

Peter Singer on Utilitarianism

Singer, P., 2011. Practical Ethics. 3rd ed. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

1. About ethics: ethics is not primarily about sex; it is not good in theory but bad in practice; it is not based on religion. Human beings inherit their moral sense from their ancestors and the intuitions they had about how to behave. The idea of living according to an ethical standard is connected to the idea of being able to justify the way one is living. Additionally, ethical behaviour must be justifiable from a social perspective rather than an individual one; in other words, it must be universalisable (e.g. the Golden Rule). One possible theory is a type of utilitarianism that considers equally the wants, needs, and desires (i.e. preferences) of all beings capable of having them. This theory meets the requirement of universalisability and is relatively straightforward to support.

2. Equality and its implications: the provision of equality of opportunity is used to justify the existence of inequality of outcome. However, equality of opportunity is impossible because of different standards of education, different family backgrounds, and different genetic endowments. It might be better to reward people for their effort rather than their ability because people's abilities are largely beyond their control; this may lead to the creation of more equitable societies. One of the clearest ways of revealing the irrelevance of intelligence (or any other ability) to the principle of equality is to consider the issue of disability. There is no reason to discriminate against a disabled person in a situation in which his or her disability is irrelevant.

3. Equality for animals? There is nothing different from preferring the interests of a white slave owner over black slaves on account of race and preferring the interests of human beings over other animals on account of species. In developed countries, most human beings have contact with other animals as part of their diet. If animal interests count in their own right, then the use of animals for food becomes questionable unless it is essential for survival (e.g. among Inuits living in the Arctic). The principle of equal consideration of interests requires human beings to boycott animal products created by inflicting pain and suffering. The robust defence of animal rights on these grounds is intended to enhance human concern for other animals.

4. What's wrong with killing? Every society has prohibited the taking of human life to some extent. However, there is confusion about what it means to be human. Some take it to mean membership of the species *Homo sapiens*, even in cases of profound disability; others take it to mean possession of typically human characteristics (e.g. self-awareness, self-control, and a sense of the future). Whilst a person cannot be said to have an absolute moral right to life by virtue of his or her personhood, the preference for continued existence does confer protection that could be referred to as a "right to life" in an offhand fashion. If the preference for continued existence is the basis for a right to life, then beings without these preferences (including infant humans) do not have this right in the same sense.

5. Taking life: animals: there is no single answer to whether or not it is acceptable to kill an animal; the term covers too diverse a range of beings. Some nonhuman animals are self-aware and possess a sense of the future, so they should be protected from killing (including chickens, cows, pigs, sheep, and fish, if extended the benefit of the doubt). It is acceptable to kill merely conscious animals if they are painlessly dispatched and replaced by others with pleasurable experiences (although it is unclear which animals are merely conscious or whether societies could practically implement such practices) and to kill animals for survival. It is acceptable to value the lives of beings with a biographical sense and hope for the future over beings without these capacities. Nevertheless, merely conscious animals should not be killed when one does not have to choose between their lives and those of persons.

6. Taking life: the embryo and fetus: conservatives argue it is wrong to kill an innocent human being; so, because the fetus is an innocent human being, abortion is wrong. However, this is speciesist unless the term "human being" refers to a person instead of a member of *Homo sapiens*, and it is not possible to support the claim that a fetus is a person. Before 18 weeks, the fetus is incapable of feeling pain, so abortion should be untroubling from an ethical perspective. After 18 weeks, the fetus can feel pain, so its interests should be considered to the same extent as any other merely conscious being. Embryos in laboratories should not be granted rights as either persons or potential persons for the same reasons as embryos in uteruses. Denying the right to life of a fetus because it is a merely conscious being requires denying the right to life of a newborn on the same grounds.

7. Taking life: humans: life and death decisions regarding disabled infants should be the same as life and death decisions regarding other merely conscious beings. There is no difference between aborting a disabled fetus shortly before birth and killing a disabled infant shortly after birth. Arguably, killing a rational and self-aware person is wrong on several different grounds; however, none of these objections applies if a rational and self-aware person wants to die. Consequently, opponents of euthanasia argue that legalising it would create a system open to abuse. Voluntary euthanasia is justifiable because it negates the arguments against killing a rational and self-aware person by acting in accordance with the person's wishes. Involuntary euthanasia does not negate these arguments because consent is not provided; consequently, involuntary euthanasia should be illegal.

8. Rich and poor: UNICEF estimates that absolute poverty kills 8.8 million children under the age of five every year, and approximately 30,000 extremely poor people die every day from preventable, poverty-related causes. By contrast, people living lives of absolute affluence can afford the necessities of life (e.g. clothing, education, food, healthcare, and shelter) with money left to spend on luxuries (e.g. exotic holidays and home cinemas). People living lives of absolute affluence have an obligation to help those living lives of absolute poverty. Everyone agrees that it is right to save a child from drowning in a pond even if it will ruin one's clothes (and wrong to let the child drown); consequently, it is right to save the lives of those living in absolute poverty even if there is a modest cost. If it is possible to prevent something bad without causing comparable harm, it is morally obligatory to prevent it.

9. Climate change: in 2004, the World Health Organisation estimated that climate change caused an additional 140,000 deaths. Consequently, an international ethical framework is required to outline the responsibilities of individuals and nations concerning climate change. The current greenhouse gas emissions of industrialised countries cannot be justified; they must be unethical. Personally reducing individual greenhouse gas emissions does not significantly impact climate change; however, this does not absolve individuals of personal responsibility for it. Presently, people living in industrialised countries participate in a practice that causes considerable harm; even if their individual contributions are small, they are still wrong, and people should take steps to avoid making them and to serve as an example to others (e.g. family, friends, and neighbours) that can lead to social change.

10. The environment: generally, Western philosophers have argued that human beings are allowed to behave as they wish towards both animals and the environment. Nevertheless, several philosophers have attempted to argue that all living organisms have intrinsic value, and some have attempted to claim that mountains, rivers, and rock formations do as well; however, in the absence of interests, it is impossible to establish intrinsic value, and without intrinsic value, there does not appear to be any moral obligation for preserving anything. Despite this, it is possible to argue for conservation on utilitarian grounds instead by considering the interests of all sentient beings now and into the distant future. This would discourage large families, the acquisition of material goods, and the avaricious consumption of natural resources and food that harms sentient beings and the environment.

11. Civil disobedience, violence and terrorism: discussions about taking life, affluence and poverty, and the environment, reveal some widely accepted practices that are open to serious ethical objections. Given these objections, is it ever justified for people to break the law? Henry David Thoreau argued that the only obligation human beings have is to do what is right, which is not always what is lawful. However, even if a law is immoral, it may still be right to follow it because the consequences of breaking it may lead to greater evil than the consequences of following it. Violence and terrorism are harder to justify than civil disobedience (i.e. nonviolent lawbreaking); however, if pacifism is likely to lead to more pain and suffering to sentient beings than violence, utilitarians can justify violence. In practice, violence, even with the best of intentions, can lead to further unintended violence, pain and suffering; consequently, violence is only justifiable in the most extreme cases.

12. Why act morally? This question asks whether or not, even if the argument for acting one way rather than another is accepted, one should bother acting ethically at all? Consequently, this question is beyond the scope of ethics; it is a question that arises about ethics rather than within it. Immanuel Kant argued that people should act ethically because it is rational; however, critics have shown that some rational actions are unethical. Others argue that people should behave ethically because it is in their best interests (if self-interest is measured over a long time period). However, F. H. Bradley opposed this argument because it reduces ethical behaviour to self-interested behaviour, which means the two are one and the same. Speculatively, it appears that truly ethical people who are concerned with others' wellbeing lead meaningful lives because they find happiness in making the world a better place. When people ask why they should act morally, the most convincing answer may be that it makes life more meaningful.