



## Writings on an Ethical Life

*Peter Singer*

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## **Writings on an Ethical Life** Peter Singer

Love him or hate him, you certainly can't ignore him. For the past twenty years, Australian philosopher and professor of bioethics Peter Singer has pushed the hot buttons of our collective conscience. In addition to writing the book that sparked the modern animal rights movement, Singer has challenged our most closely held beliefs on the sanctity of human life, the moral obligations of citizens of affluent nations toward those living in the poorest countries of the world, and much more, with arguments that intrigue as often and as powerfully as they incite.

*Writings On An Ethical Life* offers a comprehensive collection of Singer's best and most provocative writing, as chosen by Singer himself. Among the controversial subjects addressed are the moral status of animals, environmental accountability, abortion, infanticide, euthanasia, and the ultimate choice of living an ethical life. This book provides an unsurpassed one-volume view of both the underpinnings and the applications of Singer's governing philosophy.

## **Writings on an Ethical Life Details**

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## Jimmy says

A must read for anyone interested in ethical questions. Kept me thinking throughout my read.

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## Otto Lehto says

"Love him or hate him..." is such a cliché, but I found myself repeating that line in my head, over and over, as I scoured through the book's shocking and powerful essays.

Peter Singer advocates uncompromising positions, but unlike most fanatics (most notably of religious persuasion), his approach is one of clear logic and quiet reason. It has all the more deadly force because it persuades and bends, in silent fatality, the reader's will.

Animal Rights is just one, although unarguably the most famous, of Singer's sanguine obsessions.

This book collects arguments and essays from different books. Some of his atheistic moral teachings follow a more "Christian" tone - easy to swallow but onerous to follow through - such as the call for Westerners to eschew luxury to donate most of their income to Third World charity. But many of the other essays are undoubtedly shocking, at least to conventional morality.

How about the case for the post-birth killing ("abortion") of freshly delivered babies? How about the case for a "Darwinian Left" as a replacement of feel-good leftism (perhaps my favourite essay in the entire collection)? How about the justification for an active euthanasia of elderly people who lack the will to live? How about the valuation of chimpanzees over brain-dead humans and retarded infants?

In all of those cases, Singer is brutally honest and yet reasonable. This book offers the best (and the worst) of what utilitarian logic has to offer. Singer's principles, if accepted, would change the way we do morality and politics.

I wasn't left convinced in EVERY case - certainly not in the case of post-natal abortions of handicapped children - but even where I disagreed, I have to admit the force of his arguments, and our disagreements are largely empirical ("when do babies begin to develop consciousness?"). Such is the power of good science.

At the same time, one could launch a more principled, philosophical case against utilitarianism per se. It would also be a fruitful endeavour. Anybody who wishes to be spellbound, infuriated or shocked by Singer will probably end up all three.

Peter Singer is an important philosopher and everybody should read this book.

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## Tony says

Singer channels Jeremy Bentham, or perhaps James Mill, providing utilitarian solutions to ethical dilemmas,

in this collection of readings from various of his books, published from 1975 to 2000. Sometimes you may think he's imitating Johnathan Swift, such as where Singer contemplates what it would be like to be a horse. (See for instance, under "All Animals Are Equal...", p.41 in this collection.) The book is not devoid of humor, even though many serious topics are discussed, relentlessly. SPOILER ALERT: No, he does not conclude that the Houyhnhnms are a superior species to humans. Darwinism does feature (of a particular 'left' variety that the author explains) but this can never serve to justify "speciesism" (a term Singer did not coin, but which he popularized effectively, such as in his book entitled "Animal Liberation"). There is much to be said by Singer in defense of our nearest relative, the chimpanzee.

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## **Darcia Helle says**

Sometimes a person takes on controversial topics, truly exploring both sides of the argument, in an attempt to dissect and understand before taking a position. Other times, a person begins with feet and mind firmly planted, then searches for the perfect arguments to advance his/her position. This book feels like the latter. Rather than a discussion of ethics, for me this collection of essays feels more like a soapbox monologue.

These essays have a narrow focus, with much of the discussion centered on the right to die, abortion, and infanticide. The content is repetitive and I found my mind wandering as I read.

While Singer's views can certainly be controversial, the content is thought-provoking regardless of which side you're on. He raises some interesting questions that don't have easy answers. Whether you agree or disagree with his position, the essays will no doubt leave you with much to consider.

\*I received a review copy from the publisher via Net Galley, in exchange for my honest review.\*

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## **Matt says**

I've heard so much about Peter Singer, I thought it was time to find out for myself what he was about. This book is a collection of Singer's most significant writings - so a great one-stop shop in the intellectual marketplace for all things Singer. Featured prominently are his writings on Animal Liberation, Saving and Taking Life (including a section on Justifying Infanticide), and Living Ethically.

All of Singer's work rests on these four presumptions:

1. Pain is bad, no matter whose pain it might be. But inflicting pain is not always wrong; it could be justified if it leads to less suffering. Pleasure and happiness are good.
2. Humans are not the only beings capable of feeling pain.
3. When considering how serious it is to take a life we should consider the characteristics of the individual being killed (e.g. its desires to continue living, the kind of life it is capable of leading).
4. We are not only responsible for what we do but what we could have prevented.

While Singer raises some important, difficult questions that weren't so easy to answer, I was disappointed. I didn't agree completely with his presumptions, thought he was overly rigid in considering and rejecting the sanctity of life ethic, and found the reasoning that led to his conclusions problematic, and the conclusions themselves troubling. The conclusions I had the biggest problem with were his justifications for infanticide and that under certain conditions animals were more entitled to protection or had more a right to life than

human beings. It is odd that a utilitarian never stopped to consider if what he was proposing would do more harm than good. He seemed so intent on dismantling the current sanctity of (human) life ethics that it was like it never crossed his mind to consider it. Another oddity is that Singer's conclusions, if embraced by society, would lead to a drastic shift in how we live and relate to each other. However, he made little effort to articulate how his positions could be made workable at a societal level. I have a hard time seeing how it could work and Singer focused so much on personal view of ethics, societal concerns get short shrift. (I should say that I disfavor utilitarian ethics generally. Part of my problem is that calculations weighing pain and pleasure are frequently short-sighted and too often self-interested. Singer's book only strengthened this objection.)

Even though I gave this book a low rating, it is worth a read, just to understand where he's coming from. His chapters on life and death were the most challenging in a number of respects. Whether you disagree with him or find him persuasive, he will sharpen your thinking on some important issues.

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### **David says**

While I am no utilitarian and I have a number of problems with Singer's arguments (particularly the drowning child argument) this is some of the most cogent and straightforwardly enjoyable philosophy I've yet come across. It is concerned with practical issues which affect every one of us - abortion, euthanasia, animal cruelty and vegetarianism and is extraordinarily good at presenting a coherent set of principles by which to live by. In part this was one of the main reasons I chose to become a complete vegetarian.

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### **Young Kim says**

I am not yet sure if I agree with his fundamental proposition that the capacity to feel pain and the capacity to suffer should be the key qualities in determining whether a being should be respected. I need to contemplate on the subject more. Regardless, the author certainly makes a strong case for the proposition in the book. If you want an overview of Peter Singer's work, this book is the fastest way to go.

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### **Carolyn Johnson says**

Peter Singer is currently the Ira W. DeCamp Professor of Bioethics at Princeton University's Center for Human Value's.

This is a book I picked up and thought might be a good read for me since it combines issues I'm very interested in. I'm very interested to read about his views on the moral obligations of citizens of affluent nations toward those living in the poorest countries in the world. I know he has very strong views on the Animals Rights Movement, and he has been a voice in trying to push Princeton University to make universally wise choices in what they offer students and staff to eat, based not only on what health value is involved, but what planetary impact is involved. I believe I'm in for a challenging read, and you might like it as well.

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## **Kristi says**

Well there is one section talking about how truly there are 15 ways to determine if someone is legally dead but a medical board determined a long time ago that we do not have the sufficient resources or time to perform the 15 tests on someone when they are assumed dead so they voted and chose, the breath, and heart rate. Among the other tests were tests for hormone levels, etc. The doctors on this medical board did say that in rare cases these other tests could possibly save lives, but are not performed. The controversy surrounding this is modern philosophy is, are we allowing people to die?

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## **Mary says**

Singer is a straight to the point philosopher. This book is a collection of chapters he's chosen from the large collection of books he's written over the years. Not everyone is going to like the chapters on euthanasia, but I think Singer's point is that what is more ethical is not necessarily what our society considers the norm. A good book for anyone who actually thinks about how their actions affect others and the world.

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## **Dustin says**

I find Peter Singer's work to be very influential, just as millions of others have. He literally created the animal right movement in the United States. I recommend this book to anyone interested in bio-medical ethics. He views really challenge the status quo, especially those about abortion, infanticide, and euthanasia.

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## **Chrissie says**

Pieces Peter Singer has extracted from his past books and essays and put into a nice collection that would be ideal for anyone wanting to learn more about Ethics or wants an introduction on Singers views. As a reader of some of his books first, the qualities of the book as an introduction were lost on me however I would recommend to others wanting to start learning more about Ethics.

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## **Joseph says**

*Writings on an Ethical Life* by Peter Singer is a collection of essays examining ethics. Singer is an Australian moral philosopher. He is currently the Ira W. DeCamp Professor of Bioethics at Princeton University and a Laureate Professor at the Centre for Applied Philosophy and Public Ethics at the University of Melbourne. He specializes in applied ethics and approaches ethical issues from a secular, utilitarian perspective. Singer is well known in the Animal Rights community. He is to animal rights what Richard Dawkins is to evolution and atheism, but seemingly kinder and less bellicose. I was expecting a re-hash of *Animal Liberation*, and there are portions of that book in this collection, but I received a much more human to human ethics lesson.

Many of the essays examine ethics with the use of thought experiments. The idea that we can easily

recognize something as being wrong, yet fail to see the same thing in our everyday lives. Utilitarianism is looked at and examined from different angles as well. Social issues like abortion, wealth distribution, starving children, and animal rights are all examined.

Since it is a collection of essays, the topics cover a wide range of subjects under the general umbrella of ethics. The definition of ethics itself is discussed and compared. The search for a one size fits all code of ethics is discussed as well as the roots of Western (Christian) ethics, which has itself evolved over time. Utilitarianism is discussed as the once possible standard. As much as the idea of providing the greatest happiness to the greatest number of people sounds good on the surface, it has a darker side. Typical thought experiments deal with the idea of killing some people so that a majority can survive -- a few suffer (die) so the majority can live would fall into the realms of utilitarianism. Take it a step further into a real world example. China's one-child policy as a method to control population and allow for enough resources for the population was considered barbaric by some because it leads to abortion (another ethical question) and infanticide. To borrow a pop-culture phrase, "Do the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few? "

As much as we like to think there is a clear and well-defined ethical code we often miss what is in front of us. Singer uses an example of a man who buys a rare car as a retirement investment. He can't insure it and plans to sell it to cover his retirement cost. He drives it occasionally and one day he is out and a situation develops where he has a choice of saving his car or saving a child on some railroad tracks, but not both. He chooses to save his car. Of course, this is meant for the reader to show outrage at the actions of the man. How could anyone choose to save an item over a human life? It seems to be a very clear-cut case of the man acting unethically, yet we do the same thing every day. We may not watch the child die, but we know there are children dying of exposure while we buy new clothes. New clothes not because we need them, but because ours no longer in style. The same can be said about the new car, new electronics, new phone that we want and do not need, especially when that money can be used to feed the starving. Does that make us as guilty as the man who saved his car?

We see, experience, and even support activities that are ethically hypocritical. Say on the issue of abortion we oppose abortion because the fetus is a child and it is innocent of any wrongdoing that could possibly justify its death. It is an ethical position, but not the only one. But, on the other hand, we oppose programs like WIC, medical care, headstart, and other programs that cost money because now that innocent child shouldn't be a burden on others.

Some of the examples above were mine based on Singer's examples, but they all seem to share one common feature. Individual ethics in today's world seem heavily dependent on personal cost and discomfort. It is easy to be ethical when it does not cost you anything. But if it cuts into your earning through taxes or takes away luxury you believe you deserve, it is suddenly a new issue and a different set of reasoning. This collection of essays, if they do nothing else, will make the reader think and hopefully think in a different way. More than a collection that was made to simply agree or disagree with, this collection will inspire debate on the topic of ethics, which is what is needed.

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## **Marco says**

Great book! Even if you don't agree with Peter Singer's take on various ethical issues, he will still challenge your views with his premises.

Peter Singer will sharpen your argumentative skills by testing the logic behind your principles. And, if you happen to agree with him, the conclusion you arrive to will summon you to act, for this is not passive logic or classroom exercises. This is life-and-death matter, with no exaggeration.

A 5+ stars book!

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### **Terry Tsurugi says**

I enjoyed this book, and I believe Singer's writings would be great material for discussion, whether in a classroom or book club. Even though I agree with most of what he says, I still feel vaguely dissatisfied, like his thoughts aren't the last word on any of the topics he covers. I feel that beyond his very simple and straightforward arguments, there are further complications and subtleties that he doesn't touch on. I'm supportive of the mission of utilitarian thinkers to set up rational foundations for our practices and decisions, but I feel like there is much further work that needs to be done in this area to bridge the still wide gap between utilitarian theories and the infinitely more complex world and society it seeks to understand. I guess I'm looking for an approach that combines the pragmatism and clarity of analytic philosophy with the richness and sophistication of continental philosophy, and I haven't found it yet, neither here nor anywhere else.

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