

IS PETER SINGER INCONSISTENT IN HIS ETHICS?

Peter Singer é inconsistente em sua ética?

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Resumo: Peter Singer, em seu livro *Practical Ethics* (1993) e em outros trabalhos igualmente, dá importância à razão para tomar uma decisão ética. Autores questionam sua consistência e o seu emprego da razão nas decisões éticas. Jacqueline A Laing (1997) fala sobre a inconsistência de Singer em seu artigo "Inconsistency and Consequentialism". Em relação ao aborto e aos direitos dos animais, ela afirma que Singer usa diferentes medidas, assim Singer é inconsistente. Ela aponta que Singer usa a noção de "sencientismo" para a defesa dos direitos dos animais, enquanto ele emprega "pessoalismo" para ética centrada em humanos. Ela sustenta que, se Singer é consistente, porque não pode usar a mesma noção de sencientismo tanto para os direitos dos animais como para seres humanos deficientes? De acordo com ela, isto sugere uma inconsistência no trabalho de Singer sobre questões éticas relativas tanto em relação aos animais como aos seres humanos. Como corolário da discussão, ela sustenta que Singer tem um viés em relação aos animais. Neste artigo, os autores pretendem mostrar que Singer usa "pessoalismo" nas discussões relacionada a animais e similarmente usa sencientismo na discussão relacionada ao aborto e outras questões éticas voltadas para humanos. Portanto, as afirmações de Laing sobre a inconsistência de Singer e sua pretensão seguinte de que Singer tem um viés em relação aos animais necessita ser reconsiderada.

Palavras-Chave: Peter Singer, ética, sencientismo, pessoalismo

Abstract: Peter Singer in his *Practical Ethics* (1993) and in other works as well gives importance to reason in making an ethical decision. Thinkers question Singer's consistency and employment of reason in his ethical decisions. Jacqueline A Laing (1997) talks about Singer's inconsistency in her article 'Inconsistency and Consequentialism'. With reference to animal rights and abortion, she claims that Singer uses different yardstick, thus Singer is inconsistent. She remarks that Singer uses the notion of 'sentientism' for the defense of animal rights, whereas he comes up with 'personism' for human centered ethics. She claims that if Singer is consistent why can't he use the same notion of 'sentientism' for animal rights as well as issues on humans like disabled human beings? According to her, this suggests there is an inconsistency in Singer's work on ethical issues concerning animals and ethical issues concerning humans. As a corollary conclusion, she claims that Singer is biased towards animals. In this paper, the authors try to show that there is no such inconsistency. Contrary to her claims, the authors would like to show that Singer uses personism in the discussions related to animals and similarly he uses sentientism in his discussion related to abortion and other human centered ethical issues. Therefore, Laing's claims about Singer's inconsistency and her following claim that Singer is biased towards animals need to be reconsidered.

Keywords: Peter Singer, ethics, sentientism, personism

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Regarded as one of the most controversial philosopher in recent time, Peter Singer has made a unique contribution to ethics. Singer believes that an action in the domain of ethics can become an ethical action if such an action is properly justified. Singer regards reason as playing an important role in ethical decision.

The notion of living according to ethical standard is tied up with the notion of defending the way one is living, of giving a reason for it, of justifying it....On the other hand, people cannot put forward any justification for what they do, we may reject their claim to be living according to ethical standards, even if what they do is in accordance with conventional moral principles.(Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 1993, p. 10)

This suggests that, Singer believes in exercising reason as the principle that makes an action ethical or not. If we have proper justification for an action, then that act is ethical and if we do not have proper justification for an action, however noble that action is, then according to Singer that action cannot be ethical. For example, why it is unethical to tell a lie? According to Singer, the answer ‘my religion proscribes from telling a lie’ cannot be an answer, for it doesn’t involve any rational part but rather an appeal to authority. Singer believes that employing reason and following its path makes a better ethical position against an irrational moral code of conduct. In a recent work, Singer in response to Harry J. Gensler remarks,

...as a philosopher I follow the argument where it leads. Should I, as a utilitarian, resist that urge, if the argument will lead me to say something counter-productive? That isn’t so clear. Developing sound positions in ethics should, in the long run, have better consequences than doing bad philosophy, or refusing to discuss some issues for fear of losing influence on others. (Singer, Reply to Harry J Gensler, 2009, p. 186)

While Singer gives much importance to reason, critics do question Singer’s consistency in his arguments and in his position. One of the main themes of showing Singer’s inconsistency is his position on animal welfare vis-à-vis abortion, disabled infanticides. Jacqueline A Laing (1997) talks about Singer’s inconsistency in her article *Innocence and Consequentialism: Inconsistency, Equivocation and Contradiction in the Philosophy of Peter Singer*. She makes a scathing attack on Singer’s principles and the consequences of adopting his principles in practical ethical issues. More importantly, she also tries to point out the inconsistencies that are rampant in Singer’s work, particularly with respect to his work on *Practical Ethics*. She says, “what is of concern here is first, whether Singer has been misinterpreted and secondly, whether his arguments are self-contradictory, equivocal or inconsistent precisely where rationality is crucial.” (Laing, 1997) In continuation, she claims,

I want to show to what extent various principles of traditional morality, explicitly rejected by him, must explain certain of his positions. If flaws in his argument are apparent, we may want to think twice before embracing his justification of the killing of the very young, the disabled and the very old. (Laing, 1997)

In the context of Singer's treatment of animals and humans, she further remarks, "Singer's sentientism in the context of ecophilosophy sits uneasily with his personism in the context of human bioethics." (Laing, 1997)

Jacqueline Laing has said that Peter Singer commits the inconsistency because of his bias towards nonhuman animals. A similar accusation was also made by Luc Ferry (2000) when he is talking about leveling up and leveling down of animals and humans respectively. Ferry remarks, "It (Singer's position) is a leveling up of animals which are brought into the moral world of humans or rather a leveling down of newborn children, patient in a deep coma, the severely handicapped." (Dardenne, 2009) The authors are going to discuss what made them, Laing for example, to come up with a position saying that Singer is biased towards nonhuman animals. If their argument is acceptable, then perhaps, their corollary claim that Singer is biased towards nonhuman animals may be correct as well. First, let us try to see, if Laing's position regarding Singer's position is fully correct or not. The authors try to give below what she claims regarding Singer's inconsistency and then will try to prove that Singer may not be inconsistent in the way she claims him to be.

She claims that Singer is using sentientism for animal liberation, whereas he is not taking that principle when he discusses issues related to abortion, or action towards the disabled. Apparently, Singer gives arguments for animal liberation on the basis of experiencing suffering and of abortion based on the concept of person. In his *Practical Ethics*, he says, "If a being suffers, there can be no moral justification for refusing to take that suffering into consideration." (Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 1993, p. 57) Singer tries to argue for animal rights based on sentience. Sentience is the capacity for consciousness to feel the pain but which is not connected with self - consciousness. It is the ability to feel suffering or happiness. Singer writes "the meaning of sentience is the capacity to suffer or experience enjoyment or happiness." (Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 1993, p. 58) Since the animals are sentient beings and they have the capacity to suffer or feel the pain, one should not kill them.

Pain and suffering are in themselves bad and should be prevented or minimized, irrespective of the race, sex or species of the being that suffers. How bad a pain is depends on how intense it is and how long it lasts, but pains of the same intensity and duration are equally bad, whether felt by humans or animals. (Singer, *Writings on an Ethical Life*, 2000, p. 42)

In the case of human centered issues like abortion and killing of the disabled, he apparently uses the concept of person. According to Peter Singer persons are self - aware and self - motivated and they recognize themselves as individuals who continue over time. Nonpersons are those humans and nonhumans who are sentient but whose mental capacities are limited to the here and now. "In any case, I propose to use 'person', in the sense of a rational and self-conscious being, to capture those elements of the popular sense of the 'human being' that are not covered by 'member of the species *Homo Sapiens*.'" (Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 1993, p. 87) By this conception of person, Singer tried to justify abortion, killing of 'disabled' human beings. "since no fetus is a person, no fetus has the same claim to life as a person.....an abortion terminates an existence that is of no 'intrinsic' value at all." (Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 1993, p. 151) Thus, it looks that Singer in fact uses sentience and personhood in case of animal liberation and abortion respectively.

This has been noted down by Laing as well when she showed the use of sentience and person in Singer's ethical principles. Laing comments on Singer's principle of suffering as the basis of equal consideration of interests of all beings thus, "Instead of locating

interests in species according to their functions, purposes and potentialities, he locates them in sentience.” (Laing, 1997) Pointing out Singer’s view of the value of disabled infant, Laing writes, “...Singer holds that infants per se are not persons and so lack the features that make them valuable and worthy of protection.” (Laing, 1997) This makes her to claim that Singer is inconsistent. The inconsistency lies with Singer in using sentience argument for animals and person argument for humans. She claims if Singer uses ‘sentientism’ for animal liberation thereby trying to protect animals from the human killings, why doesn’t he adopt the same standard for issues of abortion or treatment of disabled infants or people. Rather, in the case of abortion and like, he uses ‘personism’ as the argument for acknowledging and accepting abortion. She says, “...If we should confine ourselves to arguments on the basis of sentience in the case of non human interests, why is the same not true of human interests? Why do we not simply confine ourselves to arguments from sentience in the human context?” (Laing, 1997).

REFUTING LAING’S VIEWS

The authors try here to refute Laing’s claims about Singer’s inconsistency. It will be shown that contrary to Laing’s claims, Singer uses personism in discussion related to animal ethics and similarly, he uses sentientism in issues related to human affairs. By pointing out the passages from Singer that tries to talk of personism and sentientism with respect to animal and human ethics respectively, the authors try to show that Laing’s claim about Singer’s inconsistency may not be apt. And the corollary conclusion that Singer is biased towards animals and Singer is leveling down the humans also needs to be relooked.

If according to Laing’s claims, Singer is talking of sentientism for animals, he should never have subscribed for animal killings, for whatever the reason may be. But, Singer did not make such a claim. Singer, says, that though we need to take care of animal protection because they can also feel the suffering, but, there can be cases, where that concern can be overridden. Overriding the concern of the animals (nonpersons), according to Singer can be done by the persons. So, Laing’s claim that Singer is trying to argue for animal liberation from sentience is not fully correct, because in the case of animal issues as well, Singer uses the concept of person to justify some acts of killing of animals by human beings. Had Singer, according to Laing’s claims, uses only sentience as the arguments for animal liberation; he could never justify some acts of animal killing. But, Singer justifies some acts of animal killing. Singer explicitly justifies animal killings at least on two counts – animal killing done for survival and animal killing for experimentations.

On killing animals for survival, Singer says, “Eskimos living in an environment where they must kill animals for food or starve might be justified in claiming that their interest in surviving overrides that of the animals they kill.” (Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 1993, p. 62) Again he says, “In any case, at the level of practical moral principles, it would be better to reject altogether the killing of animals for food, unless one must do so to survive.” (Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 1993, p. 134) Hence to talk of Singer’s argument for animal protection from sentientism is not universally and absolutely true. Singer accepts in some cases, the killing of animals for experiments as well. In the case of animal killing for food, Singer accepts nonvegetarianism out of necessity.

Similarly, in animal killing for scientific experiments as well, Singer uses the personism argument. Singer tries to lessen killing animals for experimentation, but, definitely not totally avoiding animal experimentation. He says, “...if one, or even a dozen animals had to suffer experiments in order to save thousands, I would think it right and in accordance with equal consideration of interests that they should do so. This, at any rate, is

the answer a utilitarian must give.” (Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 1993, p. 67) This passage suggests that Singer does not mind experiments on animals if it is going to be for greater and better consequences for a larger number of persons. And being a utilitarian himself, Singer would not be giving absolute right to animals based on sentientism. The rights of the animals based on sentientism can be overridden by essential concerns of the persons. He further remarks, “Those who believe in absolute right might hold that it is always wrong to sacrifice one being, whether human or animal, for the benefit of another. In that case the experiment should not be carried out, whatever the consequences.” (Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 1993, p. 67) Thus, Singer’s concern for animals, though based on sentientism can be overridden by concerns of personism. Singer argues against the killing of animals which is for self-interest and which is not for self-survival.

Even if were to prevent the infliction of suffering on animals only when it is quite certain that the interests of humans will not be affected to anything like the extent that animals are affected, we would be forced to make radical changes in our treatment of animals that would involve our diet; the farming methods we use; experimental procedures in many fields of science; our approach to wildlife and to hunting, trapping and the wearing of furs; and areas of entertainment like circuses, rodeos and zoos. As a result, a vast amount of suffering would be avoided. (Singer, *Writings on an Ethical Life*, 2000, p. 42)

As a matter of fact, Singer comes up with good many passages to show there is no reason for killing animals for the sake of pleasure, but there are enough reasons to kill animals for the sake of survival and other necessities.

Of course, one can see Singer arguing against animal experimentation in his *Practical Ethics*. Singer himself says, “People sometimes think that all animal experiments serve vital medical purposes, and can be justified on the grounds that they relieve more suffering than they cause. This comfortable belief is mistaken.” (Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 1993, p. 65) Here, Singer is not rejecting any case of experimentation. He questions our assumption that all cases of animal experimentation are for some essential medical purposes. Had Singer rejected any form of animal experimentation, obviously on the basis of sentientism, then Laing’s claim is justified. But, rather, Singer is not rejecting all forms of animal experimentation. Singer, as being a consequentialist, does not reject animal experimentation in totality. He accepts animal experimentation on certain conditions like he accepted nonvegetarianism under certain conditions. If Laing’s claim is right, then Singer would have rejected all forms of animal experimentation. But, that is not so. As mentioned, Singer subscribes for animal experimentation if the experiment is for greater benefit. But not all experiments on animals are done for that purpose. Singer clearly points out two prominent instances of animal experimentation which he says is not justified— one is for cosmetics and the other is the uncertain or nonexistent benefits to humans. In using animal experimentation for cosmetic purposes, Singer goes against such types of practices. He says,

Drug companies test new shampoos and cosmetics they are intending to market by dripping concentrated solutions of them into the eyes of rabbits, in a test known as the Draize test....Food additives, including artificial colorings and preservatives, are tested by what is known as the LD50-a test designed to find the ‘lethal dose’, or level of consumption that will make 50 percent of

a sample of animals die. In the process nearly all of the animals are made very sick before some finally die and others pull through. These tests are not necessary to prevent human suffering... (Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 1993, p. 65)

Similarly, Singer argues against use of animals for experimentation, when the experiment has no direct result in reducing human sufferings like the U.S. Armed Forces Radiobiology Institute's experiments and H. F. Harlow's experiments on monkeys, or Princeton University's experiments on rats. (Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 1993) Here, one can argue that Singer's understanding of these seemingly unnecessary experiments may not be correct. But, here again, the point of contention is not whether animals can be experimented or not, the point of contention is that whether such an animal experimentation is for reducing more suffering than they cause. If it can be shown that if such types of experiments reduce more sufferings than they cause, then Singer need not object to it. The main question is whether they can reduce suffering more than they cause? Singer doesn't think so, hence he reject such types of animal experimentations. In fact Singer says,

Experimenters show bias in favor of their own species whenever they carry out experiments on nonhuman animals for purposes that they would not think justified them in using human beings at an equal or lower level of sentience, awareness, sensitivity, and so on. If this bias were eliminated, the number of experiments performed on animals would be greatly reduced. (Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 1993, p. 68)

Singer has argued for a particular way of evaluating whether an experiment with a nonhuman animal is ever justifiable. It is called by Lori Gruen (2009) the 'non speciesist utilitarian test' or NSUT. According to NSUT an experiment would be justified if and only if:

1. Of all the options open, the experiment generates more pleasure or benefit than pain or cost on balance, for all affected
2. The justification for the experiment does not depend on irrelevant species prejudice or speciesism. Equal interests are to be considered equally no matter that has them. (Gruen, 2009, p. 240)

These passages suggest that Singer argues against animal experimentation in specific cases and not in all cases. The principle for him is that if an animal experimentation can result in a greater good consequence, then that animal experimentation can be carried out. As being a consequentialist, Singer should not find any reason to reject such types of animal experimentation which might result in reducing the human suffering, and he does not reject such types of animal experimentation. So, it clearly suggests that personism is employed by Singer in case of animal issues as well. Hence, Laing's claim that Singer uses sentientism in case of animal issues is partly right and not wholly right. He uses personism concept as well to justify some acts of animal killing. On the same line, it can be seen that Singer uses sentientism and not just personism concept in human centered ethical issues.

Laing claims that Singer uses personism in case of human centered ethical issues against sentientism in case of animal liberation. She further claims that why Singer can't use the same sentientism in case of human centered ethical issues as well. Herein, the authors

would like to show that Singer uses sentientism and not just personism concept in human centered ethical issues as well.

Singer does accept abortion, particularly without any trouble the early abortion. The reason is that Singer does not consider the early fetus as sentient beings at all. When a fetus gains its sentience and at which phase of pregnancy is given to discussions. For Singer, as long as the fetus does not have sentience (the ability to feel pain), then it is not unethical to go for abortion.

Suppose a woman has been planning to join a mountain-climbing expedition in June, and in January she learns that she is two months pregnant. She has no children at present, and firmly intends to have a child within a year or two. The pregnancy is unwanted only because it is inconveniently timed. Opponents of abortion would presumably think an abortion in these circumstances particularly outrageous, for neither the life nor the health of the mother is at stake –only the enjoyment she gets from climbing mountains. Yet if abortion is wrong only because it deprives the world of a future person, this abortion is not wrong; it does no more than delay the entry of a person into the world. (Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 1993, p. 154)

In this case, it is not personism against sentientism as Laing claims, but, rather it is personism against non-sentient being. In the case of late fetus abortion, Singer does accept it when the life of the mother is at stake or for any other medical reason. Singer for sure mentions that one should not take late fetus abortion lightly. He says, “After wards, when the fetus may be conscious, though not self-conscious, abortion should not be taken lightly (if a woman ever does take abortion lightly) .But a woman’s serious interests would normally override the rudimentary interests even of a conscious fetus.” (Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 1993, p. 151) If singer is not that particular about sentientism in case of human centered ethics, then why should he say that ‘abortion should not be taken lightly’ or late fetus abortion is justified only in the case of ‘woman’s serious interests’.

Thus, the inconsistency for Singer does not arise in applying sentientism in one instance and applying personism for some other cases as Laing claims. Singer applies personism while he talks about animal welfare as well. It is not that personism is totally absent with Singer with respect to animal issues as Laing claims. Personism is very much in Singer in animal welfare as it is there for him on human centered ethical issues like abortion, physically and mentally disabled beings. Singer is consistent with employing of sentience and person concept in issues like animal welfare and abortion. The authors therefore claim that contrary to what Laing claims, Singer does not use a different yardstick of sentientism to animals and personism to humans. So, it is not proper for Laing to claim that personism is absent in Singer’s animal protection, but, whereas it is present in Singer’s ideas on abortion and other human centered ethical issues. The authors do not think there is any such inconsistency as Laing claims. Singer clearly mentions when the sentientism can be overridden by personism. He applies this in a consistent manner in issues of animal welfare and in other issues like abortion and other human centered ethics. So, Laing’s claims about Singer’s inconsistency and her resulting claim that Singer is biased towards animals need to be reconsidered.

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