



'There is nothing in the dark that isn't there  
when the lights are on.' (Rod Serling)

That Religious Studies Website

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### Utilitarianism (Part 2): Singer, developments and critiques

**Information:** A look at Peter Singer's Preference Utilitarianism, as well as some of the developments and critiques of the principle of utility. A version of this article was originally published on the website [www.faithnet.org.uk](http://www.faithnet.org.uk).

#### Peter Singer (b. 1946)

Peter Singer works in the field of practical ethics. He also writes from the perspective of *Preference Utilitarianism*, and has published two popular books exploring moral issues from this point-of-view. In *Animal Liberation* (1975), Singer argued that animals have the same rights as humans, based on their capacity to experience pain, and that any species which has the capacity to suffer should be given equal rights because of this. Discriminating against a species simply because they have fur or feathers, is nothing more than Species-ism. In *Practical Ethics* (1979), Singer continued to explore the suffering/rights issue, in particular by considering how this relates to matters such as abortion and euthanasia.

Singer's book *Animal Liberation* was said to have been a major influence in the formation of the modern animal liberation movement.

of the issues Preference Utilitarians such as Singer are trying to draw attention to, is the question of whether one needs to directly experience something, in order for it to be morally significant. For instance, Bentham's [hedonic calculus](#) is said to be a measure of 'pleasure/pain' units, but this is largely done from the point-of-view of one making the decision how to act. Only the seventh criteria seems to consider how the matter might be viewed from another perspective:



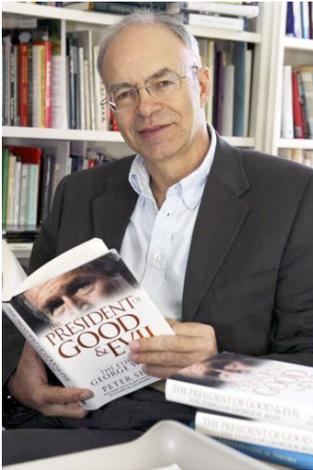
7. The **number of people** who will be affected by any pleasure or pain arising as a result of the act in question. ([Bentham J., Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation](#))

This might imply that according to Bentham, whatever you do not experience yourself, does not matter.

#### A bigger picture!

What Singer (and other Preference Utilitarians) are trying to do, is expand the horizon of who (or what) should feature in moral debates. For instance, if we say that testing a nuclear weapon is morally acceptable because it discourages wars, and that no humans are harmed in the process of doing so; have we also taken into account the impact this will have on the environment, and on non-human species living in the region of the test area? Singer's point about the capacity for animals to suffer, invites us to think about the consequences of nuclear tests from the non-human perspective. For instance, what will happen to animals living near the test site, or even the environment? If we were literally 'in their shoes' (i.e. we were these animals, or the Earth), would we want someone to detonate a nuclear weapon on, or near to us? If our answer is no, and we would *prefer* this not to

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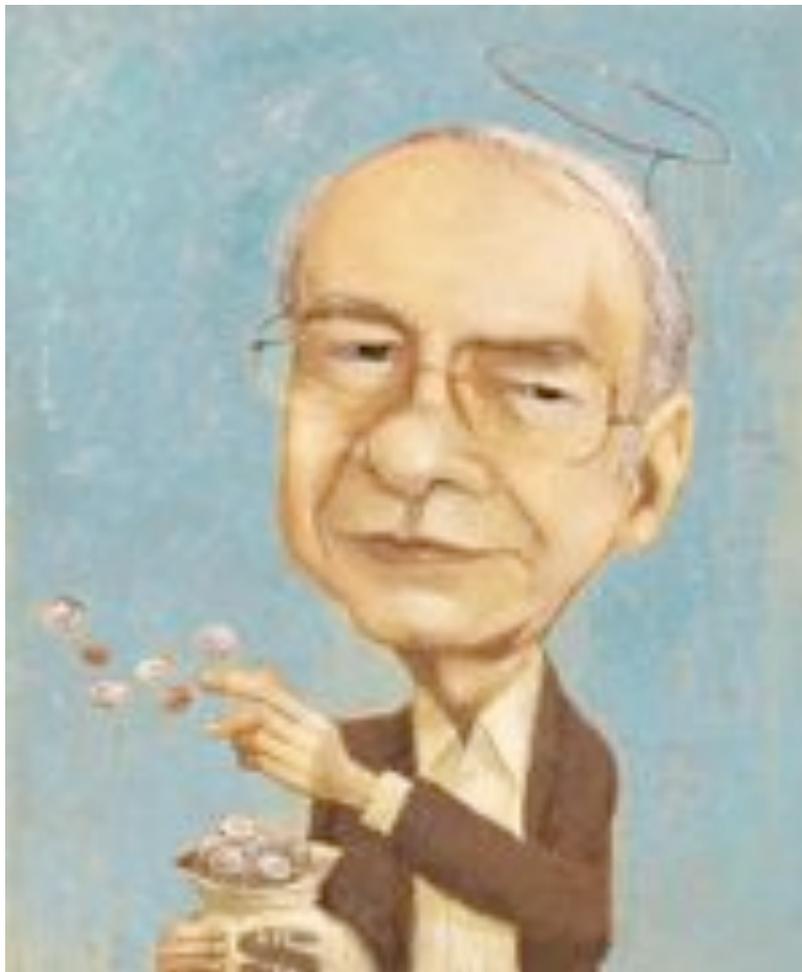


happen, then detonating a nuclear weapon is morally wrong, according to Preference Utilitarians.

*As we realise that more and more things have global impact, I think we're going to get people increasingly wanting to get away from a purely national interest. ([Peter Singer, www.brainyquote.com](http://www.brainyquote.com))*

*I think there are ways in which we have become a single global community that were not true a hundred years ago; the ability to know what's happening everywhere instantly by having CNN beaming it into our living rooms; that connection with remote parts of the world that we never had. ([Peter Singer, www.brainyquote.com](http://www.brainyquote.com))*

**Something to think about:** What do you think about Preference Utilitarianism? Do you think it is possible for people to consider such a diverse range of interests? Does it matter if we act in ways people will never know about, even though it could potentially hurt them (but never actually did)?



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