

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-05075-4 - God, the Good, and Utilitarianism: Perspectives on Peter Singer

Edited by John Perry

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

John Perry

If you have only ever heard one criticism of utilitarianism, it is likely the charge that utilitarianism permits what is morally abhorrent: torturing an innocent person to entertain a large crowd, for example. With such possibilities in mind, some philosophers dismiss all consequentialist theories of ethics as unworthy of consideration and on their way to extinction.¹ Others, often utilitarians themselves, suggest that this willingness to do the abhorrent should redound to the theory's credit: utilitarians are simply those brave enough to bite the bullet and follow their principles, wherever they lead. Put simply, we often assume that the issue with utilitarianism is that it overrides common moral rules or intuitions.

This book concerns a quite different facet of utilitarianism: its understanding of *the good*. In recent years there has been a renewed interest in basing ethics on what is good – on what leads to happiness and well-being, rather than on duty, rules, or rights. The causes for this are various. One cause is that, among religious ethicists, there has been a return to virtue, occasioned by a growing discontent with those modern moral theories based on abstract rules or procedural fairness. Many of these have been surprised to discover (though it should have been no surprise) that their innovation is hardly innovative at all. The centrality of human good and well-being was taken for granted in Aristotle's eudaimonism, Aquinas's natural law, and even Protestant views grounding ethics in the commands of a benevolent God. This was the default position. Another cause of this shift is prominent among those commonly thought to be the theological ethicists' enemies: philosophers and scientists who hope that the good will provide an objective, even a biological or neuropsychological, grounding for ethics by which to sidestep the pitfalls of pluralism. Regardless of the cause,

¹ Elizabeth Anscombe, 'Modern Moral Philosophy', *Philosophy* 33:124 (January 1958): 1–19 (17); J.J.C. Smart and Bernard Williams, *Utilitarianism: For and Against* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 150.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-05075-4 - God, the Good, and Utilitarianism: Perspectives on Peter Singer

Edited by John Perry

Excerpt

[More information](#)

greater attention to the good in ethics is a welcome development, but it also raises the stakes for how we conceive the good. It is this facet of utilitarianism that this volume explores, rather than now-wearying debates about whether it would justify the Romans feeding prisoners to the lions or public hangings of the innocent (those remain important questions, of course, especially for those about to be eaten).

A related facet of utilitarianism examined in these essays is its relation to theological ethics. This is often overlooked, perhaps for the simple reason that the answer seems so obvious. What has Bentham to do with Jerusalem? The religious traditions that have most influenced the West all place significant importance on moral rules. Within such a perspective, utilitarianism might seem to be a non-starter, and hardly even worth considering. That is too quick a dismissal, for several reasons. A focus on the good – as opposed to duty, rights, or rule-following – has a significant Christian heritage, both in patristic and medieval sources, and in twentieth-century efforts such as proportionalism and situationalism.

Not only does the history of Christian ethics have within it hints of consequentialism, the converse is also true, for utilitarianism itself was originally a Christian endeavour and its earliest defences were works of moral theology. William Paley's highly theological *Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy* remained standard fare on university reading lists for many years, while Bentham's *Principles of Morals and Legislation*, published the same decade, was virtually unknown. In less than a century, however, theological utilitarianism had been entirely eclipsed. John Stuart Mill, who took his cue from Bentham rather than Paley, offered a version of the theory associated with deep scepticism towards religion, and whose practical conclusions were regarded as anti-Christian. This transition alone deserves further study if we hope to understand the history of ethics in modernity.

Studying these two facets – utilitarianism's focus on the good and its relation to theological ethics – would still be too broad and so this volume approaches the topic by focusing specifically on the work of Peter Singer. Singer is an apt choice not only because he is the world's best-known utilitarian, but because his work touches on our two facets in important ways. First, religion, especially Christianity, plays a prominent role in Singer's work because he presents his own ethical theory as a self-conscious rejection of those elements of Christianity that he sees as morally problematic, such as the place it assigns animals in the natural world and its regard for the sanctity of life. It is therefore worth exploring whether his critique of Christianity is sound, and whether he deserves the often-hostile

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-05075-4 - God, the Good, and Utilitarianism: Perspectives on Peter Singer

Edited by John Perry

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

3

condemnation of Christians. Second, Singer has recently suggested that he is in the process of rethinking the concept of the good in his own theory, and thus it is a timely occasion to study it more fully. Singer's rethinking has been prompted by Derek Parfit's *On What Matters* and by Henry Sidgwick, who is prominent in Parfit's book, and whom Singer regards as the greatest utilitarian. In brief, Singer is now increasingly open to the possibility that ethics may have an objective basis; it may be irrational, and ultimately bad, for me to prefer certain things. What difference this change-of-mind might make remains to be seen. A minimal change might mean Singer merely shifts the foundation of his utilitarianism from preferences to pleasure. Yet it could foreshadow a more fundamental change, considering a broader range of goods as morally important.

The essays originated at an academic conference at the University of Oxford in 2011. Held under the auspices of the McDonald Centre for Theology, Ethics & Public Life, and funded by the British Academy, it was entitled *Christian Ethics Engages Peter Singer*. With this name in mind, some attendees hoped the goal was to present a harmony of the two perspectives, showing that utilitarianism and Christianity were entirely compatible on practical matters. Others expected the opposite, and hoped to see a full-scale Christian critique of Singer and all that he stands for. Both groups were predictably disappointed. The real goal was more modest: to bring onto the academic stage a debate that might otherwise be confined to talk radio, cable news, Twitter, and the rest of the culture-wars media machine. Singer is a prominent voice and his arguments deserve to be read with generosity and respect; indeed, doing so is a virtue and duty required of scholars.

This may sound trivial but, in organizing the conference, we found that it was anything but. From two different quarters, there were vigorous, even hostile, critiques of the *very idea* of this conference. Certain Christian ethicists argued that the event would simply give legitimacy to the views of a marginal, extremist fringe (i.e. utilitarians) and that, in the end, the Christians would come out of the exchange on the losing end because we couldn't count on our interlocutors to debate in good faith. There were two reasons that led us to reject this argument. First, like it or not, utilitarianism is not a fringe view, but is influential in the academy and, increasingly, in popular culture and government. Second, behind this critique lies a mistaken assumption about the nature and purpose of scholarly conferences. A conference is not the sort of thing one can 'win'. A quite different objection to the very idea of the conference was that Singer's views are anti-feminist and so to invite him to speak in an 'exchange' with Christian ethicists would

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-05075-4 - God, the Good, and Utilitarianism: Perspectives on Peter Singer

Edited by John Perry

Excerpt

[More information](#)

be no exchange at all; it would simply be one batch of misogynists preaching to a misogynist choir. The flaws with this objection should be obvious. It is based on the mistaken beliefs that there are no Christian feminists and that Singer is anti-feminist.² I mention this background because it shows that the charitable, yet candid, exchange of views displayed in the following essays was not easily achieved.

The first of the essays sets the stage for the others by asking, ‘Where did utilitarianism come from?’ That question could be asking two different things, and so the essay provides two answers. One answer is historical. From what genealogy did utilitarianism emerge? That is, who were the first utilitarians and in what socio-political context did they develop their ideas? The other answer is conceptual. By what process of reasoning would someone become a utilitarian?

The essay shows that, historically, utilitarianism first emerged from Christian theologians who were themselves responding to perceived challenges to natural law. Key aspects of their work were then challenged by Bentham and Mill, leading to forms of utilitarianism that are more recognizable today. This contrasts with the ‘Standard Story’ told both by utilitarianism’s champions (it is the one, true rational ethics that throws off the monkish superstition of all past theories) and by utilitarianism’s critics (it is a rejection of ethics and an aberration, soon to die out).

Where does utilitarianism come from *conceptually*? How does one come to embrace it? The essay recounts Singer’s answer to this question, showing that his view is characterized by three features, each of which we have reason to doubt. First, Singer’s utilitarianism is committed to a particular vision of rationality as the only possible mode by which ethics can proceed: the deductive certainty of mathematics or geometry. Second, classical utilitarians are interested in only one way of evaluating the good: that is, by rendering all expressions of moral goodness commensurable and measurable on a single scale. Third, they are surprisingly averse to considerations of human nature. Bentham and Sidgwick shaped modern utilitarianism so that it displays these three features, but they need not have. There were other possible avenues they might have followed, connecting both Christian moral sense theory and Hume’s ethics to today. The essay explores some of these alternatives, especially by comparing Jonathan Haidt’s Humean utilitarianism to Singer’s work.

² See Peter Singer, ‘An Intellectual Autobiography’, in *Peter Singer Under Fire: The Moral Iconoclast Faces His Critics*, ed. Jeffrey Schaler (Peru, IL: Open Court, 2009), 1–74 (40, 49).

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-05075-4 - God, the Good, and Utilitarianism: Perspectives on Peter Singer

Edited by John Perry

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

5

The second chapter is Singer's, and it well displays our twin themes of God and the Good. In it, he presents a brief religious autobiography, explaining how he came to his current views on God and religion. In brief, he became sceptical of Christianity at an early age because of certain puzzling stories that he read in the Bible, and because of the hypocrisy of certain Christians that he met. Later, he was troubled by how he saw the social conservatism of some Australian churches as harmful to others on topics like obscenity legislation and abortion.

Singer then offers a more substantive engagement with Christian ethics on four issues: the treatment of animals, taking life, duties to the poor, and moral theory. He sees both the Greek philosophical tradition and the Hebrew Scriptures as anthropocentric, and thus ultimately immoral in their lack of regard for non-human animals. Though he recognizes that there are biblical passages that seem to give high regard to animals and Christians who put this into practice (movements such as Christian vegetarianism, for example), these are minority voices and largely ineffectual. The 'dominion' over nature granted to humans by Genesis still carries the day in how the West regards animals. On this issue Eastern religions such as Buddhism are better in theory, he says, though societies influenced by Buddhism are rarely better in practice.

On the taking of life, Singer's critique is more robust. The core tenet of Christian ethics on this issue (and the root of the problem, as far as he's concerned) is 'the doctrine of the sanctity of life', which he defines as the double claim that it is always wrong to intentionally kill the innocent and that there is an absolute right to life for all members of the human species. Singer's response to this is well known: simply being *Homo sapiens* doesn't merit certain sorts of treatment, any more than being white or black skinned should merit certain sorts of treatment. Rather, what should matter are features such as being sentient or being rational. Unlike skin colour these are morally relevant because they influence how we experience pleasure, pain, happiness, preferences, and so on. Singer follows this with a sharp critique of the Catholic distinction between ordinary and extraordinary forms of medical treatment, and the principle of double effect. He concludes by noting one, perhaps surprising, point on which he agrees with a 'traditional' Christian view: that human life begins at conception. This does not lead him to oppose abortion, however, for he regards murder as killing persons rather than killing humans.

When Singer turns to obligations to the poor, he notes that his utilitarianism and Christianity are in harmony. Both consider it a moral duty to

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-05075-4 - God, the Good, and Utilitarianism: Perspectives on Peter Singer

Edited by John Perry

Excerpt

[More information](#)

give to those in need, even at significant personal sacrifice. Unlike the treatment of animals, where Singer can find affinity with only a minority strand within Christianity, generosity to the poor is at the core of Christian teaching, running throughout the Bible and subsequent millennia. He closes the section by asking Christians to follow this teaching more consistently.

Finally, Singer briefly considers a series of questions in the realm of utilitarian moral theory. Through most of his career, he has been a preference utilitarian, meaning that his particular brand of utilitarianism is grounded on what maximizes preferences, rather than, for example, on pleasure or happiness. On this view, moral judgements are not ‘reasonable’ in the usual sense of the word, but may be statements that reflect our desires (as in Hume) or universalizable imperatives (as in R.M. Hare). But now, persuaded partly by Parfit’s *On What Matters*, Singer reports that he is sympathetic to Sidgwick’s non-naturalist objectivism. Preference utilitarians can remain agnostic on whether anyone’s preferences are morally good or bad. If you prefer to eat dirt, while I prefer rice, who is to say which is better? What matters is that our preferences are satisfied without thwarting others. But a Sidgwickian objectivist cannot maintain this agnosticism. On this view, at least as Singer appropriates it, some preferences are simply irrational. He concludes by offering a hypothetical defence that might allow him to remain a preference utilitarian despite what Sidgwick and Parfit say, while acknowledging that he has not yet decided. He closes with the tantalizing speculation that there may yet be ‘some other form of consequentialism that has more than one intrinsic value’.

Before I summarize the remainder of the essays that comprise this volume, it is worth noting that Singer’s chapter displays one feature that we intentionally encouraged at the conference, and which is discernible throughout the subsequent chapters. The questions we are asking about utilitarianism – about its understanding of the good and its relation to religious ethics – can be addressed from three perspectives: moral theory, history, and practical ethics. Or to put it another way, moral theory cannot stand on its own; it is both inherently practical discipline and unavoidably historically situated. To use language more familiar to Christian theology, ethics is *pastoral* and *traditional*. Utilitarianism, whether in its pre-Victorian Christian origins or the secular utilitarianism of Bentham and Mill, has always had a practical bent. Throughout Singer’s career, real-life concerns such as cruelty to animals and famine have motivated his writing, and the causes that he personally supports. In an online interview, the economist Tyler Cowen even suggested to Singer, half-teasingly, that Singer’s practical

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-05075-4 - God, the Good, and Utilitarianism: Perspectives on Peter Singer

Edited by John Perry

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

7

ethics makes him pastoral in a more literal sense, a sort of rabbi: a 'Jewish moralist' providing a mishnah for the secular Talmud that is utilitarianism.³

What has been less common to the utilitarian tradition is its self-understanding *as a tradition*. It is a movement that is situated within a particular historical context, one that is extended over generations and achieves its coherence partly by reference to influential texts and decisive verdicts on practical questions. Some schools of thought quite obviously fit this description, such as rabbinic Judaism, Aristotelianism, and Catholicism. Utilitarianism belongs on that list too, but has often eschewed that image, not recognizing that it too has 'authoritative' figures like Mill and Sidgwick or that it emerged as it did because it first faced a particular set of problems: in Bentham and Mill's case, the problems addressed by the great Victorian reform movements.

We can see why some utilitarians might want to deny the parallel between their theory and, say, Judaism or Aristotelianism, because denying it appears to afford a strategic advantage. It allows utilitarianism to represent itself as the basic or default 'moral point of view' from which all other points of view begin, committed as it is to nothing more than happiness and fairness. Other moral theories *add onto* this basic ground with various embellishments, such as virtue or God's command or categorical imperatives, but since these cannot garner universal assent, real ethics must be limited to what is morally basic. Unsurprisingly this basic ground turns out to be utilitarianism.

More plausible would be to see these various traditions as just that; none is more 'basic' than others. Each begins from somewhere: that God's law is revealed in Torah, or that eudaimonia is the well-functioning of the rational part of the soul in accordance with virtue, or that it is immoral to treat others only as means, or that each counts as one and none for more than one. Acknowledging these differences need not (as is sometimes supposed) lead to relativism. What follows, rather, is that a full understanding of an ethical tradition demands careful and sustained attention not only to its underlying theory, but to its full historical context, how it conceives itself as a conversation over time about how to live morally. To ask that utilitarianism self-consciously consider itself a tradition is not to stack the deck in favour of religious ethics, simply because tradition might be a word more commonly used in religious ethics than moral philosophy. In fact, part of what makes utilitarian ethics attractive is precisely how well it scores when viewed from such a perspective: Bentham stood for prison reform when being 'soft on crime' was unpopular; Mill advocated women's rights

³ A video of the interview is available at www.bloggingheads.tv/videos/2022.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-05075-4 - God, the Good, and Utilitarianism: Perspectives on Peter Singer

Edited by John Perry

Excerpt

[More information](#)

when many thought it foolish; Singer was a friend to animals when this was seen as sentimentalism.

It is because of this that the following essays give attention not only to moral theory, but to the history from which those theories emerge and the practical conclusions to which they lead. Singer displays all of these in his chapter, as does the subsequent essay by Charles Camosy. Much of the impetus for the conference came from Camosy who, since then, has published a book on the topic.⁴ More so than with any of the other authors, Camosy is arguing for common ground between utilitarianism and Christian ethics, more specifically, between Singer's ethics and Roman Catholic moral theology. Camosy of course recognizes the sharp differences in practical conclusions – after all, Catholic teaching rejects even early abortion as akin to murder, while Singer thinks infanticide can be morally permissible – but he believes these differences are theoretically narrow. It is not always clear what he means by *narrow*, but he seems to have in mind that the two moral views can be stated in *commensurable language* and that the different conclusions hinge on only one or two presuppositions. That these conclusions diverge so widely makes them appear more opposed than they actually are. Though his claims sounds counter-intuitive, Camosy makes his case well, focusing on exactly the same issues Singer did in his chapter: duties to the poor, duties to animals, taking of life, and moral theory. As mentioned above, it is unclear (even to Singer himself) what difference a switch to an objectivist moral theory will make for his utilitarianism; Camosy is clearly among those who hope that it will make a great deal of difference. Other contributors are more sceptical of Christian–utilitarian common ground than Camosy.

The subsequent three essays focus in greater detail on particular questions of moral theory. The first of these is John Hare's 'Morality, happiness, and Peter Singer'. Though brief, it is perhaps the most analytically rigorous of the chapters. It explores the relation of morality to happiness, and morality to God, in a number of utilitarians. Hare's 'big picture' question concerns the connection between happiness and moral goodness. Do we have some kind of assurance that these will go together? If so, what is it? And if not, why be moral? Hare begins with his father, the philosopher R.M. Hare, who was Singer's doctoral supervisor and whose universal prescriptivism remains deeply influential on Singer (a debt Singer acknowledges in many places, including his contribution to this volume).

⁴ Charles C. Camosy, *Peter Singer and Christian Ethics: Beyond Polarization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-05075-4 - God, the Good, and Utilitarianism: Perspectives on Peter Singer

Edited by John Perry

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

9

R.M. Hare recognized the difficulty these questions posed. Part of his response was made via the notion of an all-knowing archangel, someone who would know the preferences of all beings, know how to satisfy them, and be impartial between them. Insofar as we are like the archangel, we can be utilitarians. But of course we are not like the archangel and so the solution is not so simple. Even if God is a utilitarian (John Hare suggests that God is) this leaves unanswered the moral principle on which mere mortals act. One possibility is the sort of God one finds in Joseph Butler. Butler's God is essentially like an archangel that guides individuals to the cosmic good via their consciences. R.M. Hare was not fully satisfied with such an answer. According to John Hare, this left R.M. unable to defend his utilitarianism fully, for it only works for certain sorts of preferences. Other sorts of preferences depend upon an archangel's viewpoint, and on these R.M. doesn't have a complete answer. It is John Hare's view that this is precisely where Singer is now caught when he says that he doesn't know if he should remain a preference utilitarian. Singer is 'stuck' where R.M. once was. Hare then traces these questions about morality and happiness further back, through Sidgwick to Mill. Throughout all of the thinkers he considers, Hare notices three features: (1) the recognition that happiness and morality are separate, (2) an acknowledgement that in this world the two can come apart, and (3) some hope to keep the two together. He judges Singer's account of these to be, so far, unsatisfactory.

Lisa Sowle Cahill appreciates Singer's focus on practical or 'pastoral' ethics but wishes he would go further in this direction. She argues that many of the major disagreements in moral theory, especially among analytic philosophers, are actually only resolvable by reference to the communities from which they emerge. By drawing on his 'Intellectual Autobiography' and a largely unknown personal history of his family, *Pushing Time Away*, she shows that this is already implicit in his work. At every stage, Singer's theory has been led by personal activism, and communities of friends gathered around particular causes. This is a remarkable claim, for utilitarianism is commonly criticized from precisely the opposite direction: it is bare bureaucratic principalism, lacking any point of contact to the real world. But as Cahill shows, in Singer's case it was through communities of friends concerned with issues such as the suffering of animals that made possible his own theoretical work. This she connects to various Roman Catholic sources to show a similar perspective, though at points she criticizes these for being over-theoretical and ultimately unconvincing. Her goal is to show that quests for justice in *global* context, such as she and Singer support, depend more than ever on *situated* communities of

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-05075-4 - *God, the Good, and Utilitarianism: Perspectives on Peter Singer*

Edited by John Perry

Excerpt

[More information](#)

IO

JOHN PERRY

friends, on moral exemplars (more than abstract principles), and so on. To set this within the themes of the book as a whole, Cahill is arguing that our conception of the good cannot be abstract or procedural; it is, first of all, local. Though she supports this partly by reference to Singer, it also constitutes a challenge to forms of utilitarianism, such as R.M. Hare's, that place significant weight on the universalizability of moral norms.

Whereas the preceding essays bring the relation between religious ethics and utilitarianism to the fore, Brad Hooker's essay sits more comfortably within the realm of moral philosophy proper. He raises, but then sets aside, questions about the different possible ways utilitarianism can construe the good, be they hedonistic, perfectionist, eudaimonist, and so on. On his view, such distinctions are often practically irrelevant, since the same events will often maximize the good whichever conception of it one has in mind. Of much greater practical significance, says Hooker, is how that good is aimed at, either directly via acts or indirectly via act-guiding rules. Hooker argues for the latter, endorsing a form of rule-utilitarianism. He concludes by suggesting that both theists and atheists have reason to prefer rule- over act-utilitarianism, though their reasons for this preference will be different. One possible tension for utilitarianism of Singer's sort is that it is exceedingly demanding, and Hooker hints that part of the widespread appeal of Singer's work is that he fudges the choice between rule- and act-utilitarianism, switching to the latter whenever supererogatory acts (not accommodated by the usual rules) seem needed. He does not provide concrete examples of where Singer does this, but it would certainly explain some tensions raised by Camosy, where Singer appears to waffle on this distinction (e.g. does Singer maintain, as Camosy claims, that there is a rule against killing persons?).

The subsequent four essays each focus on a concrete moral issue and ask what different practical conclusions on that issue reveal about utilitarianism and the good. Nominally, Tim Mulgan focuses on the issue of climate change. In fact, he is using this issue to generate a thought experiment that reveals deeper problems with most forms of utilitarianism (though Mulgan is himself a utilitarian of a sort). The good that utilitarianism seeks to maximize (however construed) generates duties not only to others living now, but to distant future people whom we will never meet. But those people may be quite different than us in terms of their preferences and what makes them happy. So what sort of a world ought we to leave behind for them? The answer seems to require something significantly more objective than utilitarianism is usually willing to provide, and certainly more objective than Singer has provided so far. One possible response would be to