SINGER - A DANGEROUS MIND
PETER SINGER—A biography

BORN IN 1946, PROFESSOR PETER SINGER is a world-renowned utilitarian philosopher who specializes in the field of bioethics. He was educated at Melbourne and Oxford Universities and held senior positions in the Department of Philosophy and the Centre for Human Bioethics at Monash University before accepting an appointment as Ira W. DeCamp Professor of Bioethics, University Center for Human Values, Princeton University (USA) in 1999.¹

The personal portrait of Peter Singer in Singer—A Dangerous Mind traces the development of some of the philosopher's most influential ideas. Singer is not some remote theorist of life. We learn, for example, that his experience as the father of three daughters and of his mother’s suffering from Alzheimer’s Disease have been formative. Rather than seeing a monster, as Singer is sometimes portrayed, we meet a warmly engaging human being who thinks deeply about serious ethical problems and suggests pragmatic, if confronting, solutions.

Singer's opponents sometimes describe his ethics as Nazi-like—a label he regards as both inaccurate and ironic. For one thing, he has special reason to remember the Nazi regime with abhorrence because he has Jewish heritage. Singer's book Pushing Time Away records his exploration of Vienna in his effort to trace the history of his grandfather who died in the Theresienstadt ghetto during the Holocaust. Singer specifically objects to comparisons between his ethics and the gruesome Nazi experiments. He says in the documentary:

To run these ideas together as if there were no difference between them, I just think is really camouflaging such huge differences between them that it degrades the whole level of the debate.

Peter Singer attempts to live his life in accordance with the moral principles he believes we should all follow. As the author of Animal Liberation, he firmly rejects ‘speciesism’ and is a rigorous vegetarian who does not wear leather. He donates twenty per cent of his income to charity, particularly to Oxfam, on the principle that you should not give your own interests greater importance than those of strangers.

Singer—A Dangerous Mind is a thought-provoking and challenging film which will arouse strong passions and generate vigorous classroom debate.

USING SINGER—A DANGEROUS MIND IN THE CLASSROOM

Singer—A Dangerous Mind has wide relevance to many subject areas at senior secondary and tertiary levels. Teachers should be aware of the sensitivities of disabled students, students

¹ Using Singer—A Dangerous Mind in the Classroom

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who have disabled family members and students who have suffered recent bereavement.

The documentary is of specific interest and relevance to teachers and students of:
English
Legal Studies
Philosophy
Psychology
Religious Studies
Science

Learning outcomes

- Explain how causes, motives and consequences may be related.
- Analyse the core values of groups and societies.
- Critically evaluate the consequences of the applications of science.
- Identify ways science is used responsibly in the community.
- Describe and explain the responses of various cultural groups to issues of human rights.
- Consider the context in which the text was created and how this is reflected in the text.

Before watching the documentary

- Read and discuss the Glossary of key terms.
- Read and discuss the explanation of utilitarianism and the Bugatti example (below).
- Learn more about Peter Singer’s ideas by visiting some of the web sites listed at the end of this Study Guide.

Glossary of key terms

bioethics — the study of ethical problems produced by medical or scientific research.

dementia — form of insanity characterized by loss of memory, intelligence and orientation.

ethics — a branch of philosophy concerned with moral conduct.
euphemism — a mild term that takes the place of a more offensive one.

philosophy — the pursuit of wisdom and knowledge.

pragmatic — concerned with facts rather than theories; practical.
sanctity — holiness or sacredness.
sentient — conscious; capable of sensation; responding to stimuli.
speciesism — the treatment of a living creature according its species rather than its ability to suffer.

UTILITARIANISM

Utilitarianism is a theory of morality
that connects the rightness of actions with their effects. It was developed in the late 1700s and early 1800s by the English philosophers Jeremy Bentham, James Mill and John Stuart Mill. Unlike most religions, which argue that there are fixed principles people should follow regardless of the consequences, utilitarianism is based on a flexible moral code that seeks the greatest happiness of the greatest number.

Peter Singer explains this idea in *A Dangerous Mind*, when he says:

**Utilitarianism is an ethical view that says that the right thing to do is the thing that will have the best consequences for all of those affected. The utilitarian says you should try to reduce suffering and increase happiness if you can.**

**THE BUGATTI EXAMPLE**

Peter Singer often gives this ethical problem to his students:

**The dilemma:** A man owns a very expensive Bugatti car that threatens to be destroyed by a runaway train. Meanwhile on a different track, a small child is trapped between the lines. Would it be all right for the man to redirect the train to save his luxury car and thereby kill the child?

**The answer:** Most students think it would be selfish and immoral to kill a child in order to save a car.

**The moral:** You live in a rich country so have the choice of ‘switching lines’ and directing some of your income to assist people in great poverty. Even a dollar a day could make a tremendous difference. Although people are programmed by evolution to protect self and family first, they can and should overcome these feelings. It is preferable to assist the lives of ten strangers rather than the single life of a person one knows well.

**OLD AND NEW COMMANDMENTS**

In the final part of his book *Rethinking Life and Death: The Collapse of Our Traditional Ethics* (1994), Peter Singer discusses five ‘old commandments’ that still exist as the basis of moral decision-making. Singer claims these old commandments about the sanctity of all human life are similar to old ideas about the nature of the solar system. Both are now outdated. In the past, people believed that the earth was the centre of the universe but abandoned that notion in the light of new evidence. So too, technology and modern medical practice now require humans to establish a new system of ethics that will help decide matters of life and death.

Singer argues that ancient astronomers often tried to patch up their theories but the theories still never quite
worked. This was because they did not reflect what actually occurred. So too, old commandments about the sanctity of human life do not really hold true in practice. For example, doctors ‘give terminally ill patients huge doses of morphine that they know will shorten their lives, but say this is not euthanasia, because their declared purpose is to relieve pain’. Singer believes it is time for the five old commandments to be replaced with five new ones that reflect what actually occurs.

He is highly critical of euphemisms or ‘weasel words’ such as ‘futility’ and ‘withdrawing care’ because he believes they are used to disguise ethical decisions as medical decisions.

In the documentary Singer—A Dangerous Mind Peter Singer says: ‘We should try to be more open about recognizing when we’re making the judgement and allow that to be open to criticism and discussion’.

(see chart)

Activity – Principles in practice

Many scenes in the documentary provide examples of Singer’s ethics in practice. Which of Peter Singer’s new commandments seem to apply to the following situations shown or mentioned in the film? Compare and discuss your answers with other members of your class.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Old Commandments</th>
<th>New Commandments</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Treat all human life as if of equal worth</td>
<td>Recognize that the worth of human life varies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Never intentionally take innocent human life</td>
<td>Take responsibility for the consequences of your decisions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Never take your own life, and always try to prevent others from taking theirs</td>
<td>Respect a person’s desire to live or die</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Be fruitful and multiply</td>
<td>Bring children into the world only if they are wanted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Treat all human life as always more precious than any non-human life</td>
<td>Do not discriminate on the basis of species</td>
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Singer addresses a meeting of doctors at the Princeton Medical Centre about the case of a 90-year-old patient known as DZ and suggests it would be best to let her die.

In a discussion with Dan Rather of 60 Minutes (America), Singer advocates allowing medical experiments on some humans rather than on animals.

Singer meets the family of Nancy Crick and approves her decision to commit suicide.

Carol Glass disconnects the tube that was administering diamorphine to her son David.

**CASE STUDIES**

What makes a life worth living and who decides? This is the central question in Singer—A Dangerous Mind. The documentary examines a number of situations that show how difficult it is to make moral decisions about matters of life and death.

**Case 1: David Glass**

David Glass was born profoundly handicapped and never walked or talked. When he was twelve years old David became seriously ill and was admitted to hospital with pneumonia. However medical staff did not try to save his life. Instead of treating him with antibiotics as they would other patients, the doctors gave David diamorphine—a medication his mother Carol describes as ‘an end of life drug’. Doctors ignored her requests to change David’s treatment so Carol herself disconnected the tube administering the drug. She insisted that doctors make a full effort to save her son’s life.

David survived his hospital stay and we see him living with his family at home. Peter Singer meets David and observes that he is making eye contact, suffers no pain and appears to enjoy a limited quality of life.

**Case 2: Nancy Crick**

At the age of sixty-six Nancy Crick was diagnosed with bowel cancer. Despite three operations and continued medication she endured a lot of pain over the next three years. Once a vibrant and energetic woman, Nancy was unable to enjoy her previous activities, such as visiting the pokies or going out for lunch. She was confined to her house and frequently felt ill.

Nancy considered the quality of her life so terribly diminished that she decided to commit suicide. She discussed the decision with her family, made statements on national television and kept an online diary of her experiences. She also joined the Voluntary Euthanasia Society of Queensland and Exit, two organizations that want to change the laws relating to euthanasia. In 2002, with members of her loving family nearby, Nancy took an overdose of barbiturates (often called ‘sleeping pills’) and died.

Her case caused great concern. Police investigated the circumstances surrounding her death and considered charging people with assisting a suicide.

**Case 3: Cora Singer**

Cora Singer was Peter Singer’s mother. Home movies in the documentary show her as a happy and active woman. However when she was in her late sixties Cora Singer fell victim to Alzheimer’s Disease, a serious form of dementia. In the end she could not even recognize members of her own family. Her quality of life, like that of Nancy Crick, was much diminished. The Singer family spent a lot of money...
providing the best possible care for Cora until she died naturally. In A Dangerous Mind Peter Singer simply says:

There did come a time when we decided that her quality of life had fallen to the point where there really was no benefit for her and we were able at that time, when a particular crisis came up, to decide not to intervene medically to prolong her life.

Critics of Peter Singer’s ideas pounced on Cora’s case as an indication of Singer’s hypocrisy and inability to put his beliefs into practice when they involved a member of his own family.

Activity—Making decisions

• What did you think about each of the cases described above?
• Did you agree with Peter Singer’s point of view in each of them? Why or why not?

REASON AND EMOTION

Peter Singer has often been accused of being coldly logical and lacking the human characteristics of feeling and intuition. His denies this accusation and says:

Lay off with the ‘You reason, so you don’t feel stuff’ please ... I feel, but I also think about what I feel. When people say we should only feel ... I am reminded of [Nazi politician and founder of the Gestapo] Göring, who said, ‘I think with my blood’. See where it led him. 5

In A Dangerous Mind, Wesley J. Smith criticizes Singer and says:

I think there is a danger in allowing intellectuals to have undue influence in society because as a mind game we can justify almost anything. But we have to understand that these intellectual exercises, when they become embedded in public policy, have consequences in real people’s lives. So what may sound good intellectually, may end up causing a great deal of oppression, exploitation and discrimination.

Activity—Thinking and feeling

• What is your personal impression of Peter Singer? Do you think he has the right balance between thinking and feeling?
• Can you see any logical inconsistency in the above statement by Wesley J. Smith?

SINGER’S CRITICS

The documentary shows us a number of Singer’s opponents. We learn that Singer’s ideas have sometimes led him into personal danger and his life has sometimes been threatened. Mostly, though, Singer’s opponents attempt to refute his ethics with ideas of their own. Here are some examples:

Dr Mark Hiatt

We see Dr Hiatt working in the neonatal ward of St Peter’s Hospital, New Jersey. Although he does not respond directly to Peter Singer’s ethical position, he does say:

All of our training, all of our experiences as physicians and nurses is to save lives. I’m a physician. I will never be an assassin.

Disabled group—We’re Not Dead Yet

This group is carrying signs that read: ‘What ethic would kill a disabled child?’ and ‘Singer cannot judge our lives’.

One member says ‘We’re looking backwards. We’re going back into the Dark Ages. They want to kill us’.

Another one remarks that Singer’s ideas are ‘Adolf Hitler’s philosophy in academic robes’.

Wesley J. Smith

Wesley J. Smith is an attorney for the International Taskforce on Euthanasia. He makes many strong statements about Peter Singer and his philosophy including:

Peter Singer is a self-proclaimed enemy of universal human rights

Either all human life is equal or none of it is equal.

The answer is not suicide. The answer is proper medical treatment. We should take each other’s burdens on our shoulders and help them carry through the difficult times.

Raymond Gaita

Raymond Gaita is Professor of Moral Philosophy at Monash University. He reminds us that reason alone is not the only way we should solve problems:

Reason leaves out all that’s involved sometimes when we say ‘Look, I know you see the fact but you don’t understand what it means’. In giving an account of what it means, we elaborate what some people sometimes call an understanding of the heart.

Activity—Singer’s defence

• What arguments does Peter Singer use to defend himself against each of the above critics?
• The New York Times described Peter Singer as ‘the most dangerous man in the world’. Do you agree?

THE HOLOCAUST

The Holocaust is the name given to the Nazi program of extermination carried out in Europe during the Second World War. It was conceived by the German leader Adolf Hitler and
organized by other members of his regime. Although some six million of its victims were Jews, others deemed to have ‘a life unworthy of life’ were also killed. They included gypsies, homosexuals, disabled people and people of different ethnic groups. The Nazis facilitated the Holocaust by establishing vast prisons known as concentration camps. In these camps many victims died from starvation, overwork or disease while others were brutally murdered. The camps also provided subjects for horrific medical experiments such as those carried out by the Nazi, Dr Josef Mengele.

**A THIRD WORLD PERSPECTIVE**

As Peter Singer points out, people in rich Western countries believe in the sanctity of life when it affects their own citizens but appear to have a blind spot when it comes to the rest of the world. Americans and Australians spend huge sums of money and use the most modern technology to prolong the lives of terminally ill patients while people in poorer countries are dying of starvation or curable diseases.

As a utilitarian, Singer finds this situation illogical and intolerable. He maintains that people in rich nations talk about all human life as being of equal value but do not really follow the idea in practice. They seem to regard the lives of people in poor nations as being not as valuable as their own.

In following his own ethics, Singer donates twenty per cent of his income to Oxfam (an organization that distributes aid to people in poor nations). *A Dangerous Mind* shows him in conversation with Laxmi Narayan of the Ragpickers Cooperative in Pune, India.

**THE FILM’S TECHNIQUES**

While you are watching *Singer*—*A Dangerous Mind*, take note of the different elements of the documentary. Most of the film comprises interviews with Peter Singer and other people but the film-makers maintain our interest with shots of Singer travelling to England and Vienna or visiting a hospital with his students. There is also archival footage taken during the Nazi regime and the unusual inclusion of home movie footage from the Singer family archive. These different components are held together with a connecting narrative or ‘voiceover’.

**Extension activities**

- As a class, discuss why the producers of the documentary used the title ‘a dangerous mind’. Consider also the comment by Princeton University’s Harold T. Shapiro: ‘I don’t believe thoughtful ideas can ever be dangerous’.
- Make your own ‘homemade history’ by conducting short video interviews about some of the questions that arise in *Singer—A Dangerous Mind*.
- Invite a speaker from Oxfam, Community Aid Abroad or Care International to visit your school.
- Show your respect for the idea of the sanctity of life and organize an event that will raise money for people in Third World countries.

**Select bibliography**

Terry Hastings is a Melbourne-based freelance writer and researcher.

**Endnotes**

1 For further details of Peter Singer’s academic career see his online curriculum vitae at http://www.princeton.edu/~uchv/faculty/CV91802.htm
3 Ibid. p.188.
4 The Online Diary of Nancy Crick http://www.exitaustralia.net/nancycrick/index.htm

A BBC, ABC, Serendipity Co-Production assisted by Film Finance Corporation Australia and the Australian Film Commission.

**Producer/Co-Writer:** Margie Bryant
**Writer/Co-Producer:** David Roach
**Director:** Terry Carlyon

This study guide was produced by ATOM. For more information about ATOM study guides, The Speakers’ Bureau or ScreenHub (the daily online film and television newsletter) visit our web site: www.metromagazine.com.au or email: damned@netspace.net.au

**Web sites**


Online Diary of Nancy Crick http://www.exitaustralia.net/nancycrick/index.htm

Peter Singer Links http://www.petersingerlinks.com/

Singer: A Dangerous Mind is distributed by ABC Video Program

Sales Phone: 1300 650 587
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