Ethics in an age of self interest

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What is the meaning of life? Peter Singer's new book offers us this answer (258-9)[1]:

> If we are to find meaning in our lives by working for a cause, that cause must be... a 'transcendent cause', that is, a cause that extends beyond the boundaries of our self. There are many such causes... No doubt a commitment to each of these causes can be, for some people, a way of finding meaning and fulfilment. Is it... arbitrary, then, whether one chooses an ethical cause or some other cause? No; living an ethical life is certainly not the only way of making a commitment that can give substance and worth to your life: but for anyone choosing one sort of life rather than another, it is the commitment with the firmest foundation. The more we reflect on our commitment to a football club, a corporation, or any sectional interest, the less point we are likely to see in it. In contrast, no amount of reflection will show a commitment to an ethical life to be trivial or pointless... living an ethical life enables us to identify ourselves with the greatest cause of all.

In Singer's view the greatest cause of all is "to make the world a better place", a cause which Singer also calls, apparently without irony (or indeed even humour), "taking the point of view of the universe" (274).[2] "Making the world a better place", as Singer understands it, in fact means only "the reduction of pain and suffering, wherever it is found" (275). What is the reflective justification for seeing *this* project as the only one involved in "making the world a better place"? It is that "If we take the point of view of the universe we can recognise the urgency of doing something about the pain and suffering of others, before we even consider promoting... other possible values like beauty, knowledge, autonomy and happiness" (276).

"Now this sounds rather edifying; it is I think quite characteristic of very bad degenerations of thought on such questions that they sound edifying" (Elizabeth Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy", *Philosophy* 1958). There is something fundamentally wrong with Singer's line of thought. My present purpose is to try and unpick what. In this context I shall therefore at least try to stick to the main point, and

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1998.tb01635.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

to pass by, without any further comment, many of the more superficially provocative features of Singer's racy and elegantly-written little book. For example:

(a) Its pervasive, rather Victorian, self-satisfaction ("There is something uplifting about ethical commitment", 193; "a higher ethical consciousness", 276).

(b) Its condescending assumption that the decision to "live ethically" is something that most people have *not* already taken ("In a society in which the narrow pursuit of material self-interest is the norm...", 276).

(c) Its outrageous parodying of ethical positions that Singer finds inimical, such as Kant's and Jesus's. (Singer claims (216) that it is Kant's position that "harmony between the moral law and our desires" is impossible, and that "Jesus recommended obedience to God's command in order to avoid damnation" (220). Given that Jesus held that the whole of the law of Moses could be captured in two commands about *love,* the latter claim is a remarkable achievement in the field of wilful misunderstanding. Given even a passing acquaintance with Kant's works, the former claim seems equally perverse though when coupled with Singer's insinuation (299) that if Kant says other things in other passages, then that makes Kant inconsistent, not Singer wrong, the claim seems not so much perverse as breathtakingly disingenuous.)

However, as I say, I am trying *not* to rise to such baits, but to stick to the main point.

One's first thought about the hyper-moralistic life-plan that Singer wants to sell us is its striking similarity to another life that Singer considers a number of times— the stone-rolling life of Sisyphus.

What makes Sisyphus' life hell is (partly, anyway) the fact that he *doesn't get anywhere.* His stone is no sooner pushed to the top of the slope than it rolls back down again. In that respect at least, Sisyphus' experience is more similar than Singer admits to the experience of Singer's ideal moral agent (call him Sim). It is an unhappily familiar phenomenon that the aid or relief worker's work is never done. No sooner have you dealt with one crisis than another one pops up. Trying to "feed the world", as Band Aid put it in 1985 (remember them?), is more than a little like trying to count the drops of water in the sea. If you want an image of futile endeavour, the image of Sim's attempt to abolish pain and suffering is almost as telling as the Sisyphus image.

To this Singer will of course reply that there is a crucial difference. Sisyphus' task is intrinsically pointless, because getting the stone up the hill is not "a rationally grounded value". But Sim's task is not intrinsically pointless, because "reducing pain and suffering" is "a

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rationally grounded value". Sisyphus' task would not be worthwhile even if Sisyphus succeeded. Sim's task is still worthwhile even if he fails.

This is a fair response. After all, it would be outrageous to refuse to help *any* starving people on the grounds that there are always *more* starving people to help. (Still, it is disturbing how often one hears that sub-Malthusian pretext.) But even if we agree—as we should—that reducing pain and suffering is a rationally grounded value, the response does not banish the spectre of Sisyphus. For it does not take seriously enough the possibility of what philosophers sometimes call "the overmoralised self".

There are lots of ways for Sim's life to be meaningless. One of them is (as Singer points out) commitment to a project that reflection cannot defend. Another (as he does not point out) is the following scenario. Every time Sim wants to read a book, or go to the cinema, or enjoy a bottle of wine, or buy some fertiliser for his roses, or make a sculpture, or play the cello, or even just *lie down for a few minutes,* a stern and inexorable moral demand overrides his right to do any of these things. There are still starving people in the Horn of Africa. Given that moral emergency, how can Sim be so egoistic and trivial as even to consider promoting these other possible values (except, of course, as a means to reducing pain and suffering: 276)? How, in short, can Sim have any projects except famine relief?

In the face of this level of moral demand Sim's life can very quickly lose its meaning. This happens not so much because Sim's life is committed to unworthy causes, as because in the case envisaged Sim *has* no life. He is no longer a person with a project: he is a project which has completely swallowed a person. In Williams' phrase, he has become no more than an "agent of the universal utility system" *(Utilitarianism: for and against,* 118).

"Coming to the cinema tonight, Sim?" "I can't—there are famines to relieve." "Will you be at your father's funeral, Sim?" "I can't—there are famines to relieve." "Will you marry me, Sim?" "I can't—there are famines to relieve..." Sim might very reasonably resent the overwhelming burden of moral demands that (he feels) forces him to give such answers. Dull joyless duty harries him at every turn, and nothing he can do can satisfy it. Like Sisyphus', Sim's world has become a grim, guilt-ridden, resentful struggle towards a point that he can never reach; like Sisyphus, Sim is not allowed to think of anything else except when thinking of something else helps him towards the goal. (But this is going to happen far less often than utilitarians find it convenient to imagine. How for instance could going to his father's

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funeral help?) *No matter what* "the point of view of the universe" might have to say about its meaningfulness or otherwise, a life like Sim's will naturally seem, to the person 'inside' it, as meaningless as Sisyphus' life. But that just returns us to the original question "Why be moral"?—i.e. the question of how Sim could conceivably be motivated to adopt his extreme life-plan in the first place.

Weirdly, Singer assumes a straightforward proportion between the meaningfulness of my life and the moralisation of my self. I've already shown, in part, what is wrong with this conception. But in any case Singer's argument is a *non sequitur*. Apparently it goes like this.

1. What we really want is for our lives to have as much meaning as possible.
2. Living for other people gives my life more meaning than it would have if I just lived for myself.
3. So the most meaningful life of all is the life lived for as many other people as possible, i.e. as many people as there are; i.e. the ethical life.

This argument equivocates between two quite different sorts of commitment to others, friendship commitments and justice commitments, (The equivocation is characteristic for a utilitarian: it is no surprise to see R.M.Hare in the background at this point, either [cp. 206].) Friendship commitments have a high tendency to enrich our lives with meaningfulness, but it's not always true that the more of them, the better. Justice commitments are the other way round. It's always true that the more of them, the better, but their tendency to enrich our lies is remarkably lower. (In some cases, in fact, they seem to do the opposite.)

Once we disambiguate these sorts of commitments to others, Singer's argument (1–3) falls apart on either reading. If we're talking of friendship commitments, then (1) and (2) are true, but they hardly entail (3): one might as well argue that if tea is better with sugar in it, then the more sugar the better. But not even jobbing plumbers think that. Whereas if we are talking about justice commitments then (1) and (2) entail (3); however (2) and (3) appear to be false. *Some* justice commitments might add meaning to one's life. But there is no reason to think that *every* justice commitment will, nor indeed, that *any* justice commitment will add meaning to one's life *qua* justice commitment. (And anyway, one wants to say, it's not because being just adds *meaning to one's life* that one should choose to be just in the first place. The requirement to be just goes deeper than that. It is not even the *beginnings* of an excuse for injustice to object that doing the just act would not be life-enhancing!)

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Thus Singer's argument for the hyper-moralistic outlook fails, despite his assertions to the contrary, to stand up to reflective examination. Two important conclusions are suggested by my diagnosis of this failure. First, if we want to argue for a hyper-moralistic view, or even a strongly demanding view of first-order ethics, we will have to do it differently from Singer. Second, and connectedly, there is irreducibly more than one way of being committed to other people. Friendship is not simply an efficient way of achieving the ends set by impersonal justice and benevolence. Justice and benevolence are not, as Singer possibly thinks, simply the limiting case of friendship generalised, the "expanding circle" expanded to the widest possible dimensions. The two forms of commitment are *fundamentally* different.

This means that they make, or can make, fundamentally different demands on us, and that neither form of demand is a sure-fire trump of the other form. In other words, it means that there is no *a priori* guarantee that the demands of famine relief will, in every person's life, always (as they say) 'outweigh' the demands of commitments to friends, family, comrades etc. So the solution to the problem of demandingness lies in *pluralism about the good:* in the recognition that the sources of the ethical (or better, practical) demands and motivations that we are subject to are many and various, and cannot smoothly be reduced to any single category. They can't, in fact, even be reduced to the two categories of demand that I have just argued for, namely the demands of impartial benevolence and the demands of personal relations. But an awareness of that distinction will at least begin to give us an awareness of how much more various (and *interesting)* "the good" is than utilitarians are naturally led to assume.

If this is right, it confirms an initial suspicion that we might have felt about Singer's argument—that it is vulnerable to a "false or trivial" dilemma. As remarked, Singer understands our "grand project" as that of "making the world a better place". But if we hold, in accordance with pluralism about the goods, that there are indefinitely many different ways of "making the world a better place", then Singer's thesis turns out to be about as controversial as being against sin.[3] Alternatively, if we go along with Singer in denying pluralism about the goods, and assume that "making the world a better place" means *exclusively* "the reduction of pain and suffering, wherever it is found", then his thesis that *that* has to be our grand project is just obviously false. Mastering the cello or writing the definitive book on prehistoric Hittite languages are certainly ways of "making the world a better place". But it is just fanciful to claim that these projects are means to "the reduction of pain and suffering, wherever it is found"; or that unless we can, by whatever mental

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gymnastics, contrive to *treat* them as that, then the validity of these projects is somehow imperilled.

In arguing like this against Singer's zealous moralism, I am *not* promoting complacent bourgeois amoralism as an alternative. I am *not* saying that for normal people living in the prosperous West, it could be perfectly all right to be so wrapped up in one's cello-playing or linguistic projects that one never gave a sou to the starving millions, or never spent any time in protesting at injustices and acts of arbitrary violence against humans or animals or environments. No: most of us are nowhere near concerned enough about others, and many of the *conclusions* (as opposed to *arguments* for them) advanced in Singer's works, above all his insistence on the pressing need to alleviate human and animal suffering, are both right and important.

However, this impression that complacent amoralism is *the only alternative* to Singer's own hyper-moralistic position is itself one of the most pernicious implications of Singer's style of argument. Against this, what we need to insist on is simply the point that *agents have a right to their own lives*— a point that hyper-moralistic utilitarians like Singer are very ill equipped to accommodate. Pluralism about the good can do better. It needn't imply complacent amoralism. But it does imply that there are all sorts of ways of living, other than famine-relief or any sort of directly charitable work, which admit of rational justification. It is plainly morally imperative that my *financial arrangements* should be sensitive to the occurrence of famines. It is a less obvious claim, and in fact I think a false one, that *every commitment in my life* should be sensitive to their occurrence. I might respond to a famine by rushing off to work for famine relief, and of course it might be admirable if I did: it doesn't always follow that there is something morally wrong with me if I don't.

As a matter of fact, historically speaking, most of the idealists who have been hot on the demandingness of morality, for example Jesus, Ghandi, Buddha, St.Francis of Assisi, and Mother Teresa, have also been very clear on the necessity of recognising that not every moral demand is addressed to everybody, or addressed to everybody with the same force. In this respect, therefore, most of those who have *actually lived* lives of the sort to which Singer is exhorting us when he speaks of "living ethically" have based their idealism and their advocacy of demandingness on very different ways of thinking about ethics from Singer's. Such ways of thinking are unlike Singer's, if taken literally, in that they have room for the thought that there are *some* limits on the demandingness of morality, even if (as is doubtless the case) those limits are in most places set a good deal higher than most of us are ever

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in any danger of reaching.

It is natural, therefore, to infer that Singer's arguments (as opposed, again, to *some* of his conclusions) should not be taken literally. Since Singer himself is not a famine relief worker but a philosopher with books on Hegel and Marx to his credit, he himself presumably does not take it literally.

But then a moral argument that should not be taken *literally* should not be taken at all. As Singer himself remarks:

> We cannot rest content with an ethic that is unsuited to the rough and tumble of everyday life. If someone proposes an ethic so noble that to try to live by it would be a disaster for everyone, then—no matter who has proposed it—it is *not* a noble ethic at all, it is a stupid one that ought to be firmly rejected.

Quite so.

1 Peter Singer. *How are we to live? Ethics in an age of self-interest.* Oxford, OUP, 1997. Pp. 318. £8.99

2 Henry Sidgwick's phrase: *The Methods of Ethics,* VIIth edition, 382. The phrase and the thinking behind it is trenchantly criticised by Bernard Williams in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* 105–109, and *Making Sense of Humanity* 153–171. These are well known sources that Singer just ignores.

3 Not in fact that Singer *is* against sin; but I won't pursue that here.

The Latest Vatican Statement on Christianity and Other Religions

John Hick

Last year the Vatican issued a document, Christianity and the World Religions, prepared by its International Theological Commission and approved by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger as Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith[1]. The document arises from a recognition that 'The question of the relations among religions is becoming daily more important', and that circumstances today 'make interreligious dialogue necessary'. Accordingly, the Commission sets out to 'clarify how religions are to be evaluated theologically' by offering 'some

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