

Peter Singer

A Gadfly for the Greater Good

Draft version

(from [A Very Bad Wizard: Morality Behind the Curtain](#) 2nd edition)*gad·fly* (ˈɡɑdˌflī/)*noun*

1. a fly that bites livestock, especially a horsefly, warble fly, or botfly.
2. **a person who persistently annoys or provokes others into action by criticism.**

Two gadflies bookend the almost 3,000 year history of philosophy. The first is Socrates in late 5th century B.C. Athens. The second is Peter Singer in our own time. Of course, Singer is far from the only philosopher who aims to provoke, to question common beliefs and subject them to scrutiny. But a true philosophical gadfly gets under our skin. They challenge our behavior, make us question our whole way of live. They make us feel inadequate, like we're not living as we ought to be living. Beginning with his famous 1971 article "Famine, Affluence, and Morality" and continuing throughout his career, Peter Singer has offered simple, easy to understand arguments with conclusions that, if true, would radically alter our understanding of what it means to live morally.

If you've taken an introduction to ethics course, you already know what I'm talking about—the article is in virtually every introductory anthology. It begins with several facts about the vast amount of preventable suffering, disease, and death in the world and it concludes that 99.99 percent of individuals who live in affluent nations (a conservative estimate) are not doing anything close to what they ought to be doing to prevent this suffering.

The paper and the argument are models of clarity; there are a handful of plausible premises leading to this unsettling conclusion. And the argument is valid, so if you don't like the conclusion, you have to identify the false or implausible premise. This is much harder than it first appears. "Famine" is a fun article for professors to teach, in spite of its sobering topic. Your previously quiet class won't just participate. They'll get mad. They'll offer objections, usually ones that Singer has already anticipated "The charities are corrupt!" (There are many easily accessible watchdog organizations.); "Throwing money at them won't solve the problem--

you have to teach a man to fish!” (So give money to education programs or political reform). After objections comes righteous indignation. “I earned my money! Why should I give it away?” (Aren’t your parents paying a lot of your tuition?) “What if every member of my family gets cancer—I need to put my money away in case that happens!” (So why did you buy that X-Box?) Then comes the ad hominem attacks on Singer’s other ethical views, usually inaccurate. (“He thinks animals are more important than humans! He wants to kill disabled infants!”) Finally, there’s grudging acceptance, and sometimes a calmer, fairer attempt to challenge the argument.

Don’t get me wrong, there are reasonable challenges out there. It’s just that Singer’s arguments often bring out the worst in students of philosophy—at least at first. (Nobody likes to be told they’re a bad person.) We discuss several of the best challenges to his view in our interview. One of them concerns the importance of Singer’s famous “drowning child” case for establishing his conclusion about our obligations to the poor. The case is simple. You’re walking by a pond and you see a child gasping for breath, about to drown. If you jump in immediately, you can probably save him. But you’re wearing some fancy clothes and a nice watch. What should you do? The answer is obvious. Of course, you should save him--who cares about the clothes, we’re talking about a kid’s life! Only a monster or a psychopath would keep walking while the child drowns. But wait, how different is that from...You can see where this is headed.

In books such as Practical Ethics, The Life You Can Save, and The Most Good You Can Do Singer has used this case as an analogy for our own situation. We spend money on cars, televisions, restaurants, NFL Sunday Ticket, and so forth. If it’s so obvious that we should save the drowning child, then why is it okay to spend money on luxuries rather than donating to save children and adults from preventable diseases all across the world? A good question, one we all have to wrestle with every day.

Peter Singer is Ira W. DeCamp Professor of Bioethics at Princeton University. He also has a regular visiting position at the University of Melbourne. He is author of too many books and articles to list here. Even more impressive is the practical impact he has had on the world. No living philosopher comes close. With his book Animal Liberation, Singer almost single-handedly created the modern animal welfare movement. And for over forty years, Singer has inspired people to increase their charitable giving, often significantly. We began the interview

by discussing the case of the drowning child and its role in the “Famine, Affluence, and Morality” argument. Singer was in Australia so I interviewed him over Skype.

August 2015.

1. A Sea of Drowning Children

TS: Like everybody who teaches intro to ethics, I assign the famine paper where you introduce the case of the drowning child. And I’m always surprised when I reread it. These days, the case is discussed as an analogy for our everyday situation--millions of children die every day of preventable diseases, what are we going to do about it? But you don’t really press that analogy in the original paper. Instead you use the case to establish a more general normative principle about our obligation to prevent suffering.¹

PS: Well, I do consider whether it makes a moral difference that the child is only a few yards away rather than across the globe.

TS: Right, you note that the general principles take no account of distance. But how important is the aptness of the analogy for establishing the conclusion of that article?

PS: I’m saying, look, if you feel you ought to save the child in the pond then it’s implausible to think that just because somebody is further away, you don’t have a responsibility to save his. So that gets people started on a train of thought that asks what exactly makes a morally relevant difference in terms of our obligations. In later work I’ve been more explicit in developing the analogy that way, particularly in *The Life You Can Save*. I look at a range of attempts to explain

¹ Singer actually gives two versions of this principle. The stronger version is “If it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, we ought, morally, to do it.” The moderate version is “If it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening without thereby sacrificing anything of moral significance, we ought, morally, to do it.” We talk in more detail about those principles below.

why our situation--the situation of affluent people and children dying of preventable diseases--is not analogous to the drowning child case. And I argue that those attempts don't work.

But yes, you're right about the article. And actually, I don't think an argument from an analogy is enough to carry the weight of what I'm trying to establish. The analogy is helpful in eliciting our intuitions about the responsibility to help people in need. So I use it to establish some broader principles and then argue on the basis of those principles.

TS: Even as a means of establishing the principles, there's the question of how well the analogy captures our everyday situation. You noted that distance is not a morally relevant factor and I'd certainly grant you that. But there may be at least one morally relevant difference, which is the following. The drowning child scenario is a singular event in your day to day life. Most people never pass a drowning child that they could save. But that's obviously not the case when it comes to helping children all across the globe. A more apt analogy might be one where the moment you step out of your house there are thousands of drowning children in ponds everywhere. And as soon you jump in to save one, there are already two more children in her place.

This has been raised as an objection to the argument. Because in my version of the case, it's not as intuitively obvious what obligations we have to all the children. Yes, you ought to save a bunch of them. But at some point it might be morally acceptable to go about your business, or even do something with no moral significance like eat at a nice restaurant. And if that's true, the case would no longer support your general principle—at least in their absolute forms.

PS: Obviously it's hard to really imagine what we would do in your version of the case or how we would live with it. But I think I'd be very uncomfortable if I went to a nice restaurant and I knew that there were children drowning outside that I could help. Obviously there would be some things that I would still have to do. I'd have to go to work, to earn some money. I have to keep myself and my family from starving, those sorts of things yes. But the luxuries? I don't know.

I suppose there are places in the world that are closer to this reality. If you look at highly unequal societies, you'll see wealthy people going to the opera and perhaps there are really poor people, beggars, dying outside. But it's not exactly parallel to the drowning child because the opera-goers may not know if the beggars' lives really are in imminent danger.

TS: But if this case better captures an everyday situation, and we're less confident about our intuitions there, doesn't it undermine its effectiveness for your argument?

PS: No, it raises a question about how we *would* behave. How we *ought* to behave in these situations is a different question. I suppose what it does suggest is that the intuitive response that we have in the single child in the pond situation is distinct from the intuitive response we have in the many children drowning all-the-time situation you just described.

So complicating the case like that does show that intuitions alone are not really enough to determine our obligations. For this, you need to get back to some basic principles. But in a way, as you mentioned, I said that in the original article.

2. Our Obligations to the Needy

TS: So let's look at those principles. You give two versions of it in the original paper, strong and weak. Can you explain what those are?

PS: Sure, the moderate version holds that if you can prevent something bad from happening without making a morally significant sacrifice, you ought to do it.

TS: What counts as morally significant?

PS: Well, if you're buying fancy clothes, or expensive dinners, you can't claim that these items have moral significance. And if you could use the money you spend on those clothes to prevent something bad from happening, you ought to do it. I added the moderate version because I realized many people would find the stronger version of the principle impossibly demanding. The strong version says that you ought to prevent bad things from happening until you get to the

point where your sacrifice is of *comparable* moral importance. In other words, you're obligated to help until you get to the point where you've reduced your own assets so much that further transfers aren't really going to make a significant difference in suffering...

TS: - Because they're going to hurt me as much as they're going to help the other person.

PS: Yeah, roughly that's right, allowing for transfer costs and so on.

TS: And of course, you'd have to take that same attitude toward your children's suffering as well, right? The strong version doesn't allow you to be partial to your family.

PS: That's right.

TS: You say in the original article that you think the strong version is true. Do you still believe that?

PS: I do still think the strong version is true in one sense. But I also think we ought to be aware of what will actually motivate people. So I've become more reticent about discussing the truth of the strong version because I think it may be counterproductive. In the end, my goal is to get people to alleviate suffering and prevent diseases that kill kids in developing countries. In *The Life You Can Save*, for example, I have a much more modest scale of suggested giving. In *Practical Ethics*, I talk about tithing, giving ten percent of your income. Tithers still shouldn't feel like they're doing *everything* they ought to be doing. But they can feel reasonably comfortable that they're doing a lot more than most people.

It is important to try to think how to motivate people. It depends on what hat I'm wearing. As a philosopher, I try to clarify what I think is the true position about what we ought to do. As a public advocate, I'm trying to make the world a better place.

3. The Point of View of the Universe

TS: Let's talk about these principles with your philosopher hat on. I wanted to ask you about the justification for the stronger moral principle—why you believe the principle is true. In *Practical Ethics* (your book from 1979), you concede that it can't be derived from pure reason. So you took a more subjectivist or Humean approach that ultimately grounded the principle in our emotions, desires, or subjective capacities. But in recent work your view has shifted. Can you explain how?

PS: It's shifted in that I no longer accept Hume's view that reason must always start from a desire. I now think some things are irrational no matter what your desires are. An example would be something like Parfit's case of future Tuesday indifference.² I came to think that Hume was wrong about this kind of case. From an egoistic perspective, it's irrational to be partial over time. And I thought this idea could be extended to partiality over a range of moral questions.

TS: And that's what's so controversial about the principle—the impartiality, the idea that when we think about our moral obligations, we should adopt “the point of view of the universe.”³ We should regard all suffering as morally equal and act accordingly. The implications of this can be pretty tough to swallow. Because let's say that my daughter suffers from a serious but nonfatal health problem that makes her life much harder than it could be. There's an operation to cure it, but it's very expensive. According to the strong principle, I ought to donate the money for the operation to prevent greater suffering; it would be morally wrong for me to get the operation for my daughter. It's impossible for me to accept that conclusion, it's too counterintuitive. Can you demonstrate that I'm being irrational?

² Singer is referring to Derek Parfit's example of a person with ordinary desires except that he doesn't care about his pains and pleasures on future Tuesdays. Parfit writes: “This indifference is a bare fact. When he is planning his future, it is simply true that he always prefers the prospect of great suffering on a Tuesday to the mildest pain on any other day.” According to Parfit, this shows that certain preferences can be irrational, no matter what the person's core desires are. Simon Blackburn briefly discusses this case in Chapter 10.

³ This phrase comes from the philosopher Henry Sidgwick. It's also the title of Singer's 2014 book on Sidgwick co-authored with Katarzyna de Lazari-Radek.

PS: The future Tuesday case demonstrates the irrationality of partiality over time. Katarzyna de Lazari-Radek and I then argue that we can debunk this intuition that it's rational to give more weight to my own interests or the interests of those close to me. And if we can debunk it, we can get to impartiality across persons as well as over time.

TS: Right, that's the crucial move: this idea of how we can debunk intuitions that go against the impartiality principle. Like Josh Greene (see Chapter 17), you've appealed to evolutionary theory and neuroscience as a way of doing this. Can you explain how that strategy works?⁴

PS: Yes, so through the work of Josh and others we know more about how moral intuitions are formed. And it's reasonable to say that they were formed as a result of evolutionary selection. We were living in small face-to-face societies, and we developed the intuitive responses that were best fitted for survival and the survival of our offspring in those situations. Given that, you can argue that there's no particular reason why these intuitions actually track the truth of our moral judgments. This is something that Sharon Street has argued as well.⁵

TS: Right, although she uses the strategy to debunk moral realism entirely.

PS: Exactly. But we argue that this is too swift. You can distinguish between intuitions that have evolved in the manner I just suggested and intuitions that haven't. The former are not likely to be truth-tracking. But consider the intuition supporting Sidgwick's axiom of rational benevolence that requires us to be impartial across different people.⁶ It's very hard to see how

⁴ In Chapter 17, Liane Young and I raise further challenges to the strategy Singer outlines in this section and the next. It might help to read these two interviews in tandem.

⁵ See her 2006 article "A Darwinian Dilemma for Realist Theories of Value." *Philosophical Studies* 127 (1):109-166

⁶ Sidgwick's describes this axiom in his book *The Method of Ethics* (London: Macmillan, 1874): "[E]ach one is morally bound to regard the good of any other individual as much as his own, except in so far as he judges it to be less, when impartially viewed, or less certainly knowable or attainable by him"

that intuition could have conferred any evolutionary advantage. That intuition is therefore likely to be a rational insight into moral truth.

TS: This is the part of the strategy that I've struggled with. Josh and Liane Young, we debated this very point. Because of the benevolence axiom requiring impartiality, that seems like precisely the intuition that people *don't* have. People do think it's permissible or even obligatory to favor the interests of family members, friends, and so forth. In many cultures, people think it's deeply immoral to value the welfare of strangers over the welfare of their group. So, given that most people don't have this intuition, what's the basis for calling it rational?

PS: I agree with you that ordinary people believe they have obligations to their kin that they don't have to strangers. Of course, that is exactly what you would expect in terms of the evolutionary story. But at the same time, if you look at people who have reflected and thought about ethics a lot more, not just in our culture but in a wide range of cultures and a wide range of historical periods, you get a large number of thinkers talking about this idea of the universal point of view, of universalizability, the golden rule and so forth. This is consistent with what we're trying to argue. You only reach the conclusion when you manage to reason clearly and put aside the evolved intuitive responses. And there's not a lot of people who do get to the point of reasoning clearly and who put aside those evolved responses.

TS: So the fact that you see some version of the axiom in a small number of moral and religious traditions--that's the whole justification for calling it rational?

PS: There has to be a sense in which we find the principle to be self-evident. Because Sidgwick says it's a self-evident axiom. If it's a self-evident axiom, you have to distinguish it from other intuitions we have. How would I distinguish it from the other intuitions? By the evolutionary debunking account of those intuitions.

TS: But I'm still not clear on the basis for calling it self-evident. Is it just that a few different traditions have theorized their way towards it? That doesn't seem like enough.

PS: - No, no, that's not the justification. It's not just some quote that I've come up with, or that my particular culture or group of people have come up with. It's a kind of truth that people who think carefully can reach.

TS: But why should I believe you that it's a "truth," given the miniscule proportion of people who accept it?

PS: Well, I think there's mathematical intuitions that a lot of people don't have as well that we know to be true.

TS: Is that true? Most mathematical axioms have near universal assent because of their simplicity, right? Think of Euclid. The more complicated theorems are counterintuitive but they're derived from simple axioms that we all agree about. Or maybe if it's something like a counterintuitive relativity principle, we accept it because of its great predictive and explanatory power. Either way, we have clearer grounds for calling them true. You see what I'm saying?

PS: There are some people that can actually see mathematical truth—Ramanujan⁷ or someone like that—they actually see that some things are true that other people don't see. And then they have to prove them. And then other people say "oh really? I don't see that." And then you work it out and say "right, okay, that is a theorem, you're right." So I think there is something going on there which I think we don't really fully understand.

TS: But the benevolence principle is an axiom, right? So how do we know who's the Ramanujan of morality? We're open to the axiom being true but we don't see its truth, and we've never seen a proof that demonstrates this. Why should we accept it?

⁷ Srinivasa Ramanujan was a mathematical prodigy and genius, who made exceptional contribution to number theory without any formal training. On numerous occasions he was able to intuit the truth of (non-obvious) mathematical propositions long before their truth was established with formal proofs.

PS: Well, you'd need to sit down with these people and ask them to reflect on it. You can say to them: "look, I understand that you may care more about your daughter rather than a stranger and I would too. But do you really think that your daughter's welfare is more important? Putting aside your own concerns, do you really think that her welfare is independently more important than the welfare of someone else's child?" I think people will come around.

4. Runaway Debunking

TS: Another problem with evolutionary debunking strategies is that they might go farther than you want them to. You might end up debunking *all* of our moral intuitions which would leave us with moral skepticism. (And I know you're not a moral skeptic.) Take, for example, the intuition that suffering is bad. Or the intuition that we have an obligation to prevent any suffering at all. These judgments also seem to be the product of evolutionary forces--an aversion to pain, an evolved sense of empathy, processes like kin selection, reciprocal altruism, gene-culture co-evolution, choose your favorite story. So if we're going to distrust intuitions that are the product of evolutionary processes, doesn't the benevolence baby go out with the partiality bathwater? Or do you disagree that we can give evolutionary accounts for the intuitions I just mentioned?

PS: You certainly can. It's clearly true that our sense of pain and suffering evolved because it helps us to avoid various dangers. But—and this is an argument that I suppose is still going on and getting sorted out--I think you can say that here we have direct acquaintance with suffering. And this direct experience is what causes the judgment that suffering is bad and that we should avoid it. It also causes the judgment that it's a bad thing not just for me but for anyone. The direct experience makes it a judgment that, in a way, we can't resist making. It's not just an empirical fact that we can't resist it. We actually have direct knowledge of what it's like, and direct knowledge that it's bad.

TS: But what about the judgment that it's OK to favor my daughter's welfare? There's a way in which I can't resist making that judgment either.

PS: I don't agree with that. I can say that I can't resist preferring my daughter's welfare over that of a stranger. That's true. But I can also think that maybe it's not the right thing to do. I can raise that question. And I think we do raise it all the time. We raise it about not only our kin but our own interests as well. There are things we want, but we can question whether it's right to want them.

In the case of the badness of suffering I think it is different. We can't really pretend to ourselves that it's not a bad thing when we suffer. And if we then come back to the first principle that we were talking about, the impartiality principle, we have to accept that it's a bad thing when anyone suffers, you know, other things being equal.

TS: But that's what we're debating, that that impartiality principle. So if I grant you that we can't resist saying that our own suffering is bad because we have direct experience with it. But I also have direct experience of my daughter suffering (fortunately nothing serious). And in that particular context, it seems a little arbitrary to say that I *can* resist thinking I should do my best to alleviate it.

PS: I think the two things that you talked about are different stages of the argument. We talk about it in *The Point of View of the Universe*. We accept that suffering is bad. And we also accept the universal benevolence axiom: I have to be equally concerned about that whatever is good or bad for everyone else as I do about whatever is good or bad for me. You conceded that I can't deny my own suffering is bad. And of course I agree that your daughter's suffering is bad. If we then add the universal benevolence axiom, which is a form of the impartiality claim, then I think we get to where we want to get to.

5. Complexity and Indeterminacy in Moral Life

TS: Now I'm wondering as we're talking about this, whether the plausibility of your argument depends, in part, on this stark contrast between a purely egoistic perspective and the universally benevolent perspective. And this is how Sidgwick frames it so it's not surprising. But of course those aren't the only two perspectives. They're just extreme ends of a whole spectrum of ethical

positions. The perspective of universal benevolence can sound a lot more plausible if the only alternative is pure egoism. But what if you toss in another perspective—a W.D. Ross⁸-style blend that combines elements of egoism, universal benevolence, and special obligations to particular people? Then it starts to seem a little like special pleading for the evolutionary debunker to pick and choose what they can call rational and what they call irrational.

PS: It is true that when we're talking about what's rationally required we're making an extreme claim. Because we are talking about what would we do if we were fully rational beings. And we know that we're not fully rational beings. So there a sense in which a morality for fully rational beings is not going to suit us as we are. And that's part of the Humean story that you have to take humans as they are, with their variety of feelings and derive something out of that. I think to some extent these are different projects.

TS: Okay, but that's not what I mean exactly. This is not another version of the 'it's too demanding' or 'we're not fully rational creatures' objection. It's an objection that concerns what full rationality requires. When we ask what rationality requires, our options shouldn't be limited to impartial benevolence or pure egoism. We should include these intermediate positions. And these positions have a bunch of principles that combine partiality, impartiality, and special obligations. Moreover, just like with universal benevolence, many of these intermediate positions would not have obvious evolutionary explanations.

PS: Perhaps. But they would also be indeterminate, right? At various points, it would be indeterminate how much we ought to give to strangers and how much do you give to yourself? And there would be a whole range questions involving your family too. If your daughter has an ingrown toenail, and you could save a child's life with the money for treating your daughter's ingrown toenail--then probably you'd think you ought to save the life. If your daughter's going to lose a foot, then you might say well, no, I'm going with my daughter. So it needs more

⁸ W.D Ross defended a form of moral realism called "intuitionism." Like Singer, Ross believed that we could intuit certain ethical truths. But Ross was critic of consequentialism, arguing instead that we have a variety of moral duties and special obligations and no systematic way of prioritizing them.

specification, more specification about where I draw the line and also why this is where I draw the line.

TS: But you could view the indeterminacy as a benefit rather than a deficiency. Because it accurately reflects the complexity of our moral lives. In many domains of judgment, there are clear cases on both sides and vague middle where it's impossible to draw a line. There is no line. If she wants a \$10,000 operation to remove a harmless blemish on her wrist, then I should probably spend that money (if I have it) to save as many lives as possible. But if she would lose her foot, then I'm not just permitted but obligated to pay for that surgery. And then there are all these cases in the middle that are indeterminate. They're indeterminate because moral life is like that.

PS: I'd still like to know more about why it is like that. You're saying there's a lot of complexity in our moral lives and that's the way it is. But why is it that you're obligated to save your daughter's foot rather than save the lives of three strangers? That's too much a matter of saying: "those two cases are clearly one on each side of the line because that's my intuition." I want to know more. I want to know why.

TS: Right and here I would appeal to reflective equilibrium, which I know you've criticized in your work. But just to borrow something from it, I would say this. They're not just intuitions, they're considered intuitions. I endorse them after a great deal of reflection about their nature and their origins. As I said to Josh Greene, I've read about kin selection--I'm fully aware of the history behind my intuition that I have special obligations to my child. Nevertheless, I endorse the intuitions upon reflection. Why? Because even with full knowledge about its origins, it still seems more plausible than an intuition that I ought to be impartial. In the end, considered intuitions with full information about the relevant empirical facts—that's all we have to go on when we evaluate moral principles. I guess it's that last part you would disagree with.

PS: Yes, exactly, that last part. Obviously different societies and different cultures have different sets of intuitions that they feel very strongly about. But we don't think it's sufficient if, for example, someone says "I have this very strong intuition that homosexuality is wrong." We

reject that now. Yet there are plenty of cultures where that's a very strong intuition. I think we need to get beyond that. If you really take the reflective equilibrium model seriously, you end up with a kind of social relativism that I find very disturbing.

6. Empathy and Animal Welfare

TS: Are you familiar with Paul Bloom's recent attacks on empathy?

PS: I am, yes.

TS: Paul and I had a spirited debate about them in this book (see Chapter 13). I imagine that you'd have a lot of sympathy with Paul on this. Do you agree that with him that we should be wary of empathy as a guide to moral judgment and behavior?

PS: I do, but we need to be careful what kind of empathy we're talking about. My understanding is that Paul is talking about the form of empathy in which people identify with particular other individuals.

TS: Mostly, yes. .

PS: So this is the baby in the well case, where people know about this particular child, she's down in the well, and so they send in millions of dollars to save this child. But they don't have that sort of empathy with the children who are dying from malaria in distant countries because they don't know who they are, they can't put a face to them. And then there's another study in which you have people on a waiting list for surgery, and you tell the participants particular things about one of them. And then the participants are allowed to re-order the waiting list, and they bring the person they know about to the top--because now they empathize with her. And they do this even though this person's medical need is less urgent than people they are jumping her over.

TS: So this is the kind of empathy that results in judgments that go against the impartiality principle. That's your concern.

PS: That's right, that's right. But if you're talking about empathy in a different sense, if you're thinking "look, all these kids dying from malaria, think about what they're suffering, think about how terrible it is for the parent to lose their child from malaria," that's a different story. That's an attempt just to get people to understand that the lives of others are essentially similar to their own or to those of their own kids. And that's something different.

TS: I wanted to briefly apply these questions to another aspect of your work that I'm a huge fan of - your work with animal welfare. To my mind, *Animal Liberation* has had a more positive practical impact on the world than any work of philosophy in the last 100 years. I wanted to ask you about two stories from it that relate to empathy. The first is one that you tell in the 1975 preface. You were in England, you went over to a woman's house for tea. She started telling how much she loved her dogs and cats, and asked if you had pets. You replied that you didn't. She was surprised and said she thought you were "interested in animals." You replied that you weren't particularly interested in animals and you had never been an animal lover in the traditional sense. What you were "interested" in was preventing the suffering and misery of sentient beings. You believed that animals were sentient beings that were being cruelly exploited for human ends and you wanted to put a stop to it.

PS: And then they served me a ham sandwich.

TS: (Laughs) Right, I forgot, that's the punchline. I always thought that story was interesting because unlike many animal welfare advocates, you're not motivated by a sense of empathy with particular animals. It's this general principle about sentient beings that moves you to want to end their suffering. I take it that was the point of the anecdote, right?

PS: Yes absolutely. You don't have to be an animal lover to want to end their suffering. What I saw myself trying to do in that book was to move concern for the way we treat animals beyond the community of people who self-identify as animal lovers. They love being around cats and dogs, or horses or whatever, and basically think "I'm an animal lover so I should be opposed to cruelty to animals."

Of course my view is that this is another major issue of mistreating a particular group. And just as you're against racism even if you don't have any particularly strong feelings for people of an oppressed racial minority, you ought to be against speciesism and the way we treat animals-- whether or not you happen to enjoy the company of cats and dogs and horses.

TS: Right, that makes sense. It does seem irrational to get outraged over puppy mills, or leaving a dog in a hot car, while being indifferent when it comes to factory farms for pigs. Because pigs are just as intelligent and capable of suffering than dogs, if not more so.

PS: Right.

TS: There's another story about that book that's not documented, or at least I can't remember where I heard it. But the story is that at some point you agreed that the most effective part of the book for causing reform was not the theoretical arguments that you gave against speciesism, but rather the photographs of painful animal experiments, of factory farms, and--

PS: No, I never agreed with that. That's wrong. Richard Posner claimed that the pictures were doing most of the work persuading people.⁹ In fact, I rejected that claim.

TS: Oh you did? Okay.

PS: I mean, obviously I haven't done the research, so I don't really know. But that's certainly not my impression. And there were plenty of horrible pictures around before the book came out.

TS: As a matter of personal history though, I will say that the photographs in your book and the videos that animal welfare activists can sometimes smuggle out of factory farms—those images played a big role in changing my way of thinking. There's a difference between thinking about

⁹ See <http://www.utilitarian.net/singer/interviews-debates/200106--.htm> . It's an exceptionally interesting and revealing debate.

factory farms in abstract terms and then seeing what actually goes on there. That's why their lobbyists spend so much time and money to prevent visual information from reaching the general public.

PS: Yes they're trying to pass legislation even now—these 'Ag-gag' laws. Some of these states have made it a criminal offense to get into a factory farm and take video. That's pretty extraordinary, you're right about that.

TS: It's appalling. And what they want to prevent is precisely the triggering of empathy in people, right? It's true that these videos will trigger more empathy in some people than others. And the cuter animals and the ones who look like us will benefit more. It will probably work better for dogs than pigs, better for pigs than for chickens, and it may not work well at all for certain marine life like lobsters or Octopi. But still, the triggering of empathy does pose the greatest threat to their whole institution. I wonder then if you think it might be counterproductive to take Paul's line on empathy too strongly when it comes to ending something like animal cruelty.

PS: I see, I see where you're coming from. Yes, again, I think this example is an interesting one because it shows where empathy is desirable and where it leads you in the wrong direction. The example that you just gave: how irrational it is for people to be very concerned about dogs but not concerned about pigs. The reason for that is that people have more empathy for dogs than pigs, probably because people have dogs as companions so they get to read their emotions a lot better or relate to them better. Or maybe in some way dogs are just more attractive to us because of some physical features about them.

TS: But we're also around dogs all the time, and we're not around pigs. A pig is an abstract entity to many people.

PS: That's true, that's right. These pigs in factory farms are hidden away unless the video gets out. So that kind of empathy can actually be harmful. It's good for dogs I suppose but on balance I'd say it makes it more difficult to get people to do the right thing as far as pigs are

concerned. On the other hand, it's true that people may respond to a video showing animal suffering and mistreatment, including pigs and cows and chickens and whatever else it might be. That's important, I agree. If there were no such feelings then who knows how much harder it would be for the animal movement to make progress?

So, I think that we don't want to cut out those sorts of feelings. We certainly want to retain this broad empathy with suffering beings. And we need to be able to see and understand the suffering that's inflicted on these beings, to understand what it's like and to say it's something that we don't want. So I'm not trying to get rid of all empathy. It's really important for a lot of our social causes.

TS: So the crucial thing, then, would be to flesh out a principled distinction between the right kinds and wrong kinds of empathy.

PS: Yeah. That's right. And I guess emotional empathy is motivationally important for most people. But it can also be misleading. But even there, if we want to change people's attitudes and behavior in regard to an area, you have to work with them as they are. So yes, we have to draw on the kinds of things that they will respond to. And we can try to do that without reinforcing the tendencies that you don't want, for example to focus all our resources on helping one particular individual whose picture we have seen, or about whom we know some salient facts, when we could do more good by spreading these resources over others with whom we lack empathy because we cannot identify them as individuals.

Questions for Discussion

1. What is the role of the drowning child case in Singer's original article "Famine, Affluence, and Morality"? How has the function of the analogy changed in more recent work?
2. Why might the "many children in many ponds" variation serve as a challenge to Singer's use of the case as an analogy for our own everyday situation?

3. Singer offers two versions of the principle concerning our obligations to prevent suffering: a strong version and a qualified one. What are those principles? Give an example where the strong principle would oblige you to perform an action, but the weak principle would not.
4. Singer believes that the strong version is true, but he believes that defending it may be “counterproductive.” Why?
5. Why does Singer no longer accept Hume’s view about the connection between reason and desire?
6. What is Sidgwick’s axiom of rational benevolence? How does Singer defend it? What are the two challenges that I raise against the axiom and how does Singer respond?
7. Why is Singer ambivalent about empathy as a guide to moral judgment and behavior?

Suggested Readings

All writings by Peter Singer

"Famine, Affluence, and Morality." *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 1.3 (1972): 229-43

"Ethics and Intuitions." *The Journal of Ethics* 9.3/4: 332-352, (2005)

“The Singer Solution to World Poverty.” *New York Times Magazine*. September 05, 1999.

<http://www.nytimes.com/1999/09/05/magazine/the-singer-solution-to-world-poverty.html>

“The Life You Can Save” (First Chapter in *The New York Times*, March 10, 2009.)

<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/11/books/chapters/chapter-life-you-could-save.html>

The Most Good You Can Do: How Effective Altruism Is Changing Ideas About Living Ethically. Yale University Press, 2015.

The Point of View of the Universe: Sidgwick and Contemporary Ethics (with Katarzyna de Lazari-Radek), Oxford University Press, 2014

The Life You Can Save: Acting Now to End World Poverty. New York: Random House 2009.

Practical Ethics, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1980; second edition, 1993; third edition, 2011.

Animal Liberation: A New Ethics for our Treatment of Animals, New York Review/Random House, New York, 1975.

Assorted Media and Podcast Pairings

“The Why and How of Effective Altruism” TED talk. March 2013.

http://www.ted.com/talks/peter_singer_the_why_and_how_of_effective_altruism?language=en

Very Bad Wizards, Episode 28 “Moral Persuasion.”

<http://verybadwizards.com/episodes/28>