



A Modern Gadfly

PETER SINGER

You're in a garden where you know there is a pond. There's a splash and some shouting. You realize that a young child has fallen in and may be drowning. What do you do? Do you walk by? Even if you'd promised to meet a friend and stopping would make you late, you'd surely treat the child's life as more important than being on time. The pond is quite shallow, but very muddy. You'll ruin your best shoes if you help. But don't expect other people to understand if you don't jump in. This is about being human and valuing life. A child's life is so much more valuable than any pair of shoes, even a very expensive pair. Anyone who thinks otherwise is some kind of monster. You'd jump into the water, wouldn't you? Of course you would. But then you're also probably rich enough to prevent a child in Africa from dying of hunger or of a curable tropical disease. That probably wouldn't take much more than the price of the shoes you'd be prepared to ruin by saving the child in the pond.

Why haven't you helped the other children – assuming you haven't? Giving a small amount of money to the right charity would save at least one life. There are so many childhood diseases that can easily be prevented with a relatively small amount of money to pay for vaccinations and other medicines. But why don't you feel the same about someone dying in Africa as you do about a child you can see drowning in front of you? If you *do* feel the same, you are unusual. Most of us don't, even if we feel slightly awkward about that fact.

The Australian philosopher Peter Singer (born 1946) has argued that the drowning child in front of you and the starving child in Africa are not so different. We should care more about those we can save all over the world than we do. If we don't do something, then children who might otherwise have lived will certainly die young. This isn't a guess. We know it's true. We know that many thousands of children die each year from poverty-related causes. Some die of starvation while we in developed countries throw away food that rots in the fridge before we get round to eating it. Some can't even get clean water to drink. So we should give up one or two of the luxuries that we don't really need in order to help people who are unfortunate about where they were born. This is a hard philosophy to live up to. But that doesn't mean Singer is wrong about what we *ought* to do.

You might say that if you don't give money to charity, someone else probably will. The risk here is that we will all be like bystanders, each one assuming that someone else will do what is necessary. So many people across the world are living in extreme poverty and going to bed each day hungry that their need won't be met by leaving charity to the few. It is true that in the case of a child drowning in front of you it is very easy to see if someone else is coming to that child's aid. With those

suffering in far-off countries it can be harder to know the effects of what we do and the effects of other people's actions. But that does not mean doing nothing is the best solution.

Connected with this point is the fear that giving money for overseas aid makes poor people depend on the rich, and stops them from finding ways to grow their own food and build their own wells and places to live. Over time this might make things turn out worse than if you didn't give at all. There are cases where whole countries have become dependent on foreign aid. What this means, though, is not that we should not contribute to charities, but that we should think carefully about the sorts of aid these charities are offering. It doesn't at all follow that we should not try and help. Some kinds of basic medical aid can give poor people a good chance of becoming independent of outside help. There are charities that are very good at training local people to help themselves, building wells that provide clean drinking water or providing health education. Singer's argument is not that we should simply contribute money to help others, but that we should contribute it to the charities that are most likely to benefit the worst off in the world in ways that will empower them to live independently. His message is clear: you almost certainly *could* have a genuine influence on other people's lives. And you *should*.

Singer is one of the best-known living philosophers. This is in part because he has challenged several widely held views. Some of what he believes is extremely controversial. Many people believe in the absolute sanctity of human life – that it is always wrong to kill another human being. Singer doesn't. If someone is in an irreversible persistent vegetative state, for example – that is, if they are just being kept alive as a body without meaningful conscious states or any chance of recovery or hope for their future – then Singer has argued that

euthanasia or mercy killing may be appropriate. There is little point in keeping such people alive in this state, he believes, as they have no capacity for pleasure or for any preference about how they live. They don't have a strong wish to keep on living, because they are incapable of having wishes at all.

Such views have made him unpopular in some quarters. He has even been called a Nazi for defending euthanasia in these special circumstances – despite the fact that his parents were Viennese Jews who fled the Nazis. This name-calling refers to the fact that the Nazis killed many thousands of sick and physically and mentally disabled people on the grounds that their lives were allegedly not worth living. It would be wrong to call the Nazi programme 'mercy killing' or 'euthanasia', however, since it was not meant to prevent unnecessary suffering, but to get rid of those the Nazis dismissed as 'useless mouths' because they were unable to work, and because they were supposedly contaminating the Aryan race. There was no sense of 'mercy' there. In contrast Singer is interested in the quality of life of the people concerned, and would certainly never have supported to any degree the Nazis' policies – though some of his opponents caricature his views to make them sound very similar.

Singer first became famous because of his influential books about the treatment of animals, especially *Animal Liberation*, which was published in 1975. In the early nineteenth century Jeremy Bentham had argued for the need to take animal suffering seriously, but in the 1970s when Singer first began writing on this topic, few philosophers saw it this way. Singer, like Bentham and Mill (see Chapters 21 and 24), is a consequentialist. This means he believes that the best action is the one that produces the best result. And to work out the best result we need to take into account what is in the best interests of all concerned, including the interests of animals. Like Bentham,

Singer believes that the key relevant feature for most animals is their capacity to feel pain. As human beings, we sometimes experience greater suffering than an animal would in a similar situation because we have the ability to reason and understand what is happening to us. This too needs to be taken into account.

Singer called those who don't give enough weight to the interests of animals 'speciesist'. This is like being racist or sexist. Racists treat members of their own race differently: they give them special treatment. They don't give members of other races what they deserve. A white racist might, for example, give a job to another white person even though there is a better-qualified black person who applied for the job. That's clearly unfair and wrong. Speciesism is like racism. It comes from only seeing your own species' perspective or being very heavily biased in its favour. As human beings many of us think only of other human beings when we decide what to do. But that's wrong. Animals can suffer, and their suffering should be taken into account.

Giving equal respect doesn't mean treating every animal species in exactly the same way. That wouldn't make sense at all. If you slap a horse across the rump with an open hand you probably won't cause the horse much pain. Horses have thick skins. But if you did the same to a human baby, you would cause it intense pain. But if you hit the horse hard enough to cause the horse the same amount of pain as slapping a baby would, that would be just as morally wrong as slapping a baby. You shouldn't do either, of course.

Singer argues that we should all be vegetarians on the grounds that we can easily live well without eating animals. Most food production using animals causes suffering and some farming is so cruel that it causes the animals intense pain. Factory-farmed chickens, for example, are kept in tiny cages,

some pigs are reared in stalls so small they can't turn round, and the process of slaughtering cattle is often extremely distressing and painful for them. It can't, Singer argued, be morally right to let such farming continue. But even more humane forms of farming animals are unnecessary, as we can quite easily do without eating meat. True to his principles, he even printed a recipe for lentil daal in one of his books to encourage readers to seek alternatives to meat.

Farm animals aren't the only ones that suffer at the hands of human beings. Scientists use animals for their research. It's not just rats and guinea pigs – cats, dogs, monkeys and even chimpanzees can be found in laboratories, many of them suffering pain and distress as they are drugged or given electric shocks. Singer's test to see if any research is morally acceptable is this: would we be prepared to perform the same experiment on a brain-damaged human being? If not, he believes, it is not right to perform the experiment on an animal with a similar level of mental awareness. This is a tough test, and not many experiments would pass it. In practice, then, Singer is very strongly against using animals in research.

The whole of Singer's approach to moral questions is based on the idea of consistency. Consistency is treating similar cases in a similar way. It is a matter of logic that if what is wrong with harming human beings is that it causes pain, then other animals' pain should affect how we behave too. If harming an animal brings about more pain than harming a human being, then it's better to harm the human being if you have to harm one of them.

Like Socrates many years before him, Singer takes risks when he makes public statements about how we should live. There have been protests against some of his lectures and he has had death threats. Yet he represents the very best tradition in philosophy. He

is constantly challenging widely held assumptions. His philosophy affects how he lives, and when he disagrees with other people he is always prepared to challenge the opinions of those he finds around him, to engage in public discussion.

Most importantly, Singer supports his conclusions with reasoned arguments informed by well-researched facts. You don't have to agree with his conclusions to see his sincerity as a philosopher. Philosophy, after all, thrives on debate. It thrives on people taking positions against each other and arguing, using logic and evidence. If you disagree with Singer's views on, for example, the moral status of animals or the circumstances in which euthanasia is morally acceptable, there is still a very good chance that reading his books will make you think hard about what you do actually believe and how it is supported by facts, reasons and principles.

Philosophy began with awkward questions and difficult challenges; with gadfly philosophers like Peter Singer around, there is a good chance that the spirit of Socrates will continue to shape its future.