



Singer's different drummer

Rethinking Life and Death
by Peter Singer
Text Publishing, Melbourne, 1994.

It is May, 1995. A bill called Rights of the Terminally Ill is passed by the Northern Territory parliament. Further controversy erupts in connection with the Victorian in-vitro fertilisation program. An episode of ATN-Seven's *Chicago Hope* argues powerfully for the absurdity of keeping on life support an anencephalic infant (who survives with almost no brain tissue) while another healthy-brained infant lies dying next to her, in need of the healthy heart she could donate.

You'd have to be living under a rock to avoid bioethical issues like these. It is already an area where many Christians feel ill-at-ease and off-balance—and into the melee comes this recent book by Peter Singer, arguably Australia's most prominent ethicist.

Singer is a man of formidable intellect, and *Rethinking Life and Death* is so closely and carefully argued that I suspect it will leave many Christians reeling and have a dramatic effect on the wider secular debate.

Indeed, it seems that both these outcomes are Singer's intention. There is an "old ethic" with which Singer is in vocal disagreement throughout the book. He sums up two assumptions that are central to it in the final pages:

The first...is that we are responsible for what we intentionally do in a way that we are not responsible for what we deliberately fail to prevent. The second is that the lives of all and only members of our species are more worthy of protection than the lives of any other being (p. 221).

It might be hard to know how to react to the first assumption. But it doesn't take a rocket-scientist to see that the second sounds a lot like Christian teaching about humanity's position in the world. The body of the book charts a careful course which intentionally aims to tear down

these two assumptions, to bring about a "paradigm shift" in ethics that is as far-reaching as the work of Copernicus was for cosmology. Singer is not so arrogant to claim that this is all his doing; he sees himself as drawing many different trends in Western thought into one coherent package. The new ethic is supposedly much bigger than just Singer's own opinions—his closing statement is "The question is not whether [the old ethic] will be replaced, but what the shape of its successor will be" (p. 222).

How does Singer go about this task?

The book is in three parts. Part 1, 'Doubtful Endings', argues that shaky foundations in Western thinking and practice are revealed by well-documented and tragic cases of people who still breath but who have no hope of further conscious existence. Few argue that it is right to promote the continuance of such an existence, thus such persons have generally been deemed 'brain dead'. This legal 'death' makes it possible to remove organs or to turn off life support apparatus, without violating the 'sanctity' of their life.

For Singer, this is a dubious use of the word 'dead' which has been invented to protect this notion of 'the sanctity of human life'. Far better, argues Singer, to call this existence 'life' (watch how people talk to the 'corpse' and comb her hair), and so open the door just a tiny bit on the possibility that *there may be some circumstances in which it is right to take an innocent human life.*

The rot thus having set in, it is forced along in Part 2, 'Crumbing at the Edges'. There is a complex argument re-examining the thinking surrounding abortion. There are demonstrations of even ardently pro-life medical practitioners who, on the basis of quality of life forecasts, are forced to allow or even promote death. There are cameos of terminally ill people choosing to be euthanased, and a careful scrutiny of legal and medical practice in the Netherlands. All of this is employed in a full scale assault upon the *sanctity* of human life. Singer's argument is that this

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outdated concept just cannot bear the weight of modern bioethical dilemmas.

Part 2 concludes with an assault on the sanctity of *human* life. Singer is a well-known enemy of 'speciesism'. By raising questions based on research into other intelligent social species, he asks how reasonable it is that completely dysfunctional human persons (like the anencephalic baby) should be more greatly valued than a primate who is demonstrably conscious, self-aware and interrelational.

This style of argument is *reductio ad absurdum*. This is a technique of argument in which the opposition—in this case, the sanctity of human life—is subjected to such scrutiny that it becomes impossible to hold it with any credibility. In contrast, Part 3 is entitled 'Toward a Coherent Approach' and outlines what Singer considers to be a saner, balanced, and more reasonable approach to bioethical problem solving.

Along the way, Singer has seriously canvassed options that we would conventionally regard as shocking and monstrous. He proposes times when it is not wrong to commit infanticide. He even tiptoes into a brief consideration of the possibility of human-chimpanzee interbreeding.

Christianity only attracts sidelong, incidental glances through the first two-thirds of the book, suggesting (without saying) that Christendom is a totally marginalised force in society that is not worth bothering with. Out of some twenty-five glancing references to Christianity or Christians, about fifteen or twenty pertain to Roman Catholic approaches. While never openly derogatory, these references are largely dismissive. Later in the book Singer pauses for open battle with the Bible's teaching. A major flaw in Western thought began, he claims, when Genesis 1-2 taught that humanity is a special creation of God and unique above animals as the 'image' of God. (Elsewhere God's command to be 'fruitful and multiply' is also seen as an inept basis upon which to value human life, given current population pressures.) There follows a short and selective account of various abuses and teachings in subsequent Christian history.

Throughout the book, the Bible's position is lumped in with a variety of other positions that we should not feel compelled to defend. American fundamentalist views and Roman Catholic views come under attacks that arguably do not reflect the contours of the Bible. For example—does the Bible teach a radical split between soul and body as is seen in much Roman Catholic teaching? There is good evidence (e.g. 1 Cor 15)

that it does not. Does the Bible advocate a 'sanctity of life' ethic? More accurate perhaps to say that it teaches a fundamental though not an *absolute* value of human life. Singer is unimpressed with some positions that Christians should not feel forced to defend.

Essentially, the conflict that Singer has with Christians represents a conflict between two different ways of doing ethics. On the world stage, Australian society is remarkably *teleological* in its approach to ethics. Such an approach decides whether an act is right or wrong solely on the basis of its result. On the other hand, the Christian approach to ethics is strongly *deontological*, to rip off a word that ethicists use. That is, we will often argue that an act is wrong in and of itself, regardless of your motive or the intended consequence. We do this because of certain boundaries that we see God placing around humans in the Bible.

This is why Singer is totally dismissive of Christian positions. He is so committed to a teleological approach, and so convinced that material reality is the sum total of reality, that our deontological arguments are not worth his bothering with. And in a sense, he has a point. We do represent a tiny minority in our approach to ethics. The teleological flavour of the book will have massive appeal in a land full of people who think similarly.

What are we to do? Many Christians will be shocked and outraged by the ideas expressed in this book. That may be a valid response, but it is not an adequate one. We need mature Christians to read it, and somehow to respond in the public arena with well-thought-out counter arguments. A full rebuttal is well beyond the scope of this review, but there are some obvious starting points.

Step One is to isolate areas where we can agree with and even learn from Singer's position. It may well be foolish for humans to overpopulate the world. Christians have been in error to interpret 'dominion' of the world in terms that lead to environmental degradation and the abuse of animals. It is certainly true that in order to be consistent, pro-lifers must value the lives of third world people and assist where possible.

Step Two is to identify areas of overlap between Christian and secular approaches to these matters. A major Christian objection to euthanasia is deontological—that with some exceptions, God largely forbids one human to take the life of another. Australians will have no time for this objection at the beginning of a discussion.

However, Christians can present a teleological argument stemming from what we know of human sinfulness. We are loathe to give the power of euthanasia to any human, no matter what the checks and balances, because we can barely trust individual doctors with it, let alone what our society might do with it in future. Everyone involved is too marred by self-interest, says the Christian, to be allowed the power of life and death.

This is an argument that resonates strongly with the average Australian, because it isn't just theologians and historians who have found that humans are a moral disaster area. And since it is a teleological argument, it lies right at the heart of Singer's territory. Unlike our

deontological objections, he is forced into vigorous opposition of what he calls the 'slippery slope' argument.

There is also some overlap with our deontological arguments, perhaps more at an emotional level. Many Australians remain vaguely uneasy about voluntary euthanasia because of some residual sense that life is generally not ours to take. Clearly this won't convince Singer, but it may be a starting point as we converse with readers of his book.

Of course, Step Two will not suffice. If we fight these battles solely upon the ground of our opponent's choosing, we will lose. Step Three, then, is to declare the mind and will of a God who has created material and ethical reality, and

to persuade our hearers that issues like this wouldn't be the subject of public debate if we weren't a community committed to the destruction of God. We might need brief apologetic detours while we declare these things. But it is not difficult to see how the ultimate task, as usual, comes back to arguing passionately for the gospel. That is our only way to "take every thought captive"—indeed, if we are honest with ourselves, it becomes clear that this is the only ground on which we have any hope of fighting more than a holding action. □

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