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Peter Singer's Ethics: A Critical Appraisal

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Book Review

Peter Singer's Ethics: A Critical Appraisal. By AMIN JOHN ABBLOUD. Edited by GEORGE MENDZ. Pp. 308. New York: Nova Publishing. 2019. £169.99 (hb). ISBN-10: 1536134066/ISBN-13: 978-1-53613-406-3.

This book is about the meta-ethics of Professor Peter Singer, arguably the most influential philosopher of the past half century and certainly one of the best known. 'Even his opponents have credited him with being a thoroughly logical philosopher' as Abboud acknowledges in his introductory chapter. Abboud, however, begs to differ on this verdict and his book consists of a careful analysis of the philosophers who have influenced Singer throughout his long career, combined with a quietly devastating critique of Singer's preference utilitarianism.

Singer, like Kant before him, lays claim to having created a Copernican revolution in ethics and he has attempted to do so by being both practical – focusing on moral reasoning not just for its own sake but to guide action – and populist – 'some of his writings could be quoted with ease by a Sunday preacher recommending a life of concern for others'. Rather than focusing on the practical applications of Singer's writings, however, Abboud states his aim in this volume is to 'establish the scope and limitations of Singer's theoretical foundations in order to assess the viability of his practical conclusions'.

Firstly, Abboud summarizes the major influence upon Singer of two utilitarian philosophers, Henry Sidgwick and Richard Hare – the latter being Singer's Ph.D. supervisor at Oxford. Abboud shows how Sidgwick's intuitive axioms of practical reasoning shaped Singer's thought, particularly his claim that 'it is a self-evident truth that from "the point of view of the Universe", the good of one individual is of no greater significance than the good of any other'. Singer's persistent emphasis on the universalizability of ethical principles clearly stems from this. Richard Hare's form of non-cognitivism known as prescriptivism was another lasting influence on Singer. Prescriptivism claims that moral statements, rather than affirming or denying any specific truth claims, merely command something to be done. Thus 'Murder is wrong' rather than stating any truth about the rightness or wrongness of murder is a command intended to dissuade others from murdering. Both Hare and Singer, however, considered that even though such prescriptive statements were not descriptive of moral facts, never the less they have to be universalizable to be morally consistent.

The next lengthy chapter explores the influence of Darwinian evolutionary theory and Edward O. Wilson's concept of sociobiology on Singer. Whilst Wilson and Singer concur that evolutionary biology 'will fashion biology of ethics', Singer considers that evolution is purposeless and ethics is chosen rather than being imposed by

biology. He also proposes that evolutionary ethics undermines traditional ethical principles such as the inviolability of human life and that utilitarianism is the ethical system best placed to utilise and incorporate the findings of sociobiology. Finally, sociobiology affirms Singer's passionate belief that our ethics needs to involve other animals as we are on a spectrum of biological continuity with them.

A critique of a number of highly specific key elements of Singer's meta-ethics forms the substance of the next chapter which would probably prove the most challenging to understand for the general reader though perhaps be the most interesting to those working in moral philosophy. Abboud considers that Singer's aim to imitate geometry in constructing an ethics according to the Euclidean model of one basic theorem from which all other conclusions are deduced, puts Singer in a difficult bind. Singer's basic theorem is the universalization of equal consideration of interests. However, this theorem is intuitive and yet Singer rejects the role of intuition in ethics.

Another putative double-bind explored in this section is Singer's claim that Hume's 'is-ought' distinction should not be a barrier to reasoning about ethics, whilst at the same time Singer agrees with Hume that ethics is desire-dependent. 'How is it possible to reject the role of reason in ethics and at the same time want to reason as if ethics is objective?' asks Abboud.

He moves on in the next chapter to examine and critique the key principles on which Singer constructs his practical ethics. Universalizability and its appeal are examined first and two questions are raised in this context which Abboud claims that Singer needs to answer and fails to do so. Firstly, What is the logical foundation for universalizability? and secondly Why is universalizability the only principle on which to build ethics? The way in which universalizability enables Singer to reject egoism and provide a justification of benevolence and how it also facilitates utilitarianism as a normative system to apply to ethical dilemmas is then explained. This latter element in Singer's philosophy, Abboud regards as 'a selective adoption of objectivity in ethics applied retrospectively to a give a rational justification for his hasty conclusions'.

The concluding chapters examine Singer's critique of the concept of human dignity and his sociocultural and philosophical defence of infanticide. Numerous arguments are used to highlight the perceived weaknesses of Singer's position on both issues and I outline here just one example in relation to each of them.

Singer considers claims made on the basis of intrinsic human dignity are just 'fine phrases' by those who have 'run out of arguments'. Abboud, however, points out that in his essay *All animals are equal*, Singer criticizes the use of factual features such as intelligence as a basis for equality and yet is quite content to make sentience – the capacity to suffer – the basis of equality thus introducing a factual feature of his own. Furthermore since in some of Singer's writing he sets the bar of sentience as low as that of an oyster, Abboud asks why not equality for plants as well?

Singer, in *Should the baby live? The problem of handicapped infants*, co-authored with Helga Kuhse, seeks to justify infanticide on sociocultural and philosophical grounds. Abboud suggests that the sociocultural data is selectively skewed and the philosophy doubtful. With regard to philosophical arguments Singer, drawing on the work of Joseph Fletcher and Michael Tooley, strives to correct the 'crucial

mistake' of what he sees as the erroneous doctrine of the sanctity of human life. Abboud in return suggests that Singer makes six crucial mistakes of his own. The first of these is that Singer equivocates between rationality and sentience as the basic relevant criterion for deciding moral status. In regard to animals, Singer considers sentience as the morally relevant issue, agreeing with Bentham that 'The question is not, Can they reason? nor Can they talk but, Can they suffer?'. Yet whilst rationality does not matter as a morally relevant criterion in forbidding the killing of animals, when it comes to permitting the killing of infants rationality suddenly becomes *the* relevant criterion and sentience appears to have no relevance. With understatement that characterizes the whole book, Abboud comments 'There seems to be some arbitrariness in the way Singer considers rationality'.

Though this volume is a little repetitive in places, Abboud writes fluently about some very complex metaphysical conundrums in a way that for the most part makes them easy to understand even for the non-specialist. Though disagreeing with many of Singer's conclusions, this reviewer had not really explored the philosophical foundations on which they are constructed until reading this book. Abboud delivers one blow after another at the edifice of preference utilitarianism espoused by Singer in a way that demands a response. I look forward to Singer's reply in due course, though since he has gained worldwide acclaim already, it would be quite understandable if he chose to rest on his laurels.

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