

Foreground and background: an interview with Peter Singer and three arguments against naturalism

Andrea Loffi

MA, University of Trento, Italy

Correspondence to: Andrea Loffi
E-mail: andrealoffi91@gmail.com

Summary

The first part of this paper reports an interview with the philosopher Peter Singer. In the second, we examine Singer's background: naturalism and neurophilosophy, discussing three of its theses, as presented by Patricia Smith Churchland. Finally, we go back to Singer himself, to draw some conclusions.

KEY WORDS: mind/body problem, naturalism, neurophilosophy, Patricia Smith Churchland, Peter Singer, reductionism.

Introduction

Peter Singer, who is of Austrian Jewish origin, is one of the most widely known and important contemporary philosophers. He is 71 and married. His academic career has taken him to a number of prestigious universities, such as Melbourne, Oxford, Princeton and NYU. His books, mostly dealing with moral philosophy, are read all over the world and contribute to debate on topics in a range of areas, such as bioethics, animal rights, equality and charity towards poor countries. His ethical reflection revolves around the central, utilitarian, principle of maximizing the general amount of pleasure and thereby reducing the amount of suffering. According to this principle, the faculty to perceive pain and pleasure is enough to render a subject worthy of moral consideration. In line with this view, an animal may be considered worthy and a gravely malformed child not. However, in the following interview, which Mr. Singer granted me, I focused more on theoretical concerns than on specific ethical issues (for a recent and biographically detailed interview, see: Sosis, 2017).

Interview

A.L. Well, Mr. Singer, let us begin with a very direct shot: how does it feel to be considered, at least in the English-speaking philosophical world, one of the most influential living thinkers, known for your ability to "bite the bullet"?

P.S. I'm very pleased that my work is influential, because most of what I write is directed towards persuad-

ing people to act so as to reduce the amount of suffering in the world. So if I am having some influence in that direction, it's good for the world, and of course, fulfilling for me.

A.L. Would you like to sum up the story of your encounter with philosophy?

P.S. It's hard to sum up fifty years of studying, discussing and writing philosophy, but I've always wanted to make the work I do in philosophy relevant to important problems that we face, as individuals, societies or globally.

A.L. Nowadays, more than ever, philosophy seems to be facing an identity crisis. There is a dizzying variety of methods and schools of thought, far more, I assume, than in other disciplines like physics or literature. What exactly are, in your opinion, the methods and the tasks of philosophy, if it is to be understood as a coherent discipline?

P.S. I'm not bothered with trying to categorize philosophical methods or schools of thought. My area is ethics, and that means that I try to think clearly and deeply about how we ought to live, and what we ought to do. I'm interested in making good arguments, and showing the flaws in poor arguments, and I'm open-minded about how to do that.

A.L. Let me now ask a very brutal question: how can you still support utilitarianism after traversing the depth and the breadth of thinkers like Hegel and Marx, on whom you wrote two books?

P.S. Hegel and Marx both have interesting things to say, but as I explain in the two books you mention, they both say things that are clearly mistaken. Utilitarianism rests on more plausible foundations. I've tried to explain that in my most recent book, *Utilitarianism: A Very Short Introduction*, co-authored with the Polish philosopher Katarzyna de Lazari-Radek. Incidentally, all three of these books, Marx, Hegel, and Utilitarianism are in the same series, OUP's *Very Short Introductions*, and each one of them can be read in two hours or less, so I invite your readers to compare the arguments (Lazari Radek and Singer, 2017; Singer, 2000; Singer, 2001).

A.L. Let us move on to more specific topics. The main focus of your philosophical reflection is ethics, and indeed *Practical Ethics* could be considered your main philosophical work. Why this primacy?

P.S. As I said, I'm interested in areas of philosophy that can make a difference to the world, and I've seen, literally hundreds of times, how work in ethics can change

lives. Other areas of philosophy are intellectually intriguing, but given that we are living in a world with an immense amount of avoidable suffering in it, the fact that a problem is intellectually intriguing isn't sufficient justification to spend one's life working on it.

A.L. The magazine *The New Criterion* recently published an article entitled "What makes life worth living? Well, not Peter Singer" (Schick 2017). The Author portrays you as an arrogant and needlessly provocative academic with a flat prose style and basically no idea on what real life is. What would you say in response to this?

P.S. I haven't read the article to which you are referring, but I've never been needlessly provocative, and I've never defended a position that I do not think has strong arguments in its favour. If I have no idea what real life is, it's strange that so many people have changed their lives on the basis of my writing — doing things like becoming vegetarian or vegan, or donating a substantial proportion of their income to charities helping people in extreme poverty. As for my prose style, I suppose that's a matter of taste, and your readers should pick up one of my books and judge for themselves.

A.L. In a debate you conducted with the mathematician and Christian apologist John Lennox (Lennox and Singer, 2016), I had the impression that, for the entire time, the point was being missed. In my opinion, science cannot dismiss religion, and religion does not need science. They are two different fields and should be regarded as distinct; therefore reducing religion to science seems to make as little sense as reducing Mozart's Requiem to just a series of sound waves striking the ears.

P.S. I don't agree. Mozart's Requiem makes no claims about the world. In contrast, most religious believers do hold that their religion makes true claims about the world. They believe that there is a god, that certain writings are divinely inspired, and so on. Philosophical and science-based arguments are relevant to the truth of these claims.

A.L. In your opinion theism cannot explain undeserved suffering of children and animals. Let me turn the issue upside down and ask you: how can you explain undeserved suffering on the basis of your utilitarianism? To put it bluntly: can people really be so short-sighted as to refuse to increase the general amount of pleasure, or even so evil as to commit acts such as the holocaust? Don't you think that there is something more than pain and pleasure at stake here?

P.S. Utilitarianism is a normative theory. That means it tells us what we ought to do. Neither utilitarianism nor other normative theories attempt to describe the world, or, as you put it, "explain undeserved suffering." Utilitarianism is not committed to any view about whether people are foolish or sensible, compassionate or selfish.

A.L. Thank you for your replies, Mr. Singer, this has been a fascinating exchange of ideas. It is perhaps appropriate to end with a Hegelian conclusion: of course there are different and even opposite positions in philosophy — and this is precisely what absolute knowing is about: grasping opposing ideas together.

Foreground and background

In the following paragraphs, I shall examine Singer's neurophilosophical background, which underpins some of his theses. Indeed, in his philosophical thought, the state of the nervous system is crucial in order to determine the moral significance of a subject, and his argument against anti-specism, which started 20th century debate on animal rights (Magni, 2011), is based on the neurological consideration that animals can feel pain and pleasure (Singer, 1990). So, to use a cinematic analogy, at this point in this article the camera switches from the foreground (Singer himself) to the background. The recent growth of knowledge about the brain has given rise to a philosophical approach called neurophilosophy. Patricia Smith Churchland has published a number of interesting articles on this topic, also for this journal. Essentially, neurophilosophy may briefly be defined as follows: «Neurophilosophy embraces the hypothesis that what we call "the mind" is in fact a level of brain activity. A corollary of this hypothesis states that we can learn much about the reality of mental function by studying the brain at all levels of organization» (Churchland, 2007). Moreover, neurophilosophy is a naturalistic philosophy, i.e. one that dismisses a priori knowledge and does not differ from science «either in the status of its theories or in its ultimate dependence on empirical data» (Churchland, 2008b).

If this holds true, we can consider Singer part of this movement, as well as many other prominent figures like Richard Dawkins, Stephen Hawkins, Daniel Dennett etc., who share this same conceptual background. They are, of course, different thinkers, but there is a sense of similarity between them nonetheless (for a different, milder version of neurophilosophy see Northoff, 2001; Northoff, 2013).

As always in history, science presents philosophy with major intellectual challenges. To quote the best known examples: the scientific revolutions of Galileo, Newton and Copernicus changed the idea of reality from qualitative and teleological to quantitative and mechanical, and Einstein's relativity and quantum physics are revolutions that still puzzle traditional ontologies. On such ontological implications and their possible interpretations see, for example, two very different thinkers (Prini, 1988; Žižek, 2012 – and, in particular, chapter 14: The Ontology of Quantum Physics). Therefore, the ever recurring question is: how is it possible to reconcile the findings of science and of systematic philosophical reflection? And more specifically, in our case, how is it possible to reconcile the findings of neuroscience and philosophy?

With profound respect for Patricia Smith Churchland, I here discuss some of the methodological points of neurophilosophy presented by her, with which I profoundly disagree. Hopefully, by exploring briefly the background to these questions, a new light will also be shed on the foreground, namely on what Peter Singer said in the interview.

Three arguments against naturalism Which monism?

First of all, Churchland says that neurosciences render a Cartesian-like mind/brain dualism implausible: «Since the weight of evidence indicates that mental processes actually are processes of the brain Descartes' problem

has disappeared. The classical mind/body problem has been replaced with a range of questions: what brain mechanisms explain learning, decision making, self-deception, and so on. The replacement for “the mind-body problem” is not a single problem; it is the vast research program of cognitive neuroscience» (Churchland, 2008a).

This, then, is my first argument. Half of the story is being missed here: if neurosciences make the mind as a separate entity (*res cogitans*) disappear, then they make matter understood as a brute, inertial entity (*res extensa*) disappear as well. Hegel might, unexpectedly, be recalled here. In the section on phrenology of *The Phenomenology of Mind* he writes the following:

1) «[...] that the existence of mind is a bone [daß das Sein des Geistes ein Knochen ist]» (Hegel 1807).

2) «[...] connection of higher and lower which, in the case of the living being, nature naïvely expresses when it combines the organ of its highest fulfillment, the organ of generation, with the organ of urination [Verknüpfung des Hohen und Niedrigen, welche an dem Lebendigen die Natur in der Verknüpfung des Organs seiner höchsten Vollendung, des Organs der Zeugung, – und des Organs des Pissens naïv ausdrückt]» (Hegel, 1807).

Such speculative (and not naturalistic) statements provide a philosophical account consistent with neurosciences, possibly even more than naturalism: the mind as a transcendent beyond, as a *res cogitans*, is not explained away by neurosciences, on the contrary it is incorporated into the brain. The Hegelian temptation here is to say that both brain and mind are sublated [aufgehoben] in a more concrete concept: a thinking extension and extended thought (*extensio cogitans cogitatioque extensa*).

Are there facts, interpretations, or both?

Another key point of this naturalism is the denial of *a priori* forms of argumentation. In the 1970s philosophers like W.V. Quine and P. Feyerabend «undermined the conventional wisdom that philosophy was an *a priori* discipline whose truths were accessible by non-empirical methods, and whose discovery supposedly laid the *a priori* foundation for any science» (Churchland, 2008b). In another passage Churchland describes what an *a priori* form of argumentation is like: «The dominant methodology of philosophy of mind and morals in the twentieth century was conceptual analysis.

Pilloried by philosophers of science as know-nothing philosophy, conceptual analysis starts with what introspection reveals about the allegedly unassailable truths of folk psychology. Then, via reflection and maybe a thought experiment, you figure out what must be true about the mind. A frankly *a priori* strategy, conceptual analysis ran up against a torrent of neuropsychological results that clashed with the “truths” of folk intuition» (Churchland, 2008a).

Let us make some distinctions:

a) *A priori* does not mean conceptual analysis in Churchland’s sense: what she describes is basically just the analytical “vulgarized” *a priori* argumentation, very close to the mere presentation of one’s opinion.

b) *A priori* means that some truths do not depend on facts or experience. And this is held to be false by naturalism. So:

l) If the claim of naturalism is that truths depend exclu-

sively on scientific facts and experiences (experiments), that is evidently false.

ll) If the claim of naturalism is that truths depend on facts and experience generally meant, this is true even for an Hegelian philosopher. But only as long as — and this is my second point — the obverse also is true: there are no facts and experience independent of truth(s); facts and experience are always already contained within a conceptual framework. Genuine *a priori* argumentation has many names in philosophy, from metaphysics (Aristotle) to critique (Kant) to speculative logic (Hegel, Jaspers) to eidetic reduction (Husserl), and it indicates the work on concepts, principles and methods of philosophical research.

To put the problem again in somewhat simplistic terms: if Quine denies *a priori* truths (Quine, 1960), we have to summon once more the ghost of Hegelianism and supplement Quine with Giovanni Gentile. Maybe the fundamental trait of Gentile’s style of argumentation is that of reducing dichotomies to concrete unities and showing the primacy of the “I think”, the pure activity of thinking. He would therefore argue: if there is no *a priori* as such, there is no *a posteriori* as such either (Gentile, 1924). Or, in even more simplistic terms: all truths depend on facts except Truth itself, which is somehow an innate concept and cannot be defined in a non-circular way: as G. Frege showed, the definition of Truth has to be true (Greimann, 2015).

Two sides of reduction

The last issue is that of reductionism. Churchland, in an illuminating passage, well worth quoting, writes: «Many contemporary dualists also shared a rhetorically convenient misunderstanding [...] if a science reduces a macro phenomenon to a micro phenomenon, then the macro phenomenon is not real or “goes away” [...]. The heart of the misunderstanding concerns the idiosyncratic notion of reduction, where it tends to be assumed that in science reductions make things disappear. This assumption is just confused. Famously, physics reduced visible light to electromagnetic radiation, but no one believes that light therefore ceased to be real or became scientifically unworthy. Temperature was reduced to mean molecular kinetic energy, but temperature did not disappear. Some beliefs about the nature of light and temperature did change, but the important point is this: reduction of a phenomenon traditionally means only that we have an explanation of the phenomenon [...]. Given the aforementioned confusion about “reduction”, the expression “the reduction of A by B” might usefully be replaced by the expression “the explanation of A by B”» (Churchland, 2007).

It is symptomatic that Churchland uses only scientific cases of reduction as examples. Indeed — and this is my third argument — if we reduce something within its own field we are actually explaining it (as in reducing a natural substance like sugar to its molecular components, say), otherwise we are explaining it away — in more classical terms we are operating a *metàbasi eis állo ghènos*, a change into another kind of genus. A reduction of a natural phenomenon to its natural causes, within its own field, is actually a reduction as explanation (a); instead, reduction of, say, a religious phenomenon, or an economic or political phenomenon, to its (sup-

posed) natural causes, and therefore to another field, seems to constitute reductionism (b).

We can here recall another Hegelian thinker, Benedetto Croce: one of his main assumptions, clearly stated in many books and fairly convincing, is that the diversity of fields like aesthetics, philosophy, politics and morals is an irreducible diversity. We therefore have to use different conceptual frameworks to grasp each of these fields in order not to miss their proper significance (Croce, 1907; Bonetti, 1984).

Let us try with an experiment. I will quote a passage of Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* and then re-write it reducing it to naturalistic terms.

«A minute later Sonia, too, came in with the candle, set down the candlestick and, completely disconcerted, stood before him inexpressibly agitated and apparently frightened by his unexpected visit. The colour rushed suddenly to her pale face and tears came into her eyes.... She felt sick and ashamed and happy, too.... Raskolnikov turned away quickly and sat on a chair by the table. He scanned the room in a rapid glance» (Dostoevsky, 2000).

And now the reduced version:

A minute later Sonia too was brought in by the muscles of her legs, with the candle; she set the candlestick down and, with her facial muscles moving rhythmically, stood before him in evident psychomotor agitation and with a region of her amygdala apparently stimulated by his unexpected visit. Her blood pressure and the pulse changed suddenly and her lacrimal glands began working... The area of her brain related with emotions was crossed by opposite stimuli... Raskolnikov turned away quickly and sat on a chair by the table. His eyes were detecting many electromagnetic radiations from the room.

It should be evident that in the reduced second version something is lost. This x is precisely the problem of reductionism (b), whereas in a genuine reduction (a) nothing should be missing.

Conclusions

After this digression, let us switch back from the background to the foreground, and Singer. Does it throw a new light on him? I am persuaded that my three arguments are also valid in his regard.

On the one hand, Singer's ethics is evidently consistent with its premises, simple and handy. But on the other, to cut a long story short (and maybe adding a touch of irony), his utilitarianism reduces ethics to calculation — evil to electricity and nervous stimuli.

We can accept this in the case of physical pain, but things become more complicated in that of a properly moral pain or symbolic pain (like the pain of someone whose life is shattered by, say, the end of a love affair) (see Milanese and Nappi, 2009).

His claim for animal rights is serious and absolutely worthy of consideration, but its neurological foundation does not seem, to me, completely convincing so far. The monistic attempt to arrive at one principle of ethics is appropriate, but the principle seems to me the wrong one. Instead, his methodological monism prevents us from seeing the specificity of other degrees of reality, as in the case of religion.

Finally, my critique of reductionism might also remind us that the philosopher's task is primarily that of interpreting the world and must not be reduced to political ac-

tivism as Singer seems to do. Marx's eleventh thesis on Feuerbach must be turned upside down here: "Philosophers have hitherto only tried to change the world in various ways; the point is to interpret it".

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