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Greetings from Amsterdam!

How are you all doing?

I am happy to report that over the last months I have gathered some significant inspiration, which I hope to share with you over the coming months. Today will be the first in what I hope will be a series of E-zines. The topic will be Peter Singer's challenge to Socrates' legacy and how the thought of Robert Spaemann and Leonardo Polo can help to answer this challenge. This line of thought is in the process of being published, but I would like to share it with you in this way. I co-authored this paper with Juan-Pablo Puy-Segura, and have had much help from prof. José Ignacio Murillo. I'd be really interested to hear your thoughts!

I have a nice experience to share as well, as well as another conversation starter: ChatGPT. At Amsterdam University College conversations are happening about how to deal with this tool in teaching. If you have thoughts, I would be very interested!

Finally, I have managed to upgrade my website, and have added a section with information for those interested in running reading clubs about interesting issues like love and economics, who are we as human beings, and hope in an information age. This could be with a group of students, but also with professionals. You can [find that information here](#).

In any case, I hope this provides interesting reading for you at the beginning of a new semester.

All the best,

Daniel Bernardus

## What's in This Issue?

- 1) [An Idea](#): Peter Singer's Challenge to Socrates' Legacy
- 2) [An Experience](#): The life of Pedro Ballester

## 1) An Idea: Peter Singer's Challenge to Socrates' Legacy

Peter Singer has attacked the thought tradition that arguably springs from Socrates for being responsible for enslaving animals. He has specifically attacked what he calls the “sanctity of life” stance, the view that it is always wrong intentionally to take an innocent human life. From his preference utilitarian perspective, any rational self-conscious being with future preference should be included in ethical deliberation, which leads him to attribute personhood to certain animals, and not to human beings who do not display rationality and self-consciousness. According to Singer, attributing personhood exclusively to humans and to all humans is speciesism, discrimination on the sole basis of biological species.

Singer’s position has been criticized from different angles, and he has answered many of these critiques. We will examine Singer’s answers to the challenge from potentiality, to the charge of dualism, and to the question what happens to his argument if Socrates’ legacy is not speciesist. In future newsletters, we will examine a critique of this position that can be constructed based on the thought of Robert Spaemann and Leonardo Polo.

### Introduction

In Athens Socrates was accused of impiety towards the gods of the state, a charge amounting to high treason in those times, and he was famously found guilty. Now, after this trial has been discussed in academic settings for ages, Peter Singer puts Socrates on trial again. Not the man himself of course, but his legacy. The charge this time is different: not the gods are being mistreated, but the conceptions resulting from Socrates’ thought have made the enslavement of animals possible. Animals need to be liberated, and the tradition called western thought, Socrates’ legacy, in so far as it provides a legitimacy for animal slavery, needs to be left to die.

Below we will first examine Singer’s positions on animal liberation, and his attack on what he calls the “sanctity of life” view, the view that it is always wrong to intentionally take the life of an innocent human being. We will then explore some of the attempted defenses of this view and Singer’s reply to them. In future e-zines, Robert Spaemann’s answer to Singer will be elaborated on. Leonardo Polo’s epistemology in line with Socrates’ legacy and notion of

human life is coherent and not necessarily speciesist. Finally, we will explore why Singer's writings still constitute a relevant call to examination of conscience for Christians and others following Socrates' legacy, in our behavior towards animals.

## Singer's attack on Socrates' legacy

Singer's attack on Socrates' legacy can be found in his famous work "Animal Liberation". After having vividly described practices of maltreatment of animals, especially in experimental settings and in factory farming, Singer discusses the history of ideas that has made this maltreatment possible. He decries

*the continued existence of the ideology whose history we have traced back to the Bible and the ancient Greeks. It is important to expose and criticize this ideology, because although contemporary attitudes to animals are sufficiently benevolent—on a very selective basis—to allow some improvements in the conditions of animals to be made without challenging basic attitudes to animals, these improvements will always be in danger of erosion unless we alter the underlying position that sanctions the ruthless exploitation of nonhumans for human ends. Only by making a radical break with more than two thousand years of Western thought about animals can we build a solid foundation for the abolition of this exploitation.* [1]

The attack on western thought about animals, also entails an attack on western thought about humans, which Socrates can be argued to have fathered. To Singer, this tradition has not given convincing arguments about the difference between humans and animals. As he puts it:

*Faced with a situation in which they saw a need for some basis for the moral gulf that is still commonly thought to separate human beings and animals, but unable to find any concrete difference between human beings and animals that would do this without undermining the equality of human beings, philosophers tended to waffle. They resorted to high-sounding phrases like "the intrinsic dignity of the human individual." They talked of "the intrinsic worth of all men" (sexism was as little questioned as speciesism) as if all men (humans?) had some unspecified worth that other beings do not have. Or they would say that human beings, and only human beings, are "ends in themselves" while "everything other than a person can only have value for a person."* [2]

Singer therefore directly attacks the concept of human dignity or worth:

*are the last resource of those who have run out of arguments.* [3]

Instead, Singer proposes a that we distinguish between human beings and persons. He takes 'person' to mean 'a self-conscious or rational being', which is one of the meanings of the term in the Oxford dictionary. [4] He then goes on to argue that this description does not apply to all human beings, only those that can actually be seen to be self-conscious or rational. He also argues that this definition can be applied to certain animals. In his books, he develops the ethical consequences of these views, which include a better treatment of animals and increased giving of first world towards third-world countries, as well as an ethical justification of abortion, euthanasia, and infanticide, though none of this in an unqualified way, rather always maximizing the preference utility of persons involved. [5]

Singer's stance is at odds especially with what he calls the "sanctity of life" view, the view that it is always wrong intentionally to take an innocent human life. [6] The religious nature of this terminology has been objected to by Harriet McBryde Johnson, one of Singer's atheist critics. [7] There have been several attempts to defend this view and criticize Singer; let us examine some of these defenses.

## Singer answers the defense from potentiality

One of the lines of defense, one that Singer discusses in *Practical Ethics*, is to say that before a human person or a human being can be recognized as such, there is a potential human person or human being. This potential life is inviolable. Singer shows this argument as follows

*First premise: It is wrong to kill a potential human being.*

*Second premise: A human fetus is a potential human being.*

*Conclusion: Therefore, it is wrong to kill a fetus.* [8]

For Singer, the second premise of this argument is solid, however he finds the first premise unacceptable. He reasons

*Tooley's link between a right to life and the capacity to see oneself as a continuing mental subject, and the principle of respect for autonomy – are all based on the fact that persons see themselves as distinct entities with a past and a future. None of the reasons apply to those who are not now and never have been capable of seeing themselves in this way. If these*

So even though there may be potential human life, or potential personhood, that for Singer does not constitute solid ground for inviolability.

## Defense against the charge of dualism

In the handbook of Catholic Medical Ethics, Singer's position, together with the "identity theory of mind" is classified as dualist. According to the authors, the Identity Theory of Mind

*implies an unconcealed dualism between, on the one hand, human beings with a human body and human nature and, on the other hand, human persons, that is, human beings with a specific consciousness. In effect, personhood is reduced to a few brain functions specific to humans.*

[\[10\]](#)

Philosophically, dualism is a highly problematic position, for how can one justify the dignity of a few brain functions over the rest of human nature?

Yet for one, as we have already seen, Singer does not say that personhood is "specific to humans", rather he extends it to various types of animals. Perhaps more importantly, Singer explicitly refrains from ontology. He describes his own ethical approach, preference utilitarianism, in the following way

*(...) preference utilitarianism is a straightforward ethical approach that requires minimal metaphysical presuppositions. We all know what preferences are, whereas claims that something is intrinsically morally wrong, or violates a natural right, or is contrary to human dignity invoke less tangible concepts that make their truth more difficult to assess.* [\[11\]](#)

Singer therefore attempts to minimize his metaphysical presuppositions. In a response to Don Maquis, who pointed out Singer's statement that "when I think of myself as the person that I now am, I realize that I did not come into existence until some time after my birth" and the view that "Peter Singer is not a biological organism", [\[12\]](#) Singer states that "it is plausible to think of ourselves as persons, rather than organisms". [\[13\]](#) Yet he does not fully commit to this view. He states

*matters, on my view, are the consequences of what we do. Before there is a being with future-directed desires, the consequences of destroying an individual organism, and refraining from bringing an individual into existence, are often virtually identical. Once there is a being conscious of its own future, with desires about that future, which we can satisfy or frustrate, the consequences of ending its life are different, but just as the development of those desires is gradual, so is the seriousness of thwarting them. [14]*

So to the charge of dualism, Singer answers that as an ethicist following preference utilitarianism, he does not have to be involved in ontology. He only needs to take into account beings that have preferences.

## Singer's reply in case "sanctity of life" were not speciesist

Finally, in a defense of the "sanctity of life" view, Marcus Düwell argues that giving reasons for defending "potential persons" is not "speciesist", as Singer would have it. [15] In response, Singer argues

*Finally, as far as the discussion on the sanctity of human life is concerned, it is worth pointing out that Düwell as focused on only two aspects of my discussion on this topic, mainly on the objection that the doctrine is speciesist, and on my ground for rejecting the argument from potential. There is more to my critique of this doctrine that he does not discuss, in particular my objection to the absolutist nature of the doctrine – that is, the claim that it is always wrong intentionally to take the life of an innocent human being. (...) Another aspect of the doctrine that I criticize extensively is the idea that all human life has an equal value or worth (...). Hence even if Düwell thinks something like the traditional view can survive my objections to speciesism and to the argument from potential, this does not show that the traditional view, or anything like it, is defensible against other objections. [16]*

Singer therefore argues that even if the "sanctity of life" doctrine were not speciesist, it does not follow from there that all human life has equal value, or that it is always wrong intentionally to take the life of an innocent human being, for example in the case of someone asking for their life to be taken during unbearable suffering.

not been freed from blame. The book 'Persons' by Robert Spaemann,<sup>[17]</sup> suggests a different line of defense. Next time, we will examine how Spaemann would react to Singer's answers to the objections above.

[1] SINGER, P.A.D. *Animal Liberation*, New York, 2015, p309

[2] Ibid., p343

[3] Ibid., p345

[4] SINGER, P.A.D. *Practical Ethics*, Cambridge, 2011, p74

[5] See e.g. SINGER, P.A.D. *Animal Liberation*, New York, 2015;

SINGER, P.A.D. *Practical Ethics*, Cambridge, 2011;

SINGER, P.A.D. *Should the baby live?*, Oxford, 1988;

SINGER, P.A.D. *The Most Good You Can Do*. New Haven and London, 2015.

[6] SINGER, P.A.D. *Animal Liberation*, New York, 2015, p50

[7] SCHALER, J.A. *Peter Singer Under Fire*, Chicago and La Salle, 2009, p197-8

[8] SINGER, P.A.D. *Practical Ethics*, Cambridge, 2011, p138

[9] Ibid., p139

[10] EIJK, W.J. *et al. Handboek Katholieke Medische Ethiek*, Almere, 2010, p47

[11] SINGER, P.A.D. *Practical Ethics*, Cambridge, 2011, p14

[12] SCHALER, J.A. *Peter Singer Under Fire*, Chicago and La Salle, 2009, p160

[13] Ibid. p161

[14] SCHALER, J.A. *Peter Singer Under Fire*, Chicago and La Salle, 2009, p162

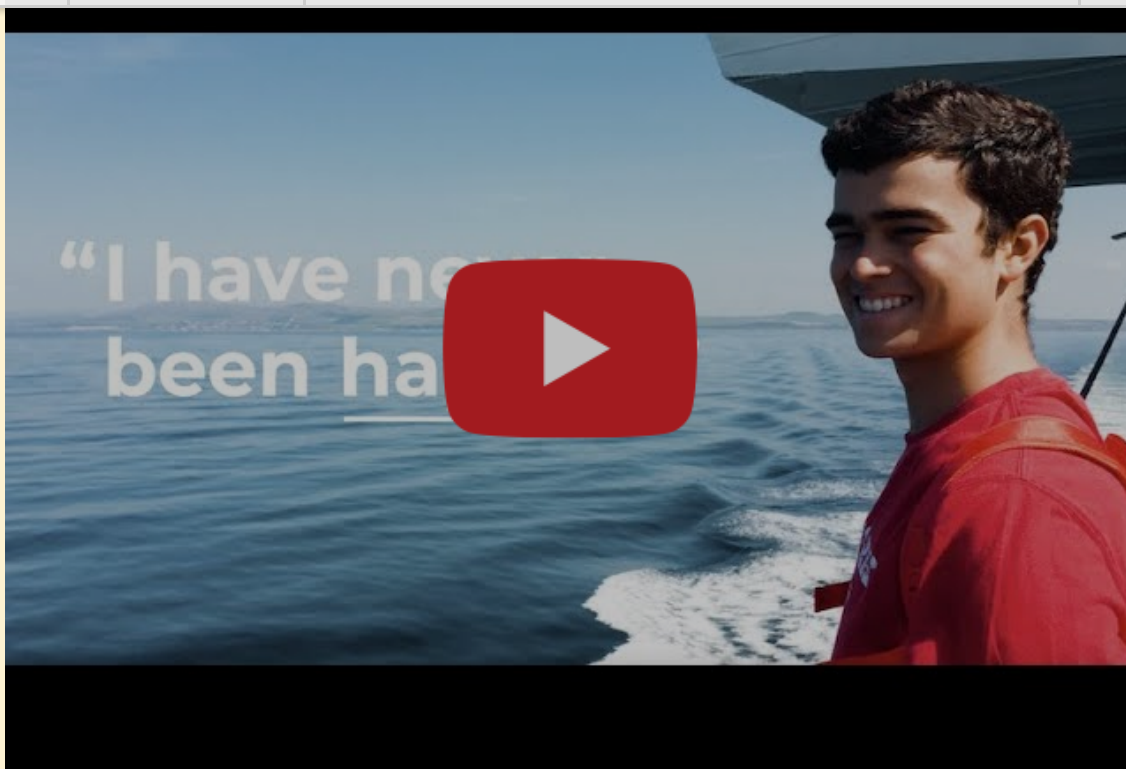
[15] Ibid., p413

[16] Ibid., p426

[17] SPAEMANN, R. *Persons*. Oxford, 2017.

## 2. An Experience: The Life of Pedro Ballester

Recently I have had the opportunity to visit Manchester, and specifically the house where Pedro Ballester lived. Pedro was a young man who passed away at an early age due to an aggressive form of cancer. I have been so fortunate to get to know him during the last stages of his life, when he spent some time in the Netherlands. Pedro was a very special person who has touched the life of many people, including my own. Not long ago, this documentary was released about his life, which I warmly recommend.

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A documentary [on the life of Pedro Ballester](#).

#### 4) An Anecdote: How will academia deal with ChatGPT?

It's all over the news, but for good reason: it looks like ChatGPT will change the face of academia.

Speaking for myself, I can say that I am having to change the assessment structure for a course I am teaching at Amsterdam University College, which is quite writing-heavy. For example, there was a creative writing assignment there which was supposed to be a team challenge for scientists who had never written before... I don't think it's a challenge any longer.

There is still a reflection essay at the end of the course. I plan to have an open conversation with my students about how to approach this. We have been having some conversations among our staff members as well. What should we change, what should we embrace, what are the dangers?

If you have any thoughts, I'd be really happy if you would reply by email and let me know.

#### 5) What's coming up?

I hope the new section on my author website will help people to set up reading clubs about interesting issues like love and economics, who are we as human



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The Canyons and Stars Dutch language podcast I told you about previously will get started in the coming month. For the Dutch speakers I'll repeat the [audio](#) and [video](#) links, watch the space over the coming month!

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Juan-Pablo Puy-Segura for co-authoring the article on Singer with me, and José Ignacio Murillo for his useful comments to an earlier version of the manuscript.

## Legal letters

Please note that this newsletter is copyrighted material. You are able to share this E-zine in its entirety, but not to modify, shorten or copy from it in any way. I actually appreciate it if you share the entire E-zine with friends, family or colleagues who might be interested. I hope we can spark many good conversations together.

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Daniel Bernardus

Publisher, Relax, Relate, Reflect about Big Questions E-zine

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