On *Ethics in an Age of Self-Interest* (Singer 1993)

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This book — How Are We To Live? Ethics in an Age of Self-Interest — *offers an accessible introduction to Peter Singer's system of practical ethics. While leaving some philosophical questions up in the air, it may encourage readers to get off their armchairs and out into the world.*

"Is there still anything to live *for*? Is anything worth pursuing, apart from money, love, and caring for one's own family? Is so, what could it be?" Like any prospective reader, I was drawn in. Who doesn't want a philosophically sound argument for how to live one's life? More specifically, I hoped to learn more about secular accounts of objectivist ethics. What do we mean by "ethical behavior" and what justification is there to give authority to normative "ought" statements? And, to presage the conclusion, the book's subtitle suggests modern society may be too individualistic and self-interested - a favorite line of sociologists from Emile Durkheim to Robert Putnam.

While Singer does give his own answers to these questions, the book is less a secular account of objectivist ethics than 1) a conceptual history of "self-interest"; a central term Singer twists and stretches to cover his answers to the book's driving questions, and 2) a cursory plug for universal utilitarianism, fleshed out using Singer's familiar topics of global poverty, animal liberation, and environmentalism. The book concludes with a final argument for why acting ethically ultimately serves your self-interest by giving your life meaning and purpose. While he can't bridge Sidgwick's "immoral paradox" of ethics vs self-interest (1907), Singer aims to "soften" this tension by showing ways we can expand our understanding of self-interest to include ethical behavior.

The first chapter introduces "the ultimate choice" to be made in one's life: to what extent do you live for yourself or live for others? A noble-sounding dichotomy, but Singer hasn't yet defined the latter as "ethical" (this only comes in chapter nine), so for the majority of the book the reader must confront a confusing conflation of ethical conduct and any other-directed behavior. In chapters 2-4, Singer condenses 2500 years of social and intellectual history into a short and snappy history of individualism, weaving through Socrates, Martin Luther, Thomas Hobbes, Alexis de Tocqueville, Karl Marx, Max Weber, and *Habits of the Heart* (Bellah et al. 1985).

Singer doesn't suggest abandoning the modern concern for self-interest, despite its deleterious effects on inequality and the environment. Instead, he shows how this preoccupation can be stretched to encompass more ethical (read "prosocial") behaviors. Chapters five uses our commitment to friends and family members as evidence that selfishness isn't genetic. Chapter six offers Japanese society as an example of a more communitarian ethos. Chapter seven uses an extended discussion of the prisoner's dilemma to explain the benefits of cooperation among local strangers. While contemporary work in moral psychology does a better job of explaining the evolution of morality in terms of group-level selection (cf. Haidt 2013), I especially liked his discussion of Robert Axelrod's *The Evolution of Cooperation* (1984).

The preliminary conclusion reached at the end of chapter seven is a widening conception of self-interest: as long as we're talking about friends, family, in-group members, or people you live in close proximity to, there is often much to be gained (self-interestedly) by acting ethically (read "prosocially"). The rest of the book deals with the admittedly tougher question: *why should we act ethically towards complete strangers, or those in distant countries?*

Before answering this question, Singer finally gives us a definition of ethical behavior:

> "To act ethically is to act in a way that one can recommend and justify to others—that, at least, seems to be part of the very meaning of the term." (p.173).

This meta-ethical statement may seem hollow to the average reader looking for normative content: A persuasive person can "recommend and justify" anything they want! Plus, the final escape clause suggests any disagreement should be directed at the term itself, not his definition. He strengthens this conception by adding a universalism common to R.M. Hare (1963), John Rawls (1971), and others: ethical reasoning should take place outside of your subjective position; from the perspective of a neutral bystander, "the universe", etc. (Lazari-Radek and Singer 2016). While a much stronger position, Singer leaves the philosophical heavy lifting aside and quickly proceeds to the next question: *why should we act ethically?*

To this end, chapter nine offers a brief history of unsatisfactory answers from the likes of Gilgamesh, Buddha, Plato, Jesus, Kant, David Hume, Dostoyevsky, Kierkegaard, and AJ Ayer. While his treatments are admittedly surface level, one can group these answers into four groups: fear of punishment, a sense of duty, an optimistic view that ethical behavior is in our human nature, and a pessimistic view that all ethical systems are arbitrary and subjective. Singer's answer seems to be a combination of duty and human nature.

First, we have a duty to use our human capacity for reason. We have the ability to step outside ourselves and imagine the needs of other people. While not explainable by a

simplistic Darwinian account, this ability emerged as an unintended by-product of the same ability to reason that allowed our species to thrive. I found the jump from ability to duty weak, and Singer ultimately has to appeal to our self-interest for his final push to live an ethical life.

To do so, he distinguishes between two camps: those that think a meaningful life comes from a subjective orientation, and those that think a meaningful life comes from devotion to objective and external goals or projects. This was my favorite part of the book. Contrary to the dominant "inward turn" of the twentieth century, he explains the human need for external purpose using a variety of sources, from factory farms (whose hens' lack of purpose leads them to boredom-induced homicide), to the frustrated housewives immortalized in Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963). He also effectively marshals evidence from Bellah and colleagues' *Habits of the Heart* (1985), a widespread sociological study of Americans' moral language that demonstrate the erosion of Americans' values of civil and institutional engagement in favor of radical or expressive individualism (cf. Sheliaism).

To combat this "inward turn" Singer offers an external goal to devote your life to: "The reduction of pain and suffering, wherever it is to be found."(p.232). This universal utilitarian agenda will be familiar to anyone acquainted with his work, and he wastes no time elaborating on it here. This leads to one of the confusing moves of the book: after setting up the history of ethical terms and meta-ethical debates, Singer sidesteps the justification for his normative system and instead takes a pragmatic approach:

> "As yet, I offer no philosophical justification for taking this apparently objectivist stance. For the moment, it is enough that, in practice, it seems to work." (p.207)

> "How we would find meaning in our lives if all avoidable pain and suffering had been eliminated is an interesting topic for philosophical discussion, but the question is, sadly, unlikely to have any practical significance for the foreseeable future." (p.223).

In the final chapter, Singer offers his big finale against subjectivism and towards an external universal utilitarianism:

> "I am not defending the objectivity of ethics in the traditional sense. Ethical truths are not written into the fabric of the universe: to that extent the subjectivist is correct. If there were no beings with desires or preferences of any kind, nothing would be of value and ethics would lack all content. On the other hand, once there are beings with desires, there are values that are not only the subjective values of each individual being. The possibility of being led, by reasoning, to the point of view of the universe provides as much 'objectivity' as there can be. When my ability to reason shows me that the suffering of another being is very similar to my own suffering

> and (in an appropriate case) matters just as much to that other being as my own suffering matters to me, then my reason is showing me something that is undeniably true. I can still choose to ignore it, but then I can no longer deny that my perspective is a narrower, and more limited one, than it could be. This may not be enough to yield an objectively true ethical position. (One can always ask: what is so good about having a broader and more all-encompassing perceptive?) But it is as close to an objective basis for ethics as there is to find." (p.231-32).

If I could sum up his main points:

1. Self-interested behavior is often self-defeating (cf. the paradox of hedonism).
2. Ethical behavior (in one sense) is to act pro-socially in order to ultimately reduce universal pain and suffering.
3. We should widen our conception of self-interest to include acting ethically towards friends, family, neighbors, and proximate strangers. In these situations, acting ethically often overlaps with what is best for us self-interestedly.
4. To act ethically toward complete or distant strangers (with no regard for self-interest) is to use the highest capacity of our uniquely-human ability to reason. If this ability doesn't convey you with a sense of duty, acting ethically can serve as an external goal that gives your life (a sense) of purpose and meaning.

Ultimately, *How Are We to Live?* brings together an impressive array of philosophical and historical sources to tell a convincing story of the paradoxes of our modern self-interested culture. While social scientific research provides more systematic data on some of Singer's central concepts, he weaves them together in an accessible fashion. And, while not what I hoped to get out of the book, I appreciate his push towards applied ethics: If you are concerned enough to read a book about ethics, then you should at least be willing to act on some ethical behavior.

That said, I wish he was more systematic in his definitions of self-interest and ethics. His separate discussions of meta-ethics (in chapter 9) and normative statements (chapters 10-11) make the reader work unnecessarily hard to piece together a coherent statement. Furthermore, these discussions left some philosophical weight to be desired – one should look elsewhere for a rigorous defense of ethical objectivism or universal utilitarianism. This brevity frees up space for his political discussions on animal rights, environmentalism, or global poverty, but these detours will not convince anyone who either 1) doesn't already agree with him or 2) hasn't read his previous work. I was a bit disappointed with this pragmatic turn. Rather than defending an objective normative system, Singer gets us most of the way there and then asks us to jump the rest of the way, baiting the other side with pathos about suffering animals.

One of the larger ironies of the book was his ultimate appeal to self-interest: one ought

to acting ethically because it gives them a (subjective) sense of meaning and purpose. After spending the first half of the book critiquing excessive self-interest, the grand conclusion of his book ultimately rests on this very motive. Perhaps this can be seen as a coy selling point: the ultimate harmony of our desires with the universe's. But this Humean optimism feels cheap and hasty. To ammend the book's opening line, "Is there still anything to live for **besides self-interest?**" I hope to explore this question in future reading. How do secular accounts of objectivist ethics marshal enough authority to make normative statements? Derek Parfit's three-volume *On What Matters* (2011) promises anything but a cursory treatment of this question, and a better grounding in competing ethical systems would undoubtedly help my approach to this question. *How Are We to Live?* offers an accessible introduction to Singer's system of practical ethics. While leaving some philosophical questions up in the air, it may encourage readers to get off their armchairs and out into the world.

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