

Debate

Peter Singer and ‘lives not worth living’ – comments on a flawed argument from analogy

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Abstract

The Australian bioethicist Peter Singer has presented an intriguing argument for the opinion that it is quite proper (morally) to deem the lives of certain individuals not worth living and so to kill them. The argument is based on the alleged analogy between the ordinary clinical judgement that a life with a broken leg is worse than a life with an intact leg (other things being equal), and that the broken leg therefore ought to be mended, on the one hand, and the judgement that the lives of some individuals, for example, severely disabled infants, are not worth living and therefore ought to be terminated, on the other. In the present article it is argued that Singer’s argument is flawed, intellectually and/or ethically.

The renowned bioethicist Peter Singer was rightly upset by the reception he got in several places in Germany a few years ago. Under the slightly melodramatic heading, ‘On being silenced in Germany’, he has told us, from his own point of view of course, what happened (1). And the socio-cultural background to the anti-Singer frenzy in Germany has been ably analyzed by two German scholars (2). However, there is good reason not to interpret the anti-Singer sentiments in Germany as sheer folly, as a post-Nazi syndrome, or as a sign of bad, irrationalist (national) character. An admixture of human concern and defensible rational argument cannot be ruled out out of hand. Of course, I am not speaking here about the intimidation and harassment Singer suffered in Germany; they are indefensible. In the context of bioethical argument they are interesting only as signs of the anger and frustration that may be aroused by certain opinions in the bioethical field, notably opinions regarding euthanasia. What I want to show in this article is that one may have good reason, based on rational argument, to be sceptical of Singer’s opinions on euthanasia and prenatal diagnosis-plus-abortion (which in several respects may be regarded as a special case of euthanasia).

Key words

Clinical ethics; euthanasia; existential meaning of death; argument from analogy.

Singer’s argument from analogy

I will concentrate on one argument of Singer’s, one distinct argument, which at one stroke conveys what may well be the most controversial aspect of his bioethics, *viz*, his contention that we may have the right to pronounce other people’s lives not worth living and so to kill them. The argument was originally published in 1991, in the article referred to earlier (1). This article has recently been re-printed as an appendix to the second, revised edition of Singer’s bestseller, *Practical Ethics*, a fact that testifies that the argument was no casual lapse (3). The relevant passage of the article runs:

‘If the suggestion [... of Singer’s opponents] is that whenever we seek to avoid having severely disabled children, we are improperly judging one kind of life to be worse than another, we can reply that such judgments are both necessary and proper. To argue otherwise would seem to suggest that if we break a leg, we should not get it mended, because in doing so we judge the lives of those with crippled legs to be less worth living than our own’ (3).

Singer’s argument is an argument from analogy, and it is directed against those who criticize his claim that it is quite proper (from a moral point of view) to deem some lives (of fetuses, infants, or others) less worth living than other lives, and some lives as simply not worth living at all.

To put a convenient label on what is here at stake, we may speak about the ethics of euthanasia, whether ‘prospective euthanasia’ on fetuses after prenatal diagnosis, euthanasia on malformed or disabled newborns, or euthanasia during later stages of an individual’s life history. In Singer’s argument, it is selective abortion after prenatal diagnosis that is focused on, but with a slight change in the wording of the argument other instances of euthanasia or mercy-killing could be discussed in much the same way.

To repeat, Singer’s argument is an argument from analogy. In an analogy there are two parts or ‘members’, one of them being illuminated by being compared to the other. In order to work – indeed, in order to be an analogy in the first place – an analogy

must be such that the two 'members' are similar in some respect(s), which is/are deemed major or crucial, and dissimilar in others, which are deemed minor. Now the two 'members' of Singer's analogy are, on the one hand, the judgement of the life of a severely ill, disabled, or suffering individual (a fetus, newborn, child, or grown-up) as less or not at all worth living, with the practical implication that such an individual ought to be killed, and, on the other hand, the judgement of the life of an individual with a broken leg as, *ceteris paribus*, less worth living than a life with an intact leg, with the practical implication that such an individual ought to have his or her leg mended. Is this a workable analogy? More specifically, will it do the work Singer employs it to do, that is, show that euthanasia is no more morally problematic or objectionable than the mending of a broken leg, that the relief of the one kind of suffering is morally on a par with the relief of the other?

Singer, of course, believes the analogy can do the ethical job for him. Thus he contends that criticizing, on moral grounds, selective abortion of fetuses whose (future) lives are considered not worth living because of severe illness, disability, or suffering, is on a par with criticizing the mending of a broken leg, because then too one life, the life with a broken leg, is considered less worth living than another life, the life with an intact leg. In order to be consistent (and rational), he goes on, the opponents of euthanasia ought to give up their support of ordinary medical/surgical measures that aim at improving people's lives – or give up their opposition to euthanasia. The last mentioned alternative is of course the one Singer wants his opponents to choose. Because giving up ordinary, successful medical practice, which improves people's lives, is morally absurd or outrageous. But giving up euthanasia, when there are people who suffer from severe illness or disability, is that also, and similarly, absurd or outrageous, as Singer pushes his opponents to concede? In other words, and again: Is Singer's analogy a reasonable one? Does it work as an argument in favour of judgements that some lives are not worth living, and thus of euthanasia?

Criticism of the argument

In order to approach an answer to these questions, the following question may be asked: Does the doctor's (and indeed the patient's) judgement that a broken leg should be mended and restored to its former anatomical and functional integrity commit him to the judgement that a life with a broken leg is *less worth living* than a life with an intact leg? Well, it might seem to, at least at first sight; for it seems to be an indisputable common-sense judgement that, *ceteris paribus*, a life with an intact leg is a better life than one with a broken leg. But what about a 'better' (or 'worse') life here? Does 'better' necessarily mean 'more worth living' – and 'worse' 'less worth living'?

No, it does not, because it is both possible and reasonable, in several instances and situations, to judge one life as better/worse than another without bringing in the question whether this or that life is *worth living*. The latter is an *existential* question, a question concerning the individual's very existence in the world, which radicalizes the question about 'better'/'worse'. Such an existential radicalization does not seem to be necessary, not logically and not psychologically necessary, in an ordinary case of a broken leg. The life with a broken leg is indeed deemed *worse* than a life with an intact leg, but by mending the broken leg and by considering it better to have an intact than a broken leg, we (the doctor, the patient, or whoever) do not seem to be committed to any judgement as to which lives are more, and which less, *worth living*. And so Singer's analogy is shaken to its foundations. It is thus shaken, because it has been shown that the two 'members' of his analogy are dissimilar on one crucial point, I even dare to say *the* crucial point, namely that *worse* by no means implies *less worth living*.

But this is not all; we cannot end the argument yet. Someone might be sceptical about my semantics; he might say my *distinction* between 'better' and 'more worth living' (and between 'worse' and 'less worth living') is arbitrary and idiosyncratic. You *could* just as well, he might retort, equate 'a better life' with 'a life more worth living' and 'a worse life' with 'a life less worth living'. So be it; this semantics does not violate ordinary usage of the words involved. But nor does it help much to rescue Singer's analogy. Because if we take a close look at his analogy, we see that on the euthanasia/selective abortion side of it, it is not just a question of judging some lives as *less worth living* than others (and some as *more*); the question is whether some lives (here: some fetuses' lives) are *not worth living at all*. Here again we see the existential note coming in, only it has now taken on its most radical form: one life is considered so much worse than other lives that it is simply *not worth living* (at all). In my opinion it is pretty obvious that the judgement of a life as not worth living is not (morally) on a par with – and not similar enough to be considered analogous to – the judgement that a life with an intact leg is better than a life with a broken leg. Saying 'that life is *not worth living*' *tout court* we have crossed a significant moral and existential border as compared to saying 'that life is *less worth living* than this life'. In the latter case we are still moving in a grey area between what may be a rather trivial remark: 'that life is worse than this life', and the quite extreme: 'that life is simply not worth living'.

Now the contention 'that life is not worth living' – in my opinion, and in most cases – morally dubious to an extent that the contention that a life with a broken leg is worse, or less worth living, than a life with an intact leg never even approaches. That is, if

is morally dubious when uttered about someone else's life (when uttered about one's own life, there is a moral twilight that makes it morally equivocal rather than dubious), especially in a professional, 'executive' clinical context, presumably designed to define proper attitudes and proper action toward fetuses, infants, old people, and others suffering from severe illness and/or disability. As a casual remark in passing it may be innocent enough, implying nothing in terms of action. But in a clinical context there is only a short step from saying 'that life is not worth living' to saying 'that life ought to be terminated' – and to action on that conviction.

Again, we must conclude that Singer's suggested analogy does not work as an analogy – which is more or less the same as saying it is no analogy at all. Or, alternatively, if someone insists that there is indeed an analogy here, and that it makes good sense, we may retort that if it appears to him to be a tenable analogy, then it is no doubt a morally dangerous and ultimately ethically untenable one. In any case, the alleged analogy is flawed, intellectually and/or ethically.

Existence or non-existence?

The existential and moral radicality, not to say extremism, of deliberations in terms of *lives not worth living* – as compared with other evaluations of human lives, whether one's own or those of others – can be further illustrated as follows: It's one thing to say (contemplating the lives of the severely ill or disabled): 'What a dreadful life; I would not like to have it, I would rather be dead', and another thing to say (in the same situation): 'What a dreadful life; such a life is not worth living, and to wipe it out is therefore morally permissible, advisable, even laudable'. The fact (let us assume it is a fact) that nobody would like to have such a life (if it turned out to be a matter of *choice* whether to have it or not), does not make it a fact that everyone of us would consider it a life not worth living were we to *find ourselves* leading exactly such a life. In this latter case a change of existential scenery has taken place; the unwanted kind of life is no longer a possibility among other possibilities but an expression of one's own very existence. This change of scenery turns a commonplace evaluation in the abstract (it is better to be healthy and happy than to be mentally retarded, severely ill, or disabled) into an actual, individual question: Should I reject the only life I have, should I reject myself, my very being?

Furthermore, it is one thing to say to another individual: 'I understand you are very troubled with your illness. Let me try to relieve your suffering by finding a remedy'. And it is a very different thing to say: 'I understand you are very troubled with your illness. Let me relieve your suffering by killing you'. The first option is consonant with traditional, 'hippocratic' medical ethics; the second is not. Why?

After all, the second option is more certain to reach the aim of both: relief of suffering. Killing the patient (painlessly) is certainly a more efficacious and reliable way of relieving his or her suffering. Why then is traditional medical ethics so hesitant to allow or advise the physician to kill? Probably for the same reason that some would hesitate to accept capital punishment, even though this must be recognized as the most efficacious way of preventing that particular individual from committing any further crimes. The reason is that *killing* is considered morally in a category of its own; killing is not only influencing the existence of another in one way or the other, it is wiping out that very existence. Punishing someone, or relieving his suffering, may therefore be regarded as activities where innovations and aims should stop short of killing people. Experientially and phenomenologically, as distinguished from attempts at abstract justification, the reluctance to kill would be grounded in the challenge to respond to the presence of another human being, face to face (4) – an experience that has become encoded culturally as a taboo (5). And this taboo would be strong enough (in most people's minds) to counter successfully the argument from efficacy.

It appears that Peter Singer does not consider human existence *per se* to be any better than non-existence. Thus there is basically nothing special about killing as a remedy for the hardships of human existence, except perhaps that it is reliably irreversible. But exactly its irreversibility may be considered a boon if life's sufferings are deemed severe and intractable. For Singer the switch from individual life to death seems to be, *per se*, insignificant; what counts is the overall state of satisfied or dissatisfied interests. The weight of life, and of death, *per se* in that calculation is nil. Life *per se* is as good as death; or rather, they are equally worthless.

A blind spot in Singer

The meaning of death for the individual is no prominent theme in Singer's *Practical Ethics*. It is telling that he has little more to say about it – the existential meaning of death, if you like – than this: 'death is the end of all pleasurable experiences' (6). This statement is of course perfectly true, as far as it goes. The remarkable thing is that Singer, in spite of his preoccupation with the ethics of killing, does not say a lot more about death as a fact, theme, and 'presence' in human life. You find no notion of 'fear/awe of death' in Singer; no 'fear and trembling' in front of the fact of death is allowed to play a role in his 'practical ethics'. Such themes are conspicuous by their absence.

The existential meaning of death appears to be almost a blind spot in Singer's perception of ethics in connection with life and death issues. Why? Is it because he considers fear, awe, and other similar feelings irrational? They are no doubt irrational by at

least some standards of rationality, but so what? Does that give us a good reason to blind ourselves to their prevalence? Should people be 'educated' to give them up? Should they be taught that death is simply the end of a series of sometimes pleasurable and sometimes painful bodily and mental states? After such an educational effort it would perhaps be easier to find people ready to agree that death/killing as a remedy for pain and suffering is analogous to a doctor's mending a broken leg.

Singer's view of death seems to be a through-and-through naturalist one: death is simply the end of a series of bodily and mental states and events. In my opinion this is by far too partial a view of (human) death; if taken to be anything in the neighbourhood of a *full* account, it is both false and dangerous. A great many people would think that the naturalist's definition is but a fragment of a full account of their own death as individuals. And to these people death as a remedy for pain and suffering would be something radically different from any established medical remedy. In other words: Singer's analogy does not hold *for them*. And it would be less than decent to discuss the *practical* ethics of killing *vis-à-vis* them in terms of the alleged analogy between killing and the mending of a broken leg.

Closing remarks

In this article I have demonstrated that Singer's argument from analogy is not, on closer examination, convincing; it does not show what it purports, according to its author, to show. Admittedly, the reasonableness, relevance, and validity of analogies can often be argued back and forth; and it may be argued that refutations (and justifications) in the stricter sense of the term are not possible. However, the employer of analogies – in order to illustrate or argue a point – ought to see to it that the dissimilarities between the two 'members' of the analogy are not more impressive than the similarities. And above all, he ought to be careful to avoid dissimilarity on (what most people would consider) the crucial point. If he is not careful to avoid this, the analogy breaks down as a vehicle of argument; it becomes question-begging, and risks

being denounced as a sophistic attempt at persuasion without argument. Therefore it is indeed a bit ironic that Peter Singer, who prides himself on a *rational* ethical discussion (in laudable contradistinction to his opponents) (7), should present an argument the thrust of which seems to be rhetorical rather than rational.

In order to prevent misunderstanding I wish finally to point out that I have *not* been arguing that lives that are not worth living do not exist. I can well imagine there are such lives. Even so, assuming there are such lives, Singer's analogy is flawed. Similarly I have not tried to demonstrate that euthanasia is always wrong. Singer's analogy, however, suggests there is nothing remarkable with deeming a life not worth living; it is no more remarkable than deeming a life with an intact leg better than one with a broken leg (other things being equal). It thereby tends to 'normalize' acts of euthanasia (on fetuses, infants, etc) and to trivialize them morally: of course we should practise euthanasia; we mend broken legs, don't we? ... As against this I would contend that there is, after all, a striking difference between improving a life and wiping it out – although in both cases pain and suffering are relieved. That was the gist of my argument.

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References

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