

Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics*
Discussion Questions/Study Guide
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Ch. 1: "About Ethics," p. 1-15

1) Clarify and discuss the different ethical theories:

Deontological approaches-ethics as a system of rules and norms;

Teleological approaches (including consequentialism and utilitarianism)-a focus on ultimate goals. (See Singer 2-3.)

Which framework do you find most useful? Has either perspective been central to your personal moral reasoning? Examples?

Analyze the war in Iraq through these two perspectives.

2) Discuss Singer's four statements about what ethics is not (1-5):

*Not a set of prohibitions;

*Not an ideal system (good in theory but not in practice);

*Not something intelligible only in the context of religion;

*Not relative or subjective.

How widespread are these four beliefs about "ethics"? Which of these statements have impacted on your view of morality and justice?

Does an aggressive human nature make the realization of an ethical viewpoint throughout society impossible?

If a person's ethics are not based on faith, isn't that person developing a personal, subjective ethical framework? Don't ethics then become culture bound and relative to place and tradition?

3) Discuss ethical reasoning: is it possible (see pages 6-8)? What if there is ethical disagreement? How is this resolved? Singer gives the example of disagreements about cruelty to animals (p.7). Are ethics so subjective that there is no road to resolve differences (as relativists would maintain)?

4) Discuss Singer's arguments about what ethics is (8 - 15):

*the role of reason and justification (9-10);

*why self-interest is inadequate (10);

*the "universal point of view: (11-12);

* Singer's endorsement of utilitarianism (12-15).

Ch. 2: "Equality and its Implications," p. 16-54

- 1) What does the phrase "all humans are equal" mean to you?
- 2) John Rawls maintains that "moral personality is the basis of human equality" (18). . Why does Singer object to this Rawlsian approach to equality? Do you agree with Singer or with Rawls? Why?
- 3) Singer introduces the principle of "equal consideration of interests" (20-21).
 - *Explain this principle-what types of "interests" are to be considered equally?
 - *How does this principles (according to Singer) rule out racism, sexism and discrimination on the grounds of disability?
 - *What are the in egalitarian implications of this principle?
 - *How do you answer the question Singer poses on p. 26: "Can any of us really give equal consideration to the welfare of our family and the welfare of strangers?"
- 4) Singer argues that biological differences in race or gender should play no role in relation to the "equal consideration of interest." How does he make this argument? Shouldn't differences be taken into account? Aren't males more "aggressive" than females? Do we eliminate diversity and difference in the name of equality?
- 5) Singer states: "So equality of opportunity is not an attractive ideal. It rewards the lucky, who inherit those abilities that allow them to pursue interesting and lucrative careers. It penalizes the unlucky, whose genes make it very hard for them to achieve similar success" (39). How does Singer make this argument? Do you agree with him?
- 6) How do you answer Singer's question on p. 40: "Is it realistic to aim at a society that rewards people according to their needs rather than their IQ, aggression, or other, inherited abilities?"
- 7) How does Singer argue the case for affirmative action (44-54)? Do you agree with his conclusion: "The important point is that affirmative action, whether by quotas or some other method, is not contrary to any sound principle of equality and does not violate any rights of those excluded by it" (51).

Ch. 3: "Equality for Animals?" p. 55-82

1) Discuss the quote from Jeremy Bentham (56-57): "The day may come when the rest of the animal creation may acquire those rights which never could have been withholden from them...But 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 suppose they were otherwise, what would it avail? The question is not, Can they *reason*? nor Can they *talk*? But, *Can they suffer*?"

Is Bentham's argument ethically sound? Is there any moral justification to refuse to take a being suffering into consideration?

Note Singer's discussion of the difference between a stone and a mouse (57-58).

2) How does Singer define "speciesist"? Is his analogy between a "speciesist" and a "racist" valid?

3) Is a human life of more value than an animal life? Is this even the right question? Doesn't the principle of "equal consideration of interests" dictate that we act to prevent the suffering of all beings?

4) If we are going to eat animals, why do we care whether or not they lead miserable lives? They are going to be killed anyway.

5) Discuss the experiments on animals documented on p. 67.

6) How does Singer answer the Darwinian "survival of the fittest" argument? Isn't it "natural" for the stronger to prey upon the weaker?

7) Some philosophers claim that there is a profound moral difference between human and animals because animals cannot think or reason and have no self-consciousness. "It has been suggested that autonomous, self-conscious beings are in some way much more valuable, more morally significant, than beings who live from moment to moment, without the capacity to see themselves as distinct beings with a past and a future" (73). Do human beings thus have greater moral value than animals? How does Singer address this argument?

8) Singer is very critical of "contract" theories of ethics. Summarize his arguments.

Ch. 8: "Rich and Poor," p.218-246

- 1) Discuss the difference Robert McNamara draws between "absolute poverty" and "relative poverty." Have you ever seen or experienced "absolute poverty"? I think Singer is right: "Absolute poverty is probably the principle cause of human misery today" (220), Is there an ethical obligation for rich individuals, and wealthy nations, to help end this misery?
- 2) Is indifference to the plight of the poor struggling in absolute poverty "the moral equivalent of murder"? Singer writes: "If, then, allowing someone to die is not intrinsically different from killing someone, it would seem that we are all murderers" (2~2). Are we all murderers? What about the 5 differences Singer notes that are often raised to justify non-action (223-225)?
- 3) Singer establishes a strong argument for "an obligation to assist." How does he make this argument? How does a utilitarian perspective establish this obligation to assist? Is there a deontological argument for an obligation to assist?
- 4) Analyze each of the objections raised to the obligation to assist. Do you agree with any (or all) of these objections? Why?
 - *Taking care of our own;
 - *Property rights;
 - *Population and the ethics of triage;
 - *Leaving it to the government; .
 - *Too high a standard.

Ch 9: "Insiders and Outsiders," p. 247-263

- 1) Read the scenario described by Singer on p. 247-249: You are a member of the underground community called Fairhaven. How would you vote on the three proposals in the referendum: to admit 10,000 outsiders, to admit 500 outsiders, or to admit no outsiders?
- 2) Summarize the *Ex Gratia* approach to refugees. In particular, describe how Michael Walzer makes this argument, Do you agree with Walzer?
- 3) On what grounds does a consequentialist criticize the *Ex Gratia* framework? Are there negative consequences, for example, for not taking significant numbers of refugees?
- 4) How important is "nationalist" to you? How do you balance the rights of the citizens of your country with the rights of refugees?

Ch 10: "The Environment," p. 264-288

- 1) Is Singer fair to what he calls "The Western Tradition" (265-269)? Most of you have grown up in this tradition. Were you raised to feel that nature is a hierarchy "in which those with less reasoning ability exist for the sake of those with more" (267)? Is there a place for the environment in this human-centered moral framework?
- 2) Are "human rights" helpful in this discussion? Is there a "human right" to a healthy environment?
- 3) What is the value of a forest? Is the wilderness "priceless" and "timeless"? If so, do we have an obligation to protect it for future generations? Or, as Singer poses the question: "Is there value beyond sentient beings?" He notes that something "is of intrinsic value if it is good or desirable *in itself*" If the wilderness has intrinsic value, on what grounds can we do it harm?
- 4) What does Bill McKibben mean when he writes that "we live in a post-natural world"? Do you agree?
- 5) Note the passage from Albert Schweitzer on the "reverence for life" (278). Do you agree with Schweitzer? What does Singer object to in Schweitzer's formulation?
- 6) Naess and Sessions develop a strong "deep ecological ethic" (p. 280-281). Explain what is meant by "deep ecology". Why does Singer object to this ethical framework?
- 7) Singer ends this discussion with a section on the need for a new environmental ethic (284-288). How does Singer define this new ethic? Do you agree with his analysis? How much do environmental ethics fit into your quest for meaning?