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Some Considerations on Peter Singer's Practical Ethics

Mihai ANDRONE[1]

Abstract

Peter Singer's applied or practical ethics constitutes a typical product of the pluralist, relativistic, utilitarian and secular spirit of the postmodern era. Being an influential public figure, at the same time famous and controversial to the highest degree, his ideas have more than once been considered as dangerous. A passionate advocate of animal rights, Peter Singer is not a supporter of man's right to live. His philosophical attitude towards humanity and personality, his total separation from the Judeo-Christian tradition, protector of the sanctity of life, made him profess, in his book Practical Ethics, that the unborn children and the newborns are not rational beings and therefore do not value more (in fact, they value less) than certain animals. Such an anthropological conception evincing the psychological aspects of human existence is meant to "justify" abortion, infanticide, removal of haemophiliac children. This doctrinaire stance of the Australian moral philosopher aims at showing us the unhappy position of contemporary man who is deprived of certainties, of absolute moral benchmarks. Being an admirer of the French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, the atheist philosopher and ethicist Peter Singer considers that ethics is a natural phenomenon and man has no essential nature, being free to choose what he wants to be. By this type of existentialist ideas Peter Singer only confirms the truth of Jean-Paul Sartre's statement in Existentialism is a Humanism: if God does not exist, then everything is permissible.

Keywords: Peter Singer, postmodernity, practical ethics, atheism, Jean-Paul Sartre.

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1. Introduction

Peter Singer is a famous Australian moral and utilitarian philosopher whose controversial works have given rise to vivid polemics in the Western cultural space, aimed at eventually highlighting the effects of secularization on contemporary bioethics. The present paper is to be included in the category of papers meant to underline the negative moral character of some of his theses regarding man and human life.

2. Theoretical Background

There is a rich specialized literature questioning the validity of some of the ethical principles proposed by Peter Singer, on the grounds that they blatantly counter human dignity. A perfect illustration would be in this case the book by Susan F. Krantz, *Refuting Peter Singer's Ethical Theory : The Importance of Human Dignity* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2002). The conflictual relations between Peter Singer's moral intuitions and theological ethics, Christian in nature, are evinced, among others, in the book edited by John Perry, called *God, the Good, and Utilitarianism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), as well as in Charles C. Comosy's *Peter Singer and Christian Ethics: Beyond Polarization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012). But the present article aims at a critical approach of the moral doctrine of the Australian ethicist, starting from the distinction he makes between human being and person.

3. Argument of the paper

Numerous papers discuss the present era in which we live, as its profile is *challenging*. And if Peter Singer's practical ethics constitutes a specific product of the Postmodern Age, when the knowledge of the latter actually helps us better understand the specific character of the philosophical and ethical reflection of the famous Australian thinker. Therefore, to what extent is the postmodern spirit responsible for some of the controversial theses in the books and articles signed by the author we are dealing with in these lines? And what role may still be assigned to *Applied Ethics in a troubled world* [1]?

The present paper aims at revealing Peter Singer's ethics in a larger discussion context, in its quality of product specific to the postmodern era and, in addition, at showing that the distinction he (and not only he) operates between *human being* and *person* is not an ominous one, but one that

proves to be ethically harmful. The atheistic Singerian philosophy of the person actually turns against the human being, which is explainable if we take into account the Sartrian verdict whose validity we consider to be above all doubt: if God does not exist, then everything is permissible [2 p39].

4. Arguments to support the thesis

(Post)modernism is, beyond any doubt, a challenge to Christian values, through its pluralism, relativism, utilitarianism, materialism, individualism, pragmatism, Darwinism, and atheism. Contemporary philosophers and ethicists extensively question to a great extent the old certainties and are trying to reformulate the normative principles of the past, thus creating, through their axiological nonconformism, confusion and even moral anarchies.

The society we live in is fragmented, inhomogeneous and devoid of stable reference points. Although science and technology are trying (and to a great extent succeeding in) prolonging man's lifespan and considerably improving his life quality, today's philosophical and ethical iconoclasm, indulging in ambiguity and conceptual confusion, seems to serve death rather than life. Emancipation in relation to the philosophico-ethical tradition and the demise of the classical axiological register specific to the Judeo-Christian tradition are one and the same reality, which is not at all joyful: would it be possible for us to ignore that one of Peter Singer's books suggestively entitled for the century we live in - *Rethinking Life and Death: The Collapse of our Traditional Ethics*?

Although relativism should not be mistaken for pluralism, we nevertheless acknowledge that relativism is a good companion to pluralism, diversity, and more recently pluralism becomes predominant, a sort of a highly valued imperative, opposed to the idea of normativity and objective truth. The democratic and liberal Western culture eulogizes in various expression forms the "openness" and lack of prejudice that man shows, in other words his tolerance towards those with completely different moral-religious options. But relativism is the basic element of such "openness", the postmodern virtuous man, passionate supporter of equality and freedom, would rather avoid authoritarianism than error, and the concern with truth becomes in his case secondary. The idea that truth is relative adds to its epistemological meaning a new meaning of moral-political extraction, considered to be the premise of a free and happy society, whose enemies would mainly be "the faithful", "the fundamentalists": "The true believer is the real danger" [3 p26].

The contesting postmodern ethics, an ethics of the crisis by the flexibility it shows, has turned good and evil into functional values, according to Zygmunt Bauman, it is an ethics devoid of specific code: "With the *pluralism* of rules (and our times are the times of pluralism) the moral choices (and the moral conscience left in their wake) appear to us intrinsically and irreparably *ambivalent*. Ours are the times of *strongly felt moral ambiguity*. These times offer us freedom of choice never before enjoyed, but also cast us into a state of uncertainty never before so agonizing. We yearn for guidance we can trust and rely upon, so that some of the haunting responsibility for our choices could be lifted from our shoulders. But the authorities we may trust are all contested, and none seems to be powerful enough to give us the degree of reassurance we seek. In the end, we trust no authority, at least, we trust none fully, and none for long: we cannot help being suspicious about any claim to infallibility. This is the most acute and prominent practical aspect of what is justly described as the 'postmodern moral crisis'" [4 pp20-21].

5. Arguments to argue the thesis

The analysis of the philosophico-ethical position of Peter Singer may start with a quotation from the *Foreword* of the 3rd edition of his famous work, *Practical Ethics*: "I am now more ready to entertain – although not yet embrace – the idea that there are objective ethical truths that are independent of what anyone desires" [5 p xiii]. Peter Singer is an exponent of the mentality of his time. He wants to be a protector of animal life, his position on this matter is of notoriety nowadays. But on the other hand, he is not a protector of human life as well. Claiming that life is sacred, Christian tradition inevitably promotes an ethics specific to human existence, opposing certain practices that most are tempted to consider, in our time, as normal: abortion, assisted suicide and euthanasia, prostitution and unrestricted drug consumption. Taking as debate issue *the value of foetal life*, the secular philosopher Peter Singer captures the traditional Christian position regarding the sanctity of human life by means of the following syllogism: "First premise: It is wrong to kill an innocent human being. Second premise: A human fetus is an innocent human being. Conclusion: Therefore it is wrong to kill a human fetus" [6 p149].

Peter Singer shows that the objections to this position may fall into two categories. Thus, some admit the truth of the former premise and contest the truth of the latter; on the other hand, others, without rejecting the premises, contest the conclusion as such, or rather are opposed to the

prohibition of abortion by law. None of the opponents of this Christian vision regarding the value of human life dares to deny the truth of the first premise. However, Peter Singer opines that even the first premise is uncertain, its weakness being due to the fact that human life is perceived as having a special status. *Human* has two meanings: one refers to the appurtenance of a certain organism to the *Homo sapiens* species. The other refers to the quality of a being to be a person.

This semantic delimitation, according to Peter Singer, would be apt to reveal the weakness of the conservative Christian position: if, on the one hand, there is equality between fetus and person (rational being), then the second premise of the syllogism is false, as the fetus is not self-conscious. If, on the other hand, *human* is seen as meaning the mere appurtenance to the *Homo sapiens* species, then the argument in favour of preserving the fetus' life has no special moral significance, in which case the first premise becomes questionable. "The belief that mere membership of our species, irrespective of other characteristics, makes a great difference to the wrongness of killing a being is a legacy of religious doctrines" [6 p150]: in other words, the assertion that only human life is sacred would be true only to the extent in which we give credit to a certain religious view. To the extent in which we adopt a different viewpoint or a different philosophy, possibly Darwinist, the first premise loses all relevance: "It is time for the left to take seriously the fact that we are evolved animals, and that we bear the evidence of our inheritance, not only in our anatomy and our DNA, but in our behaviour too" [7 p6].

6. Dismantling the arguments against

The manner in which the famous ethicist distinguishes between the two meanings mentioned above (*humanity* and *personality*) may create more than confusion or concern. The unborn children are not persons as they are not rational beings, and their appurtenance to the human species is of absolutely no avail. The same ruthless verdict is also given to newborns, as they are considered as completely devoid of any personal quality that would place them in a privileged position in relation to the rest of the living beings. "A week-old baby is not a rational and self-conscious being, and there are many nonhuman animals whose rationality, self-consciousness, awareness, capacity to feel, and so on, exceed that of a human baby a week or a month old. If the fetus does not have the same claim to life as a person, it appears that the newborn baby does not either, and the life of a newborn baby is of less value to it than the life of a pig, a dog, or a chimpanzee is to the

nonhuman animal" [6 p 169]. Such an anthropological perception that brings to the fore the psychological aspects of human existence is meant to "justify" infanticide.

A newborn is worth less than an animal. A severely handicapped child is also worth too little, has absolutely no rights, and deserves to stay alive as long as his parents want it so [6 p186]. "Human babies are not born self-aware, or capable of grasping that they exist over time. They are not persons. Hence their lives would seem to be no more worthy of protection than the life of a fetus" [8 p210]. This type of "shocking" conclusions, as the Australian utilitarian himself acknowledges at some point [8 p210], are a consequence of the delimitations he makes from an anthropological point of view. It is certain that the bioethical approaches dispose of anthropological essence: just like it may be seen in the present paper [9 p108ff.], our behaviour towards the other human beings is conditioned by the answer we give to the question "Who is a person?"

Therefore, the person philosophy is of utmost importance in today's ethical debate, as countless philosophers, theologians and ethicists aims at finding whether there is a sensible qualitative difference between "human" and "person", and what ethical repercussions it would have once we accept it as such. Are the two concepts equivalent? Are they different, and if so, how different are they? Is "man" a superordinate notion to the notion of "person"? And if so, how harmful is this kind of "logic" who turns the person into a sort of superman who would enjoy special rights and especially the exclusive right to have his life respected and preserved? Is it possible that there are certain people who are more "human" than others, who would exclusively enjoy the privilege of biological, bodily survival? Is the life of certain people more valuable, more important and worth living than the life of others? Are the state of health and age the criteria that would totally work against some of our peers, depriving them of the most important right-the right to live? Aren't we by any chance living today, indifferently and unawares, in a genuine culture of death?

If the life of a fetus and the life of a normally-developed mature person would have the same relevance, then, as Peter Singer purports in *Practical Ethics*, he would not be able to consider abortion as morally permissible. Abortion and infanticide are "moral", i.e. "acceptable" practices only in the circumstances in which we deny some representatives of the human race the person quality, i.e. human wholeness, as is also the opinion of the American philosopher Michael Tooley: "if one is going to defend infanticide, one has to get very clear about what makes something a person, what gives something a right to life" [10 p38]. This is an extremely thorny issue, and as Michael Tooley says, if we considered the fetus a person, then

abortion might be permitted only if the mother's life were in danger (although not even this aspect is clear and uncontested), according to the conservative position. But if the fetus is not a person, then it is natural to wonder what difference would we find between destroying the fetus and destroying any random inanimate object? But considering that neither the fetus, nor the newborn are persons, do we not transform abortion and infanticide into a mere trifle, something completely minor and unimportant?

Questions are abundant. Is the "person" a morally relevant concept, while "human" would be totally unimportant, devoid of profound meaning? To Peter Singer and Michael Tooley, the mere appurtenance of a being to the human race is completely irrelevant from an ethical point of view. Under these circumstances, is birth still endowed with a moral significance? Does parenthood still hold any moral meaning? And if not, how moral is this new levelling and nihilistic "moral", which morally equates diametrically opposed acts?

The questions that come to mind are countless. What is the value of human life, is it still worth anything? Should we, keeping into account the distinction "person"-"human", invent another manner to express ourselves, one that would fit the thinking paradigm of Peter Singer and Michael Tooley? Can we destroy man, but not the human person? Do persons have the right of life and death on others who are only humans? With this type of reasoning, don't we reach an ethical impasse, which is downright monstrous? Doesn't man sabotage himself through such a conception which turns depriving somebody else of life into a moral act?

Michael Tooley, just like Peter Singer, sees in self-consciousness the differentiating feature of the person. Somebody is entitled to life only if he wishes to live and is aware of this desire. Eventually Michael Tooley passes from *desires* to *concepts*, in fact he makes a man's right to life depend on his intellectual capacity: "the desires one can have are limited by the concepts one possesses " [10 p47]. But it is clear that no member of the human race is born with this capacity: if we really gave credit to this vision, then the existence of all men would be endangered from the very start. Do we still know what it means to be a man? Is the issue of the moral status of abortion and infanticide impossible to solve? Don't the supporters of abortion and infanticide profess from the very start the existence of an irreconcilable opposition between the parent and the child? And in this case, wouldn't we draw the conclusion that the parent has all the rights, while the fetus or the newborn would have none? What is the point of making such a fuss about children's rights? Or is it that the newborn cannot be considered a "child", terminologically speaking?

This type of "restrictive" philosophy we have examined and will relate to in the following– restrictive as it restricts full humanity to a few criteria, like "consciousness", "reasoning", "self-motivated activity", "the capacity to communicate", "self-awareness" [11 p55], and they are not the only ones possible – is not favourable to life, is not meant to encourage and protect it, as long as it stipulates that anybody who is not able to take on all moral obligations and responsibilities cannot have rights, including the right to life. Such a defective human being, according to this reasoning paradigm, *resembles* a person, without actually being one. The practical consequences of this view are already well-known by now.

We should not neglect an extremely important aspect, viz. that man *becomes* self-conscious, and by disease or accident this capacity may be irretrievably lost. The quality of being a person, although fundamental, defining, eventually proves to be not only potential, acquired, but also extremely weak and fleeting. Today's bioethics seems to have completely forgotten not only the religious reference points that gave a special identity to the Western space, but also the Kantian categorical imperative. Isn't the terminological distinction between "human being" and "person", also conceptually speaking, a form of looking down on man, and in addition, a manifestation of our lack of sensitivity towards him? The following text seems eloquent in this respect. "If a being suffers, there can be no moral justification for refusing to take that suffering into consideration. […] If a being is not capable of suffering, or of experiencing enjoyment or happiness, there is nothing to be taken into account" [6 p57-58]. In the presence of this "postmodern terminological revolution", what is left of *human rights*?

In any case, Peter Singer does not agree that the human being should enjoy any special consideration or that man should feel privileged in any way. The interdiction to use man as a means and the urge to consider him just a purpose were abolished by Peter Singer's philosophico-ethical doctrine: as he does not believe in the sanctity of human life, he also does not agree that all human life would be of equal worth. To claim that life is sacred means to perceive it as being "untranslatable", without terminological equivalents, to see it as irreducible to nothing else, such as happiness, self-consciousness, rationality, autonomy: sacred life has value in itself, infinite, sacred life is above all these qualities we mentioned before [12 p18-19]. But in the opinion of the Australian ethicist, "persons" may use the "human" embryo to perform a series of experiments and medical research in order to find therapeutic solutions to various illnesses (Parkinson, Alzheimer, Huntington). "Compared with adult tissue, foetal tissue appears to grow better after transplantation and to be less likely to be rejected by the patient" [6 p164]. Peter Singer sees no harm in a woman's autonomous decision to

get pregnant on purpose and then abort the fetus to get the foetal tissue necessary to save the life of her sick child.

6. Conclusions

From its very beginning, Christianity has been concerned with the preservation of human life, explicitly forbidding abortion and infanticide, *The Didache* contains the following exhortation: "Thou shalt not murder a child by abortion, nor shalt thou kill it when it is born" [13 p113]. The philosophy differentiating *personality* from *humanity*, placing them in antagonist relations, does not constitute an environment favourable to human life and social life, but instead creates distrust among all the members of society and thus undermines social harmony. "If we could never trust other persons not to kill us whenever they judged that some net good might result, social relationships would become immeasurably more difficult, and the lives of all but the most powerful persons would be greatly impoverished" [14 p310]. Totally separating ethics from Christian principles, Peter Singer actually empties moral duty of all real content and imperative force, showing at the same time that morality and happiness would be on irreconcilable levels [15 p187]. Peter Singer's philosophical and ethical doctrine confirms through its main theses the truth of Sartre's famous statement in his short work entitled *Existentialism is a Humanism*: if God does not exist, then everything is permissible. Atheism involves amorality.

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