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| **Living and Dying** [Peter Singer](http://www.utilitarian.net/singer/index.htm) interviewed by Jill Neimark*Psychology Today*, January, 1999 |
| The Australian ethicist who fathered the animal rights movement is coming to the U.S. Brace yourself for a storm of controversy. He has been called a "notorious messenger of death" in his hometown of Melbourne, Australia. The British media have denounced him as "the man who would kill disabled babies," and in Germany he's been compared to Hitler's henchman Martin Borman. Protesters in wheelchairs have fought his appearances, chained themselves to barricades and smashed his glasses. He's also been called the most influential philosopher alive, but many are trying to compare his philosophy to the "life unworthy of life" eugenics program of the Nazis.Who is the man behind all the furor? Peter Singer, director of the Centre for Human Bioethics at Monash University in Australia, is a 52-year-old Australian Jew whose grandparents, ironically, were victims of the Holocaust. In person, he's tall, slender, soft-spoken, even affable. His most famous book, Animal Liberation, published in 1975, jump-started the entire animal rights movement, converting many readers to lifelong vegetarianism and inspiring reforms in humane treatment for laboratory animals and livestock. But animal liberation is only one facet of Singer's ethics. Indeed, his goal is to reconfigure our entire moral landscape. Singer argues that ethics today should be guided by a particular brand of utilitarianism: he calls himself a "preference utilitarian." In classic utilitarianism, what is good is defined as what brings happiness. But happiness is hard to measure. Singer proposes instead that good be defined by "preference." Under this philosophy, moral decisions are based on the most intense preferences of a given individual or group.Thus, claims Singer, many times animals will be more deserving of life than certain humans, including disabled babies and adults who are brain-injured or in vegetative comas. Presumably, a healthy chimp's preference for life is more intense than a disabled infant's. This philosophy would rule out most medical experimentation on animals, as well as the breeding of animals to provide organs for human transplants. Even more radical, Singer suggests that since preference is influenced by self-awareness, babies should not be considered "persons" until they are one month old. Before that time, parents and their doctors should be free to kill a baby if, for instance, it has Down's syndrome and the parents don't wish to raise it. Though many people will find Singer's proposals deeply troubling, he defends his points with powerful arguments, as PT's Jill Neimark found when she caught up with him recently in his 19th-century row house on the water in Melbourne, Australia.PT: One of the great ironies connected with your work is that your ideas are continually compared to those of the Nazis, although you yourself are Jewish and your parents escaped from Vienna just before the Holocaust. Do you feel misunderstood?PS: In those instances, very much. My entire philosophy is shaped by an abhorrence of suffering and cruelty. My grandparents actually went through the concentration camps, and my grandfather died there.PT: Can you sum up your philosophy?PS: I want us to have a graduated moral approach to all sentient beings, related to their capacities to feel and suffer. If the being has self-awareness, we ought to give it even more rights. I'm not a biological egalitarian. I do not think that all nonhuman animals have the same claim to protection of their lives as humans do. I don't think it's as bad to kill a simple animal, like a frog or fish, as it is to kill a normal human being.You have to ask yourself what actually makes it worse to kill one being rather than another, and the best answer I can come up with is one's sense of self, that you are alive and have a past and future. And apart from the great apes, I have made no claim that any other nonhuman animals are definitely capable of the self-awareness that I think gives humans, beyond the newborn stage, a more serious claim to protection of their life than other beings. But I would give animals of some other species the benefit of the doubt where that is possible.PT: One of the aspects of your philosophy that is most galling to some people is that you don't view human life as sacred. According to you, since a person in a vegetative coma is a being without self-awareness, he or she should be accorded fewer rights than a fully-aware chimpanzee. Needless to say, you've enraged a bunch of religious and disabled folk.PS: But you really have to question human superiority What justifies the things we do to animals? What justifies keeping a person in a vegetative coma alive? There are two basic views that support cruelty to animals: either you accept the Aristotelian view that the universe has a purpose and the less rational are here to serve the more rational, or you believe the Judeo-Christian view that God has given us dominion over the world. But once you get away from those two worldviews, there just isn't a basis for drawing a sharp moral boundary between us and them.PT: But you are still drawing a boundary. Why draw one at all? Aren't you still guilty of human arrogance in saying apes deserve human rights, when other animals don't? Who are we to decide?PS: That's absolutely true, and what we really have is an infinite range of gradations of awareness. But if you are trying to shape policy, you need to draw lines somewhere.PT: Let's take a specific case. Research on chimpanzees led to the hepatitis B vaccine, which has saved many human lives. Let's pretend it's the moment before that research is to begin. Would you stop it?PS: I'm not comfortable with any invasive research on chimps. I would ask, Is there no other way? And I think there are other ways. I would say, What about getting the consent of relatives of people in vegetative states?PT: That would cause a riot!PS: Well, if you could really confidently determine that this person will never recover consciousness, it's a lot better to use them than a chimp. I agree, it doesn't go over well, and people throw up their hands in shock and horror. But I'd like them to explain why it's better to lock a fully-conscious, self-aware chimp in a seven-foot cage in solitary confinement than to experiment with someone lying unconscious in a hospital ward.PT: You deal in great depth with the issue of medical ethics and people in vegetative comas in your book Rethinking Life and Death. You point out that when we call people brain dead, we're arbitrarily marking the moment of death because they're not literally dead.PS: My point is that we shouldn't pretend breathing human beings are dead when they're not.PT: We should say they're alive but nonetheless their life is not viable.PS: Right. They're alive but that life is not worth living.PT: Do you think we're avoiding a difficult moral dilemma by calling them brain dead, so that we can, for instance, feel it's acceptable to harvest their organs for transplant?PS: Yes. We have pushed them out of the category of the living, because the living need to be protected and we can never kill an innocent human being. But if we say they're really dead, we can feel comfortable removing their hearts. |

Questions MUST be answered in order to participate in the seminar.

1. In your own words, explain “preference utilitarianism”.

2. Why does Singer say that babies should not be considered “persons” until they are one month old?

3. Why does Singer say it would be better off to do research on people in a vegetative state than to use chimpanzees?

4. In your opinion, under what circumstances is it OK to use animals for scientific research?

5. When is it OK to use humans for scientific research?