

Critical Analysis

Practical Ethics: Text Review

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A variety of real life ethical situations are described in “Practical Ethics” as examples of how to apply logical thought to analyze each situation. The arguments proposed by the author, Peter Singer, lead the reader to the ethical conclusion or position he believes should be assumed on each issue. This is made clear when he says, “...chapters of this book have discussed what we ought, morally, to do about several practical issues and what means we are justified in adopting to achieve our ethical goals.” (Page 276)

Singer’s opinion on ethical behaviour therefore appears to be there is only one possible response to given dilemmas and that either one is ethical or not. He does not ascribe to a theory like that presented by Kohlberg who believes we use our experiences to progressively assume more complex thought to apply to ethical dilemmas and that each person is therefore at a different developmental stage. Singer argues that one is ethical if one has a standard of behaviour, follows that behaviour, the behaviour benefits more than self, and if the position can be universally applied; to take on an understanding of those affected by one’s decision (Pages 9-12), “Ethics goes beyond ‘I’ and ‘you’ to universal law... my own needs, wants and desires cannot...count more than the needs, wants and desires of anyone else.” (Page 11)

The author makes the point that one cannot claim to live ethically and only be interested in self.

“...self-interested acts must be shown to be compatible with more broadly based ethical principles if they are to be ethically defensible, for the notion of ethics carries with it the idea of something bigger than the individual. If I am to defend my conduct on ethical grounds, I cannot point only to the benefits it brings me. I must address myself to a larger audience.”

(Page 10)

Singer also says, "...we can never get people to act morally by providing reasons of self-interest, because if they accept what we say and act on the reasons given, they will only be acting self-interestedly, not morally." Kohlberg's second stage of ethical development, defined as self-interest or "what's in it for me", clearly is not recognized by Singer as having any role in shaping ethical behaviour.

Another point made by the author is that making ethical decisions by following a set of rules does not demonstrate ethical behaviour. This is reflected in several statements including, "...the failure of an ethic of simple rules...", "those who think that ethics is a system of rules – the deontologist – can rescue their position...", and finally, he makes the point that applying ethics is more complicated making, "...simple rules difficult to apply." (Page 2) Singer also does not see where religion has a role with ethics, "...ethical behaviour does not require belief in heaven and hell and, conversely, that belief in heaven and hell does not always lead to ethical behaviour." (Page 4) He concludes that "...morality was not given to use by a divine creator..." (Page 4) Therefore, Singer totally disregards Kohlberg's fourth stage of ethical development which involves following rules to maintain social order or applying principles as guided by one's religious teachings to shape our ethical behaviour.

The Sinclair/Kohlberg Paradigm states that the stages of ethical development, "...do not dictate whether or not an individual is moral in the eyes of the critic, but rather indicate the level of complexity at which the individual is operating in terms of the way he reasons about ethical/moral dilemmas." (Page 4) Singer only really recognizes ethical behaviour as being at Kohlberg's sixth stage of ethical development. He states, "The ethical point of view does...require us to go beyond a personal point of view to the standpoint of an impartial spectator. Thus, looking at things ethically is a way of transcending our inward-looking concerns and identifying ourselves with the most objective point of view possible – with...'the point of view of the universe'." (Page 293)

Singer further identifies with Kohlberg's stage six by encouraging the reader to consider when it is necessary to break the law in order to do what is right, "If we think that a practice is very seriously wrong, and if we have the courage and ability to disrupt this practice by breaking the law, how could the illegality of this action provide an ethical reason against it?" (Page 262) He answers the question by saying, "There is no simple moral rule that will enable us to declare when disobedience is justifiable and when it is not..." (Page 270) He also says, "...there are still situations in which the use of illegal means can be justified." (Page 267) However it is clear that "...we must decide for ourselves on which side of the line particular cases fall." (Page 269)

Singer concludes his rational argument that ethical behaviour is only expressed when being done by looking outside of oneself and challenging laws that may be unjust with a quote from Henry Spira who was an activist for the protection of animals.

"I guess basically one wants to feel that one's life has amounted to more than just consuming products and generating garbage. I think that one likes to look back and say that one's done the best one can to make this a better place for others. You can look at it from this point of view: what greater motivation can there be than doing whatever one possibly can to reduce pain and suffering?" (Page 294)

Beautiful words to aspire to in the course of a public health professional's career and personal life.

The arguments presented by Peter Singer assists people working in public health by enhancing awareness of various perspectives that can be held by other health professionals, advocates, government leaders and the general public. The book also shares stories that could be used to draw from when faced with the day-to-day challenges of working in public health.

The title of the book is, "Practical Ethics" and the author indicates that the "... book is about ...the application of ethics...to practical issues." (Page 1) He goes

on to state that “the point of ethical judgments is to guide practice.” (Page 2)
Therefore the book was written in order to have personal usefulness to
individuals.

The various ethical dilemmas presented by Singer will assist anyone wanting to
know more about how to come to an ethical conclusion and therefore help shape
their own understanding or position.

The objectives of the course are to:

- enhance ability to reason ethically in the moment of leadership crisis
through conversation and questioning of diverse leadership
representatives
- seek out and assess role models within leadership contexts where a
higher moral standard would seem to be a mandatory requirement
- provide guidance leading towards the establishment of a firmer foundation
in the personal life of one who faces moral dilemmas in public service

The book assists in achieving each of the three objectives. First, it provides a
clear example of an approach to ethical reasoning. As well, a number of
philosophers and researchers in the field of ethics are quoted along with an
outline of several real life examples of people, role models, putting their ethics
into practice. They each serve as inspiration to encourage the public health
professional to take the necessary action if and when identified. The information
shared throughout the book helps to shape the reader’s understanding of issues
and therefore equips him/her with a stronger background in ethical dilemmas.
Therefore, the reader is able to define personal values better which in turn will
help the public health professional more readily respond to moral dilemmas.
This is a challenging book to read. The author takes too long to make his point,
and is somewhat repetitive. The book is written at a grade 12 level according to
the Flesch-Kincaid Reading Scale which is too high for the average reader.
Finally, the book would benefit from some editing as there are too many
sentences that are way too long. One such example,

“The problem is that if we describe the universal aspect of ethics in bare, formal terms, a wide range of ethical theories, including quite irreconcilable ones, are compatible with this notion of universality; if, on the other hand, we build up our description of the universal aspect of ethics so that it leads us ineluctably to one particular ethical theory, we shall be accused of smuggling our own ethical beliefs into our definition of the ethical – and this definition was supposed to be broad enough, and neutral enough, to encompass all serious candidates for the status of ‘ethical theory’.” (Page 11)

All of these points confirm the book is difficult to read. Simply stated, the book does not draw in its reader and does not hold one’s interest. This is unfortunate since there is the potential for much to be gained from the examples and analyses provided.

Sources:

1. Singer, Peter. Practical Ethics, Cambridge University Press. Cambridge, 2011.
2. Sinclair, Glenn, “Sustaining Ethical Leadership Good...But Have We Got the Cart Before the Horse? Presentation to the Learned Societies”, 2009