THE NEW MORALITY

Ethics has recently become a matter of life and death. Perhaps it always was, but in this century the terror of its questions has been somewhat muted by a reluctance to attempt answers. Muted, that is, until the comparatively recent revival of interest in moral philosophy. This revival is characterized by a concern with dramatic and consequential issues, and by a commitment to answering rather than clarifying or otherwise analysing the questions.

The most fundamental question for ethics remains simply: How should people live? Attempts to answer this question have led practitioners of "the new ethics" to reflect upon the ways in which our life-style is maintained at a very high cost, a cost that is to be counted in the lives of others. The issues which have consequently dominated current writing in moral philosophy are quite literally matters of life and death. Violence, abortion, euthanasia, the distribution of life-saving resources, the difference between killing and letting die, have been among the most frequently discussed, and they are all discussed in Peter Singer's provocative Practical Ethics (Cambridge Univ. Press, 237 pp.; £10 cloth, £2.95 paper).

Professor Singer has been prominent among writers who include animals in the list of others at whose expense we live, and in Practical Ethics he shows how the radical utilitarianism to which he is committed protects animals as well as people. To do so Singer develops a particular conception of equality, one which requires us to show equal consideration for the interests of all who, like ourselves and animals, are capable of having interests. Singer uses this conception of equality to great effect in attacking racism and sexism, particularly when adverse discrimination is based on alleged differences in I.Q. and other capacities. In a patient and fair-minded account he shows how, even if such differences between races, sexes or other identifiable groups could be demonstrated, these "facts" could not support discrimination against the disadvantaged but would, if anything, justify compensatory discrimination. Singer does not shrink from following his arguments through to what, for many, will be unpalatable conclusions, and there are strong chapters on abortion, euthanasia, and our responsibility to the poor in both health and wealth. There is a particularly good demolition of "thin end of the wedge" arguments in the discussion of euthanasia. In all of these areas Singer relies on
our accepting that there can be no moral difference between killing and letting die.

However, if Singer's book has one unifying theme it is his painstaking investigation of the value of life, or more exactly of which lives are valuable and how to weigh their value one against another. It is this difficult issue that I want to take up in more detail.

Before I do so, however, a couple of less apocalyptic points. The first is not simply stylistic. Singer adopts the practice throughout his book of using the pronoun 'she' to include both males and females rather than letting 'he' perform this function. This self-conscious piece of reverse discrimination is a gallant attempt to do justice to the feminist complaint that all writing appears to be about men when 'he' is used as an "unmarked" pronoun. Part of the feminist point is that women should appear as equal candidates for rôle models and that not all interesting things should seem to happen to men. Unfortunately, because Singer's main preoccupation is with life and death issues, his women's lives are all too interesting. They appear almost without exception as victims, of death, of dismemberment or worse. The only exceptions are where they act with reckless disregard of human life. I doubt whether this action of Singer's can genuinely count as "affirmative". What is genuinely affirmative, however, is Singer's courageous commitment to a figure which he believes we, the relatively well-off, owe to the poor, particularly in the Third World. For those with cheque books handy, the sum is ten per cent of your annual income.

Singer's central points all depend upon the way in which he combines and qualifies two forms of utilitarianism, "Classical" and "Preference" utilitarianism. For Classical Utilitarianism all that matters morally is that we should act so as to maximize happiness and minimize misery. Preference Utilitarianism on the other hand sees the satisfaction of the wishes of individuals as all that matters morally. Briefly, Singer applies Classical Utilitarianism to animals and the Preference variety to persons, since animals are not conscious of their preferences and cannot have the most crucial preference of all, that of wishing to go on living. Singer thus holds that we must not make animals miserable, but we may kill them so long as we replace all we kill with equally or more happy successors, thus maintaining or increasing aggregate happiness. We cannot do this to (or for?) persons, however, because to kill them against their will would frustrate preferences which would not be adequately compensated for by the creation of equally preferring successors. Singer believes that Preference Utilitarianism takes the "prior existence" rather than the "total" form. Like Singer, I would very much like to find a watertight defence of Prior-Existence Preference Utilitarianism, but I am not sure that Singer has yet found it.

Singer believes, with one exception to be discussed later, that future lives have no value at all, and that we are under absolutely no moral pressure to create them or see to it that they be created. He explains his attitude to future lives very concisely, in a reply to H. L. A. Hart's criticisms of his views, in The New York Review of Books (August 14th,
"The creation of preferences which we then satisfy", argues Singer, "gains us nothing. We can think of the creation of unsatisfied preferences as putting a debit in the moral ledger which satisfying them merely cancels out. That is why Preference Utilitarians can hold that it would be bad deliberately to create a being most of whose preferences would be thwarted, and yet hold that it is not a good thing to create a being most of whose preferences would be satisfied."

A first short answer might be: Why, if we are in the profit and loss business, cannot we think of the killing of someone against their will as putting a debit in the moral ledger which creating someone who wants to live cancels out? Singer's reply to this involves the notion of compensation, which he elaborates thus: "... with non-self-conscious life, birth and death cancel each other out; whereas with self-conscious beings, the fact that once self-conscious one may desire to continue living means that death inflicts a loss for which the birth of another is insufficient compensation" (p. 103).

I am unclear as to why the impossibility (if it is an impossibility) of compensating someone for loss of life shows that there is no amount of future lives, or total of future happiness or of preference satisfaction, which has the same moral weight as that uncompensated loss of life. It may well be persuasive as an argument against straight one-for-one replacement so that I cannot justify my murdering you by immediate procreation. But where, in a hard case, we have to choose between saving either the life of one person or those of two others where we cannot save all three, we (and certainly Singer) believe that we ought to save the greater number of lives. The fact that the one who loses cannot be compensated for the loss is not a reason for not maximizing. Why then is compensation crucial where we have to choose between preserving one present life and bringing into being two future people or, indeed, any number of future people? We should bear in mind that the future people cannot be compensated either! It all depends then on Singer's showing that not coming into existence is no bad thing. Singer has two arguments for this proposition. One is that there exists no-one of whom we can say "the loss is yours"; and the other is that future lives have no value and so it cannot be bad not to bring them into existence.

For the argument against there being any value in future lives Singer relies on the profit and loss account. But even if we grant, as Singer says, that the creation of preferences which we then satisfy gains us nothing (although the satisfaction of satisfying preferences, not to mention the God-like satisfaction of creation, is not obviously of no account), it is difficult to think that it does not gain them something. They gain life and its satisfactions.

Singer wants to avoid the embarrassment of treating people, individuals, as replaceable in the way that animals are, while at the same time preserving our intuition that we should care about future generations to the extent of not spoiling the environment for such future people as there will be. But we must not value future people so much as to find ourselves saddled with the moral obligation of procreating ourselves blue. Singer
manages to achieve all this with great ingenuity, but the cost seems to me to be high.

Part of the cost is the loss of our sense of what's good about preference satisfaction and with it the sense of what might be good about the continuation, beyond the present generation, of such lives as can feel such satisfactions. Singer holds that goodness consists in preference satisfaction but that there is nothing good about preference satisfaction. This allows him to hold that while unsatisfied preferences are bad, satisfied preferences are in no way good. They "gain us nothing". But surely, the value of satisfying preferences is not just the stale, flat and unprofitable task of repaying overdrafts so that once repayed our balance of satisfaction is again set at zero. The value is the satisfaction.

Singer's account of satisfaction seems to have the same defects as Russell's. What satisfies a preference is what cancels it out; what we want is not, as we may think, what we desire, but simply that, whatever it is, that removes our wants. Here preferences are contentless, not so much to be satisfied as to be removed, cancelled out. It is doubtful if Singer can make any sense of choosing between preferences, or see some lives as richer than others because of the quality of their respective satisfactions. I doubt also if he is able to object to preferred preference reduction, where, as in the case of voluntary heroin addiction, a course is chosen which gradually forecloses options and reduces the quality of life.

Suppose I discover some interstellar radiation which will render all creatures sterile in three generations unless it is deflected and I have also worked out how this can simply be done. No-one else has noticed anything. Unless I deflect the radiation there will be no future generations, although everyone now alive can procreate successfully if they wish. So, no people will exist in the future independently of my decision. For Singer the only reason I could have for deflecting the radiation would be the wishes of people now living that I do so; and if all people now living were indifferent or wanted me to "leave well alone" I would have no moral reason not to allow life to become extinct. Suppose there were a worldwide debate as to whether or no we should allow the human race to die out by simply ceasing to reproduce so that the present generation would be the last. What reasons could Singer have to persuade anyone not to decide on extinction? And if there were a real danger (?) of people deciding to cease reproduction, could he be sad or feel the decision was wrong in any way?

This is all very bleak indeed and it is a bleakness of which Singer is not unaware. But it does detract somewhat from the vivid sense of humanity and of the importance of the quality of life that otherwise comes strongly through his book. It is also at odds with some others of Singer's arguments.

In elaborating his conception of Prior-Existence Preference Utility, Singer extends the idea of priority beyond those actually in existence to include some future people. According to Singer, what matters to Prior-Existence Utilitarians is "people who exist now or, independently of our decisions, will exist at some future time, rather than... the creation of
possible extra people” (p. 103). But it is again unclear why only extra future people don’t matter morally. Why should we care about the preferences of those who will exist independently of our will, but not about those we could create? These two categories are not of course as independent as they appear. There is a feedback effect here and the number of people who will exist is influenced by *inter alia* the number we think there ought to be, so the notion that future people are “extra” depends upon our already accepting that we have no obligation to produce them.

Earlier in the book Singer takes on the daunting task of rank-ordering the value of various lives. The way we decide which lives are more and which less valuable is via sympathetic imagination. We are to imagine ourselves as in turn a mouse or a man and then, comparing what life would be like for that creature and supposing the life would be an optimum mouse-life and an optimum human life, the one we prefer is the most valuable. So “If it is true that we can make sense of the choice between existence as a mouse and existence as a human then . . . we can make sense of the idea that the life of one kind of animal possesses greater value than the life of another.” (p. 90.) Among other uses, this method of comparative “objective” evaluation can help when we are forced to choose between killing one sort of creature or the other. Singer discusses such choices only between different species, and claims that it is in no way speciesist to value one species over another on the basis of which we would prefer to be. But if such exercises of the imagination are a good way of arriving at comparative judgements about the respective value of lives, why stop at inter-species comparisons? Why not first imagine life as a man and then life as a woman and see which on reflection we find more agreeable and so more worth saving? Many will be quite clear which sex has the better life, but for those who find this too close, we can compare the life of a child with that of an adult, or those with disabilities (deafness, dyslexia) with those without; or indeed imagine life with disfigurement or simply ugliness and compare these with the lives of the beautiful or even the ordinary. In each case we are likely to have a very clear picture of which life we would rather lead and so of which we would be more justified in choosing to save (?).

Now of course Singer believes that the lives of people are specially valuable and that we ought to respect equally the interests of all people. But if his imaginative exercise really is a way of finding an answer to the most difficult question of what makes one life more valuable than another, it is not clear from anything Singer says why we should not use it when, perhaps *in extremis*, we have to make a choice between the lives of people. But Singer’s imaginative exercise has another use. If we can imagine ourselves into the life of a mouse so as to make sense of choosing between existence as a mouse and existence as a minnow, why should we not imagine ourselves into the shoes of some future person and compare existence with non-existence and so see the value of existence to that future person?

Here Singer must insist on his second objection to the value of future
lives. It is simply that a future being "being unborn and impersonal can feel no loss of life" (p. 102). And, presumably, to feel no loss is to suffer no loss. But in one sense this is not true and in another it is an objection to a view Singer does not wish to abandon. If 'feel' here is meant to mean 'be conscious of', then all who die too suddenly to be aware of it, or in their sleep, and so on, also suffer no loss. If on the other hand it means simply that we cannot say now that there is any actual person whose desire for existence is thwarted by our decision not to allow her to come into being, this is true. But it is also true of the miserable being, who doesn't exist at the time that we have to decide whether or not she should exist, and whose future frustrations Singer believes we must presently take into account.

It comes down to this. If, as Singer accepts, positive and negative acts are isomorphic, then my two omissions to create two future beings, one miserable and the other happy, are both acts with moral consequences if either one is. For in neither case does the being whose future welfare I must consider exist at the time I must make my decision. The argument Singer offers to avoid this embarrassing parallelism is the somewhat odd idea that overdrafts are bad but credit balances are not good, and I have suggested that this is only plausible so long as it is supposed that the only thing credit balances are good for is the repayment of overdrafts. For Singer there is no such thing as a credit balance in the moral ledger, only debits and their cancellation. But if we think of satisfaction as satisfying, then we can, as Singer recommends, imagine what life would be like for those we might allow to exist, and have a sense of what a loss it is never to have existed or of how bad it would be if self-conscious life came to an end.

I have concentrated, like most reviewers, on the difficulties that I have had with Singer's arguments. These however contribute to rather than detract from the interest and importance of the book. It is an admirable introduction to the seriousness of the problems of practical ethics and to the moral commitment required for their solution.

UNIVERSITY OF MANCHESTER

JOHN HARRIS

REPLY TO DR HARRIS

I shall concentrate, like most of those who reply to reviews, on the objections Harris makes to my position. I trust this will not be taken to show any lack of appreciation of the more favourable comments he makes.

The objections focus on a central issue raised by my discussion of the value of life. The issue can be raised by asking why it is wrong to kill someone. One answer is that if the person killed would have continued to lead a happy life, had we not killed her (I see what Harris means about my use of the female pronoun), then the loss of happiness resulting from our killing is what makes the act of killing wrong.

This simple answer gets us into difficulties. It suggests that the positive value of bringing a happy person into existence is as great as the value