

## ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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### ***Living with Contradiction: Peter Singer and the Value of a Human Life***

For many years, ethicist Peter Singer served as Ira W. DeCamp Professor of Bioethics at Princeton University. Author of many books, including his important *Animal Liberation*, Singer has championed ideas that are now cherished and central to the People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals organization. He lives a frugal lifestyle and does not eat meat, fish or wear leather. Arguably controversial and provocative, Singer has advocated among many other things the following:

- We must embrace the collapse of an ancient system of values that has enshrined the sanctity of human life.
- Human life is not necessarily more sacred than a dog's life.
- It is probably more compassionate to carry out medical experiments on hopelessly disabled, unconscious orphans than on perfectly healthy rats.
- He has vehemently argued that human dominion over the animal kingdom is "speciesism," which "resulted from the centuries of tyranny by white humans over black humans."
- "You don't need to suffer from existential doubt to be miserable: the anguish of a pig that lives only to be confined and then butchered counts as suffering to Singer in just the same way human anxiety does."
- A severely mentally impaired human being is worth less than that of a chicken.

However, Singer's entire ethical paradigm has been challenged by a rather common reality of human life: His mother has Alzheimer's disease and he made the conscious decision to spend his money taking care of her, "rather than helping chickens." Several publications, including *The New Republic*, have charged Singer with being a hypocrite and being selfishly inconsistent. How should we think about all of this? Two fundamental comments:

- First, Singer's entire ethical construct and his seeming inconsistency stems from an unwillingness to embrace a central teaching of genuine, biblical Christianity—namely that humans alone have infinite worth and value because they are created in the image of God. Indeed, one of the most fundamental of all biblical propositions is that humans both resemble God (e.g., attributes such as intellect, emotion, will) and represent God (i.e., as His theocratic stewards, Gen. 1:26ff), and this truth provides the basis for the worth, value and dignity of humanity. Theologian Albert Mohler writes: "Human dignity can survive only if we commonly believe and commonly affirm that every single human being, at every stage of development, is a person in God's image and bearing the dignity

that is the mark of God's personal possession. The only adequate conception of human dignity rests upon the biblical teaching that such dignity is not a human achievement, but a gift. Human beings do not achieve the status of dignity by their abilities or performance or development. Human dignity and the worth of the human individual are predicated only upon the fact that every human being is made in the image of God, and therefore is to be respected, protected, and cherished as a member of the human community." In this Postmodern era, American civilization is currently struggling with how to affirm human dignity without the biblical premise of bearing God's image. This effort is not going well, for without absolute truth rooted in God's revelation, we are finding that as a civilization we have our feet firmly anchored in midair! We have no absolute, all-encompassing basis for establishing and affirming human dignity. Further, with the Darwinian hypothesis now the widely accepted view, humans are merely products of exactly the same force that produced all life—natural selection. According to this model, our closest biological relatives are the primates (more than likely the chimpanzee). Thus, life is a product of vast amounts of time, random chance and an impersonal force called natural selection. Indeed, in such a worldview, life is a "cosmic accident." If human beings are simply a more complicated primate and merely a cosmic accident, why does it matter how we treat human life at any stage in its development?

- Second, how should we think biblically about our pets, about animals in general? Even though Peter Singer's mother who suffered from Alzheimer's disease was of far more value than a chicken, do we as God's dominion stewards have a responsibility to chickens? There are several biblical principles to aid Christians in thinking about animal life, the larger physical world, and about our relationship to both. The non-human creation is of great significance to God. He created the physical world as a deliberate act. God also takes pleasure in His physical world. This is clear from the Creation Ordinance in Genesis 1 and 2 and from 1 Timothy 4:4: "For everything created by God is good and nothing is to be rejected, if it is received with gratitude." (See also Psalm 104:31 where we see God rejoicing in His created work.) The point is that if the physical world is important to God, then it must be to us—His dominion stewards—as well (see also Job 39:1-2, Colossians 1:16 and Psalms 19:1-4). Scripture teaches that God has a covenant, not only with humans, but also with the nonhuman creation. After the flood, God made a covenant with the physical creation: "Behold, I establish my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the cattle, and every beast of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark" (Genesis 9:9-10). The physical world has dignity, worth and value quite apart from its service to humanity. Incredibly, God's redemptive plan has a cosmic quality to it. The whole created order will be part of the Christ's kingdom (and the New Heaven and New Earth), and this truth confirms that the created order is good and important to God. Romans 8:19-23 demonstrates that at Christ's return the groaning of creation will cease, for the creation will be transformed: "The creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God" (v. 21).

We honor animals as valuable beings, a part of God's world. It is our stewardship responsibility to treat them well, and care for them. But, animals are not persons. They do not deserve to have the rights associated with personhood. Only humans bear God's image and that is the fundamental difference between animals and humans—an eternally significant difference. Jesus' death, burial and resurrection were accomplished for the justification of human beings, not animals. For Peter Singer to care for his elderly mother suffering from Alzheimer's disease rather than spending his money caring for chickens is thoroughly consistent with a biblical worldview. But if he holds to the worldview reflected in his writings and lectures, he is then being hypocritical and thoroughly inconsistent. May he therefore embrace the liberating truth of God's word.

See Albert Mohler [www.albertmohler.com](http://www.albertmohler.com) (25 February 2014); James P. Eckman, *Christian Ethics* (2013), pp. 109-120; Michael Specter, "The Dangerous Philosopher" in *The New Yorker* (6 September 1999), p. 46; and Eric Kaplan, "Can We Live with Contradiction" in the *New York Times* (29 January 2017).