

Peter Singer's practical ethics

A specific form of egoism appears when humans are understood as a special "moral" species.

Egoism (in this understanding) means anthropocentrism.

Anthropocentrism is not identical with humanism.

Humanism: human being is especially valuable.

Anthropocentrism: only human being is valuable.

Peter Singer (born 1946), a world known criticiser of anthropocentric ethics. According to him, anthropocentrism in ethics means **speciesism**. (Oxford Dictionary: the assumption of human superiority leading to the exploitation of animals.

or

The practice of treating members of one species as morally more relevant than other species because they belong to this species.

The term "speciesism" was formulated by the English philosopher Richard Ryder (in 1970th) and then popularised by Peter Singer.

According to Singer (*Practical Ethics*, second edition):

"So the first thing to say about ethics is that it is not a set of prohibitions particularly concerned with sex. Even in the era of AIDS, sex raises no unique moral issues at all." (Singer, 2)

"Second, 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 judgment that is no good in practice must suffer from a theoretical defect as well, for the whole point of ethical judgments is to guide practice. Some people think that ethics is inapplicable to the real world because they regard it as a system of short and simple rules like 'Do not lie', 'Do not steal', and 'Do not kill'. It is not surprising that those who hold this view of ethics should also believe that ethics is not suited to life's complexities. In unusual situations, simple rules conflict; and even when they do not, following a rule can lead to disaster. It may normally be wrong to lie, but if you were living in Nazi Germany and the Gestapo came to your door looking for Jews, it would surely be right to deny the existence of the Jewish family hiding in your attic." (Singer, 2)

"Third, ethics is not something intelligible only in the context of religion. I shall treat ethics as entirely independent of religion." (Singer, 3)

“The fourth, and last, claim about ethics that I shall deny in this opening chapter is that ethics is relative or subjective. At least, I shall deny these claims in some of the senses in which they are often made.” (Singer, 4)

“This issue of the role that reason can play in ethics is the crucial point raised by the claim that ethics is subjective. The non-existence of a mysterious realm of objective ethical facts does not imply the non-existence of ethical reasoning. It may even help, since if we could arrive at ethical judgments only by intuiting these strange ethical facts, ethical argument would be more difficult still. So what has to be shown to put practical ethics on a sound basis is that ethical reasoning is possible. Here the temptation is to say simply that the proof of the pudding lies in the eating, and the proof that reasoning is possible in ethics is to be found in the remaining chapters of this book; but this is not entirely satisfactory. From a theoretical point of view it is unsatisfactory because we might find ourselves reasoning about ethics without really understanding how this can happen; and from a practical point of view it is unsatisfactory because our reasoning is more likely to go astray if we lack a grasp of its foundations. I shall therefore attempt to say something about how we can reason in ethics.” (Singer, 8)

General thesis: “My reason for suggesting this is as follows. In accepting that **ethical judgments must be made from a universal point of view**, I am accepting that **my own interests cannot, simply because they are my interests, count more than the interests of anyone else**. Thus my very natural concern that my own interests be booked after must, when I think ethically, be extended to the interests of others. Now, imagine that I am trying to decide between two possible courses of action - perhaps whether to eat all the fruits I have collected myself, or to share them with others. Imagine, too, that I am deciding in a complete ethical vacuum, that I know nothing of any ethical considerations – I am, we might say, **in a pre-ethical stage of thinking**. How would I make up my mind? One thing that would be still relevant would be how the possible courses of action will affect my interests. Indeed, if we define 'interests' broadly enough, so that we count anything people desire as in their interests (unless it is incompatible with another desire or desires), then it would seem that at this pre-ethical stage, only one's own interests can be relevant to the decision. Suppose **I then begin to think ethically**, to the extent of recognising that my own interests cannot count for more, simply because they are my own, than the interests of others. **In place of my own interests, I now have to take into account the interests of all those affected by my decision. This requires me to weigh up all these interests and adopt the course of action most likely to maximise the interests of those affected.** Thus at least at some level in my

moral reasoning I must choose the course of action that has the best consequences, on balance, for all affected.” (Singer, 12-13)

“The way of thinking I have outlined is a **form of utilitarianism**. It differs from classical utilitarianism in that 'best consequences' is understood as meaning what, on balance, furthers the interests of those affected, rather than merely what increases pleasure and reduces pain. (It has, however, been suggested that classical utilitarians like Bentham and John Stuart Mill used 'pleasure' and 'pain' in a broad sense that allowed them to include achieving what one desired as a 'pleasure' and the reverse as a 'pain'.” (Singer, 14)

If this interpretation is correct, the difference between classical utilitarianism and utilitarianism based on interests disappears.)

“There is no logically compelling reason for assuming that a difference in ability between two people justifies any difference in the amount of consideration we give to their interests. **Equality is a basic ethical principle, not an assertion of fact**. We can see this if we return to our earlier discussion of the universal aspect of ethical judgments. We saw in the previous chapter that **when I make an ethical judgment I must go beyond a personal or sectional point of view and take into account the interests of all those affected. This means that we weigh up interests, considered simply as interests and not as my interests, or the interests of Australians, or of people of European descent**. This provides us with a basic principle of equality: **the principle of equal consideration of interests**”. (Singer, 20-21)

“**The essence of the principle of equal consideration of interests is that we give equal weight in our moral deliberations to the like interests of all those affected by our actions**. This means that if only X and Y would be affected by a possible act, and if X stands to lose more than Y stands to gain, it is better not to do the act. We cannot, if we accept the principle of equal consideration of interests, say that doing the act is better, despite the facts described, because we are more concerned about Y than we are about X. What the principle really amounts to is this: **an interest is an interest, whoever's interest it may be**” (Singer, 21)

“Equal consideration of interests is a minimal principle of equality in the sense that it does not dictate equal treatment. Take a relatively straightforward example of an interest, the interest in having physical pain relieved. **Imagine that after an earthquake I come across two victims, one with a crushed leg, in agony, and one with a gashed thigh, in slight pain. I have only two shots of morphine left**. Equal treatment would suggest that I give one to each injured

person, but one shot would not do much to relieve the pain of the person with the crushed leg. She would still be in much more pain than the other victim, and even after I have given her one shot. giving her the second shot would bring greater relief than giving a shot to the person in slight pain. **Hence equal consideration of interests in this situation leads to what some may consider an inegalitarian result: two shots of morphine for one person, and none for the other.**” (Singer, 23- 24).

Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation*

“Do animals other than humans feel pain? How do we know? Well, how do we know if anyone, human or nonhuman, feels pain? We know that we ourselves can feel pain. We know this from the direct experience of pain that we have when, for instance, somebody presses a lighted cigarette against the back of our hand. But how do we know that anyone else feels pain? We cannot directly experience anyone else's pain, whether that "anyone" is our best friend or a stray dog. Pain is a state of consciousness, a "mental event," and as such it can never be observed. Behavior like writhing, screaming, or drawing one's hand away from the lighted cigarette is not pain itself; nor are the recordings a neurologist might make of activity within the brain observations of pain itself. Pain is something that we feel, and we can only infer that others are feeling it from various external indications. (*Animal...*, 10)

“If it is justifiable to assume that other human beings feel pain as we do, is there any reason why a similar inference should be unjustifiable in the case of other animals? Nearly all the external signs that lead us to infer pain in other humans can be seen in other species, especially the species most closely related to us—the species of mammals and birds. The behavioural signs include writhing, facial contortions, moaning, yelping or other forms of calling, attempts to avoid the source of pain, appearance of fear at the prospect of its repetition, and so on. In addition, we know that these animals have nervous systems very like ours, which respond physiologically as ours do when the animal is in circumstances in which we would feel pain: an initial rise of blood pressure, dilated pupils, perspiration, an increased pulse rate, and, if the stimulus continues, a fall in blood pressure. Although human beings have a more developed cerebral cortex than other animals, this part of the brain is concerned with thinking functions rather than with basic impulses, emotions, and feelings. These impulses, emotions, and feelings are located in the diencephalon, which is well developed in many other species of animals, especially mammals and birds. We also know that the nervous systems of other animals were not artificially constructed—as a robot might be artificially constructed to mimic the pain behavior of humans. The nervous systems of animals evolved as our own did, and in fact the

evolutionary history of human beings and other animals, especially mammals, did not diverge until the central features of our nervous systems were already in existence. A capacity to feel pain obviously enhances a species' prospects of survival, since it causes members of the species to avoid sources of injury. It is surely unreasonable to suppose that nervous systems that are virtually identical physiologically, have a common origin and a common evolutionary function, and result in similar forms of behavior in similar circumstances should actually operate in an entirely different manner on the level of subjective feelings.” (Animal..., 11)

“Even if there were stronger grounds for refusing to attribute pain to those who do not have a language, the consequences of this refusal might lead us to reject the conclusion. Human infants and young children are unable to use language. Are we to deny that a year-old child can suffer? If not, language cannot be crucial. Of course, most parents understand the responses of their children better than they understand the responses of other animals; but this is just a fact about the relatively greater knowledge that we have of our own species and the greater contact we have with infants as compared to animals. Those who have studied the behavior of other animals and those who have animals as companions soon learn to understand their responses as well as we understand those of an infant, and sometimes better. So to conclude: there are no good reasons, scientific or philosophical, for denying that animals feel pain. If we do not doubt that other humans feel pain we should not doubt that other animals do so too.” (Animal, 14-15)

„I conclude, then, that a rejection of speciesism does not imply that all lives are of equal worth. While self-awareness, the capacity to think ahead and have hopes and aspirations for the future, the capacity for meaningful relations with others and so on are not relevant to the question of inflicting pain-since pain is pain, whatever other capacities, beyond the capacity to feel pain, the being may have-these capacities are relevant to the question of taking life. It is not arbitrary to hold that the life of a self-aware being, capable of abstract thought, of planning for the future, of complex acts of communication, and so on, is more valuable than the life of a being without these capacities. To see the difference between the issues of inflicting pain and taking life, consider how we would choose within our own species. If we had to choose to save the life of a normal human being or an intellectually disabled human being, we would probably choose to save the life of a normal human being; but if we had to choose between preventing pain in the normal human being or the intellectually disabled one-imagine that both have received painful but superficial injuries, and we only have enough painkiller for one of them - it is

not nearly so clear how we ought to choose. The same is true when we consider other species. The evil of pain is, in itself, unaffected by the other characteristics of the being who feels the pain; the value of life is affected by these other characteristics. To give just one reason for this difference, to take the life of a being who has been hoping, planning, and working for some future goal is to deprive that being of the fulfillment of all those efforts; to take the life of a being with a mental capacity below the level needed to grasp that one is a being with a future-much less make plans for the future-cannot involve this particular kind of loss.

Normally this will mean that if we have to choose between the life of a human being and the life of another animal we should choose to save the life of the human; but there may be special cases in which the reverse holds true, because the human being in question does not have the capacities of a normal human being. So this view is not speciesist, although it may appear to be at first glance. The preference, in normal cases, for saving a human life over the life of an animal when a choice has to be made is a preference based on the characteristics that normal humans have, and not on the mere fact that they are members of our own species.” (Animal, 20-21)