

# The New Criterion

## Books

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### Dr. Jekyll & Mr. Hyde

by [Jenny Teichman](#)

A review of *A Darwinian Left: Politics, Evolution, and Cooperation*, by Peter Singer & Singer and His Critics, edited by Dale Jamieson.

Dr. Jekyll would not be famous were it not for his connection with Mr. Hyde. Perhaps one reason that Peter Singer's name is well known, both to students of philosophy and to lay people, is that he is a Jekyll-and-Hyde kind of person.

As Dr. Jekyll, Singer is a leading figure in the campaign against cruelty to animals. *Qua* Mr. Hyde, he insists that there is nothing wrong with killing human infants if they are either (a) severely deformed or brain-damaged or (b) simply not wanted by parents or adopters.

As Dr. Jekyll, Singer deplors the despoliation of Planet Earth. *Qua* Mr. Hyde, he has no wish to condemn governments that control their human populations by encouraging abortion and infanticide.

As Dr. Jekyll, Singer discovered that he would rather spend money on nursing care for his aged mother, who is suffering from Alzheimer's disease, than on the various left-wing or pro-animal projects demanded by his utilitarian philosophy. *Qua* Mr. Hyde, he continues to tell physicians, and conferences, that the low quality of life of senile patients and patients in coma means that it is okay to allow them to die and even to take positive steps to destroy them. Peter Singer, speaking as Hyde, said, in my hearing, in December 1999, that the organs of people in persistent coma should be harvested for transplants and research. He believes that coma patients are already dead in a sense, hence the re-use of their organs is ethically required on utilitarian principles.

One of Singer's latest publications is a slim volume called *A Darwinian Left*. [1] In it he says that "the genuine left" is always on the side of the weak and the poor against the rich and the mighty. Plainly Dr. Jekyll is speaking here, but let's not forget that Mr. Hyde opposes old-fashioned right-wing folk (Christians for example) who try to protect human fetuses and unwanted human infants from destruction. Before the Catholic Church was thrown out of Communist China, its nuns saved the lives of very weak people, namely, infants targeted by the centuries-old Chinese addiction to female infanticide. Mr. Hyde, though, is contemptuous of religious ways of thinking and defends infanticide anyway—just as long as no adult feelings get hurt by it.

But let us return to the little book about Darwinism.

As a utilitarian, says Singer, he has to condemn the economic arrangements which mean that the 400 richest men in the United States own just as much between them as 45 percent of the poorest people in the rest of the world. And I think lots of other people, including lots of non-utilitarians, feel exactly the same way.

Singer believes that Darwinism has been taken over by the right and as a result has been rejected by the left. According to the right-wing view, Darwin proved that mankind is subject to the rule of the survival of the fittest and from that it was deduced that a perpetual increase in the wealth and power of the top beneficiaries of capitalism cannot be avoided because it follows an ineluctable law of nature. Singer claims that Darwin's work can be interpreted in a different way. Left-wing Darwinism accepts the theory of evolution, of course, but also allows that men are somewhat more malleable than the other animals. Unlike Marxists, however, "genuine" left-wingers do not say that human beings can be made to give up self-interest or conform to a completely egalitarian way of living.

Singer argues that the limits of human malleability can be observed by observing different social groups. Human societies vary a great deal in respect of some features—e.g., in the way food is prepared. In respect of other features they vary a little but not a lot; Singer suggests this is true of sexual arrangements and also of xenophobia and feelings of ethnicity. He notes, thirdly, that societies vary hardly at all in respect to the presence of hierarchy.

A "genuine" left-wing program would not try to alter what seems to be invariable, but that doesn't mean hierarchies have to be brutal or greedy; they don't have to be based on guns and avarice. The left has no need to attempt the impossible task of abolishing self-interest; instead it should point out the obvious, namely, that great wealth and happiness don't necessarily go together and that happiness is better than wealth. Human nature is capable of cooperation as well as competition. The well-known "tit-for-tat" solution to the problem of the Prisoner's Dilemma shows that cooperation is rational until proved otherwise. Human nature is also capable of altruism, as is shown by the British willingness to donate blood freely and anonymously for the benefit of complete strangers. These commonsensical suppositions about the human race induce Singer to believe in the possibility of "tailoring our institutions to human nature" in a left-wing kind of way.

I do not know whether Singer's interpretation of Darwinism would have been recognized by Darwin himself. I suspect it might be rejected by philosophical critics of Darwinism such as Mary Midgley and David Stove.

Another recent piece by Singer appears in a book called *Singer and his Critics*, [2] edited by Dale Jamieson. To some readers, the word "Critics" might suggest the possibility of philosophical confrontations between the subject and the commentators; if so, those readers will be disappointed.

Schopenhauer once accused the followers of Hegel of celebrating the works of their master "with corybantic shouting." Most of the commentators in this book are more decorous than that. However, Roger Crisp, of Oxford, displays a touch of the corybant when he writes: "[Singer] has done an incalculable amount of good." And Dale Jamieson—a pint-sized Adonis with iron-gray lovelocks—whirls himself happily into the dance: "Singer is one of the most influential philosophers of this century . . . none has changed more lives."

Books or series with titles like *So-and-so and his Critics* or *The Library of Living Philosophers* are really Festschriften. Each volume is a collection the aim of which is to praise someone's life work. That is why the "criticisms" included are never seriously hostile; indeed they are sometimes quite groveling. One can see why this must be so; after all, you don't celebrate a life work by trying to demolish it. And, secondly, since the subject of a Festschrift is usually still alive, his cooperation might be needed and might be sought. It would be ridiculous to invite people who throw philosophical stink-bombs at big names to contribute to celebratory books.

Dale Jamieson has followed the usual pattern. There are thirteen contributors, the best known being Richard Hare, who, as some readers will remember, stood by Singer when protestors, including several people in wheelchairs, closed down conferences in Germany and Austria because of their dislike of Mr. Hyde's support for euthanasia. Singer's fellow-Australians are well-represented. Some

contributors refer to him as “Peter.” I would guess that many or most of the authors chosen were nominated by the subject himself, for this, as I’ve hinted, is not an unknown way of compiling a Festschrift.

Jamieson praises Singer for refusing to concentrate on dreary meta-ethical topics like the is/ought question and for choosing, instead, to do what he can to change the world. Other authors offer similar praise while failing nevertheless to follow Singer’s example. For the most part they stick firmly to the meta-ethical questions which Singer allegedly despises. That means that he himself has to devote much of his “Reply” to those questions. Topics include various tiny differences in the interpretation of utility and utilitarianism and minute verbal squabbles about the meaning(s) of words such as “cognitivism,” “non-cognitivism,” “intrinsic,” “extrinsic,” etc. One paper homes in on a very old chestnut, namely the question: How do we know anyone else (or any animal) is in pain? Others discuss matters of moral psychology, e.g., the roles therein of compassion, partiality, distance, altruism, and so on.

The most notable feature of the collection, a feature which follows from its very nature as a Festschrift, is the fact that it ignores Mr. Hyde almost completely. There is virtually no discussion of the theory that it is not wrong to kill infants if no one wants them. There is virtually no discussion of the view that it is okay to kill people in coma and people with Alzheimer’s disease. There is no discussion of the rightness or wrongness of using coma victims and aborted infants as a source of organs for transplanting into other people. Only one contributor, F. N. Kamm, was brave enough to mention Mr. Hyde at all. Unfortunately her paper, though not at all bad, is very long and somewhat indigestible. It lacks punch because it covers too many diverse issues.

One of Dr. Jekyll’s roles in life is to gloss the sayings of Mr. Hyde. Thus he often pretends that the proposition about the rightness of killing unwanted infants really only has to do with infants who are severely deformed and suffering terribly. But that just isn’t true. The philosophical premises from which Singer derives his justification of infanticide are not confined to the deformed and the suffering. They consist in the theses that infants are not persons and that only persons have significant moral status and a serious right to life.

Has Dr. Jekyll really changed the way people live? I think he has changed eating habits, though the change—to vegetarianism—is often only temporary, at least according to my observation. What about Mr. Hyde’s teachings on euthanasia and infanticide? Here the picture is rather murky. Many people in the West now regard voluntary and some kinds of non-voluntary euthanasia as acceptable practices. But I do not think Peter Singer can claim all the credit for this state of affairs. Some credit, or discredit, is owed to Jack Kervorkian and to Derek Humphries (of the pressure group Exit) and to utilitarian philosophy teachers such as Michael Tooley and Jonathan Glover and Richard Hare and Mary Warnock. And when governments legalize euthanasia that too affects popular perceptions of the practice.

On December 30, 1999, Singer stated in public, in Hong Kong, that the Dutch government’s decision to make euthanasia lawful in certain circumstances has not been followed by an increase in the number of medical killings carried out. He said that he and his colleagues have been monitoring the situation “since about 1986.” Yet the findings of other monitors are quite different from Singer’s. Two surveys carried out in Holland by P. J. van de Maas indicate that there were 2700 cases of voluntary euthanasia in 1990 and 3600 cases in 1995, an increase of one-third. His findings are reported by John Keown and Henk Jochemsen in *The Journal of Medical Ethics* (February, 1999).

Who is right? There is a mystery here. Was Dr. Jekyll innocently mistaken? Or was Mr. Hyde telling fibs? But why should Mr. Hyde tell lies about what happens in Holland? Singer, after all, is an advocate of euthanasia and infanticide; instead of going into denial, he ought to welcome increases in the frequency of those practices. Perhaps we should remember, here, that if punishing or not

punishing a procedure or practice makes no difference at all to its incidence there'd be no need to have laws and policemen.

As far as I know Singer has never been officially invited to give advice about the proper treatment of animals. Dr. Jekyll has not officially advised farmers or zoo keepers or animal hospitals or governments. But as the director and founder of the Monash Centre for Bio-Ethics, Mr. Hyde receives *official* recognition as an ethical expert and consequently has been invited to advise doctors on matters of life and death, especially death.

In brief: as Dr. Jekyll, Singer's influence on vegetarianism and related matters, though widespread, has been unofficial and (I believe) often temporary. As Mr. Hyde, he has been officially endorsed in Australia and at Princeton, as an ethical expert, an ethical advisor, and I suspect that in this case the influence has been more permanent. It is perhaps not a coincidence that one of the world's first programs for legal euthanasia was put into effect in one of the states in Singer's native country. Fortunately for the aged aboriginal inhabitants of the Northern Territory, the legislation was struck down when federal politicians decided it was contrary to Australia's undertaking to adhere to the Charter of the United Nations and its Declaration on Human Rights.

## Notes

[Go to the top of the document.](#)

1. *A Darwinian Left: Politics, Evolution, and Cooperation*, by Peter Singer; Yale University Press, 64 pages, \$9.95. [Go back to the text.](#)
2. *Singer and His Critics*, edited by Dale Jamieson; Blackwell Publishing, 300 pages, \$27.95 paper. [Go back to the text.](#)

**Jenny Teichman's** *Ethics and Reality* is forthcoming from Ashgate in the UK.

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