



UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK

“Unsantifying Human Life”: Wrestling with Peter Singer’s Ethics

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One of the reasons that we print our UU Principles and Sources on the back of each Order of Service is that newcomers often say that our principles and sources were one of their first indications that a UU congregation might be a spiritual home for them. And part of what makes our principles welcoming for a wide diversity of people is that they are intentionally not a creed or test of belief; rather, they are *ethical aspirations* of how we seek to treat one another amidst our diversity and how we seek to work together to build a more just, equitable, and compassionate world.

Our principles and sources are also not written in stone. Indeed, we explored last week how our Sixth Source of “Earth-centered traditions” was added in 1995. Similarly, the original Six UU Principles passed during the 1961 consolidation of the American Unitarian Association and the Universalist Church in America were revised in 1985 to make them more inclusive — in particular to make them less sexist.

The “dignity of *man*,” for instance, was changed to the “dignity of *every person*.” And the “ideals of *brotherhood*” was changed to “the goal of *world community*.” The most substantive change was the addition of a *Seventh Principle*: “Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.” As important as our First Principle is — grounded in the

opening lines of the U.N.'s Universal Declaration of Human Rights — there was a growing sense that we needed to balance individual rights with the common good.

And it is our Seventh Principle which is inspiring a small, but growing movement within Unitarian Universalism to ask if our principles — which thirty years ago were revised to become less *male*-centric — need now, especially in light of global climate change — to become less *human*-centric. The First Principle Project proposes that our support for the “the inherent worth and dignity of every *person*” be expanded to recognize “the inherent worth and dignity of every *being*.” I have, likewise, seen a proposal to expand our Second Principle from “Justice, equity, and compassion in *human* relations” to “Justice, equity, and compassion in *all* relations.” We are *human* beings — and I hear this proposal as a challenge to expand our circle of care, compassion, and concern to *other beings* on this planet who also experience forms of sentience and subjectivity.

In last year’s Earth Day service, we explored some of **the impact of our human population septupling (increasing sevenfold) in a mere two centuries — from approximately 1 billion in 1800 to more than 7 billion today**. The resulting environmental impact of our species is jeopardizing the entire planet’s climate. We were not always aware of our potential to have a cataclysmic effect on “the interdependent web of all existence.” As Elizabeth Kolbert has written about in her Pulitzer Prize winning book The Sixth Extinction, prior to fossil discoveries in the 1700s, we humans didn’t know that any species had ever become extinct, but since then we have come to learn that

there “have been five great mass extinctions during the history of life on this planet”.... The first took place...some 450 million years ago, when living things were still mainly confined to the water. The most devastating took place at the end of the Permian period, some 250 million years ago, and it came perilously close to emptying the earth out altogether.... The most recent — and famous — mass extinction came at the close of the Cretaceous period; it wiped out, in addition to the dinosaurs, the plesiosaurs, the mosasaurs, the ammonites, and the pterosaurs.

(6)

Regarding “the interdependent web of all existence” and climate change, Kolbert’s writes: “**In pushing other species to extinction, humanity is busy sawing off the limb on which it perches,**” increasing the likelihood of a potential *sixth* mass extinction on this planet. There is relatedly an increasing use of the term “**Anthropocene**” (similar to the word *anthropology* for the study of humans) to describe a new era of geologic time in which the dominant force shaping the Earth is *humanity*.

Here in the early twenty-first century, it is important to be honest about what it means to be heirs to the paradigm-shifting discoveries of Copernicus, Darwin, Einstein, Hubble, and so many others. I invite you to consider that minimally, this broadened perspective means at least two things. First, it means that **we humans are *much less singularly significant than it was once reasonable to maintain***. Our species has been wrestling for almost 500 years with the growing awareness that that we are not the center of the universe but rather inhabitants of one far-flung planet, on the edge of one galaxy, that is merely one of more than 100 billion other galaxies in the universe. Second, it means that **other beings on this planet are *more much significant*** than was once reasonable to grant — both intrinsically significant to themselves and extrinsically significant to us — since our survival depends on the continued flourishing of the diverse, interdependent ecosystems that comprise this planet's biosphere. From this perspective, we can perhaps begin to more fully appreciate the call to consider changing our principles from “every person” to “every *being*” — and “human relations” to “*all relations*.” The goal is to increasingly shift our sense of ourselves *from* ‘The One, Best Species’ (who should do whatever we want without worrying about the consequences) *to* a more realistic sense of ourselves as one among many beings who are inextricably woven together in an interdependent web.

The person who has most helped me in thinking through how we might make such a shift with the maximum amount of integrity and compassion is **Peter Singer (1946 -), a professor of bioethics at Princeton University, who “is almost certainly the best-known and most widely read of all contemporary philosophers**. He may also...be one of the most influential ones.... His 1975 book *Animal Liberation*, translated into thirteen languages, has sold more than half a million copies” (Kuhse 2). That being said, Singer himself admits that:

“When I wrote [*Animal Liberation*], I really thought the book would change the world. I know it sounds a little grand now, but at the time the sixties still existed for us. It looked as if real changes were possible, and I let myself believe that this would be one of them. All you have to do is walk around the corner to McDonald’s to see how successful I have been. (11)

There are some parallels to our own UU movement, which was founded in the hope-filled 1960s. However, Singer’s lament about factory farming and the fast food industry is from 1999. And I just saw this past week that McDonald’s is beginning a decade-long plan to use only cage-free eggs — in the wake of its other recent announcement that it is moving away from chicken treated with antibiotics. And while McDonald’s is a long way from getting the Michael Pollan food-justice seal of approval, when such food giants make a shift in the right direction, there are significant ripple effects across the whole industry.

To give you an overview of how Singer thinks we might become less human-centric and more compassionate toward all beings who can experience suffering, the following are four of his central convictions:

1. **Pain is bad, and similar amounts of pain are equally bad, no matter whose pain it might be.** By “pain” here I would include suffering and distress of all kinds. This does not mean that pain is the only thing that is bad, or that inflicting pain is always wrong. Sometimes it may be necessary to inflict pain and suffering on oneself or others...because it will lead to less suffering in the long run....
2. **Humans are not the only beings capable of feeling pain or of suffering....** Of course, the nature of the beings will affect how much pain they suffer in any given situation.
3. **When we consider how serious it is to take a life, we should look, not at the...species to which that being belongs, but at the characteristics of the individual being killed,** for example, its own desire about continuing to live, or the kind of life it is capable of living.
4. **We are responsible not only for what we do but also for what we could**

have prevented. We may never kill a stranger, but we know that our intervention will save the lives of many strangers in a distant country, and yet do nothing.... Consider, for example, the fact that the sum that buys us a meal in a fine restaurant would be enough to provide basic health care to several children who might otherwise die of easily preventable diseases. (Writings on an Ethical Life, xv - xvi)

If you are interested in going deeper into the specifics of these issues, **I will be teaching a six-week class here at UUCF titled “What Does It Mean to Live Ethically?” on Tuesday evenings at 7:00 p.m., starting this Tuesday, September 15, based on the 3rd edition of Peter Singer's textbook Practical Ethics, which has been the classic introduction to applied ethics for 30 years. If you have the time and interest, you are welcome to read the relevant parts of the book prior to each class session. In that case, the reading assignments are posted on the class webpage (frederickuu.org/PeterSinger). But you are welcome to attend the class regardless of whether you have time to read the book. At the beginning of each session, I'll outline the basic framework of the arguments for that day's focus.**

Over the six sessions, we'll be exploring topics such as:

- Is it ethical to buy luxuries when others do not have enough to eat?
- Should we buy meat from intensively-reared animals?
- Am I doing something wrong if my carbon footprint is above the global average?
- Equality and discrimination on the grounds of race or sex
- Abortion, the use of embryos for research, and euthanasia
- Political violence and terrorism

Then, in mid-November, we will have a sequel to this morning's service in which we will reflect further on wrestling with Peter Singer's ethics, as well hear brief reflections from participants from the Tuesday night class on **“How I see the world differently or will live differently as a result of this course?”** If you are interested, I invite you to join us on Tuesday evenings. You are welcome to come to as many or as few of the sessions as your schedule allows.

In the meantime, allow me to put a few more items on the table. Some critics say that Singer, as well as other supporters of any form of legalized euthanasia, risk the slippery slope down to Nazi science, an accusation that **fails to account for Singer being well aware of his own family's history as the child of Jewish parents who fled their native Austria in the late 1930s** (Kuhse 5, 9). There is also the perennial question of whether or not Singer is able to follow the implications of his logic. **He did not, for example, "kill his mother, who had advanced Alzheimer's disease and whose care was consuming money that could, those critics said, more profitably be spent elsewhere"** (11). But Singer has never said he is a perfectly rational and emotionless in his actions; rather, his challenge, both to himself and others, is to continually live into a more ethical way of life. For instance, **he has for many years given away more than 20% of his income** to organizations that have been proven to do the most good for the world's poor — an approach he calls "Effective Altruism."

My title for this sermon, borrowed from an anthology of Singer's essays, is "Unsanctifying Human Life." What I take him to mean is that it is no longer reasonable to maintain the ancient religious worldview that all human life is sacred and inviolable from womb to tomb without exception. Instead, **for more than 150 years our species has been wrestling with Darwin's discovery that we humans are not "a little lower than the angels," but rather a "little higher than the apes,"** and deeply interconnected with the other life forms and larger ecosystems of this planet. Put even more provocatively, it might be increasingly helpful **not to think of all humans as "Children of God," but instead to think of ourselves as part of the Animal Kingdom.**

There is a lot more to say, and we will be exploring some of the further implications of this perspective on Tuesday nights for the next six weeks as well as in an upcoming sermon in mid-November. There is also a longer-term question of whether this congregation is interested in becoming a sponsor of the First Principle Project by voting to change the wording of our UU Principles from "every person" to "every *being*" and/or "human relations" to "*all* relations." Any such change in the UU Bylaws requires at least 15 congregational sponsors as a first step, and the latest update I have heard is that the First Principle Project currently has 8 sponsors. But they just presented their first workshop at UU General Assembly this past June, so they are only getting

started. To clarify, at this point what we (or any other UU congregation) would be voting to sponsor is *not* whether to change the wording of our principle, but only whether this topic is worthy of a two-year UUA-wide conversation on whether the proposed bylaw change should take place.

For now, I will conclude with the closing part of a **Buddhist *metta*** (“loving-kindness”) **meditation** that seeks to open our heart and expand our compassion — starting with compassion for ourselves, then extending to other human beings, and finally including all beings who have the capacity to experience suffering:

May all beings be filled with loving-kindness

May all beings be well.

May all beings be peaceful and at ease.

May all beings awaken to their true nature.

May all beings be free.

In this spirit of “respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part” — and with an increased awareness of our place as one among many species of this far-flung but beautiful and precious planet — I invite you to rise in body or spirit as we sing together hymn 1064, “Blue Boat Home.”