

Interview

PETER SINGER: The rich ought to be doing much more than the poor

Interview by Ana Galić



Photo: Petrina Hicks

Peter Singer is a prominent philosopher and ethical theorist known for his influential advocacy of animal rights, which began with his groundbreaking essay "Animal Liberation" published in 1973.

Singer was born in 1946, Melbourne, Australia, to an Austrian Jewish family that emigrated from Austria to escape persecution by the Nazis. He studied law, history and philosophy at the University of Melbourne, and majored in philosophy. He later did a B.Phil at Oxford University, where he associated with a vegetarian student group and became a vegetarian himself. Around this time he wrote *Animal Liberation* (1975), which has been called the "bible" of the animal liberation movement. In 1999, Singer was appointed as Professor of Bioethics in the University Center for Human Values at Princeton. In 2004, he was recognized as the Australian Humanist of the Year by the Council of Australian Humanist Societies. He founded the non-profit organisation *The Life You Can Save*, named after his book of the same name, and is often regarded as a core intellectual inspiration to the effective altruism movement.

Singer is the most famous and influential contemporary utilitarian philosopher.

Professor Singer was kind enough to answer our questions, which we read below.

Dear professor,

I am really great admirer of yours and my students know that you are the greatest authority to me, when we teach ethics in our class. Actually, I plan to frame that famous picture of you and a sheep so I can have you on my desk for quick moral questions (smile). With that being said, I would like to ask you just a few simple questions, so that we can be honoured having you as our guest philosopher in our journal A priori.

Can one person be good if he/she eats animals?

It depends on the circumstances. If the alternative is starvation, or a serious risk to the person's health, or there is some other very pressing reason for eating animals, then yes,

one can still be good and eat animals in those circumstances. Or if the person eats only animals who have been well looked after, and led pleasant lives, and were killed without suffering, then perhaps such a person may still be a good person. But as most animals are raised in factory farms, to just walk into a supermarket and buy meat, without some exceptional reason for doing so, is not the act of a good person.

What is the smallest step for anybody to do so one can say – today I did something good?

It can be anything that reduces the suffering, or increases the well-being, of any sentient being.

Is dualism between deontology and consequentialism still the most relevant in moral theories?

Yes, it is still very relevant.

Can we teach someone that being good doesn't need some sort of race, religion, position in society, age etc. and how? You see, there is a great deal of theology interfering with philosophical studies, and in everyday life, especially in countries that survived the war, like ours.

I agree that to be good one does not need to have any special race, or position in society, and one does not need to be religious.

Do we need to believe in Heaven and Hell, why yes and why not?

I don't, because I see no evidence that they exist, or indeed that there is a life after death.

What are the main ethical problems today? Please share your opinion?

Climate change, the treatment of animals, the continued existence of extreme poverty in some countries, and, today, the wars in Ukraine and Gaza.

Do we need to help the poor ones and is there some variety in our responsibility?

Yes, we do need to help them, and our responsibility for helping them increases with our wealth. The rich ought to be doing much more than the poor.

Effective altruism teaches us that we should make as more as possible in our career, so we can help others – is it really possible for everybody?

Effective altruism allows us to choose whatever career will enable us to do the most good. It may mean working for an aid organization, or doing research that can help the world and reduce suffering, or going into politics, or it may mean earning a lot of money so that one has more to give away. What is best for anyone will depend on their talents and interests.

How exactly tastes that GM chicken that you manage to eat, after almost 40 years of vegetarianism?

It was not especially good. It was rather dry and without a lot of flavour. There are many much more delicious foods that come from plants.

There is some question I would like to address: that is the Trolley problem; how, in the name of Plato, can we explain to students that we need to sacrifice one man

so the other five could continue to live and that that is considered good?

I am not sure what this question has to do with Plato (smile), but to me it seems obvious that five people dying is a greater tragedy than one person dying. So if we must choose between 5 people dying or one person dying, and we don't know anything about the people involved, we should choose that only one person dies.

Best wishes,
Peter Singer

V.K. Rajah Professor in Medical Ethics, Centre for Bio-medical Ethics, National University of Singapore & Ira W. DeCamp Professor of Bioethics, Emeritus, Center for Human Values, Princeton University

Thank you for your time and everything you did for humanity.

In Banja Luka, July, 08. 2025.
Ana Galić, editor-in-chief