

**The Royal Society of Edinburgh
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**Professor Peter Singer,
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Living Ethically in the 21st Century

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at the George Square Theatre, University of Edinburgh

Report by Jennifer Trueland

Renowned philosopher Peter Singer considered ethical responses to three big 21st-Century issues – global poverty, our treatment of animals and climate change – and concluded that it behoves us all to become active citizens.

How can one lead an ethical life in the 21st Century? Professor Singer, author of more than 40 books, including the international best-seller *Animal Liberation*, took on some of the biggest issues around to help the audience in a packed George Square Theatre to come up with some answers. The three topics in focus were global poverty, our treatment of animals and climate change – issues of particular concern in the current century, he said.

He began with poverty, as defined by the World Bank as those without enough income to meet basic needs – in essence, those living on less than the equivalent of \$1.90 (US dollars) per day; around 700 million people live below this line. We are making progress – a few years ago the figure was a billion – but, with around 10% of the world's population living in this dreadful situation, there is still a long way to go. Global poverty has real, human consequences: in 2015, nearly six million children died preventable deaths – 17,000 per day. “That’s tragedy on a huge scale,” he added. He drew a comparison with the minute’s silence observed that day for the victims of the Manchester Arena bombing, which killed 22 people, including children. The deaths of the world’s poorest children happen every day, he said. “It is not in the headlines but it is preventable – not easily preventable, but we do know what to do to bring that figure down.”

Professor Singer advocated effective altruism – a different approach to charity and philanthropy, defined as a philosophy and social movement that applies evidence and reason to determining the most effective ways to improve the world. Too often people give to charities without investigating where their money will do the most good, and it is actually incredibly difficult to find the data on which to make an informed decision. He directed people to GiveWell (<http://www.givewell.org>), a non-profit organisation dedicated to rating charities on their effectiveness; it has examined hundreds of charities, but has just three it recommends (largely because of the lack of data available on many others). The Life You Can Save (<https://www.thelifeyoucansave.org>) also has an approach of recommending charities that work cost effectively. As individuals, we look for value for money, but the charity sector has not been very good at it, he warned.

Professor Singer then turned to ethics and animals, and his view that we should extend equal consideration beyond human beings. He spoke about the

contradictions in a culture that condemns bull-fighting, but tolerates other activities that cause suffering to other species. For example, debeaking, or beak-trimming of hens is standard in the egg and poultry industries, using a machine to cut the ends off chickens' beaks with a hot blade. Chickens have very sensitive nerves in their beaks and no pain relief is used, he added. "We need to rethink the ethics that reject bullfighting but accept debeaking."

His approach is based on rejecting speciesism, defined as a bias against other beings simply because they are not members of our species; this has parallels with racism or sexism, he said. While racists or sexists develop sets of ideas that justify their position, for example, on slavery, the idea that man should be the dominant species builds in a bias against other species.

He asked why we should not give equal consideration to the interests of a being because it is not a member of our species. It is an expanding circle: equal consideration of interests requires us to give equal weight to similar interests, irrespective of race, sex, age, gender, sexual orientation, disability, or species, he said. If chickens feel pain, we should give that as much consideration as when a similar amount of pain is felt by us.

If we want to focus our resources on where we can do the most good, where should that be? While the number of vertebrate animals killed annually in research is around 100 million, this is far, far less than the 65 billion land animals killed annually for food (and this does not include fish). Food production, then, is the issue we should focus on. While some progress has been made through European Union regulation, for example, banning individual veal pens, crowded pig production is still standard. Chickens are also reared in crowded conditions, and meat poultry are bred to grow so quickly that their bodies are too heavy for their bones, leading to broken legs – and to chickens dying from hunger or thirst because they cannot reach food and water. Apart from the suffering this causes, it means that a proportion of chickens die before they are ready for slaughter, but this waste is built in to the economic model. The chicken industry is responsible for more suffering than all shelters, fur farms or research, he stressed.

Humans can take different approaches to boycotting these methods, for example, adopting veganism, or vegetarianism, or boycotting food from factory farms. All of this is vastly better than going into the supermarket and picking up what's cheap – which will be factory-farm products.

Global warming is another reason for adopting a plant-based diet, he said, pointing out that the livestock sector generates more greenhouse gas emissions than transport. He called climate change the "distinctive problem of the 21st Century", and one that needs to be solved in this century, or it will be too late.

We know that the planet is getting warmer, and the consensus from scientists is that human emissions have been the dominant cause of this – with a probability factor of 95–100%. Some people question this, and point out that science has got things wrong before. But even if we accept the possibility that science could be wrong about this, the risk simply is not worth taking, as the probable consequences of global warming are so severe. These include more and longer heat waves, more severe weather events such as storms and droughts, a rise in sea levels, more acidic oceans, and a huge increase in refugee numbers as people flee areas where living is no longer sustainable. Even if we can't be sure that the scientists are right, we can't be sure that they are wrong, so we must take action, Professor Singer insisted.

At the Rio Summit in 1992, 189 nations, including the US, China, India and all European nations, agreed to stabilise greenhouse gases "at a low enough level to prevent dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system". There is general consensus that a temperature rise of more than 2°C would be dangerous,

explained Professor Singer. There are a number of reasons for this, including the risk of 'feedback loops' exacerbating the negative consequences. For example, loss of sea ice is not just bad in itself, but it also means that there is less ice to reflect away sunlight, and more ocean to soak it up, contributing to heating the planet.

Consequent rising sea levels could cause problems such as cessation of the Gulf Stream – a real issue for the UK – and loss of the Amazon Rain Forest, which would also in itself lead to yet more warming. Failing to take action is playing Russian Roulette with the lives of billions of people on the planet, and with those of future generations. "Even if we think [the science] is wrong, it's not ethical to take a gamble with the lives of so many people," he said. And while taking action could cause some hardship, it is much less hardship than if we don't do anything and the scientists are right.

Avoiding exceeding a rise of 2°C will require action such as not burning all the fossil fuels we have discovered, and moving to cleaner energy, even if it is more expensive. But there is an ethical issue over how this scarce resource should be distributed. Historically, countries that have produced the most emissions are those with the least to lose from global warming. The US has less than 5% of the world's population, but emits 16% of the world's greenhouse gases, while India, with 17%, emits 7%. John Rawls' theory of justice would suggest that there should be priority for the worst off – that we should "allow inequalities only to the extent that the benefit the worst-off group". The US needs to do more, said Professor Singer, as do European nations.

What should we, as individuals, do to live a more ethical life? We can change our diet, for example, reducing meat; we can take public transport and reduce our personal emissions; but while this all helps, it's not enough. Professor Singer called on everyone to become an active citizen, saying there is an ethical imperative to see the wrong we are doing, and take action to improve it. He reminisced about his own days as a student in Oxford, demonstrating against the Vietnam War, and pointed out that there were compelling images, such as the child fleeing a napalm bomb attack. We don't have the same images with climate change, but we need to take action; it's even more important than the Vietnam War, he concluded. Donald Trump, who had previously dismissed global warming as a hoax had "changed rhetoric a bit" since being elected US President, he said, but added that it is really important that other nations do not allow him to beg off the US's commitments made at the Paris summit to reduce emissions; there can be no "free-riders" in this most important of efforts.

Questions

Professor Singer answered questions on topics ranging from if and when it is permissible to break the law to how he personally justifies taking flights to Europe from the US. On the first point, he said that while in his first book he had said it could be permissible to break the law for an ethical good, this should be non-violent, and he continues to hold that view. He also said that violent protest – such as using letter bombs to tackle animal research – has a negative effect, because people do not want to associate themselves with a campaign that carries out such actions. On climate change, while it would be justifiable to protest about things such as large-scale fossil fuel initiatives in a non-violent way, you would also have to consider whether it would be effective, or counter-productive.

Asked about whether laboratory-grown meat would be a 'good', or if it would reinforce the meat culture, he said that he would be in favour if it produced meat that had not harmed a sentient creature, and if it would reduce emission of greenhouse gases. Alternatives to meat do not have to be lab-based, he added, pointing out that

when one company mixed up its chicken-salad with actual chicken salad it was a month before they realised, and customers had not noticed.

Asked about his view on whether it is ethical that the pay and bonuses paid to chief executives so far out-strip those of the workers, Professor Singer said that there are obscene cases in terms of proportion, but he added that some people who have generated wealth through start-ups have been philanthropic; for example, Bill Gates of Microsoft. While the focus is on these top earners, we have to consider that anyone earning more than £40,000 per year is in the global top 1% in terms of income, so we need to look at our own contribution too.

Asked about his personal thresholds for flying, Professor Singer said it wouldn't be worth crossing the Atlantic for one, or even two lectures, but that he tries to 'string' several together. "I hope that makes it worth it," he said.

Several audience members asked about where to draw the line in other areas, such as in the rights of animals – is it okay to kill ants? – and whether it is ethical to recommend that people continue to eat animal products even if they are thoughtful about it. Professor Singer said that there are questions about which creatures can feel pain. He said he doesn't know if insects suffer, and added that it is hard to get evidence in this matter. He also said that insisting people become vegan might be a "step too far" for some, but that if they started by, for example, choosing to eat non-factory-farmed meat, then perhaps vegetarianism would be less of a challenge, and so on. He said it would be hard to say it is wrong to rear chickens in your back yard if you treat them well and kill them humanely. "It's not the killing itself, it's the suffering you inflict," he said.

Votes of Thanks

Votes of Thanks were offered by RSE President, Dame Jocelyn Bell Burnell, and Professor John Haldane FRSE, Chair of the Institute of Philosophy.