

February 23, 2007

- **Nesbitt**

“[G]iven the view mention of the point of morality, people prepared as Smith does [with intentions to actively kill] are clearly of greater concern...than those prepared only to behave as Jones does [to let die, but not to kill].” (*What’s Wrong?* p.51) Given that Nesbitt never discusses the issue of euthanasia per se, the consensus of all the three sections was that burden of Nesbitt’s argument and explanation rested on how such a distinction of intention (to kill versus to let die but not have the stomach to kill) addresses the euthanasia issue per se (other than just being a revision of Rachel’s thought-experiments to argue that Rachel glosses over a significant difference of intention).

Katrina Taschmann §0207, and **Huong Tranh §0202** for example, both argued that Nesbitt commits a fallacy of division, as he makes the somewhat obvious point that Jones-like persons are the lesser of the evils in the face of “the rasion d’être of morality...maki[ng] it possible for people to live together in reasonable peace and security.” (ibid.) Granted that obvious truism, how does this translate into the specific problem-case of euthanasia? In other words, what may overall be true for morality as a whole doesn’t necessarily hold in some particular domain. For instance, to recall the ‘Hawkeye’ case (from Feb. 16 notes) he was behaving Smith-like and obviously (as the consensus was) he did what was morally permissible, if not desirable, in putting the English Captain out of his agony. **Pearl Hong §0207** however pointed out a valuable disanalogy here: Hawkeye was not subject to the consequences of his decision in the same way a health care provider would be, should s/he administer active euthanasia. Hawkeye was leaving the Iroquois encampment, severing his communal/social obligations. Doctors obviously do not have that kind of luxury or option.

T’Naija Dickens §0207 also took issue with the relevance of the thought-experiment, as did others. For starters, reminiscent of Sullivan’s critique of Rachel, it seems misleading to discuss the passive/active distinction, even in the case involving intentions. Moreover, and more importantly, in the case of euthanasia, all things being equal, we all agree what the intentions of a doctor are: to alleviate suffering. To talk of ‘being prepared to behave in a Smith-like way’ [to kill actively] is disingenuous, as the thought experiment(s) dealt with *incentives* that we’d consider are obviously morally reprehensible. **Sarah Kimel §0206** pressed this issue further by pointing out the incentives/intentions distinction was glossed over, and to fix the thought-experiments in such a manner one should try out thought-experiments in which the intentions match those of what one assumes a typical doctor has. **Brian Phipps §0207** and **Oneg Pruitt §0207** also pointed out other disanalogies in the thought-experiment, which, as emphasized further **Ahmad Samarah §0202** seem to call into question the whole business of primarily applying talk about intentions, as well as a bare-differences argument strategy. (For instance, wouldn’t something like an Inference to the Best Explanation approach, the approach Marquis adopted for instance in his abortion article, prove more effective in dealing with the real moral issues confronting the dilemma of euthanasia?)

Mildreth Llanos §0207 however brought the recently controversial case of Dr. Jack Kevoorkian to point out that one could only criticize Nesbitt so far...euthanasia and larger ‘health of society’ issues obviously overlap in the case of active killing, and some may argue

that Kevorkian's behavior may have been a little too 'Smith-like.' In other words (hearkening to Sullivan) AMA policy shouldn't be altered in such a way as to run the risk of allowing some practitioners, shall we say, become a little too enthused in their practice of 'alleviating suffering.' Hence the 'Smith-like behavior' cautionary point on the part of Nesbitt.

- **Singer**

As expected, in all sections, the discussion was rather lively. In the main, practically everyone¹ agreed with a reasonable (or weaker interpretation) point of Singer's agenda, which would advocate 'free-range' animal products and 'cruelty-free' products. For in both cases, the suffering of the animal is taken into consideration. In the case of free range, though the animal is eventually used for human ends, it is allowed an opportunity to live a life reasonably free of excess misery and suffering. In the case of 'cruelty free' products, animal testing has not been performed at all. Aside from inducing intense suffering on the part of the animal, the value of such experiments seems questionable at best. (Case in point: does one *really* need to squirt dish soap in the eyes of a rabbit for hundreds of trials to check whether or not eye damage will set in?) **T'Naija Dickens §0207** also clarified the point that versions of Christian ethics do *not* advocate the 'Great Chain of Being' theological/metaphysical position that Singer blames much of our present-day 'specism' on (page 407). There are versions of Christian ethics, in other words, that hold humans as especially responsible for unjust suffering inflicted on any sentient being...the notion, in other words, that humans may have a greater responsibility as 'caretaker/custodian' toward all non-human life, which would go against the species incentive to irresponsibly exploit such life.

What many, in all three sections, had a problem with was taking Singer's strong points to their conclusions. Specifically, many found that such a radically egalitarian position may actually conflict with the underlying assumptions of utilitarianism that Singer bases his entire arguments on. For instance, **Jasmine Tirado §0207** answered Singer's 'medical experiment' question with another question: 'Suppose we agree with Singer that it's wrong to perform the experiment [on both an animal or a newborn infant]. What if that experiment would help in giving us a cure for a deadly disease, like AIDS?' So in other words, Jasmine is pointing out the tensions inherent in adopting a 'greatest good for the whole' utilitarian view on the one hand, versus the egalitarianism Singer wants to promote on the other. It would seem that in order to be consistent with Singer here, the elimination of such an experiment could create an overall very undersirable consequence, in terms of potential suffering. To be fair to Singer, he wouldn't say 'terminate the experiment,' he'd only adopt a parity claim that such experiments could be performed in principle on newborns as on animals, since the latter have just as much (if not more) sentience than the former. "The experimenter...shows a bias in favor of his own species..."(405) Such a bias, Singer wants to argue, has no moral sanction.

But the underlying issue in Jasmine's question brings up the notion that our interests and preferences *are* species-centric, and (from a utilitarian basis) is this necessarily contradictory or even immoral for that matter. It doesn't seem so cut-and-dry as Singer wants to claim. To give another example, **Bashirah Moore §0206**, raised the following dilemma: suppose you're driving in a car and you're either going to hit a dog (and kill it) or hit a child (and kill it). No doubt, our intuitions tell us, it's morally permissible to hit the dog! Are such

¹ With the exception of Ahmad Samarah, though there was not enough time for him to elaborate his argument

intuitions entirely sentimental and without moral merit? Adopting Singer's very own utilitarianism, one could argue that the potential value of the child (the amount of good s/he could do for the domain of utility) far exceeds that of the dog's. So by the *very principle of utility*, we *must* be 'specist' in this case.

Others saw a tension with questions (which usually are connected with utilitarianism) involving limited resources. For instance, **Ahmad Samarah §0202** mentioned the concern that even if one agrees with Singer and implements his ethos into practice, the brute fact remains that all life forms on earth compete for food and resources. Like, for instance, in a war over resources, one could acknowledge that one's enemy has just as much a right to live as you, but such an acknowledgment is largely irrelevant when you and your enemy are competing over the same resources. Hunters side with conservationists here: they want to preserve a habitat with a stable population of (let's say) deer. But for this to be possible (to avoid population explosions as **Adil Zaman §0206** pointed out here) hunters advance conservation arguments to justify their practices. Nothing *prima facie* (at first glance) seems to conflict with utilitarianism here. Furthermore, **Michael Donovan §0206** pointed out that the issue of killing-for-food should be kept separate from the issue of making an animal suffer. Singer wants to say that both are instance of 'specism' insofar as we're treating animals as means to human ends, yet, as Micheal argued, he's making a rather improbable leap in his reasoning. Again, as in the issue involving free-range, or hunting, certainly animals can be treated respectfully and not made to suffer unnecessarily. And as mentioned, all things considered, nothing like responsible hunting/farming would conflict with utilitarian principles.

Other saw disanalogies with the racist/sexist/specist connection. **Christopher Young §0206** explicitly pointed this out that it seems rather dubious to argue that championing for a society in which animals are no longer treated as means to human ends is just the same as previous moral battles such as ending slavery or securing women's rights to vote. The disanalogy argued by Christopher and others (**Christine Dever §0202, Zakria Nur §0202**) rests on the *rights/responsibilities* issue we extend to humans in a way that we certainly do not and cannot extend to animals. (Do we hold a lion 'morally responsible for murder' when he rips apart a gazelle and eats it?) In other words, though it's reasonable to argue for a kind of qualified equal interest to extend to all beings with sentience (or capacity for suffering) it seems unreasonable to shed what seem to be some irreducibly 'specist' moral values that have to do with the special kind of dignity we ascribe and demand of humans. It was precisely this idea of dignity that Singer finds fault with when he criticized Frankena. But there's a potential slippery-slope (**Christine Dever §0202**): by suspending some kind of notion or standard like human dignity we don't want to relativize conduct on the level of animals. Granted such conduct on the part of humans may be precisely what makes us unique, that we are capable of such murder and destruction towards our own kind (and other forms of life) on such a mass scale (**Christopher Young §0206**).

Granted, however, one must read Singer in a charitable light. It would be certainly be unfair to associate his position against 'specism' as sanctioning (among humans) all forms of animal behavior. What one could salvage from Singer is to point out traditional practices made by cultures (e.g. hunter-gatherers, small microfarms) outside agribusiness practices. There, one sees typically the kind of behavior among hunters and farmers that reasonably satisfies a weaker interpretation of Singer: animals are given a natural dignity and typically not made to suffer cruel and unusual treatments. And, it may be added, such communities like hunter gatherers or small farmers indeed do satisfy main points of a utilitarian ethics, if one defines the domain of utility to include the community and its impact on its immediate environment.

What's *not* clear from Singer, however, is how one must devise a society in such a manner free from all practices in which animals are used as a means to secure human ends. (Case in point: what about buying a pet? Here an animal is used as a means to secure a human end, that end being a need for affection and some companionship.) In other words, it seems difficult to reconcile utilitarianism with notions like treating all sentient life forms as ends, not means.