

March 8, 2009

Interview with Peter Singer

Princeton philosophy professor and author of “The Life You Can Save”

Peter Singer is no stranger to controversy. For more than three decades, the Australian-born philosopher has taken positions on a range of bioethical issues, not editing his views to please the masses.

Singer, who divides his time between professorships at Princeton University and the University of Melbourne, has devoted his career to hot-button topics, from euthanasia for disabled infants to stem cell research to the war in Iraq.

In his latest book, "The Life You Can Save: Acting Now to End World Poverty," published this month in the United States, Singer urges readers to donate at least 1 percent of their income to help those less fortunate around the world. A Web site he set up to promote the cause (www.thelifyoucansave.com) garnered almost 500 pledges in the first two weeks after the book appeared in Australia.

In advance of a lecture at IUPUI on March 10, Singer spoke with The Star by phone from Australia.

Your book "Animal Liberation" made you an icon of the animal-rights movement. Did you set out to do this?

I wanted to create an animal-rights movement. There wasn't one. I thought that this was a huge issue that nobody had noticed, and I wanted to wake people up to the fact that we had excluded a vast number of sentient beings from our sphere of moral concern and we were not justified in doing this. I wanted to get as much attention as I could, because I thought this was an outrage.

Were you attached to animals as a child?

Not particularly. I didn't have any pets. I had never really thought of myself as an animal person. For me, it's not a matter of emotional closeness. I don't have any pets at the moment. It's a matter of trying to do the right thing. I think anyone should be concerned about justice and about treating beings justly.

In an earlier piece about global poverty, you argued not just that people should help others but that they should make great sacrifices to do so. In this latest version, that view has softened. What led you to revise your approach?

I think I have become clearer now about the distinction between what somebody may decide individually to do and what we should put out there as a public standard.

It is a tricky issue, and not all philosophers would agree with what I'm about to say. I think you can

have a difference between what a person might privately decide they ought to do and what you might think is the best thing to advocate as a public standard. You might privately think you ought to do a lot, but if you put that out as a public standard, it might be too demanding for most people.

Many stories about you note that you give about a third of your income to charity, mostly Oxfam America. How do you cut costs?

One example I use in the book is "do you pay for water?" I drink water out of the tap. It's a waste of money to pay for bottled water when the water that comes out of the tap is safe to drink. I don't buy a lot of clothes. When I'm in the U.S., I don't own a car.

Your book will be published in the middle of a severe economic downturn. Do hard times in one's own country change the moral responsibility one has to global poverty?

Certainly if you've been put out of work and you're struggling to make sure you can keep your family home, that's a completely different situation than one in which you were employed and had enough to provide for the basic necessities. I would say that perhaps my argument doesn't apply to those people who find themselves out of work or in financial insecurity.

You often make arguments in your work that few others have made. Were you a particularly quarrelsome child?

I remember one of my high school teachers saying I would make a good lawyer because I kept arguing with whatever he said. I've never had great respect for conventions, and maybe that's something to do with my upbringing or the period in which I came of age, the '60s.

Well, it's a way of answering the question of what makes it so seriously wrong to kill a being. Once you get rid of the idea that it's just being a member of a particular species, namely homo sapiens, I argue that can't be the answer and you need to find something else. You could say it's wrong to kill a being whenever a being is sentient or conscious. Then you would have to say it's just as wrong to kill a chicken or mouse as it is to kill you or me. I can't accept that idea. It may be just as wrong, but millions of chickens are killed every day. I can't think of that as a tragedy on the same scale as millions of humans being killed.

What is different about humans? Humans are forward-looking beings, and they have hopes and desires for the future. That seems a plausible answer to the question of why it's so tragic when humans die.

Would you say your goal is to change the way society thinks about the issues you tackle or to challenge conventional assumptions?

I certainly want people to challenge their own assumptions. My hope and belief is that by doing this, if they think critically, they will come closer to the views I defend.

Certainly, I don't want people to mindlessly accept my views. If my arguments are sound, they will come to views that are at least similar to mine.

Q: Have you ever regretted any of the positions you have taken in your life?

A: There are some things that I would have put differently had I appreciated how people would respond to them. My earlier writing about euthanasia for disabled infants, maybe it was not sufficiently sensitive to the fact that people with disabilities are victims of discrimination and some of the ways of writing were reinforcing that.

Have you done humanitarian work, or is your interest in this purely intellectual?

I consider giving money to Oxfam humanitarian work. I don't think I have any particular talent for digging ditches. I think I can do more good for the world by thinking and writing about what our obligations are than by going out there. I find my writing fulfillment, so I'm happy with that.

Additional Facts

Peter Singer Lecture

» **When:** 7:30 p.m. Tuesday.

» **Where:** Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis Campus Center (Room 450), 420 University Blvd.

» **Tickets:** Free.

Peter Albert David Singer

» **Born:** July 6, 1946, in Melbourne, Australia.

» **Education:** B.A., University of Melbourne, 1967; M.A., University of Melbourne, 1969; B. Phil. (Bachelor of Philosophy), Oxford University, 1971.

» **Current appointments:** Ira W. DeCamp Professor of Bioethics, University Center for Human Values, Princeton University; Laureate Professor, Centre for Applied Philosophy and Public Ethics, University of Melbourne.

» **Awards received:** Some of Singer's awards include the Australian Humanist Association, 2004; Emperor Has No Clothes Award, Freedom from Religion Foundation, 2004. He also was included in "The Time 100," Time magazine's list of the world's most influential people, April 18, 2005.
