

PETER SINGER'S CONCEPT OF ETHICS

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Abstract:

Preferences utilitarianism is a moral theory according to which the good consists in the satisfaction of people's preferences, and the rightness of an action depends directly or indirectly on its being productive of such satisfaction. Like other kinds of consequentialism, the theory has satisficing and maximising variants. The latter are the more common ones: the more people get what they want, the better.

Key-words: *ethics, preferences utilitarianism, Peter Singer*

In no part of his own work, Peter Singer defines itself as a direct follower of J. Bentham thought that JS Mill, but even without a thorough comparative analysis we know that if they are all utilitarians, united by their consensus on the fundamental ethical principles, especially the principle of utility maximization associated with happiness and minimizing the suffering of all beings. In this thread, however, does not close the list of similarities between the concept of ethics Singer and other utilitarians.

The first common feature is their conception of empirical ethics, understood in the sense of seeking sources of standards and explain the moral behaviour of individual people. As Mill tried to lay the foundations of ethology, as Singer is trying to look for sources of human morality, reaching to the theory of evolution and socio-biology claims today. According to the methodology of ethics does not need to resort to metaphysical explanations, because it can rely on the study of empirical science. On the other hand, it points out that none of the science itself is not able to formulate the final ethics, because they do not belong to the field of science dealing with inherently description of reality. "*Neither the theory of evolution, or biology, or science, as such, cannot provide definitive evidence to ethics. Biological explanations of ethics can only play a negative role of forcing us to rethink the moral intuitions that seem obvious to us moral truths, and in fact can be explained by the laws of evolution*" [1].

Final rules of ethics are not the domain of science, there are obvious moral intuitions, but they are too subjective. You can reach them by using the only reason [2]. Rationality and

objectivity of ethics is relevant to both the concept of Mill and Singer. The reasoning is for both philosophers important process in making decisions related to ethical decision-making. According to Singer, the development of such disciplines as socio-biology provides the basis for a new understanding of ethics. Allows us to see ethics as a way of human reasoning, which developed in the context of life in a group, based on biologically conditioned forms of altruism. "*So ethics lost the spirit of mystery. Its rules are not rights enshrined in the sky. There are also absolute truths about the world, they met through intuition. Ethical principles come from our own nature as social beings capable of reasoning. Thus, the notion of ethics founded on the theory of evolution is not reduced to the question of ethics only subjective feelings, or arbitrary choices. The fact that our ethical judgments we are not dictated by an external authority, does not mean that every ethical judgment is as good as any other. Ethical reasoning indicates a method to assess the ethical judgments from an objective point of view*" [3]. For Mill ultimate ethical principle was the principle of utility, in the light of the good is that which increases the amount of happiness, and the alleviation of human suffering. Singer's view does not differ substantially from the consequences of Bentham and Mill's view, because Singer understands the principle of utility as the adoption and implementation of specifically understood interests and preferences of the creatures, which in turn is increasing the amount of happiness, and the reduction of suffering.

All these thinkers represent the belief that their concept of ethics is an expression of the

ethical progress, and that its use in practice will improve the fate of humanity. According to Singer, even if the truth about the characteristics of human nature does not reveal to us a very good report card, there is reason for optimism. The more we know about the motives of our behaviour, our biological heritage, our inclinations, the better we can prepare to work on them and possibly change them for the better. If we know more, then surely we can say that we are no longer slaves to our genes [4]. With similar optimism Mill spoke about the aetiology of which was to show and explain all the rules that govern moral teachings. With time, however, he came to the conclusion that the case logic moral teaching of writing is not easy and requires a lot of research. One of the difficulties is for sure is that a different type of science investigates and describes human life, including the moral life, but a completely different discipline is to develop and analyse ethical systems. The gap between "what is" and "what should be" does not result of our inability to combine these two issues, but with their different nature.

As representatives of utilitarian ethics, Singer and Mill combines one more feature - it is in their concepts guiding figure is not a feature, but that makes the other utilitarians accuse them some exceptions to the rules of the system of ethics, namely thinking in the category of moral obligations. The notion that something should be done, because it is our moral duty, it is appropriate for the type of absolutist ethics, such as Kantianism. Meanwhile, in the concept Singer, like Mill's, we find the argument that you should do something, because we owe it to others. Mill argued that people who are able to introduce reforms that improve the fate of humanity, should act in this direction, because it is their moral obligation, otherwise wasted their abilities, and their lives would be unfulfilled. Singer used a similar argument when it comes to improving the fate of animals, helping the poor, caring for the environment (in this case in terms of an obligation towards future generations). In both these thinkers besides argument referring to the utilitarian motivation also find motivation of a perfectionist type or indicative of a moral obligation.

This approach to liberty seems to be an

issue that Singer differs from most utilitarians, especially from J.S. Mill; however, after a more detailed analysis of the concept of Singer, one may say that these concepts have a common core - concern for the freedom of each individual, which means that by analysing the size of freedom in a society, you should look into the situation of each individual. Singer does not belong to the supporters of the liberal conception of freedom within the meaning of modern liberals or libertarians. Mill's formula is based on the principle that freedom lies in the fact that you can do anything, as long as it does not harm to others or not done to harm their interests. In the light of the concept Singer person or any entity is free, if it can pursue their interests and preferences. If the same prevents other, then limits their freedom. In fact, these concepts are similar, although Mill derives its classic liberalism, while Singer refers to the ideals of the left and Darwin's theory of evolution. Understanding the biological heritage and capacity utilization of human altruism and cooperation with others can be according to him, the cause of expanding freedom, and even the emergence of a new dimension of freedom [5].

Freedom existed in modern liberal democracies should not be the ideal release us from further exploration. As long as the use of animals by augmenting the suffering, or agree that the citizens of many countries in the world have to live a day for less than one dollar, so long our freedom is built largely on the injury being caused to the interests of others. We should strive to ensure that the injured part of the creatures has received the necessary scope of freedom. In the book *One World. Ethics of globalization* Singer occurs with the following appeal: "*We should [...] promote the following charitable public policy: every man having enough money to afford luxuries was so widespread and the whims of the wealthy societies, should give at least one cent of every dollar those who lack food, clean drinking water, shelter from the elements and basic health care. If someone does not satisfy this condition, it is not attributable to assume his share part of global responsibility, so it does something very bad*" [6].

Singer, like Mill, assumed that there is a trend of progressive and conservative social thought and both are committed to representing

the current progress. For Singer modern democratic left is the carrier of progress. He optimistically assumes that we are able to create a global ethics that is appealing to the moral principles common to all or almost all communities [7]. Common moral principle is, according to Singer, the principle of reciprocity, but would also put pressure on the altruistic behaviour towards others, not only to our loved ones.

Moral philosophers and ethicists have today a major role to play and should feel obligated to do so. In an essay *Philosophers are Back on the Job* (Philosophers on the bench again) Singer argues that philosophers should take the widest possible participation in the public debate on ethical standards, firstly because, in contrast to politicians and religious leaders have something meaningful to say, and secondly, to raise the level of discussion, which is now depressingly low. For example, too much space is devoted to the discussion of sexual morality, while it should be the subject of a marginal. Contemporary ethics should be remodelled on key issues, and for this you need unfettered public debate. Singer's experience shows that in some countries there is a problem with running a discussion on certain topics, although formally there is freedom of speech - this applies, for example, the discussion of the problem of euthanasia, especially in German-speaking countries; in Poland, although for different reasons, the situation is similar. Philosophers in Singer concept would play the role of artists within the meaning of J.S. Mill those who determine the direction of change and present new ideas.

In Singer thinking can be seen kind of intellectual courage, which is present in the writings of Mill was the fact that the author does not hesitate to abandon the current way of thinking and admit to the error, if necessary. Singer motivates it this way: *"If you have a well-established moral theory, we must be prepared to accept its conclusions, even if they force us to change our moral views on core issues. When we forget about this condition, moral philosophy loses its potential to generate a radical critique of the current moral standards and serves only to preserve the status quo"* [8].

Singer is the heir especially J.S. Mill's, also when it comes to leading goal that guided

his work - to make the world a better from an ethical point of view. He accepted the nineteenth-century decline in the form of the Mill of the belief that there are immutable interests of the people as beings with their progressive nature and that these interests should pursue. Philosophical considerations, analysis of concepts, detailed discussions are important because they allow us to access legitimate arguments. Equally important is the aspect of the operation of a concept into practice: Mill wrote about freedom of speech and the equality of women and at the same time as a local politician was trying to make is what breaks the back, could be put into practice. Singer is actively working for the liberation of animals and at the same time he is a vegetarian, calls for aid to the Third World and income from Practical Ethics is spent on charity; is an example of that philosophy can be a practical discipline, not only to the academic field considerations. There are not too many thinkers, whose leitmotif for the welfare of all mankind, and which is focused around the task of improving the fate of humans and other beings. In this sense, Peter Singer is one of the most faithful followers of philosophical thoughts of J.S. Mill.

Analysing his philosophical works, take a closer look at a few threads present in his thoughts and also present in other utilitarian ethical concepts: the characteristics of human nature and its relation to the concept of ethics and ethical idea of progress.

In one of his more famous books, *Practical Ethics*, Peter Singer gives an opinion on the ethics and morality of using these concepts - for example a number of Anglo-Saxon authors - interchangeable. Its calculation, which features should not contain good ethical system consists of four points. Firstly, ethics is not a collection of dos and don'ts that are primarily intended to regulate the sexual life of people, so that sexual morality is not the most important fields of ethics. Second, the "ethics is not an idealized system, which is great in theory but not in practice. Closer to the truth is the inverse of this assertion: ethical evaluation, which is not true in practice, must also contain a theoretical error, as its most important role is to be a guide in practice" [9]. Thirdly, ethics is independent of religion. Fourth, ethics is neither

a relative nor a subjective - on the contrary, is objective and universally valid, that is universal. This view of the role of the ethics and the way it is close to the point of view of J.S. Mill, who imagined ethics as part of the art of living. Also believed that sexual morality is a private matter of the people, and ethics are not dependent on religious dogma. For him, ethics was also universal and objective discipline, consisting of practical tips on how to live, because the meaning of life is an art based on specific principles.

Model of ethics, which takes Singer is utilitarian ethics in which moral evaluation of the act depends on what the consequences of this act will bring to further the interests of those who are affected. Because the ethical evaluation shall be made from the universal point of view, so you should accept the statement that "my own interests not only because they are my interests, count more than anyone else's business. So my quite natural self-interest must be, when I think ethically, extended to the interests of others" [10]. Note that the author uses the term 'interests' instead of 'pleasure'. According to him "the best consequences" of action based on the fact that most fully realized interests are expressed by rational preferences of individuals. Increasing the amount of pleasure, and the reduction of suffering, as expressed this classic utilitarianism is imprecise, because the modern version of utilitarianism, or preference utilitarianism, trying to correct these deficiencies. At the same time Singer adds that in some interpretations of what Bentham and J.S. Mill understood by the concept of pleasure and pain, applies not only to what is objectively gives the impression of pleasure or pain, but also of what someone is not considered. In this interpretation of the difference between the classical and contemporary utilitarianism preference utilitarianism based on interests, basically does not exist. Next to the concept of interest, which is largely synonymous with the concept of needs, Singer also uses the concept of the interest of each individual (self-interest), which, by the fact that used in the singular, suggests that it is something for everyone, but implemented by each in their own way. The interest is often equated with wealth and material prosperity, but Singer believes that this is an erroneous

understanding of the concept. "People often say that money does not buy happiness. It is a cliché, but it comes with a proposal that is in our interest more to be happy than rich. Properly understood interests of each unit is wider than its economic interest. Most people want their life to be happy, fulfilled, or in some way significant, and are aware of the fact that money is no more than a means to achieve some of these goals. Social policy does not have to rely on the narrow interests of the economic importance of each individual. In return, may appeal to the general public needs to be desirable, useful and belonging to the community - all the things that come with more co-operation than non-compete" [11].

It follows that the position of Singer can be simply reduced to the conclusion that in the interest of every being is to be happy, which clearly situates his views within the utilitarian thinking. An important element of this view is derived from Bentham to assume that everyone is counted as one, as and never for more than one, which is a helpful guideline in estimating the interest of every individual. But to say that everyone has the same interests, and that everyone has an equal right to pursue their own interests, in practice, do not lead to constructive solutions. Firstly, because everyone has the same interests in theory, but in practice it performs in different ways. Secondly, because equality is a theoretical postulate, for many reasons impossible to achieve in practice. Singer interests of equality are that we accept the principle of equal consideration of interests, which does not mean that they will ultimately be recognized as equals. "The essence of the principle of equal consideration of interests is that attach the same importance in our moral deliberations similar interests of all affected by our actions. This means that if X and Y would be affected by the possible causes and X has more to lose than gain Y is better to abandon the action. We can, if we accept the principle of equal consideration of interests, say it is better to make the act, despite the described facts, because they are more interested in Y than X. This rule really means so much: interest is interest, would it be anyone's. [...] Equal consideration of the interests is the minimum principle of equality in the sense that it does not dictate equal treatment" [12]. It should be added

that Singer's utilitarianism is generally closer to the utilitarianism of rules than criminal, as a consequence, the calculation for a single ethical decision takes place only in the event of exceptional circumstances or when we reflect on the choice of general principles. In most cases, however, we are able to take a decision based on the general principles [13].

Bibliography:

- [1] Singer P.: *The Expanding Circle. Ethics and Sociobiology*, Oxford-Melbourne 1983, 84.
- [2] It must be admitted that Singer did not take this point of view only from J.S. Mill, as it has repeatedly pointed to the concept of R.M. Hare as the source of this type of thinking about ethics as a philosophical discipline.
- [3] Singer P.: *The Expanding Circle*, 149.
- [4] Por. ibidem, 173.
- [5] Por. Idem: *A Darwinian Left. Politics, Evolution and Cooperation*, London 1999, 60-63.
- [6] Idem: *Jeden świat. Etyka globalizacji (One World. The Ethics of Globalization)*, Warsaw 2006, 205.
- [7] Por. ibidem, 157.
- [8] Singer P.: *Philosophers are Back on the Job*, [in:] idem: *Unsanctifying Human Life. Essays on Ethics*, H. Kuhse (red.), Oxford 2002, 62.
- [9] Singer P.: *Etyka praktyczna (Practical Ethics)*, Warsaw 2003, 18.
- [10] Ibidem, 27.
- [11] Idem: *A Darwinian Left. Evolution and Cooperation*, 42.
- [12] Idem: *Etyka praktyczna*, 34-35, 37.
- [13] Por. ibidem, 28.