Ethics in the Real World
Reviewer: Andrew Cameron

Traditional Ethics (OUP, 1995), a manifesto for the general public to demolish the so-called ‘sanctity of life’ ethic. The book understood itself to target the moral reasoning of Christians like me. I was surprised to find that I didn’t identify with the moral reasoning he ascribed to my kind, as if perhaps he’d not deeply engaged with a serious Christian view. Like his views on animals, these were views he went on to disseminate through posts at Monash and later Princeton Universities. They took hold. His position on the treatment of animals is now almost mainstream in Australia, and his thought undergirds much bioethics as taught in academies around the world.

82 Brief Essays is a helpful compendium of Singer’s thought for those new to this influential figure. The essays have appeared in popular media outlets over the years, and summarise views argued more fully elsewhere. Each can be read in a short sitting. The collection is grouped into eleven topic areas, such as ‘Big Questions’, ‘Animals’, ‘Beyond the Ethic of the Sanctity of Life’, ‘Living, Playing and Working’, ‘Global Governance’ and so on.

This range showcases how ethical thought scales from the very personal and immediate (‘what kind of eggs should I eat?’) through the significantly existential (‘how should I die?’), to the massively social (‘should we even have “citizenship”?’).

The book invites us to hop from interest to interest, or even to dip in for a take on whatever bugs you or I this day.

Telescoping this thinker’s output into such a compendium triggers several thoughts for me. Firstly, Singer has always been committed to taking moral reflection out of the academy into the (thoughtful) streets. ‘I ought to aim to write for the broadest possible audience,’ he says (p. xiii), as a direct outcome of his moral position. His writing is clear and effective: it is hard not to feel the tug of persuasion. His oeuvre models persistent, public dialogue, and a long-term investment in that craft.

We also see the consistency of his base position in preference-utilitarianism as his moral frame. On this view, the task of moral deliberation is to deliver as many preferences as possible to as many sentient beings as we can. Sometimes, the sum total good of the human collective might override these preferences, but usually not. My preference for the taste of cow, for example, does not trump the cow’s preference to live. However when something or someone has, as far as we can tell, no capacity for preference—such as seems likely for an anencephalic baby, or much more contestably, a person with advanced dementia—then the needs of others should take precedence. This nutshell description doesn’t suffice to

When I was a young teenager in the mid-’70s, I recall footage of a long-haired, moustached Peter Singer campaigning for animal rights in the Melbourne streets. In my lowbrow circles in those days, that was a ridiculous and laughable cause.

I became a Singer-watcher as my interest in ethics grew. I read with interest his Rethinking Life and Death: The Collapse of Our
encompass his position, but is central to it. As Singer puts it, 'utilitarianism is, I believe, the most defensible ethical view' yet 'I do not presuppose utilitarianism .... my conclusions follow from many non-utilitarian positions as well' (p xiii). 82 Brief Essays evidences some changes over time in his thought, even though its core remains constant.

A third element is harder to get at, and more subjective on my part. There is a predominantly analytical style to Singer's persona evident in this work. Having not met him, my assessment may be unfair. But perhaps in the interests of careful persuasion, each essay has a 'bloodless' tone. That is not to say he is a person lacking deep conviction—so much is clear in the subtitle Things that Matter. Yet somehow the word 'passion' does not quite fit Singer's manner of conviction. Indeed as a philosopher by trade, part of Singer's project is to challenge our reliance on the various 'passions' driving our moral positions. As I will go on to show, I often become queasy during his inexorable accounts of how I should regard something morally, for I know either that I just don't care when I should, or care deeply when Singer says I shouldn't. For better and for worse, seemingly inescapable logic drives the arguments of 82 Essays.

That comes explicitly to the fore in the essay 'Heartwarming causes are nice, but let's give with our heads' (p 175), occasioned by a U.S. charity's drive to enable kids with terminal cancer to be 'Batkid' for a day. He brings against this campaign the charity bang-per-buck for a donation to help unknowable children affected by malaria. Essentially, the first donation is more flawed than the second, because our emotions are so wired that we find the plight of a single identifiable individual much more salient to us than that of a large number of people we cannot identify (p 176). (Again, this brief article summarises arguments made more fully elsewhere.)

I am always struck by vacancies in Singer around precisely this elemental capacity of empathic response toward those next to us. Rather than regarding it as a weakness that blinds us to those far away, what if we were to craft and hone our capacity for empathic response, and then extend it by inference and imagination to those unseen? That seems to me the Christian logic of *agape* 'love'. The practice of this love discerns the inherent, God-given-then-revealed preciousness of the other; fans into flame bonds of affection; and so is strong and unapologetically emotionally predisposed to forms of individual and social justice. This kind of 'love' expands the moral imagination more effectively, for me at least, than appeals to logical inconsistencies and the consequent hypocrisies.

That is the 'route' by which I now find Singer's arguments for the proper treatment of animals so persuasive, all reprised in 82 Essays. As an avid meat-eater, my conscience is now regularly pricked about the evils of factory farming, at least. Hence my quasi-ness as I read, when my immediate wants are challenged by deeper loves for animals I have not seen. That new 'love' has started to affect my buying and eating.

For precisely the same reason, I continue to find unpersuasive his objections to practices arising from 'sanctity of life' ethics. While I would label it differently, the 'sanctity of life' is arguably a way to name the Christian predisposition to search for 'whatever is honourable', 'lovely' or 'excellent' (to borrow from Philippians 4:6) in all who fall under our gaze, whatever their state of life.

For Singer, the only relevant moral considerations at the end of life are the dying person's quality of life—measured largely according to their capacities and their suffering—and their choices arising from that experience. (This triad of capacity, suffering and choice arguably distills the historic philosophical contributions of Locke, Hume and Kant respectively.) At the same time, another relevant moral consideration for Singer is the collective. He repeatedly issues limits upon the obligations of taxpayers toward those who choose—or whose families choose—to 'prolong' life by medical means: 'taxpayers are not required to go that far in order to support the religious beliefs of their fellow citizens' (p 88). In this essay challenging the use of antibiotics for patients with advanced dementia, his triadic moral calculus of capacity, suffering and choice, and the
constraint upon individual choice implied by the collective, is simple:

[How many people want their lives to be prolonged if they are incontinent, need to be fed by others, can no longer walk, and their mental capacities have irreversibly deteriorated so that they can neither speak nor recognise their children? The interests of patients should come first, and I doubt that longer life was in the interests of these patients. Moreover, when there is no way of finding out what the patient wants, and it is very doubtful that continued treatment is in the interest of the patient, it is reasonable to take account of other factors, including the views of the family, and the cost to the community. (pp 85f)]

On the face of it, the essay is a subset of legitimate moral consideration of what might constitute ‘burdensome’ treatment when we have no conceivable way to restore a person to health. It is also part of a wider public policy debate about the dis-utility for the collective entailed by the overuse of antibiotics.

But despite the legitimacy of both questions, in this case the treatment (antibiotics) is not necessarily burdensome. Rather, life itself (in Singer’s estimate) has become so. There are prima facie problems with the paragraph, such as whether the considerable suffering caused by sepsis is an ‘interest’ the dementia sufferer would prefer to avoid, whatever their capacity for self-reporting. Singer further assumes that only a person’s present wishes count as morally relevant; and when these are inexpressible, Singer presumes them basically to be the same as his own. No consideration is made of whether or not a person’s previous expressions count—as, for example, in an ‘advance decision’, a diary, or even a survey response—thereby asserting a bifurcation of the person in dementia from what Singer construes as their former, ‘real’ self.

Hence without the empathic gaze of love to discern all he can within this person, his moral diagnosis becomes monolithic. The diminution of capacities translates straightforwardly, he assumes, into a life that is against these people’s interests; Singer’s own ‘I doubt that’ translates straightforwardly into the more objective-sounding ‘very doubtful that’; and by the end of the paragraph, the interests of family and community take precedence. As a dispassionate and unimaginative outsider, he risks underestimating the patient’s inner life when he judges them insensate and devoid of ‘interests’—an approach that tallies with his overt intention, articulated elsewhere, to depersonalise the human forms of the insensate and unresponsive. This kind of failure to inhabit someone’s inner world generously, imaginatively and empathically has fuelled horrific totalitarianisms—not, of course, that Singer lives from such a space. But he furnishes us with habits of mind that easily legitimate others to do so. I therefore find plenty of reasons in 82 Brief Essays to push back on Singer, sometimes vigorously.

Even so, I was also struck by the high-minded integrity of an ‘afterword’ in this volume, written into the vexed and polarised U.S. political scene after the election of the morally controversial Donald Trump. While he opposes this presidency, he exhorts readers to ‘start with a willingness to engage in dialogue and a readiness to treat members of the Trump administration as human beings’ and as people who are likely to ‘do the right thing if they could be shown a better way to achieve their goals’ (p 332). Only once that approach fails should morality then entail political tactics, and perhaps non-violent civil disobedience.

I recommend this book to anyone wanting to catch up on Singer, and for Christians willing to be pressed beyond our comfort zone and with a view to testing our own moral reasoning. It will make you feel mad, bad, sad, glad: it is an emotional roller-coaster. But so it should be, for anything that really matters.
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