreement among philosophers as to the underlying principles. In a way we have the situation that the
Third, Singer is, in effect, doing the same thing to Christians and other critics that he protests German and Princeton protestors have done or want done to him—silence free speech. This tendency toward exclusion fits with Singer’s tendency to define some out of the community of rational personhood. Today it is the unborn, the disabled, the nonconscious aged, the Christians as a “deviant tradition”; who knows who it will be tomorrow?

9. Singer’s preeminence in practical ethics is an expression of utilitarianism’s strategic retreat or movement sideways into practical ethics after its metaphysical and moral inadequacies in philosophical ethics were widely recognized. These include its inability to recognize the intrinsic wrongness of certain actions and the importance of motivation and personal, active agency in assigning responsibility. Singer relies on Hare’s and

‘endless debates’ of philosophers on normative ethical principles find a continuation on the level where they ought to be ‘applied’. . . Hence reference to rationality alone is not sufficient to decide these issues” (Pauer-Studer, “Singer on Euthanasia,” p. 151).

Raimond Gaita agrees. Singerians are often lauded for their logical consistency, no matter how unpalatable to the morally squeamish. “But they did not reach their conclusions gritting their teeth as reason relentlessly compelled them to go somewhere they desperately did not want to go. Nobody is in that way compelled by arguments about anything remotely interesting in ethics. Firstly, because all arguments in ethics have so many unclarities and depend on so many controversial premises. Secondly, . . . if Singer’s arguments for infanticide are now accepted as deserving of serious consideration it is not just because of the logical power of the argument. It is because changes in the culture have disposed us to accept a conclusion that only thirty years ago discredited any argument that led to it, however logically powerful the argument might have appeared. Why hasn’t Peter, who prides himself on thinking about thinking, taken more seriously the concept of a corrupted sensibility?” Further, acceptance of Singer’s arguments represent not a victory of reason but “our turning away from our obligations to others when they conflict with our self-interest.” Quoted in Sally Blakeny, “The Brave New World of Peter Singer,” The Australian Weekend Review, September 28-29, 1996, Features, pp. 3-4.


Jeffrey Stout (Ethics After Babel: The Languages of Morals and Their Discontents [Boston: Beacon, 1988], p. 297) describes consequentialism as “one of two major forms of optimistic modernism in ethical theory, recently come upon hard times” and “a machine for practical reason to live in.” See also Bernard Williams, “A Critique of Utilitarianism,” in Utilitarianism: For and Against, ed. J. J. C. Smart and Bernard Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973). Williams’s critique of Smart’s type of act utilitarianism highlights a fatal flaw in utilitarianism generally. If consequences trump other moral considerations such as moral agency, motivation or character, then it will often be right to do the prima facie wrong. Williams presents two examples where utilitarianism/consequentialism pushes us to act in ways that violate our intuitive moral feelings. In both cases, it is as if a person does not do a certain evil, someone else will, with far worse consequences. In one example, Pedro, a soldier, will kill twenty innocents unless Jim, a tourist, shoots one, thus sparing the nineteen others. For the utilitarian or consequentalist, if Jim refuses to shoot, his omission is as bad consequentially as if he shot the nineteen himself. Williams shows that utilitarianism is confused about Jim’s (or any individual’s) personal responsibility and completely inadequate concerning personal integrity. It makes all the difference in the world to his character whether he shoots. He shows that our core convictions, attitudes and personal projects do not fit utilitarianism.
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others’ inadequate answers and uses the urgency of being practical to cover over utilitarianism’s fundamental ontological, anthropological and ethical flaws.

Catholic philosopher Charles Taylor shows how general morality involves, first, “strong evaluations” that some things are of supreme worth and, second, an “ontology of the human” involving fundamental claims about human nature and worth. These are best understood not in terms of human autonomy (self-rule) but as an objective recognition of a transcendent order of reality. Because we cannot suspend our ethical evaluations in a morally neutral midair position,

we need an explicit moral ontology based on a description and assessment of human nature and the nature of the world. In the past this has usually been based on theistic claims. We are in the unfortunate position today that most of the secular moral ontologies belie the claims they make, in that their theories of human nature are at odds with the ethic they propose. Thus, in the case of utilitarianism, it has “a reductive ontology and a moral impetus, which are hard to combine.”

10. Singer, more than anyone, sees how high the stakes are in the debate between consequentialism and Christianity. He is in some ways like the great anti-Christian philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, who in the nineteenth century condemned the novelist George Eliot and other Victorian moralists as “English flatheads” for trying to hold to Christian morality without Christian belief. Singer also agrees with Alasdair MacIntyre that Western reverence for individual lives as ends in themselves is a secularized form of Christian morality, which makes little sense as isolated fragments or moral formulas without the overarching theological framework or theory that grounds them.

In some ways similarly, Quaker philosopher Elton Trueblood aptly describes our age as “a cut-flower civilization.” Cut flowers look good for a while in a vase but are doomed because they have no sustenance or roots. Trueblood adds: “It is impossible to sustain certain elements of human dignity, once these have been severed from their cultural roots.” These Christian roots ironically sustain even Singer’s intu-
tive-level utilitarianism, by preventing the full consequences of its critical level, consequentialism, from being foreseen or felt.

Singer is right that his real enemy is Christianity. In his Spectator article entitled “Killing Babies Isn’t Always Wrong,” he writes: “Pope John Paul II proclaims that the widespread acceptance of abortion is a mortal threat to the traditional moral order. . . . I sometimes think that he and I at least share the virtue of seeing clearly what is at stake in the debate.” Singerians advocate infanticide in order to re-create the stern philosophies of the pre-Christian world when babies—especially females, regarded as the property of their fathers—were left on garbage dumps. (In later generations Christians rescued and cared for these abandoned children.) “We must stoically resign ourselves, Singer argues, to an unredeemed and overpopulated world in which we have to kill useless and unwanted human beings.” “Singer . . . sees clearly (as Nietzsche did before) that the Judeo-Christian prohibition against baby-killing is a tattered, incoherent, and indefensible ethical remnant when divorced from Judeo-Christian religious belief.”

Singer is correct that current debates about life issues reflect a choice between worldviews—secular utilitarian/consequentialist or Christian. However, at the risk of having a bet each way, I will claim not that only a Christian view can support the sanctity of human life, persons and relationships, but that it best supports it. Though Christians advocate a specifically Christian narrative ethic, we need not see this as necessarily in total opposition to a rational ethic based on universally recognizable principles, rules and virtues. Rather the two can work in tandem, as they often do in Scripture, given that God is Creator as well as Redeemer, as evidenced in Genesis, the wisdom literature, and such New Testament passages as Acts 17 and Romans 1—2. Fortunately many, on seeing how high the stakes are, such as the sacrifice of the young and old, intuitively reject them, though not necessarily knowing why.

As Jean Bethke Elshtain argues against indiscriminate advocates of genetic engineering like Singer, “it is our ethics. Ethical reflection belongs to all of us—all those agitated radio callers—and it is the fears and apprehension of ordinary citizens that

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should be paid close and respectful attention.\textsuperscript{178} We must make common cause with “all those agitated radio-callers” as cobelligerents, without being literally belligerent. And we must share with them good creation-based and Christian reasons for their moral intuitions.

Richard Neuhaus negotiates a nuanced way between mere commonsense or yuck-factor ethics based on common grace and the need for special, biblical revelation.

The Yuck Factor may be an intelligently informed intuition that anticipates the disastrous consequences in what we human beings can do to ourselves. . . . Against the Yuck Factor playing much of a role in defending the humanum, however, is Raskolnikov’s [the redeemed murderer of Dostoyevsky’s Crime and Punishment] despairing cry, “Man gets used to anything—the beast!” We must hope that Raskolnikov will turn out to be wrong about that.\textsuperscript{179}

In Christ, he will be.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have argued, first, that our moral intuitions against infanticide, bestiality and the like are not to be easily rejected. The yuck factor, set within a balanced anthropology and ethic of reason and emotion, reflecting our personal and relational nature, is often a helpful warning against unwarranted ethical innovations such as Singer’s. The yuck factor needs very strong reasons to be overturned, stronger than Singer has so far come up with.

Second, Singer’s utilitarianism fails its own test of practicality. It leads to a split between critical utilitarian theory which prioritizes universal utility and our primary, personal and intuitive moral obligations and motivations. That Singer has only begun to appreciate this in the tragic case of his mother shows the naiveté and unlivable nature of his ethical theory.

Third, Singer’s utilitarianism is reductionistic in its rationalism. It is unable to do justice to the nature of care, female rationality, persons and God’s creation and is inconsistent in its use of intuition for the sake of animals but not newborn or unborn humans. For such reasons Singer’s theory needs to be radically rethought.


\textsuperscript{179} Neuhaus, “Public Square,” pp. 70-71.