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IS ABORTION MORE SERIOUS THAN MURDER? PETER SINGER'S SHIFT FROM PREFERENTIALISM TO HEDONISM AND THE NECESSITY TO REVISE *PRACTICAL ETHICS*

¿ES EL ABORTO MÁS GRAVE QUE EL ASESINATO? EL PASO DE PETER SINGER DEL PREFERENCIALISMO AL HEDONISMO Y LA NECESIDAD DE REVISAR PRACTICAL ETHICS

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ABSTRACT

Peter Singer's main interest has been practical ethics. At the level of normative ethics, Singer's moral philosophy has undergone two stages. The paper asks whether the changes at the level of normative ethics allow the Singer of the second stage to maintain the practical ethics approaches of his first stage, as he has done and as is paradigmatically shown in the successive editions of his famous book *Practical Ethics*. To this end, the first and second Singer's treatment of the question of the moral consideration of abortion and murder is confronted with a fairly widespread intuition, namely that murder is more serious than abortion. The conclusion is that the second Singer, unlike the first, cannot maintain his commitment to that intuition, and that *Practical Ethics* therefore requires an update. Finally, some possible ways in which Singer might address this situation are tentatively explored.

Keywords: Abortion, Hedonism, Killing, Peter Singer, Preferentialism, Utilitarianism.

RESUMEN

El principal interés de Peter Singer ha sido la ética práctica. En el plano de la ética normativa su filosofía moral ha pasado por dos etapas. El artículo se pregunta si los cambios en el nivel de la ética normativa permiten al Singer de la segunda etapa mantener los planteamientos de ética práctica de su primera etapa, como ha hecho y como se muestra paradigmáticamente en las sucesivas ediciones de su famoso libro *Ética Práctica*. Para ello, el tratamiento que el primer y el segundo Singer hacen de la cuestión de la consideración moral del aborto y del asesinato se enfrenta a una intuición bastante extendida, a saber, que el asesinato es más grave que el aborto. La conclusión es que el segundo Singer, a diferencia del primero, no puede mantener su compromiso con esa intuición y que, por tanto, su *Ética Práctica* requiere una actualización. Por último, se exploran tentativamente algunas posibles formas en que Singer podría abordar esta situación.

Palabras clave: Aborto, Hedonismo, Matar, Peter Singer, Preferencialismo, Utilitarismo.

I. INTRODUCTION

Peter Singer is one of the leading exponents of contemporary utilitarianism. He is best known for his contributions to the field of applied ethics,[1] where he has not hesitated to defend approaches that call into question some of the most established commonplaces of conventional morality.[2] Beyond this polemical character, which is always stimulating for the reader, the study of his work is also of special interest because his thought, far from remaining stable throughout his intellectual production, has undergone important changes. Specifically, these changes allow us to distinguish two well-differentiated stages.

In the first stage, which began with the start of his academic career in the 1970s, Singer opts for R.M. Hare's ethical proposal. Thus, at the metaethical level he follows universal prescriptivism, while at the level of normative ethics

1 Following Singer's usage, we will use *applied ethics* and *practical ethics* as synonymous expressions. We will distinguish this branch of ethics from metaethics and normative ethics, following the usual academic tripartition. For a didactic exposition of this tripartition, see Fisher (2011).

2 I use the expression *conventional morality* to describe the set of values, principles and rules of a moral nature that are widely accepted in societies such as ours. This conventional morality contains elements of very different ethical traditions, but it is not unreasonable to say that, since the appearance of John Rawls' *A Theory of Justice* in 1971, the utilitarian elements present in it have significantly diminished.

he follows preference utilitarianism.[3] In the second stage, from the 2010s onwards, Hare's influence was replaced by that of Henry Sidgwick and Derek Parfit. Both are decisive in understanding the Singerian metaethical transition towards objectivism,[4] while the substitution of preferentialism for hedonism, at the level of normative ethics, is mainly due to Sidgwick.[5]

As far as practical ethics is concerned, it is during the first stage that Singer develops the bulk of his positions on the subject. We are talking about approaches to the moral status of non-human animals, the scope of the moral obligation to combat poverty in the world, or bioethical questions related to the beginning and end of life.[6] Unlike what we have explained as happening at the level of metaethics and normative ethics, in most cases Singer has not, during his second stage, revised his approaches to this third level, the practical one.

This paper starts from the idea that it is legitimate to ask and explore whether the metaethical and normative shifts we have noted have had some kind of impact on his practical ethics, some kind of impact that Singer himself has not noticed or addressed. But the vastness of Singer's intellectual output, coupled with the limited space available here, makes it impossible to examine this question in general. We therefore intend to explore it by focusing our attention on one specific instance: Singer's answer to the question about the wrongness of killing, in connection with the moral consideration of abortion and murder.

This is a topic that Singer has worked on in several of his early works, such as the successive editions of *Practical Ethics* (1979; 1993; 2011), *Should the Baby Live?* (1985) or *Rethinking Life and Death* (1994) among others. Should we find any inconsistencies between the positions of the new Singer and what he set out in these earlier writings, this would give us reason to argue that Singer's books should be revised and brought up to date.

To this end, the structure we will adopt will be as follows: in a first section, we will introduce the conceptual framework with which Singer addresses the question of the wrongness of killing. Next, we will set out the intuition with

3 For a presentation of this variant of ethical subjectivism which is universal prescriptivism, according to which ethical judgements do not express propositions, but prescriptions or imperatives that can be universalised, see Hare (1963). For a presentation of the accompanying preferential utilitarianism, according to which the right action is that which maximises preference satisfaction, see Hare (1981).

4 In particular, the expositions of objectivism (here used in the sense of a metaethical doctrine according to which objective moral facts exist) found in Parfit (2011) and Sidgwick (1907).

5 Singer is influenced, above all, by Sidgwick (1907).

6 See, for instance, Singer (2009), Singer (1972) and Singer (1994), respectively.

reference to which we will work. Then, we will go on to synthesize the first Singer's position on this question, focusing on its implications for the moral consideration of abortion. Then, we will do the same for the second Singer's position. In section VI, we will examine the counter-intuitive conclusion we reach. Finally, we will explore some ways in which Singer might respond.

II. SINGER'S CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK ON THE WRONGNESS OF KILLING

To avoid misunderstandings, before going into the substantive issues of Singer's position on abortion and murder we consider it appropriate to outline the general conceptual framework with which our author approaches the question of the wrongness of killing. This is a complex and nuanced issue, and to deal with it in the depth that it requires would take up space that we do not have here. Therefore, we will limit ourselves to pointing out four elements:

a) To begin with, to answer the question "why is it wrong to kill?" we need a theory of what is bad about death — bad in moral terms, that is. When dealing with this issue, Singer often speaks of the (moral) *wrongness* of killing, but we believe that a rigorous use of the terms suggests that we should rather speak of the *badness* of killing.[7]

b) When we think of the badness of death, the first thing that comes to mind is the evil that death causes in relation to the one who dies. However, Singer takes into account that death can also be bad for third parties. These would include the victim's relatives and acquaintances, who will suffer the grief caused by her absence or the fear of being the next to perish, and even the one who kills, for example, if she suffers psychologically as a result of having ended a life.

c) To speak in terms of good and bad, as we have just said we will do regarding the deceased, is to speak of what has positive value and what has negative value or disvalue. As we have already mentioned in the introduction, Singer's ethics is utilitarian. As far as axiology is

7 Above all, because in Singer's conceptual framework moral rightness and wrongness do not admit graduation (de Lazari-Radek and Singer (2014) reject the scalar version of utilitarianism (p. 335)), while goodness and badness do. With respect to death, this means that if we speak in terms of moral rightness all we can say is whether a death is right or wrong (bearing in mind that any death that does not maximise that which is valuable is wrong), whereas if we speak in terms of good-bad we can compare different deaths according to the effect they have on that which we consider valuable. This second possibility is much more explanatory and relevant to the goal we are pursuing here.

concerned, utilitarianism tends to opt either for the preferentialist theory of value (according to which what is of value is the satisfaction of preferences and what is of disvalue is the frustration of that satisfaction), or for the hedonist theory of value (according to which what is of value is pleasure and what is of disvalue is suffering). Therefore, if death is good or bad, it will be because it improves or worsens the balance between what has positive value and what has negative value, either in terms of preference satisfaction or pleasure-pain.[8]

d) However, the matter is somewhat more complicated, for it is generally understood, and Singer agrees, that there are two ways in which death can generate disvalue in relation to the one who dies: in an intrinsic way and in an extrinsic way.[9] If, with respect to the one who dies, death negatively affects intrinsically valuable things (for example, the satisfaction of preferences or pleasure), then we say that it is intrinsically bad or that it generates an intrinsic evil. The paradigmatic example of an intrinsically bad death is a painful death. In preferentialist terms, it is intrinsically bad because it frustrates the preference not to suffer that we all have. In hedonistic terms, it is intrinsically bad because it inflicts suffering.

   But it may be the case that death generates disvalue without negatively affecting, *per se*, intrinsically valuable things.[10] In such cases we say that it is extrinsically bad.[11] This extrinsic badness of death can be characterized in comparative terms. According to comparativism, what makes our life worse than it could have been causes us harm, and what makes our life better than it could have been benefits us (Luper 2021).[12]

8 In the following pages we will turn our attention to the disvalue generated by death, but we must not lose sight of the fact that everything we will say also applies to those cases in which the value it generates is of a positive sign.

9 This can be seen, for example, throughout the chapter "What's wrong With Killing?" in the successive editions of *Practical Ethics*.

10 It could be the case of a painless death, for example.

11 Although this is not Singer's approach, it should be noted that the idea that death is bad for the one who dies has been questioned throughout the history of philosophy. Epicurus, in the *Letter to Menoeceus*, already attacked this thesis. Warren (2004) offers a good account of this of this discussion, which he complements with the contributions of later Epicurean thinkers, such as Lucretius:

Lucretius successfully shows that if either of two conditions are met, it is wrong to think of death as a harm and feel sorrow for the dead. First, if death is agreed to be the end of the person's existence, then death cannot be a harm. Second, if death is agreed to be the absence of sensation (like sleep) then death cannot be a harm (p. 39).

12 Some of the earliest approaches to this issue can be found in Nagel (1970), Quinn (1984) and Feldman (1991).

agel (1987) illustrates how the application of this comparative approach to the question of death works when he argues that, "if it's bad, that must be because it is the absence of something good (like interesting or pleasant experiences)" (p. 92). In other words, we can argue that death is bad because it prevents the deceased from attaining the intrinsic goods that she would have enjoyed had she not died.[13] The focus, therefore, is not on whether the deceased has suffered something intrinsically bad (e.g. pain), but on whether she has been *deprived* of good things.[14]

The comparativist reading of the extrinsic badness of death is not necessarily a utilitarian approach, but it fits very well with both its hedonist and preferentialist versions. For the former, painless death is bad because it entails a deprivation of all the pleasure that would have been experienced if life had gone on. For the latter, it is bad because it prevents the satisfaction of preferences that could have arisen and been satisfied in the future.

III. AN INTUITION AND A FEW STIPULATIONS

Having outlined the general conceptual framework within which Singer approaches reflection on the moral evil of death, we are now ready to move on to a scenario in which to test whether Singer's first position on the moral permissibility of murder and abortion holds in his second stage. With respect to abortion, different religious groups argue that, when intentional, it is morally equivalent to murder. However, it seems that the most widespread intuition is that murder is worse, in the sense that it generates greater moral disvalue, than abortion.[15] Hereafter, we will refer to this intuition as I.1.

Despite its initial appeal, the fact is that I.1's degree of plausibility depends on the way in which its elements are concretised. For example, what sense does the term *murder* take in I.1? Does I.1 apply exclusively to human beings, or can

13 After Nagel, the comparative evil of death has been discussed, among others, in Silverstein (1980), Feldman (1992) (where a characterisation of extrinsic evil very similar to the one we have provided here is also given), M. Kamm (1993) or Broome (2004).

14 To be more precise, whether she has been deprived of good things or *bad things*. According to this approach, if the future holds nothing but misery for someone, his or her death might be comparatively better than continuing to live.

15 In support of the greater prevalence of this intuition, we could argue that in all societies there have been norms that punish murder, but the same is not true for abortion.

it be extended to any animal species? I.1 refers to what is *worse*, but *worse* for whom? Tentatively, we start from the idea that I.1 responds to a whole set of variables, and that not all of them have the same weight in justifying it. Therefore, below we propose a series of stipulations that aim to neutralise some of the variables which, while they contribute to explaining the plausibility of I.1, do not make an essential contribution:

a) To begin with, to properly understand what is at stake it is interesting to read I.1 not as if we were comparing the relative badness of murder and abortion in different individuals, but as if we were comparing it with respect to the same individual. In this way, we are not comparing two future lives (each with its own amount of that which is valuable in a unique distribution over time), but one and the same life. So, I.1 would translate as saying that, if we take an individual into consideration, his abortion will be less serious than his murder at a later point in time, *ceteris paribus*.

b) Also, going beyond the technical meaning of *murder* in criminal law, when we use the term in the context of I.1 we understand it to refer to the act of ending someone's life without their consent. *Abortion*, on the other hand, would refer to the non-accidental act of interrupting a gestation process to prevent the birth of a new individual. In common parlance, the term *abortion* may apply to other species, while *murder* is usually reserved for human beings, and other words are used to refer to the killing of non-human animals and other living beings. Even though in the sense we have given the term here nothing would prevent us from extending its use beyond the limits of our species, the fact is that I.1 loses plausibility beyond these limits, so we will remain within them.

c) In relation to what was said in section II.b, in the following pages, in order to simplify things, we will leave aside the badness of death for third parties,[16] and we will focus exclusively on the badness of death with respect to the one who loses his life. Therefore, we will not be discussing the badness of killing, but rather the badness of death, strictly speaking.

16 We can imagine that it remains constant in all the cases we will compare.

IV. THE STANCE OF THE FIRST SINGER

1. The stance of the first Singer on the value of life and the disvalue of death:

The first Singer's position rests on a preferentialist conception of value. Starting from here, we are interested in what answer he gives to the question of whether all lives have equal value, or whether all deaths are equally bad. To get this answer, we must bear in mind that, for Singer, in the preferentialist framework there are two morally relevant properties: consciousness and self-consciousness or self-awareness. Let us look at this in more detail.

As is well known, for preferentialism value lies in the satisfaction of preferences. [17] Having consciousness is a prerequisite for developing preferences in the sense that utilitarians give to this term. However, it turns out that not all living beings have consciousness. Therefore, from the preferentialist perspective we can draw a first distinction between non-conscious living beings and conscious living beings.

Non-conscious living beings do not have preferences, and therefore their lives have only indirect value, and their deaths can only be bad insofar as they have effects on others who do have preferences. In contrast, conscious beings have preferences, and therefore their lives and deaths can contribute, in positive or negative terms, to what is intrinsically valuable — that is, preference satisfaction.

But Singer does not stop here, because he considers that there are two different types of preferences: *future-oriented preferences* and all other preferences. From what Singer explains we can infer that future-oriented preferences are exclusive to self-conscious living beings or *persons*, that is, to those beings who conceive themselves as existing over time and who "are highly future-oriented in their preferences". These would include "a wide range of the most central and significant preferences a being can have" and which have to do with what the person "has been trying to do in the past days, months, or even years" (Singer 1993, 95). At other times these preferences are referred to as "future-oriented goals and purposes" (Kuhse and Singer 1985, 64–65) or "hopes and desires" (Kuhse and Singer 1985, 120). They would comprise the "desire to continue living" (Singer 1993, 125), but it seems that they would not be restricted to it.

17 Preferentialism often speaks of preferences and desires as if they were synonyms. To avoid muddling the issue, we will talk about preferences.

In any case, the fact remains that the Singer of the first stage considers these future-oriented preferences to be especially valuable,[18] and that confers a special value on the lives of their holders, and a special disvalue on their deaths. In contrast, merely conscious living beings are not aware of existing over time and therefore do not have these future-oriented preferences, although they do have preferences. Compared to persons, their lives are less valuable, and their deaths are less serious.

In short, then, for the preferentialist Singer, consciousness is a morally relevant property that makes it possible to distinguish a first level occupied by non-conscious living beings from a second level occupied by conscious living beings. In turn, self-consciousness is a morally relevant property that allows us to distinguish, on this second level, the sub-level of merely conscious living beings from the sub-level of self-conscious living beings or *persons*.[19] The value of the lives and the disvalue of the deaths of these beings increases, *ceteris paribus*, as we increase in level.

2. The implications of this view for the moral consideration of abortion and murder:

Abortion is the termination of a life. It is a life that is not self-conscious, but at most conscious,[20] and therefore has the value attributed to any conscious life (Singer 1993, 135 ff.).

On the one hand, abortion is *intrinsically* bad if it frustrates foetal preferences. Given the degree of psychological development of a foetus, these

18 But in Singer's handling of the issue it is not clear whether being able to have future-oriented preferences gives persons access to a potentially greater quantity of what is valuable, or whether the satisfaction of future-oriented preferences is qualitatively superior to the satisfaction of other preferences. However, this is not a question we can dwell on now, nor do we need to in order to advance the discussion at hand.

19 Which living beings fall into each of these levels is a complex factual question that ultimately depends on each case, and there are many grey areas. Singer does not have a problem admitting this, and insists that, since there is a great deal of variability within the biological boundaries of any species, belonging to one of them cannot be a criterion for establishing which beings possess the morally relevant properties.

Although he does not provide a comprehensive treatment of the question, we can infer from his texts that non-conscious living beings include plants, among others; that self-conscious beings include normal adult specimens of the species *homo sapiens* and the other species of great apes; and that merely conscious beings would be all those living beings with sentience (i.e., with the capacity to experience pleasure and pain) that are not self-conscious (Singer 1993).

20 We say that it is at most conscious because there is a period of time, when it begins to exist, during which the foetus is a non-conscious being.

preferences do not go much further than the preference to feel pleasure and not pain. In no case can one attribute to a foetus the special kind of preferences that, with Singer, we have called *future-oriented preferences*, for a foetus is not self-conscious. On the other hand, abortion is *extrinsically* bad if it deprives the foetus of the satisfaction of future preferences — that is, preferences that would arise in the future.[21]

To murder a *person* is to end a life. It is a life that is self-conscious (that is so by definition: it is the life of a *person*), and, therefore, in the Singerian preferentialist framework it has a higher value, *ceteris paribus*, than what is attributed to the life of a merely conscious being (Singer 1993, 89 ff.).

On the one hand, the murder of a person is intrinsically bad if it frustrates the person's preference not to suffer, as well as if it frustrates his or her future-oriented preferences, the satisfaction of which is especially valuable. On the other hand, murdering a person is extrinsically bad if it deprives the person of the satisfaction of future preferences — that is, preferences that would arise in the future.

V. THE STANCE OF THE SECOND SINGER

1. The stance of the second Singer on the value of life and the disvalue of death:

The second Singer's stance rests on a hedonistic conception of value. Starting from here, we are again interested in his answer to the question of whether all lives have the same value, or whether all deaths are equally bad. To get this answer we must bear in mind that, for Singer (1993), in the hedonist framework there is only one morally relevant property: sentience (p. 58). Let us look at this in more detail.

For hedonism, pleasure is what has value. Sentience is the capacity to feel pleasure and pain, and in order to have sentience it is necessary to have some degree of consciousness (Singer 1979, 117). But it turns out that not all living beings have consciousness and, consequently, sentience. Therefore, from the hedonistic perspective we can draw a distinction between non-conscious (and non-sentient) living beings and conscious (and sentient) living beings.

21 It is important to note that future-oriented preferences are not the same as future preferences. The latter may include the former, but also non-future-oriented preferences.

Non-sentient living beings cannot feel pleasure and pain, and therefore their lives have only indirect value, and their deaths are only bad for their effects on sentient third parties. In contrast, conscious (and sentient) beings can feel pleasure and pain, and therefore their lives and deaths can contribute, in positive or negative terms, to what is intrinsically valuable — i.e. pleasure.

It is crucial to note that, in the hedonist framework, Singer cannot account for the distinction between future-oriented preferences and any other preferences. In this second stage, the value of the satisfaction or dissatisfaction of preferences of any kind is reduced to pleasure/pain they produce, so that it is irrelevant that future-oriented preferences are only available to self-conscious beings.[22] The only relevant thing is whether the being has the capacity to feel pleasure and pain, and there is no way to introduce qualitative differences between different kinds of pleasure or pain, only quantitative ones. This idea is captured by the principle of equal consideration of interests, according to which equal amounts of pleasure and pain matter the same (Singer 1993, 21 ff.).

In short, then, for the hedonist Singer, consciousness, which reflects sentience, is the only morally relevant property, which allows us to distinguish a first level occupied by non-conscious living beings from a second level occupied by conscious living beings. Therefore, at least in principle, the lives of self-conscious beings and conscious beings are of equal value and their deaths are equally bad.

2. The implications of this view for the moral consideration of abortion and murder:

Under a hedonistic value theory, abortion is *intrinsically* wrong, on the one hand, if it inflicts pain on the foetus.[23] On the other hand, abortion is *extrinsically* bad if it deprives the foetus of future pleasures.

From a hedonistic perspective, the murder of a person, on the one hand, is bad in intrinsic terms if it is painful. That it frustrates future-oriented preferences is not something that can be factored into the equation and taken into consideration, unless this frustration is expressed in the form of pain at the

22 Nevertheless, it might be that beings with the capacity to form future-oriented preferences are happier than beings who are not able to do so, and then, in purely hedonistic terms, this would give us an indirect reason to consider their lives more valuable. This possibility will be discussed further in section VII below.

23 And, as we mentioned before, there will be a lapse of time, when the foetus begins to exist, during which it is a non-conscious being and therefore no intrinsic evil can be done to it.

moment of death. On the other hand, the murder of a person is extrinsically bad if it deprives the person of future pleasures.

VI. A COUNTERINTUITIVE CONCLUSION

To recapitulate, we have stated I.1, a fairly widespread intuition about the comparative seriousness of abortion and murder, and then synthesised the approaches to the way in which, according to the first and second Singer, abortion and murder can be bad. At this point, it is time to examine whether the approaches of these two stages are equally compatible with I.1.

Starting with the first Singer, we find that, in terms of extrinsic badness, he cannot maintain I.1. If we consider an individual, her abortion when she is a foetus and has almost her whole life before him will deprive her, in comparative terms, of greater satisfaction of future preferences than her murder at a later point in time, when she has not so long to live.

However, I.1 can be sustained in terms of intrinsic evil. Since Singer is advocating a version of preferentialism in which *future-oriented preferences* have a place; since these preferences are only available to self-conscious beings or *persons*; since death frustrates these preferences; since this frustration is the source of a special disvalue; and since a foetus is not a *person* in the sense that Singer uses the term; then the Singer of this first stage can indeed hold that a murder is more serious than an abortion, that killing a person is more serious than killing a foetus, or that, if we take an individual, his abortion is less serious than his murder at a later point in time, *ceteris paribus*. Because abortion does not frustrate future-oriented preferences, but murder does.

Thus, if we look at the matter from the perspective of extrinsic badness, Singer's position is incompatible with I.1, but if we look at it from the perspective of intrinsic badness, the conclusion we reach is the opposite. It is on this second perspective, that of intrinsic badness, that Singer (1993) relied on to construct the typical position of his first stage according to which abortion is morally permissible, but murder is not (p. 90). It should be noted that it is the possibility of holding this typical position that does a substantial part of the work of making his general stance on the value of life and the badness of death plausible to the broad readership he addresses in books such as *Practical Ethics*.

Turning now to the second Singer, in terms of extrinsic evil I.1 cannot be sustained either. If we consider an individual, her abortion when she is a foetus and has almost his whole life ahead of her will deprive her, in comparative terms,

of more future pleasure than her murder at a later time, when she has not so long to live.

But what about intrinsic badness? This is where the major difference lies. Since Singer is committed to the hedonistic variant of utilitarianism (in which *future-oriented preferences* have no place), he has no way of recognising a special value in *person*'s lives, so that, by virtue of the principle of equal consideration of interests, equal amounts of suffering matter equally — regardless of the psychological complexity of the sentient being experiencing them.

Thus, if we look at the matter from the perspective of extrinsic badness, Singer's position is incompatible with I.1 because we reach a conclusion that reverses the order of I.1: abortion is more serious than murder. If we look at it from the perspective of intrinsic badness, Singer's position is also incompatible with I.1, but in other terms, because we conclude that abortion and murder are equally serious, insofar as they inflict the same amount of pain.

VII. HOW TO DEAL WITH THIS COUNTERINTUITIVE CONSEQUENCE?

We have just seen how, with respect to I.1, the second Singer deviates from the first Singer and departs from what he had been arguing, during his first stage, in the successive editions of *Practical Ethics*, *Should the Baby Live?* or *Rethinking Life and Death*, among others. This deviation is due to his shift from preferentialism to hedonism and confirms that the change at the level of normative ethics does have effects at the level of practical ethics, effects that our author has not taken into account or addressed. In this scenario, we explore three ways that Singer has at his disposal to deal with this situation:

a) A first possibility is to try to discredit I.1 by arguing that it is not true that abortion is less serious than murder. To this end, it could be argued that not only does hedonistic utilitarianism (both on the basis of intrinsic and extrinsic evil) contest the plausibility of I.1, but so does preferential utilitarianism on the basis of extrinsic evil. This convergence in rejecting I.1 would provide grounds for doubting its plausibility.

   In the same vein, one could argue that the compatibility of Singerian preferentialism with I.1 rests exclusively on the existence of future-oriented preferences, and that this is too fragile a foundation (at least within early Singer's normative ethics) to support such a construction. After all, as we have already mentioned, Singer never satisfactorily

explains what gives these preferences a special status. Be that as it may, it is unlikely that singer bites the bullet and goes for this option.

b) A second possibility is to try to accommodate I.1 by arguing that, in fact, hedonistic utilitarianism does not imply that abortion is more serious than murder. This could be done in at least three ways:

b.1) Singer has insisted on numerous occasions that, in practice, and contrary to what many people may think, the conclusions of utilitarianism (also in its hedonistic version) do not deviate too much from those of conventional morality.[24] Going further into this approach, he could argue that, in the real world, individuals do not exist in a vacuum, so that in assessing the badness of death it is necessary to take into account the effects that abortion and murder have on others. If we do so, we will find that the latter has a greater negative impact on pleasure than the former.

How is this possible? One could begin by arguing, for instance, that self-conscious beings have, as a consequence of possessing this self-consciousness, a greater capacity to experience pleasure and pain than merely conscious beings do. If we add to this the fact that the cases of abortion under consideration here are wanted by the mother, we can conclude that, while abortion in itself does not generate positive value, it avoids a great deal of negative one. In particular, that of forcing a woman (which is usually equivalent to forcing her family as well) to have an unwanted child, and often also to take care of it once it is born (in cases in which adoption is not an option). Conversely, murder often has a serious negative impact on the well-being of others. On the one hand, in the form of psychological suffering for the mourning family and friends. On the other hand, in the form of unease and discomfort for other members of the community, if they learn that someone has lost their life against their will, and that this threat also hangs over their existence (Singer 1993, 92).

These reasons would serve to prove that, in fact, also for hedonistic utilitarianism murder is more serious than abortion. Moreover, the fact that they rest on considerations that Singer himself has already pointed to in his texts gives us reason to believe that an eventual response from him would surely

24 For example, examining the hypothetical scenario in which a surgeon, by surreptitiously killing a patient, would obtain organs that would allow him to save more than one life, Singer (2014) argues that given "the extreme rarity of the circumstances in which killing one patient could benefit several others, [...] a rule absolutely prohibiting such acts by doctors is justified." (p. 299). Singer (1993) explains that this conservative approach to utilitarianism draws on R.M. Hare's distinction between two levels of moral reasoning, the intuitive and the critical (p. 92).

follow along these lines.[25] However, this attempt to accommodate this intuition is a manoeuvre that can only provide indirect reasons in support of I.1, which ultimately depend on factual considerations.

b.2) There is another way of accommodating I.1, which Singer has not explicitly explored, and which involves bringing a new variable into play: that of the prudential value of the future.

In relation to this issue, it is generally understood that the contribution that a future event can make to our welfare depends on the relationship between us and the event.[26] Depending on which type of relationship is considered to matter, a distinction is made between time-neutral theories and time-relative theories.

If one opts for a time-neutral theory, the relationship that matters is that of numerical identity, and the contribution that a future event can make to our well-being "is determined only by the positive or negative value that this event will have [for us] when it takes place" (Paez 2017, 95). If, on the other hand, we opt for a time-relative theory, McMahan (2023) explains that:

The strength of a person's interest at time t *in having some benefit in the future, or avoiding some harm, is a function of two variables: (1) the magnitude of the benefit or harm at the time when it would occur and (2) the strength of the prudential unity relations [e.g. psychological connectedness] between the person at* t *and herself at the time the benefit or harm would occur.*

Were Singer to opt for a time-relative theory and develop convincing arguments to defend it, he would be spared all these complications with regard to abortion.[27] This is so because of the weakness of the prudential unity relations (in terms of psychological connectedness) between a foetus which, at most, will be a conscious being, and itself at a later stage, when it is already a *person*.

Nevertheless, although this path seems promising,[28] in *The Point of View of the Universe* (a key work in Singer's second stage) he defends Sidgwick's axiom of prudence, according to which we should have an impartial

25 Singer himself corroborated this point in the discussion that followed the presentation of a draft of this article at the 17th Conference of the International Society for Utilitarian Studies, which took place on June, 2024, at University College London's Faculty of Law.

26 Parfit systematized many of these issues in the third part of *Reasons and Persons* (1984), devoted to the question of personal identity. For a more recent introduction to the question of personal identity, see Gallois (2016).

27 Other authors who, in addition to McMahan (2002), have supported a time-relative theory are Shoemaker (1970), Lewis (1976) and DeGrazia (2005).

28 It seems so to Paez (2017), albeit in relation to the ethical treatment of animals.

consideration for all the moments of our life (Sidgwick 1907, 381). This is a clearly time-neutral approach. Moreover, Singer (2014) argues against three time-relative proposals: Williams' (1976), who argues that "the right perspective on one's life is from the now" (p. 206-209); that of Temkin (2011), who is of the opinion that the Sidgwickian conception of individual self-interest should be discarded for an alternative that pays attention to the direction of a life; and also the Aristotelian-inspired teleological perspective of Slote (1983), according to which the acme is the most important moment of life.

All this gives us reason to dampen our enthusiasm about the possibility of making Singerian hedonism compatible with a time-relative position, [29] although initially it had seemed to us to be a promising chance of accommodating I.1.

b.3) As a third possibility, Singer could renounce hedonism as he has put it, and opt for another theory of value, choosing some kind of objective-list theory or going back to the preferentialist one. The latter seems to be a particularly unfeasible option, as it would require, among other things, a further change at the metaethical level. After all, Singer's axiological transition rests, in turn, on metaethical considerations about the existence or non-existence of objective moral values. The possibility of resorting to an objective-list theory, on the other hand, would make it possible to solve the problem without having to renounce metaethical objectivism, but it would not be free of complications either. [30]

VIII. CONCLUSION

The aim we have pursued in this paper has been to explore whether the metaethical and normative changes that have occurred in Singerian moral philosophy have had some kind of impact on his practical ethics — some kind of impact that would have gone unnoticed or has not been addressed by Singer

29 Indeed, it should come as no surprise that Singer's position aligns with time-neutral positions, because moving in this direction seems most consistent with the orientation of the second Singer's metaethics and normative ethics: the Sidgwickian hedonism he adopts points towards an impersonal conception of value; by means of debunking evolutionary arguments he has banished partiality from the world of ethics (Lazari-Radek and Singer 2014, 174 ff.); physical-geographical proximity does not affect the weight of equal amounts of pleasure (Singer, 1972), nor does biological distance in evolutionary terms (Singer, 2009); when we talk about other individuals, temporal proximity is not relevant either. Why should it be in relation to our own future well-being?

30 The most important of which would be how to resolve a conflict between different values in the list.

himself. In order to reduce this task to manageable dimensions in a work of this nature, we have focused on the moral consideration of abortion and murder.

We have proved that the first Singer's preferential utilitarianism can account for the intuition that murder is more serious than abortion. It can do so because it contemplates the existence of a special kind of preferences, future-oriented preferences, whose frustration entails a special intrinsic evil. We have also shown that the hedonistic utilitarianism of the second Singer cannot account for this intuition, because it cannot recognise, in a straightforward way, the special seriousness of preventing the satisfaction of future-oriented preferences.

In this way, we have proved that our initial suspicion was legitimate: the first Singer's practical ethical approaches to the permissibility of abortion and to its seriousness in comparison with murder can only be maintained on a preferentialist background, but not on the hedonism that defines his second stage. This would be an error in his proposal, an error which, if not repaired, would give us reason to discard his moral philosophy. In order to deal with it, the works of his first stage, such as de successive editions of *Practical Ethics*, *Should the Baby Live?* and *Rethinking Life and Death*, among others, should be reviewed in this respect.

However, it is important not to exaggerate the force and scope of the conclusions we have reached. Firstly, because, as we have already noted, there are some ways in which Singer could salvage the ethical stance on abortion and murder of his first stage, even if he has changed his axiology. Secondly, and more important, because what we have so far managed to prove is that, on a narrow issue (concerning abortion and murder and their comparative seriousness), Singer's transition at the level of normative ethics forces us to revise his classical practical stance on the matter. However, it is not admissible to extrapolate from this single piece of evidence that, because of his transition to hedonistic utilitarianism, the whole of Singerian practical ethics has become obsolete. It is likely that a detailed examination of more cases such as the one we are concerned with here will provide us with new evidence to corroborate this thesis, but until this research is carried out we can do no more than conjecture about the extent of the fit or misfit.[31] Moreover, the tensions we have detected are a consequence of the incompatibility between the transformations at the level of normative ethics and the practical Singerian thesis, but it is not

31 It seems that another aspect of Singer's practical ethical proposal where inconsistencies exist is that of the nature of value, since personal and impersonal conceptions of value seem to coexist without a precise delimitation of their contours. We will deal with this issue on a future occasion.

clear that the metaethical changes also generate these frictions. Be that as it may, those are further issues that remain to be clarified on a future occasion.

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