

Foreword to the Special Issue of *Ethics & Bioethics (in Central Europe)***Peter Singer**

I am honoured and delighted to have my work receive the attention of this special issue of *Ethics and Bioethics (in Central Europe)*. I thank the editor of the journal, Vasil Gluchman, who had the idea of creating the special issue, Elad Uzan, who accepted the work of editing it, Ludek Sekyra, whose support has made it possible for the entire issue to be open access, and of course all of the contributors.

That a journal specializing in ethics and bioethics is an appropriate place for a discussion of my work will be obvious for anyone familiar with my writings, but the special appropriateness of my work being discussed in a journal, the title of which makes a specific reference to Central Europe, will be apparent only to the few who know my account of the life and death of my grandfather, David Oppenheim, published under the title *Pushing Time Away* (Singer, 2003). I was born in Australia and have lived most of my life there, but my parents came to Australia as refugees from Vienna, and their roots were in Moravia, in towns such as Brno, Holesov, Kojetin, Mikulov, Olomouc and Uhersky Brod, all of which I have visited. My mother's family tree reaches back to a much earlier David Oppenheim (1664–1736), chief rabbi of Prague, and a scholar whose remarkable collection of books and manuscripts is now in the Bodleian Library in Oxford. Guided tours of Prague's Old Jewish Cemetery still point out his grave. Although my ethical ideas stem from English utilitarianism, I like to think that my broader intellectual interests are continuous with those of my Central European ancestors.

Since retiring from Princeton University in 2024, at the age of 78, my focus has been on making the best possible use of the time that remains for me to have a positive impact on the world. For much of my career, the best use of my time was to develop my views on extreme poverty and affluence, the moral status of animals, and end-of-life decisions such as abortion, voluntary assisted dying, and euthanasia for severely disabled newborns.

My views on these important questions, and the deep philosophical issues that lie behind different answers to them, are discussed in the articles in this issue. If I were ten years younger, I would have been happy to respond to them in detail, and explain where I can defend my views against the objections they contain, and where I need to think again, changing my earlier positions. Today, I will content myself with saying that some of the articles that discuss work I wrote when I was a preference utilitarian would be more relevant to my current views if they took account of the shift in my position from preference utilitarianism to hedonistic utilitarianism. (The essays by Jan Kalajzidis, Joshua Luczak and Jeff McMahan do show their awareness of this change.)

The first inklings of this change can be seen in the 3rd (2011) edition of *Practical Ethics*, with its attempt to combine elements of preference utilitarianism with the idea that pleasure or happiness is impersonally good. (My excuse for the awkwardness of that combination in the 3rd edition is that I started to have doubts about the adequacy of preference utilitarianism around the time of the deadline in my contract with Cambridge University Press for delivery of the new edition of the book.) McMahan's essay on replaceability ably indicates the difficulties that this combination gets me into.

It was in discussions with Katarzyna de Lazari-Radek, while we were working on our co-authored work, *The Point of View of the Universe* (de Lazari-Radek & Singer, 2014), that I became persuaded that hedonistic utilitarianism is the most defensible form of utilitarianism. As the book's sub-title indicates, it reconsiders the views defended by Henry Sidgwick in his classic work, *The Methods of Ethics* (Sidgwick, 1907). That change was also linked, as we

explain in *The Point of View of the Universe*, with our acceptance of the objectivity of ethics, rather than R.M. Hare's universal prescriptivism, which I had previously held, and from which, following Hare, I had derived preference utilitarianism.¹

In one of my earliest academic publications, I objected to the then dominant view that moral philosophers have nothing to contribute to discussions of what is right and what is wrong (Singer, 1972, pp. 115–117). On the contrary, I argued, moral philosophers can, by informing themselves of relevant facts and applying their understanding of moral concepts and sound argument, raise the level of discussion of important issues. It has been exciting to see this view gaining widespread acceptance among philosophers, and forming the basis of courses that engage students in universities and high schools. As a teacher and a writer, I have found it especially rewarding to hear from many students and readers that my work in practical ethics has changed their lives (Singer, 2026, pp. 129–137).

Obviously, then, I consider it important that the field of practical ethics will continue to thrive, and I value the contributions that are made to practical ethics in this special issue. So in saying that I do not now consider defending my views against the objections made in this issue to be the best use of my time, I am making a judgment based on my unusual circumstances at this stage of my life.

One of these circumstances is simply the grim evidence that very few philosophers do their best work at, or after, the age I have now reached. I might, I suppose, be an exception to this rule, but if I believe that I am such an exception, that belief is more likely to be self-deceiving rather than accurate. Hence, I invite younger philosophers who are in sympathy with my work to take up the task of responding to my critics, in this issue and elsewhere, as well as developing my views in ways that offer strong responses to future objections.

The most important of the unusual circumstances that I have in mind, however, can be summed up by the tag that some journalists have given me: “the world’s most influential (living) philosopher”. Given whatever influence I may have, my focus now is to use it to aid the causes that are important to me, especially reducing the unnecessary suffering inflicted on hundreds of billions of animals by factory farming (Singer, 2023), mitigating climate change (Singer, 2025), and encouraging more effective giving to assist people in extreme poverty.

Acknowledgement

The Sekyra Foundation funds the open access publication of the article in the journal.

References

- DE LAZARI-RADEK, K. & SINGER, P. (2014): *The Point of View of the Universe: Sidgwick and Contemporary Ethics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- HARE, R. M. (1981): *Moral Thinking: Its Levels, Method and Point*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- SIDGWICK, H. (1907): *The Methods of Ethics*, 7th ed. London: MacMillan.
- SINGER, P. (1972): Moral Experts. In: *Analysis*, 32(4), pp. 115–117.
- SINGER, P. (2003): *Pushing Time Away: My Grandfather and the Tragedy of Jewish Vienna*. New York: Ecco.
- SINGER, P. (2009/2019): *The Life You Can Save*. New York: Random House (now available free as an eBook or audiobook from www.thelifeyoucansave.org).
- SINGER, P. (2023): *Animal Liberation Now*. New York: HarperCollin.
- SINGER, P. (2025): What Bill Gates Overlooks About Climate Change, 11 November 2025, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/what-bill-gates-misses-in-essay-on-climate-change-by-peter-singer-2025-11>.
- SINGER, P. (2026): Changing Lives. In: R. Crisp, I. Persson & J. Savulescu (eds.): *What Is the Point of Moral Philosophy?* New York & London: Routledge, pp. 129–137.

¹ The most developed form of Hare's view can be found in R.M. Hare, *Moral Thinking: Its Levels, Method and Point* (1981).