

## Preface

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This book is a celebration of the work of Peter Singer. Since philosophers honor people by criticizing them, Singer's writings on a wide array of topics come in for analysis and appraisal in this volume. Singer's metaethical views, his normative theory, and his substantive positions on such matters as the moral status of animals, the sanctity of human life, and famine relief are all subjected to scrutiny. Singer's replies to his critics importantly supplement what he has previously written on these issues and will be essential reading for anyone who wants to fully understand his views.

Many people helped to make the present volume possible. It was Ernie Lapore's enthusiastic invitation and Steve Smith's steady support that got the project going and sustained it. Carleton College in conjunction with the Henry R. Luce Foundation provided funds for research and staff support, and the Environmental Impacts Group of the National Center for Atmospheric Research (NCAR) was my home while the book was being completed. Kelly Knutsen and Paula Lackey provided support at Carleton, and Baat Enosh performed various electronic miracles at NCAR. I am indebted to Baat for both her competence and her good humor. I also thank John Taylor for his good and patient copy-editing. Finally, Peter Singer was unfailingly helpful in making his papers available and discussing his work with me. The entire Singer family has my gratitude for their hospitality during my visit to Melbourne.

Since most of us produce so few books and there are so many worthy people to acknowledge, I believe that all books should have dedications. This book is dedicated to all those who believe that philosophy is not just an academic exercise or a way of making a living, but also an instrument for improving ourselves and making the world better. In particular this book is dedicated to those who look at themselves and others and wonder, "Why not the best?"

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## 1

# Singer and the Practical Ethics Movement

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DALE JAMIESON

Peter Singer is one of the most influential philosophers of the twentieth century. While other philosophers have been more important in the development of the discipline, none has changed more lives. *Newsweek* magazine observed that "the modern [animal rights] movement may be dated to the publication of *Animal Liberation*."<sup>1</sup> For many years this book was given away by People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, one of the organizations founded in the wake of *Animal Liberation* and now one of the largest and most effective animal rights organizations in the world. On Paul McCartney's 1993 world tour copies of *Animal Liberation* were sold alongside T-shirts. Thus far *Animal Liberation* has sold more than 400,000 copies in nine languages. Altogether Singer is responsible in whole or part for producing twenty-seven books, most of which sell significantly better than books by other philosophers. *Practical Ethics*, for example, has sold over 100,000 copies in ten languages. Singer has also authored a vast number of articles and reviews that have appeared in journals ranging from *The Philosophical Review* to the *New York Times*.

Peter Singer was born in Melbourne, Australia, on July 6, 1946. His parents were Viennese Jews who escaped in 1938, shortly after the *Anschluss* incorporated Austria into the German Reich. They fled to Australia because that was the only country that would accept them, sponsored by a man whom Peter's mother had met only once through a mutual acquaintance when he was a tourist in Vienna. By the time Peter was born, his father was a successful importer of coffee and tea and his mother was practicing medicine, a profession for which she had trained in Austria. Eager to integrate their children into Australian society, the Singers spoke only English at home and sent Peter to a prestigious Protestant school. He went on to Melbourne University, where as an undergraduate he studied law, history, and philosophy. In 1969 he

received an MA in philosophy, writing a thesis on "Why should I be moral?" A scholarship allowed Singer to complete his graduate studies in Oxford, where he received his BPhil in 1971 and served as Radcliffe lecturer from 1971 to 1973.

In 1972, Singer published "Famine, affluence and morality" in the first volume of a new journal, *Philosophy and Public Affairs*. This article, which has been reprinted more than two dozen times, is important for several reasons. In style it was an unconventional philosophical essay in that it was written in simple, direct prose, with few references to philosophical texts. Rather than beginning from Kant, Aristotle, or a hypothetical moral question, it addressed events that were occurring as Singer was writing. The article began with these words: "As I write this, in November 1971, people are dying in East Bengal from lack of food, shelter, and medical care."<sup>2</sup> Singer went on to present his readers with a stark moral challenge. On the basis of some apparently simple, plausible premises, he argued that we ought to transfer our resources to those who are worse off until we reach the point at which further transfers would harm us more than they would benefit others. Singer was asking his readers to give up their opera tickets, their wine cellars, and private schools for their children – the accoutrements of the sophisticated, upper-middle class life favored by many academics. Furthermore, Singer was completely unapologetic about making such demands:

the whole way we look at moral issues . . . needs to be altered, and with it, the way of life that has come to be taken for granted in our society . . . Discussion . . . is not enough. What is the point of relating philosophy to public (and personal) affairs if we do not take our conclusions seriously? In this instance, taking our conclusion seriously means acting upon it.<sup>3</sup>

Singer was writing these words at a new moment in philosophy. Little more than fifteen years before, in 1956, Peter Laslett had declared political philosophy dead, and moral philosophy clearly was among the walking wounded. In 1960, in *The End of Ideology*, Daniel Bell declared that "ideology, which once was a road to action, has come to be a dead end."<sup>4</sup> In the United States there was widespread agreement that fundamental challenges about how to live and what sort of country to create had largely been resolved by the affluent society of the 1950s.<sup>5</sup> The intellectual problems of the future were in the basic sciences or in devising efficient solutions to problems of rational choice and social organization. Moral and political philosophy were not only dreary subjects, but irrelevant to the modern world.

The convulsions of the 1960s came as a shock to much of the American intellectual establishment. Sparked by the war in Vietnam, the civil rights

movement and the rebirth of feminism, the apparent consensus of the 1950s was shattered by student protests and black militancy. In the United States there was a clear "disconnect" between what was going on in the university and what was happening in the streets. This was symbolized by the disruption of John Searle's ethics classes at Berkeley. Searle wanted to lecture on deriving an "ought" from an "is," while students wanted to discuss the war in Vietnam. As an undergraduate at San Francisco State in the late 1960s, I was vividly aware of this split between philosophy and life. Ethics in the classroom was W. D. Ross and P. H. Nowell-Smith but it was Martin Luther King, Che Guevara, and the Black Panthers who dominated our conversations outside of class. In 1968, the year in which student insurrections broke out all over the world, the biggest news in academic philosophy was the growing hegemony of truth-conditional semantics. But the philosophers who made a difference to the events of 1968 were not Quine and Davidson but Marx and Marcuse. The frustration that many of us felt was not merely that Marx and Marcuse were not discussed in classes, but that the very concerns that motivated them seemed to have been banished from academic philosophy. While there is a lot to be said for working in philosophy of language, even during wartime, in retrospect it seems inevitable that the concerns of real life could not forever be excluded from the academy, especially in a discipline that has a long history of concern with substantive normative questions.

By the late 1960s, a group of elite East Coast philosophers, including Thomas Nagel, John Rawls, and Judith Jarvis Thomson, had formed the Society for Ethical and Legal Philosophy and were discussing such topics as racism, abortion, affirmative action, and the morality of war. Soon thereafter a group of philosophers at Rockefeller University launched *Philosophy and Public Affairs*. The practical ethics movement soon swept the country.

The philosophers who were turning their attention to matters of urgent public interest were not exclusively moral and political philosophers. Since the issues that they discussed were of broad interest, yet had largely been ignored by professional philosophers, they were fair game for whoever wanted to take them up. Ironically, just as Russell turned out to be the most politically active major philosopher of the century, so logicians and philosophers of science helped to bring practical ethics back into the discipline. But while Russell considered his political and social writings to be distinct from his philosophical work, these philosophers thought that they were doing philosophy.

Most of the concerns, both substantive and methodological, that would dominate the next twenty-five years of work in practical ethics and political philosophy were on display in the first volume of *Philosophy*

and *Public Affairs*. War and morality was the dominant topic, but articles on Marxism, abortion, suicide, and freedom of expression also appeared. The style of argument was generally intuitive, but in a symposium on the rules of war R. B. Brandt grounded his account in rule-utilitarianism, while R. M. Hare criticized Thomas Nagel for having no theoretical basis for deciding between competing moral considerations.

In 1971, the year in which Singer was writing "Famine, affluence, and morality," John Rawls published *A Theory of Justice*. With the publication of Robert Nozick's *Anarchy, State and Utopia* in 1974 and Gerald Cohen's *Karl Marx's Theory of History: a Defense* in 1978, liberalism, libertarianism, and Marxism were all represented by major works in the analytic tradition. Political philosophy, which had been pronounced dead only fifteen years earlier, was now very much alive. Still, much of this new work in political philosophy was very abstract and surprisingly unworldly. For example, although Rawls explicitly addressed civil disobedience, it was difficult to say exactly how his view applied to particular cases. The practical indeterminacy of Rawls's views led to an explosion of literature and also to increasing differentiation between political philosophy and practical ethics. If there was any concern that was central to practical ethics it was to address specific problems in context. The emerging differences between practical ethics and the new political philosophy were obscured to some extent by the fact that throughout the 1970s much of the important literature in both fields appeared in *Philosophy and Public Affairs*. But with the founding of such journals as the *Journal of Medicine and Philosophy* (1976), *Environmental Ethics* (1979), and the *Journal of Business Ethics* (1982), the differences became increasingly apparent.

Moral and political philosophy in the UK were hardly in better shape than in the United States during the immediate post-Second World War period. However, the fact that PPE (Philosophy, Politics, and Economics) was one of the most popular Oxford courses of study kept philosophy alive and to some extent allied with topics of moral and political concern. Influential senior figures in Oxford such as H. L. A. Hart, Sir Isaiah Berlin, and John Plamenatz, though their appointments were not in the Subfaculty of Philosophy, were interested in a variety of issues at the intersection of philosophy, politics, law, and history. And although he had made his name by applying the techniques of linguistic analysis to metaethical questions, R. M. Hare, White's Professor of Moral Philosophy from 1966 to 1983, was supportive of work in practical ethics. When Peter Singer, a young veteran of the Australian anti-war movement, came to him with a proposal to write a thesis on civil disobedience, Hare was receptive.

In 1973 Singer published his first book, *Democracy and Disobedience*, which was based largely on his thesis. In April of that year, "Animal

liberation" appeared in the *New York Review of Books*. The story of how this article came to be written is by now well known. While a student in Oxford, Singer, with his wife Renata, fell in with a group of Canadians who were moral vegetarians, two of whom, Stanley and Roslind Godlovitch, were involved in editing a book called *Animals, Men and Morals*. Unable to resist the Godlovitchs' arguments, the Singers changed their lives. Wanting to do what he could to promote his recently adopted views regarding animals, Singer sent an unsolicited review of *Animals, Men and Morals* to the *New York Review of Books*. Surprisingly, it was accepted. Astonishingly, the review had a major impact, leading to a book contract from New York Review Books.

In autumn 1973 Singer moved to the United States in order to teach at New York University. He was in America only sixteen months, but his visit had a large impact. He wrote most of *Animal Liberation* during his stay, and while working on the book Singer presented draft chapters to philosophy departments around the country. With his Oxford credentials and his connections to Hare, Singer helped to legitimize concerns about animals in the American philosophical community. When *Animal Liberation* was published in 1975, it had an enormous effect in transforming what had been a collection of small, largely invisible animal welfare organizations into a strong and vibrant social movement.

Also during his time in New York, Singer wrote "Philosophers are back on the job" for *The New York Times Magazine* (July 7, 1974). This essay brought the practical ethics movement to the attention of a wide, non-professional audience. Singer began the article by providing an overview of twentieth-century philosophical movements, bringing out what was salutary about both positivism and ordinary language philosophy, but arguing that in the end they failed either to resolve or dissolve traditional philosophical problems. He went on to discuss *A Theory of Justice*, regarding its enthusiastic reception as a sign "of the new strength of moral and political philosophy" (p. 19). But while he granted that the book "has many good things in it" (p. 19), he claimed that it "does not represent moral and political philosophy at its best." Singer went on to criticize Rawls's theory in ways that were emblematic of the division between political philosophy and practical ethics that was already under way, and his objections to Rawls's method of reflective equilibrium foreshadowed fissures that have subsequently opened up within the practical ethics movement itself, and continue to reverberate in this book. Signalling his later interests, Singer identified medical ethics as an area "in need of the clarification and rigor that a philosopher can provide" (p. 20) and concluded that "the entry of philosophers into areas of ethical concern from which they have hitherto excluded themselves is the most stimulating and potentially fruitful of all the recent developments in philosophy" (p. 20).

In 1975 Singer returned to Melbourne, where he has remained, except to take up various visiting appointments in universities around the world. From 1975 to 1977 he was a Senior Lecturer at La Trobe University and since 1977 he has been Professor of Philosophy at Monash University. In the autumn of 1999 he will become the Ira W. DeCamp Professor of Bioethics at Princeton University.

In the early 1980s Singer wrote a series of books that provided some context to his moral and political views. *Marx* appeared in 1980 (since translated into four languages) and *Hegel* was published in 1982 (now translated into seven languages). In 1981 *The Expanding Circle: Ethics and Sociobiology*, Singer's account of the biological foundations of ethics, was published.

Although he produced plenty of work on other topics throughout the 1980s, Singer's attention turned increasingly to medical ethics. In 1983 he founded the Centre for Human Bioethics and served as its Director until 1992. In 1985 with Helga Kuhse he established *Bioethics*, which has become one of the leading bioethics journals in the world. Between 1983 and 1994 Singer produced seven books and monographs on medical ethics, including *Rethinking Life and Death*, published in English in 1994, and subsequently translated into Italian, Dutch, Polish, German, Japanese, and Spanish.

Virtually all of Singer's work exemplifies the following three important characteristics. First, it is revisionary. The point of practical ethics is not simply to understand the world, but to change it. Singer's specific views are well known: that we should stop eating and experimenting on animals; that we should give large portions of our wealth to those who are worse off; that in some cases infanticide is permissible. The concern that practical ethics should make a difference has led him to be skeptical of approaches to moral and political philosophy that rely on our everyday moral beliefs. His main criticism of Rawls in the 1974 *New York Times Magazine* article concerned Rawls's reliance on moral intuitions. According to Singer,

No conclusions about what we ought to do can validly be drawn from a description of what most people in our society think we ought to do. If we have a soundly based moral theory we ought to be prepared to accept its implications even if they force us to change our moral views on major issues. Once this point is forgotten, moral philosophy loses its capacity to generate radical criticism of prevailing moral standards, and serves only to preserve the status quo. (pp. 19–20)

A second characteristic of Singer's work is that facts matter. Philosophy may begin where facts run out, as Singer wrote in "Philosophers are back

on the job," (p. 20), but it is hard to see what philosophy would be for Singer if it didn't start with a vivid appreciation of the way things are. The observation that facts matter might seem platitudinous to most people, even to most academics, but philosophers often pretend that "mere" empirical facts have nothing to do with anything of philosophical significance; and when this conceit becomes difficult to sustain, they often invent facts (under the guise of thought experiments) rather than bothering to discover them. What makes *Animal Liberation* so powerful, even for readers who do not share Singer's utilitarian principles, is the two-thirds of the book that brings to light our treatment of animals and provides practical suggestions for how to change our lives. A reviewer wrote in the *Philosophical Review*, not without admiration, that *Animal Liberation* was the first philosophy book ever to contain recipes.

A third characteristic of Singer's work is the presupposition that individual action can make a difference. As his work has unfolded, Singer has increasingly addressed social policy dimensions of the problems that he considers, but usually he writes as one person in conversation with another. Feminists may have coined the slogan "the personal is the political," but Singer has been telling stories about himself, his family, and his friends as long as he has been doing philosophy. His goal is to change our attitudes and behavior because that is how you change the world. If animals suffer when they are raised for food, then we should stop eating them. If giving 10 percent of our income to Oxfam would save lives without depriving us of any comparable goods, then we should sit down and start writing checks.

What all this adds up to is a conception of practical ethics that is both activist and demanding. It requires us to find out what is going on in the world and to determine how we can change it for the better. It then requires us to act accordingly. This has led Singer to march, demonstrate, and sit in a cage in a city square to publicize the plight of battery hens. He has been enjoined from publicly criticizing or demonstrating against a circus, and arrested for trying to photograph confined sows on a pig farm partly owned by Australia's prime minister. Twice he has stood as a candidate for the Green Party in Australian federal elections.

Not everyone shares Singer's conception of practical ethics. In retrospect, it is easy to see the differences among the contributors to that first volume of *Philosophy and Public Affairs*. In the first sentence of his article on abortion, Wertheimer said that his goal was "to understand an argument"; he wasn't primarily interested in persuading us of particular conclusions.<sup>6</sup> Thomson's defense of abortion, while remarkably inventive and sensitive to feminist rhetoric about the right to control one's body, was a good deal more modest than the position that many people had already embraced and was soon to become law in the United States.<sup>7</sup>

Nagel was excruciatingly sensitive to the nuances and complexities of the ethics of war, but in the end he seemed to embrace the views with which he had begun, only now for reasons that seemed less than compelling in the light of the case that he had made for the difficulty of the issues involved.<sup>8</sup>

Since the 1970s, conservative tendencies in practical ethics have grown in influence. Although there are still those willing to be as revisionist as Singer, he has become increasingly isolated among philosophers in his willingness to argue for unpopular views and to take strong actions.

One reason for the increasing conservatism of practical ethics involves methodological problems at the core of the subject. Singer, following Hare, is hostile to the idea that considered moral judgements can serve as "the data" which moral theory is supposed to systematize. But not many have been convinced of his alternative approach.<sup>9</sup> According to Singer, we should follow moral principles wherever they lead. But if a moral principle conflicts with a deeply held, reflective moral judgement, it is far from clear why the judgement should defer to the principle rather than the principle deferring to the judgement. To put the point another way, whatever approach we take must equilibrate between our principles and our considered moral judgements. As a first approximation, it seems implausible to suppose either that principles should always defer to intuitions or that intuitions should always defer to principles.<sup>10</sup>

In part because he is clearly committed to a principle-driven methodology, Singer has been able to embrace wholeheartedly a particular normative theory: two-level utilitarianism. But most philosophers have a hard time committing themselves to a single moral theory. This sometimes manifests itself in the endorsement of some version of pluralism – a bit of Mill, a dash of Kant, some moralizing about "the virtues," and so on. In other cases it is expressed as an unwillingness to take strong normative positions at all because of refined sensibilities about the difficulty of defending any particular view against all possible objections.

A second reason why practical ethics has become more conservative is that it has become professionalized. A community of professionals examining each other's work in microscopic detail is less likely to produce bold views than a collection of concerned amateurs. Where once practical ethics largely involved the exploration of new territory, often by people who had other areas of primary academic interest, increasingly it has given way to a kind of scholasticism. There are virtues in scholasticism, but a willingness to take risks is not one of them.

Finally, practical ethics has become more conservative as it has become increasingly specialized. It is sometimes said (e.g. by Justin Oakley) that the three central areas of practical ethics are medical ethics, environmental ethics, and business ethics. As these subfields have developed, there is less communication across them. The problems of each subfield

increasingly require specialized knowledge even to understand and engage with them. What this means is that to succeed in medical ethics, for example, requires to some extent becoming part of the medical community. A reasonably charitable cynic might say that in order to speak some truth to power one must refrain from speaking too much truth, or one won't be invited to speak to power at all. As practical ethicists move closer to the communities they moralize about, they become increasingly cautious about taking strong stands.

Interestingly, reasons two and three tend to pull in different directions. Reason two requires ethicists to find some distinctive philosophical subject matter in their field so that they can claim to be upstanding members of the philosophical community. This often leads them to focus on what are practically the less important features of an issue and also to try to communicate with philosophers rather than practitioners. The third reason pulls them in the direction of trying to communicate with practitioners at the expense of their philosophical identities. Perhaps practical ethics is becoming more conservative because it is in danger of being pulled apart.

However, practical ethics should not be treated as an undifferentiated field. Environmental philosophy, for example, has thus far has been relatively resistant to the conservatizing tendencies prominent in other areas. Environmental philosophy was late to develop, and its roots were deeper in the counter-culture of the 1960s than those of medical and business ethics. Early on the field was defined (wrongly but still influentially) as involving the search for a new ethic.<sup>11</sup> People who just wanted to apply traditional moral views to the environment (e.g. Passmore) were in effect drummed out of the community. Environmental philosophy has also resisted institutionalization, not because of the moral purity of its practitioners, but because it has had a hard time finding patrons and institutions with which to affiliate. Environmental studies is an ill-defined area, and programs are constantly being born, reformed, and killed off. Since no clear ecosystem has evolved, it is not clear what niche environmental philosophy should occupy. Finally, environmental philosophy is more expansive than other areas of practical ethics. It involves philosophy of science, history of philosophy, and philosophy of religion, to name a few allied areas. Rather than being a subfield of practical ethics which in turn is a subfield of ethics, environmental philosophy is really a new area of philosophy. Since it is a large and untamed field of inquiry, it is difficult to professionalize.

The present volume is not the first to give voice to Singer's critics. As contemporary philosophy's most visible utilitarian, his views have been the target of a wide range of objections. Most of these are versions of textbook objections to utilitarianism: that the theory has no place for

justice, no account of the morality of killing, and no respect for moral agency. Some philosophers have complained that utilitarianism is a heartless doctrine which cannot recognize the importance of emotions, much less those dispositions and character traits that constitute the good life. Others have argued that utilitarian morality is too demanding. Indeed, Bernard Williams has written that

Some utilitarian writers aim to increase a sense of indeterminate guilt in their readers. Peter Singer is an example, and in his book, *Practical Ethics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1980), he is evidently more interested in producing that effect than he is in the theoretical basis for it, which gets very cursory treatment.<sup>12</sup>

Although he has written widely, Singer will forever be most closely associated with his defense of animals and his attack on the traditional ethic of the sanctity of human life. On these questions his views are the converse of what most people believe. Although it is highly improbable that we would ever have to make the following forced choices, the character of Singer's views can be brought out by saying that generally he thinks that you are more likely to do something wrong by killing a healthy pig rather than your severely handicapped infant; and if you are choosing between an early abortion and killing an adult cow, you should probably have the abortion.

The agricultural lobby and the scientific establishment have tried to discredit his views about animals, and both right-wing pro-life organizations and leftist defenders of disabled people have mobilized against his views on euthanasia and abortion. In Germany, Singer's lectures have been disrupted and he has been physically assaulted. In the United States, he has been accused of "demonizing" American scientists.<sup>13</sup> No wonder that the profile of Singer published in the Australian edition of *Time Magazine* for November 2, 1989, was entitled "Saintly or satanic?"

What has come to be called the "Singer Affair" began in June 1989 with the cancellation of a long-standing invitation to Singer to lecture in Marburg, Germany, at a European symposium on "Bioengineering, ethics, and mental retardation." The cancellation was in response to protests which were being planned by organizations of disabled people. According to Hans Johann Glock, protesters claimed that "by promoting active euthanasia Singer's *Practical Ethics* condoned 'mass extermination' of the same kind as the euthanasia programme of the Nazis, and that his ideas were 'fascist' and 'murderous'."<sup>14</sup> Eventually the entire meeting was called off, and other scheduled lectures of Singer's were canceled or disrupted. The newspaper *Die Zeit* initially defended Singer's right to speak, but it too came under withering attack. It was forced to back

down and, according to two German observers of the Singer Affair, "a vast consensus unified left-leaning and conservative papers, all of which strongly opposed ever again questioning anybody's right to life."<sup>15</sup> Since 1989 Singer has been unable to lecture openly in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland. Courses using the German translation of his book *Practical Ethics* have been disrupted, several major conferences at which he was to have spoken have been moved or canceled, and German supporters of Singer have been discriminated against for university positions. In 1992 more than one hundred people, many of them doctors of theology or medicine, signed a manifesto defending the disruption of Singer's lectures.

Another episode, different in many ways, but also indicative of the reaction Singer sometimes elicits, concerns the publication of an article in the refereed scientific journal, *Proceedings of the Society for Experimental Biology and Medicine*.<sup>16</sup> This article, "A dissection of the chapter 'Tools for research' in Peter Singer's *Animal Liberation*," is perhaps especially egregious, but it is not atypical of how Singer's views are sometimes treated by the scientific establishment. The authors of this article were openly contemptuous of Singer and his views. When they say that Singer documents his case with 138 notes they put both "documents" and "notes" in shudder quotes, as they do the words "evidence" and "scholarship" when they refer to Singer's evidence and scholarship. They say that Singer "supposedly embraces utilitarianism," that he "presents himself as an ethicist and moralist," that he is "anti-science," that he uses the methods of "propagandists," that he "lacks objectivity," and that he relies on "distortion and selective quotation." The list of charges and innuendos goes on. In the version of the article accepted for publication, the authors accuse Singer of fabricating a quotation. This charge was withdrawn in a revision to the original article that was sent to Singer after he was already supposed to have completed his reply. Nine months later yet another revision of the critical article was sent to Singer. Whatever the substance of the charges, it is clear that no scientific journal would publish such an abusive article on any other subject. Nor would the editors of a scientific journal treat other authors who were under attack in such a cavalier way.<sup>17</sup>

It is not surprising that the response to Singer has been so ferocious. In both these cases philosophical argument runs up against serious power embedded in history, culture, politics, and money. The groups that have organized in opposition to Singer are not particularly interested in his arguments. They want publicity for their causes and to intimidate or silence their opponents. A recent opinion piece in the influential right-wing newspaper the *Washington Times* (June 30, 1998, p. A17) amounts to a call for Princeton to rescind Singer's appointment.

What is surprising is the attitude of many philosophers towards these events. In assessing the responses it is perhaps useful to reflect on the fact that professional philosophers whose work is directed towards changing the world have always been rare, and often have been treated as outlaws by the profession. Compare, for example, the fate of Hegel with that of Marx. Singer is in the tradition of Bentham, Mill, and Russell, but only one of them ever held a college job.

Some philosophers have come to Singer's defense but others have come close to endorsing his silencing. In 1992, the Cambridge philosopher Jenny Teichman published an article, entitled "Humanism and personism: the false philosophy of Peter Singer," which began with these words: "I want to argue that false philosophy can be dangerous, and to suggest that, if circumstances prevent its being refuted in print, it is probably all right, in extreme cases, to try to silence it in other ways."<sup>18</sup> Two years later she returned to this subject, and wrote that

Singer's philosophy... resembles Nazism in some ways but not in others. Here we are faced with a problem which has to do with a borderline... The importance of allowing, or not allowing, the dissemination, in Germany, of Nazi-style opinions, has to do primarily with political and social consequences; and it would seem on the face of it that German citizens are the people best able to predict, and understand, those consequences.<sup>19</sup>

Teichman concluded that Singer's inability to lecture openly in the German-speaking world is analogous to the situation of someone who writes a letter to the editor of a newspaper that does not publish it. In such cases "the authors often feel very indignant indeed about being deprived of access to a public platform," but no serious infringement of freedom of speech has occurred.<sup>20</sup>

Other philosophers seem curiously ambivalent about these episodes. Some people with whom I have discussed these cases express a kind of weary acceptance of the abuse that Singer has suffered, or even a kind of "blame the victim" attitude. "Of course what was done to him was wrong," they say, "but on the other hand, given his views and how he expresses them, what else could he expect?" Indeed, I think many would agree with Teichman when she wrote: "let's remember that Singer was a guest in the protesters' countries, and guests have some obligation to be tactful and circumspect... it is a truism that gross insensitivity is liable to provoke angry reactions. Whether or not the protesters had a right to silence Peter Singer, it is surely not surprising that they wanted to."<sup>21</sup>

What I find both alarming and interesting about these episodes is the challenge that they pose to practical ethics. How can practical ethics be genuinely revisionary, yet still manage to stimulate rational dialogue

about controversial issues? To put the question in a different way, "Does revisionary practical ethics inevitably run the risk of provoking its own suppression?" Some would respond by saying that we should give up on the idea that practical ethics should be revisionary. At least two distinct alternatives to revisionary practical ethics might be suggested.

On one alternative, the role of practical ethics is to identify normative judgements about practical issues by extracting them from our prior set of considered moral judgements. On such a conception, the role of practical ethics is to reproduce our everyday moral beliefs and apply them to particular cases. It is certainly true that such an enterprise will not stimulate vocal, public opposition. On the other hand, it is hard to see why such an activity should be thought to be particularly important. Commonsense morality does not require the support of philosophers to maintain its authority. And if all that philosophers can contribute to discussions of practical moral issues is the occasional "hallelujah" in response to expressions of what most people already believe, then they might as well stick to the problem of universals.

A second role for practical ethics would be to clarify various positions on important practical issues and present a cafeteria of options. Clearly there is value in this sort of activity, and anyone who believes in revisionary practical ethics would view these clarificatory activities as steps along the way. But at least when it comes to ethical questions, clarity is not enough. Some views are better than others and it matters what views people hold. It is hard for me to imagine that anyone who would devote his or her life to practical ethics could really be as neutral about morality as this approach suggests.

Some would say that what causes extreme reactions to Singer is not the fact that he does revisionary practical ethics, but the way that he practices his subject. The problem is one of sensitivity. It is not Singer's views that provoke outrage, but the way that he expresses them. Sometimes I think that what it would have taken for Singer to be more sensitive in the Singer Affair is not to have written *Practical Ethics*, or to have saved the protesters some trouble by voluntarily banning himself from Germany. Still, no one who writes or speaks as much as Singer can claim to have always steered clear of insensitive remarks and phrases, and such lapses can be found in Singer's work. Moreover, Singer's direct approach to issues of profound importance may be viewed by some people as confrontational. Yet what I find most striking about Singer's writing is its sobriety and simplicity. Singer is usually clear and direct, without rhetorical flourishes. His books are aimed at his readers' heads rather than their hearts. This just make it all the more ironic that so many of his readers seem to lose their heads when reading him.

One reason for thinking that the problem is the singer rather than the song is that there are prominent philosophers who largely share Singer's views who do not elicit the same vituperative responses. And perhaps there are lessons here for those who do revisionary work in practical ethics. But it may also be the case that other philosophers do not provoke such reactions because their work is not seen as threatening. Perhaps challenges to the reigning orthodoxies are tolerated as long as they are seen as merely "academic" or (what comes to the same thing) ineffectual. Singer is good at what he does. His books change people's lives. Perhaps the attacks that he must endure are the complement to his successes.

Singer himself seems genuinely surprised and hurt that his views sometimes elicit such responses. He is optimistic enough about the possibility of rational thought, even about sensitive subjects, that he could honestly believe that Germans could rationally assess questions of euthanasia despite their history. And he shares the scientific worldview of many of those who have sought to discredit his views about animals. Singer believes in the epistemological privilege of science as much as most scientists, so one of his strategies in discussions of animal experimentation has been to use scientific authority to undermine scientific practices such as the Draize test, the LD<sub>50</sub> test, and the use of primates in invasive research. Since Singer believes that the scientific outlook both expresses and vindicates such values as cooperation, egalitarianism, freedom of expression, and the objective search for truth, he is constantly confounded by the often hysterical, *ad hominem* attacks which some scientists launch in his direction. At his core Singer is an Enlightenment progressive. Perhaps he would not have seemed as unusual in eighteenth-century France or nineteenth-century England as he does in the United States at the end of the twentieth century. But after the horrors of our century and the rise of relativism and postmodernism, Enlightenment progressives are hard to find.

Singer's recent work has become more introspective and perhaps a bit darker. His Oxford ethics anthology (1994) includes readings by great spiritual teachers such as Buddha and Jesus, as well as by the usual figures who are part of the philosophical canon. It is unusual for texts drawn from religious traditions to appear in textbooks on philosophical ethics. It is especially surprising to find them in a book edited by an analytic philosopher who is non-religious and a utilitarian. In *How Are We to Live?* (1995), Singer returns us to what Socrates considered to be the only really important philosophical question. Singer's answer is that we should live our lives in contribution to a worthy cause even if in the end it does not triumph, for that is what gives life its meaning. This book is also filled with reminiscences about Singer's cultural roots and acknowledges that as well as being a child of the 1960s, he is also a child of the Holocaust, having lost much of his family to the Nazis. His most recent book is about

Henry Spira, a vigorous campaigner for both human rights and animal rights.<sup>22</sup> This book is a homage to a man whom Singer considers to be one of the great activists of our time, and also a meditation on how to bring about social change. Singer is currently preparing a book about his grandfather, who was a legendary teacher in Vienna for nearly thirty years until being dismissed by the Nazis in 1938.

Singer's work ultimately challenges us as both philosophers and moral agents. Although practical ethics continues to be a growth area in terms of job opportunities, it has lost much of its energy and direction. While moral philosophy in general has turned its attention towards an intensive study of its own history and returned to the traditional questions of metaethics, practical ethics has increasingly looked to law or policy studies for guidance. Perhaps the present state of the subject is really just an expression of the larger sense of powerlessness and confusion about what is really right that seems endemic to our culture. While it would be wrong to put too much weight on the importance of any single person, I can't help but wonder if the activist conception of practical ethics would have more influence today on the international philosophical community if Singer had not returned to Australia in 1975. Philosophy, like other subjects, has a history, sociology, and its own centers of power whose influence cannot be denied. It will be interesting to see how the practical ethics movement will be affected by Singer's move to Princeton.

The generation that developed practical ethics came of age in the 1960s and is now well represented in the senior ranks of the profession. But whether practical ethics fades from the scene, burrows more deeply into specialization and professionalization, or experiences a rebirth of creativity and activism will depend largely on those who are now studying philosophy and beginning their careers. Many institutional factors will be important – for example, whether there will be professional homes for those who think of philosophy as a vehicle for social change. But it will also matter how these young philosophers understand those who pioneered the practical ethics movement and how their influence is assimilated. Reading Singer in dialogue with his most sympathetic and acute critics is one way of helping to shape this legacy. That is what I have tried to make possible with this book.<sup>23</sup>

#### Notes

1 May 23, 1988.

2 "Famine, affluence, and morality," *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 1, 3 (Spring 1972), p. 229.

- 3 Ibid., pp. 230, 242.
- 4 Daniel Bell, *The End of Ideology* (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1960), p. 370.
- 5 The former television newsmen, John Chancellor, has been quoted as saying about the 1950s in the USA that "if you weren't looking for work, black, or getting shot at in Korea, it was a very nice time" (*New York Times*, 20 February 1988, p. B33).
- 6 Roger Wertheimer, "Understanding the abortion argument," *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 1, 1 (Fall 1971), p. 67.
- 7 Judith Jarvis Thomson, "A defense of abortion," *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 1, 1 (Fall 1971), pp. 47-66.
- 8 Thomas Nagel, "War and massacre," *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 1, 2 (Winter 1972), pp. 123-44.
- 9 Singer's views about methodology are most fully expressed in his "Sidgwick and reflective equilibrium," *The Monist*, 58 (July 1974), pp. 490-517.
- 10 For more on moral methodology see my "Method and moral theory," in P. Singer (ed.), *A Companion to Ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), pp. 476-87; and James Rachels, "Moral philosophy as a subversive activity," in E. Winkler and J. Coombs (eds), *Applied Ethics: a Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), pp. 11-130, reprinted in Rachels's *Can Ethics Provide Answers and Other Essays in Moral Philosophy* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1997), pp. 1-19.
- 11 See, for example, Richard Routley, "Is there a need for a new, an environmental, ethics?" in *Proceedings of the XVth World Congress of Philosophy*, no. 1 (Varna, Bulgaria, 1973), pp. 205-10. For further discussion see my "Animal liberation is an environmental ethic," *Environmental Ethics*, 7 (1998), pp. 41-57.
- 12 *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 212.
- 13 See the articles by Sharon M. Russell and Charles S. Nicoll, and Singer's reply, in *Proceedings of the Society for Experimental Biology and Medicine*, 1996.
- 14 "The euthanasia debate in Germany - what's the fuss?" *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, 11, 2 (1994), p. 213.
- 15 Bettina Schone-Seifert and Klaus-Peter Rippe, "Silencing the Singer," *Hastings Center Report* (November/December 1991), p. 21.
- 16 Op. cit., n. 13.
- 17 The last two statements may overstate the point: "creation scientists" or those who reject the idea that HIV causes AIDS might also come in for such treatment. What is important to see is that in the pages of the *Proceedings of the Society for Experimental Biology and Medicine* Singer is treated as a dangerous crackpot rather than a colleague who holds an unpopular view. While colleagues are to be persuaded, crackpots are to be stopped.
- 18 *Quadrant* (December 1992), p. 26.
- 19 Jenny Teichman, "Freedom of speech and the public platform," *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, 11, 1 (1994), p. 101.
- 20 Ibid., p. 105. Teichman overlooks one obvious and important disanalogy: Singer had been invited by Germans to address Germans, and this was prevented by the actions of third parties.

- 21 Ibid. On the subject of "gross insensitivity," I cannot help but remark that physical assault is no way to treat a guest, especially when much of the guest's extended family was murdered in your country by your parents and their compatriots.
- 22 *Ethics into Action: Henry Spira and the Animal Rights Movement* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998).
- 23 I am grateful to Joel Feinberg for a helpful conversation, and to Susan Jones, Claudia Mills, and especially Peter Singer for comments on an earlier draft. Of course, I alone am responsible for the view expressed in this essay.