



Ethics Matter: A Conversation with Peter Singer

Peter Singer , Julia Taylor Kennedy

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Introduction

JULIA KENNEDY: I'm Julia Taylor Kennedy, program officer here at the Council. I wanted to also welcome everyone who's watching our webcast today.

I'm looking forward to a really great town hall discussion. We've had a lot of great back-and-forths in [our first couple of these](#), and so we're looking forward to hearing your insights and questions in the second half of today's program.

When we here at the Carnegie Council drew up our wish list of scholars to bring as part of this series Ethics Matter, philosopher Peter Singer sat at the very top. I could spend this entire session telling you about his extensive publishing and lecturing career. But I do want to give him a chance to speak, so instead here are a few highlights.



[Julia Taylor Kennedy](#)

He was educated at the University of Melbourne and the University of Oxford. He is currently on faculty at Princeton University and the University of Melbourne and has taught many other places. He became well known internationally after publishing [Animal](#)

[Liberation](#) in 1975, which has been called "the Bible of the animal rights movement." He has since published widely in every form of media, both mass and niche. He has published in the Carnegie Council's [Journal of Ethics & International Affairs](#) and has spoken here in the past. He is the author of the major [article on ethics](#) in the current edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.

Never flinching from tough issues, Singer has written on animal rights, right to life, globalization, and other polarizing themes. Most recently, he has turned his attention to poverty and, in 2009, published the book [The Life You Can Save](#), which mapped out an ethical response to global poverty.

As a philosopher, author, and renowned moral thinker, Peter Singer embodies the phrase "ethics matter." Not only has he made enormous scholarly contributions to the field of global ethics, he lives according to his ideals. So it is my enormous pleasure to welcome Peter Singer to the Carnegie Council.

PETER SINGER: Thank you, Julia. It's a pleasure to be with you.

Remarks

JULIA KENNEDY: Tell me when you first started to think about ethics, morals, developing a system of values. When did that start for you, and when do you start to see it as your life's work after that?

PETER SINGER: I started really thinking about it when I went to university as an undergraduate. Initially, I was not going to take philosophy, because it was not something that I had had at high school. It wasn't taught at high school at all then. But I did take it really just accidentally. My sister was going out with someone—I have an older sister who had done philosophy and talked about it. It sounded interesting, so I did it.

When I got into philosophy, although I enjoyed the metaphysics and the logic as well, I couldn't really see myself doing that as an important part of my life. It seemed a little bit too much like spending your life solving chess

puzzles.

Whereas ethics really obviously did matter, as the title says. Ethics was about how are you to live your life. So I started to think about that as something that I was interested in.

I'm not sure, really, at what point it became such a central part of my life. I think, probably, only when I was a graduate student at Oxford, and I started to think about issues like ought I to be eating meat, should I be contributing to organizations like [Oxfam](#) that are helping the global poor. That's when it really became a central part of my life and not just a kind of academic career.

JULIA KENNEDY: You are famously of the [utilitarian school of ethics](#), meaning that we should act according to—this is a rough, quick definition—the greatest good. So when and why were you first drawn to utilitarianism?

PETER SINGER: I was probably drawn to utilitarianism with the very first ethics course that I took—not because the professor teaching it was himself a utilitarian; rather the opposite, he was hostile to utilitarianism. But when he put various objections to it, I felt that they weren't really convincing objections. I could see, even though I was only an undergraduate, answers to them. I remember writing an essay in which I did try to answer them, and he was fair-minded enough to give it a good grade and to acknowledge that I had made a fair fist of meeting his objections. So to some extent, I guess, that started me down that path.

The other thing I would say is utilitarianism is a very straightforward, down-to-earth kind of view. I mean, in the classical version, it talks about pain and pleasure, things that we're all familiar with. In other versions, it talks about satisfying our preferences, again something that we know something about.

If you compare that with some of the other ethical views that talk about intuiting certain duties or perhaps ideas about human dignity, or for that matter human rights, they're a lot vaguer. And, when you start to say, "Well, what do we mean by human dignity; how do we know whether humans have this right or that right?" it's much harder to find answers. Whereas if you're talking about "Isn't it a good thing to try to minimize the amount of pain and suffering in the world?" the answer seems to me, pretty obviously, yes.

JULIA KENNEDY: Then, how do you start to translate those ideals into real life? This is something else that you've excelled at, is taking these concepts and bringing them to bear.

PETER SINGER: Well, of course, utilitarians really are saying, "We ought to do what has the best consequences." But there are many cases where it's unclear what will have the best consequences, what the facts are.

I mean, you talk about the global financial crisis that we're in now. You could argue for a long time about what course of action is really going to have the best consequences, in the long run, for getting the economy going.

Talk about Afghanistan. Will we be able to actually achieve our objectives there, or is it hopeless and so we should withdraw? Again, the facts are not very clear.

But if you take some of the questions that I have focused on, such as things like: Are we causing unnecessary suffering to animals in the way we treat them, for example—this would just be one possible example—in factory farming today, where we're confining them very closely by the hundreds of millions, or even billions, in ways that clearly cause them suffering, that also have adverse environmental consequences, that aren't necessary to feed the world, they're not even efficient in terms of producing more food?

The answer seems to me to be pretty clearly, "Yes, there is avoidable suffering on a very large scale there." So, that seems to me an issue where it's not a matter of so much disputing the facts, but just a matter of trying to alert people to what's going on, and asking them to care more about the suffering of beings that are not humans.

In a way, I think, the global poverty issue is somewhat similar too. I think it's not difficult to see ways in which we can reduce the suffering that global poverty causes, if we have the will to do it, if we want to do it.

So that's why I have focused on those issues, because I think, as a utilitarian philosopher rather than an expert in particular issues, I can make a contribution.

JULIA KENNEDY: Let's talk a little bit specifically about some of those issues that you brought up.

Starting with animal rights, in your work a lot of your positions about animal rights stems from a notion of

equality. So why is equality so important, when viewing both humanity and other animals in the animal kingdom?

PETER SINGER: Before I answer the question, I want to make just one little pedantic point.

JULIA KENNEDY: Absolutely.

PETER SINGER: You just heard me say that if we take a rights approach to human rights, it becomes difficult to decide what set of human rights we have. Julia, you talked about animal rights there, and of course the same would apply to that. Do animals have rights? What rights do they have?

Although people very frequently describe me as an animal rights advocate, as you just did—and that's fine from the point of view of taking a political stance; people will know what side I'm on, where I am—philosophically I am not an animal rights advocate, because I don't think that "rights" is the appropriate terminology to think about the issue.

I would think of it in terms of the question that you specifically asked me, in terms of equality, equality between humans and animals, in a very specific sense. Because, again, it's obvious that humans and animals are not politically equal—we couldn't give them the right to vote—but there is a sense in which I think they do share an important equality, and that is the capacity to suffer or to enjoy their lives.

I think that ought to lead to a moral equality, in the sense that I think their pain ought to count just as much as the pain of a human being, where it's a similar amount of pain. And, conversely, their pleasure ought to count just as much, if we can see it as a similar amount of pleasure.

So, what I'm opposing here, is discounting or ignoring the pain and suffering of beings, simply because they are not members of our species. That's the sense in which I want to extend equality beyond the species boundary. I want to say that we should give equal consideration to the interests of all beings that have interests—all beings, for example, that can feel pain—irrespective of their species, just as everybody now agrees we should give equal consideration to the interests of human beings irrespective of their race or sex. So it's that kind of equality that I want to argue for.

I think that leads to significant changes. Of course, it does also lead to interesting questions about what interests do animals have; where they are different from human interests; how do we compare those different interests. All of these are still questions that we need to discuss.

JULIA KENNEDY: Actually, you discussed one of them in a recent [article](#) that was published in the *New York Review of Books* about a [documentary about a chimpanzee named Nim Chimpsky](#). I don't know if many of you have heard of this documentary. He was mistreated, or at least his experiment was cut short, and he was put into an animal facility early in life. You criticize this documentary.

PETER SINGER: Well, I criticized the treatment of Nim Chimpsky. The documentary is excellent, I may say.

JULIA KENNEDY: Of course. I'm so sorry.

So you criticize the treatment of Nim Chimpsky. You also praise other work of anthropologists like [Jane Goodall](#).

I'm curious if you think there is a way that there can be fair treatment of animals for scientific purposes, and how you judge that.

PETER SINGER: Oh, I think there can be, and Jane Goodall is an example. I think Jane Goodall's work—and that of her followers, students, and associates—has taught us an immense amount about the life of chimpanzees, and also, because they are our closest relative, about human beings too.

That has been completely noninvasive. She has not captured and confined chimpanzees. She's got close enough to them in the wild for them to become familiar with her and not to fear her, just to go on about their daily business, even while she is observing them. Doing that over many years, with different groups of chimpanzees, tells us a lot, and clearly doesn't interfere with them. So that's one example.

We could think about other examples too. But I certainly think there are ethical ways of learning about animals, and learning from animals.

JULIA KENNEDY: When you take these strong positions, critics come out of the woodwork, right? One criticism

that has followed you in your career is, that while fighting for animal equality, at the same time you advocate assisted suicide and abortion in certain cases. Critics have said that in some cases you privilege animal life over human life. How do you respond to those criticisms?

PETER SINGER: The response is just that I don't. [Laughter]

What I do, of course, is that I think that we ought to regard animals and humans, as I said, in some fundamental respects, as similar. Because, at present, we privilege humans to such an extent and lower animals to a very great extent, there may be cases in fact where my view criticizes the traditional ethic of the sanctity of human life. Because the traditional ethic essentially says, "while we can kill nonhuman animals for quite trivial reasons—for example, because we want to eat them, even though we've got perfectly good vegetarian alternatives to eat—on the other hand, human life is always sacrosanct, at least innocent human life, and we must not end it, or even allow people to receive assistance in ending it. That's the case with physician-assisted suicide, for example, that somehow that is a violation of the sanctity of human life, even when it's the strongest desire of the person whose life it is, who perhaps, sadly, is suffering from a terminal disease.

That's one case where, I would say, that putting humans and animals on a more equal footing allows us to see that really, just as we would not want a nonhuman animal to suffer if it was one of our companion animals—we would take a dying dog to the vet and say, "Look, if there's no hope, please make sure this animal dies humanely"—so we should, at least, allow people the same for themselves, if they choose it. That's one of the examples.

Some of the others—you mentioned abortion, for example. I think that beings only have interests when they do have the capacity to feel pain, or to suffer in some way, or to enjoy their lives. So it would only be at that point, I think, that a being has any kind of interest—and maybe even then not a full right to life, if you do want to put it in terms of rights.

So the fetus, in my understanding, does not develop that kind of consciousness, until probably sometime around 24, 26 weeks of gestation. It's a little uncertain, and we might want to take an earlier cutoff. But at least at the time when the overwhelming majority of pregnancies are terminated, the fetus is not a conscious being, not capable of suffering. That's one, really, anyway. It's certainly not the whole of the story—we'd want to talk about and discuss human life, and the right to life and when it begins. But that's one reason for saying that the fetus does not have a right to life at that stage.

JULIA KENNEDY: Let's move to your approach on global poverty, which actually talks a lot about children and children across the globe. You published—as part of a lot of your writings about global poverty—a gripping hypothetical about a drowning child. I was wondering if you could share that with the group.

PETER SINGER: Oh sure, gladly, yes.

I ask you to imagine that you are walking across some park that you know quite well, and in this park there is a shallow ornamental pond. Let's assume that you know that it's shallow, because on summer days you see teen-agers playing in it, and it's only waist-deep.

But today, it's not summer, and nobody is playing in it. But there is something going on, some splashing around in the pond. So you look closely, and you see it's a small child, a toddler, who has fallen into the pond and is apparently in danger of drowning, because it is too deep for a toddler to stand.

So your first thought is: Well, who's looking after this child? Where are the parents or the babysitter? There must be somebody. But you look around and, to your dismay, there is nobody. In fact, there is nobody around at all except you and the toddler.

So your next thought presumably is: Well, this child appears to be drowning. Maybe I should jump into the pond and pull the child out, which I know I can do quite safely, at no risk to my life. Oh, but I did just put on my best pair of shoes, and maybe a nice pair of trousers, or whatever it might be, and they're going to get ruined if I rush into the muddy pond, and I wouldn't really have time to take them off.

So is that a reason why maybe I don't have to save the child? Is it going to be okay if, because I don't want to ruin my shoes or my trousers, I just say, "Well, it's not my child. I didn't push the child into the pond. I'm in no way responsible for this child being in a dangerous situation, so I could just be on my way?"

Well, I saw some heads shaking already, and I'm glad to see that. Because most audiences when I do ask that

question say, "No, of course that would be totally wrong. It would be horrible to think that somehow your shoes or trousers outweigh a great danger to a child's life. You forget about that, forget about them, just jump in and pull out the child. Of course I think that is the right answer, and I hope that is what we would all do.

But the way that this relates to global poverty, of course, is that there are children in many developing countries in danger of dying right now. There are things that we could do to help them for something like the cost of an expensive pair of shoes or shoes and your trousers as well. And yet most people are not doing it. So if you are going to condemn the person who fails to save the child because he doesn't want to incur the expense of replacing the clothes, then don't you yourself have to at least donate the cost of a pair of expensive shoes and clothes to those organizations that are helping the global poor?

JULIA KENNEDY: Why do you think there is that disconnect, that difference in human reaction to a visible specific tragedy, like a child drowning in front of you, to something that's more abstract, less visible, like malaria in the developing world?

PETER SINGER: I think some of the words that you've used give us a clue to that.

You said the child right in front, of you as compared to something more abstract, less visible. I think that's exactly what's going on. We have developed compassion and a readiness to help those in distress close to us, at least if we identify them in some way as part of our group, as one of us. So I think we probably would feel that that child in front of us is someone that we ought to rescue, and that we would rescue.

Whereas if you talk about something far away, we never evolved to help people far away that we can't see. It's obvious why we didn't evolve to help them, because until a couple of hundred years ago, at the earliest, maybe even more recently, there was effectively nothing we could do to help them. We couldn't know what their suffering was. And if we did, we couldn't assist them in any way in time before they were going to die or whatever else was going to happen to them. So we haven't evolved with capacities to think about those who are distant.

We also haven't evolved with capacities to respond to more abstract problems, like the idea that there are—I think [UNICEF](#)'s current figure is a little over eight million children dying every year from avoidable poverty-related causes. So a figure like eight million is an abstraction; we can't quite picture it, and it's very different from the one child in front of us.

So I think there is that psychological difference. But it's not really a moral difference. We wouldn't really think of this as meaning that the child's life is less valuable if we can't see them, or they're far away.

JULIA KENNEDY: There's also a kind of an argument within this field over whether you ought to privilege poverty in your own country, or whether poverty across the globe should be seen as equally a threat. You've come down in the second camp. I wonder why.

PETER SINGER: I have come down in the second camp, at least for Americans. Now, if I were addressing an audience of wealthy Indians or Brazilians, I might take a different view. I might say, "There are plenty of people, sadly, in extreme poverty in those countries. You are in a position to help them and that's what you ought to do."

But a lot of poverty in the United States is relative poverty rather than absolute poverty. What I mean by that, is there are people who are very poor, compared to those who are middle class and above. And they have real difficulties—I'm not in any way minimizing the difficulties that they have—but think about the cost of actually making a significant difference to their lives.

In the United States, you're below the poverty line, if I remember roughly rightly, if you are a family of four earning less than \$22,000. I'm sure we can understand that it would be very difficult to support a family of four. But, even if you are below that poverty line there, you do have access to safe drinking water, you have access to sanitation. And, if you're seriously ill, if you are below the poverty line, you can get [Medicaid](#), and anyway, if you turn up at an emergency room, they can't evict you if your life is in danger. So you do have some rights to basic health care, and you can get food stamps and if you use that sensibly you're not going to starve. To make a real difference to your lives, to give you a better chance, is going to cost thousands of dollars to make a difference once you're at that level.

Whereas if we're talking about the global poor, the [World Bank](#) defines those in extreme poverty as those earning the purchasing power equivalent of \$1.25 U.S. per day, so you're talking about less than \$500 a year. So obviously, if you're considering how much will it take to help people earning \$500 a year, people who don't have

safe drinking water or don't have sanitation or have no health care at all, whose lives maybe are endangered because they don't have bed nets to protect them against malaria, or because their kids have not been vaccinated against measles, or because if their kids get diarrhea they can't get oral rehydration therapy—those are circumstances in which you can save lives for maybe, as I said, the cost of an expensive pair of shoes.

Maybe \$300, \$500—it all depends, and you get different estimates, but certainly I think you can confidently say less than \$1,000. Whereas, as I was saying, that's not going to make a life-changing difference to the poor in America.

So I think we just get a lot better value for the money that we're giving to charities and to help people, if we give it to those who are poor by a more absolute standard, rather than those who are poor by the relative standards of the United States.

JULIA KENNEDY: You've put your money where your mouth is. You're famously giving 25 percent of your income to Oxfam and UNICEF.

How do you decide how to implement your ideas in your own life? How do you decide Okay, 25 percent?

PETER SINGER: Well, the 25 percent isn't an absolute line. It sometimes is 25; sometimes it's 30. It depends, to some extent, on what I have available at the time. I actually want to keep increasing that amount. I think everybody will have their own cutoff level, what they're comfortable with, what they feel is doing some good, and yet is not too great a sacrifice.

In my book *The Life You Can Save*, I have a suggested table of giving—if you don't have the book handy, I've got a website with the same address, thelifeyoucansave.com—which is much less than I'm giving actually, for people with my income. But it is progressive; it goes up with the amount of income that you have.

I suggest that as something which, if you could get a large number of people to give, you could really make a huge dent in the amount of extreme poverty in the world, and the suffering that causes. But I don't think any of it is unrealistic. I don't think any of it is making demands for real hardship on the part of anybody who's middle class or above in a developed country.

JULIA KENNEDY: So we've moved through a lot of different areas that you've written on and published on. I'm curious. As you step back, and you look at the way that humans treat one another, are we getting more ethical? Are we getting better?

PETER SINGER: Well, I think that in some ways we are. I know a lot of people would deny that. But if you look at the kinds of principles that we apply now in things like how we treat other humans, people of different races and ethnicities; how we treat women, for example; how we treat people who are different in other ways, say their sexual orientation; even how we treat animals, although I think we've got a long way to go there, I do think we are significantly more ethical than people were a century or two centuries ago.

So I do believe that we are making progress in the right direction.

I've actually got a book, which is 30 years old, that just got reissued with a bit of some updates, called [The Expanding Circle](#), which is talking about the way in which we have expanded the circle of moral concern over the centuries. I think that that is a process that is still happening.

Questions and Answers

JULIA KENNEDY: Well, with that note of optimism, let's turn to the audience. I would love to hear your questions and comments.

QUESTION: Good evening. Susan Ball.

When you talk about poverty in the developing countries—I've done a lot of traveling in third-world countries, and way out in the middle to villages. How do you come down on the side of whether helping them out by giving them material things really improves their life, versus, I see some of them out there with hardly anything, and they're actually quite happy, or seem to be happy.

PETER SINGER: Yes. It's a very good question.

I'm not necessarily advocating that we do just go to the villages, and give them either food or material things. Maybe giving them bed nets is valuable, because that can save their children from malaria. But it will depend on the particular situation. I think it's very important to make sure that we give as effectively as possible. I think that's really what your question is getting at.

So how do we decide what's effective in each situation? That's a question that—again, you asked about whether we're making progress—I think there are now more people looking at that, I'm pleased to say.

There's a website that I recommend, called givewell.org, which rates some charities as to where you can get the best value for your dollars and looks at what they're doing.

There are also a number of economists looking at that. There's a group at MIT [Massachusetts Institute of Technology], called the [Poverty Action Lab](#), that have been doing that. There is [Dean Karlan](#), an economist, who has also brought out a [book](#) recently on that topic.

So I think we need to really be a bit experimental. We need to look at projects, and see what works and what doesn't. In that way, we are already learning the ways in which some things are highly effective, and other things that might have looked like a nice thing to do, a charitable thing to do, but turn out to be not so effective in the long run.

QUESTION: It's easy for me to connect with animals and fowl—I don't eat meat and I don't eat chickens. However, I do eat fish, and I do step on ants if I find them. Is there some difference in all of this? How would you differentiate a crawling insect from a fish, from human beings?

PETER SINGER: Well, it's not a matter of whether it crawls or not, of course. After all, I've had grandchildren who crawl [laughter]—but it is a matter of what kind of nervous system they have, and where it becomes a reasonable inference to believe that they can feel pain.

I do think that it's reasonable to believe that all vertebrates can feel pain. So, I'm sorry, that leaves fish out of my menu; I don't eat them. On the other hand, if you get down to oysters or clams, with much more rudimentary nervous systems, I think they probably can't feel pain, so I wouldn't really have a problem with eating them.

QUESTIONER: So the consideratum is pain?

PETER SINGER: The consideratum is essentially really I'm trying to say: Are they conscious beings; do they have subjective experiences of any kind? I would take it that the minimal subjective experience would be a capacity to feel pain.

With insects I'm somewhat more agnostic because their nervous systems are, again, quite different, more complicated perhaps than that of an oyster; and they're certainly more mobile, but also a little more rigid, one could almost say robotic. So it's not clear to me whether they do feel pain.

If you need to get ants out of your house—well, I certainly do that myself too, but I wouldn't gratuitously step on them if I didn't need to.

QUESTION: I would assume you are not in favor of the use of animals for medical research. And of course, when you're talking about eating things, we can eat vegetables rather than animals. But is there an alternative to contribute to advancing medical science through the use of animals?

PETER SINGER: I certainly think that there are other ways of advancing medical science. But you're right, the costs of not using animals for medical research are actually greater than the costs of not using them for food—where I think, in fact, there is no cost at all; there are actually net benefits, both in terms of our health, and certainly in terms of helping the environment, slowing climate change, and so on.

As far as advancing medical research, I think there is obviously a lot we can do with clinical research, with proper ethically regulated trials with consenting patients.

There has been a great deal of work on tissue culture and use of cells to test. That's why a lot of cosmetics that used to be tested on animals now, after protests from the animal movement, industries have found many alternatives—not completely eliminated animal use, but many alternatives.

There may be some areas on which it is more difficult to make advances without using animals.

I'm not an absolutist on this. If somebody can convince me that a particular experiment had great prospects of curing a major disease, but the only way you could obtain that knowledge would be by using a small number of animals, as a utilitarian I would have to say that as long as you're giving the proper weight to the suffering of animals, and you're doing absolutely what you can to minimize their distress and suffering, that is something that—in principle at least—could be justifiable. But you would certainly have to look at all the alternatives properly, first, to see if there were anything else you could do that didn't involve that pain.

QUESTION: To just continue that same pathway of thought, if that's true of animals, would it not also be true of a human?

PETER SINGER: Would it not be true of a human, that it would be justified to use some in experiments, too, for the great benefit of others? Look, in theory it would be.

In fact, of course, we do experiments with humans. It's just that generally we do them with humans who have given their consent to be part of a trial.

There are some cases where there isn't consent—for example, if we want to do experiments on small children or infants. We can get consent from the parents, but we can't get consent from the subjects. There may be other cases, if we want to do research on patients with dementia, or in a persistent vegetative state, or something like that, where we can't do it.

I think we need to be ethically very careful about that. I can't really imagine cases where we would do research on humans who could consent, but whose consent we have not sought. That has happened, obviously, but it produces a scandal when it does happen.

I think the reason for that is with humans, one of the differences is if this becomes known, there is a breakdown of trust between humans and the medical profession, the medical establishment, and there is a sense of outrage that "You could have asked me but you didn't."

The difference with nonhuman animals there is that in fact, we can't actually ask them for their consent, and we have to make decisions on their behalf in those circumstances.

QUESTIONER: So you're assuming their consent or their well-being in testing them?

PETER SINGER: I'm certainly not assuming their consent, no. I'm saying that it may sometimes, at least in principle, as I said, be justifiable to do that, despite the fact that you can't obtain their consent, just as it might be justifiable to do it with humans where you can't obtain their consent as well.

QUESTION: Anthony Faillace, one of the Carnegie Council Trustees.

What's the ethical principle we're supposed to use to weigh, on one hand, our own pleasure, whether it be eating a steak, or a nice pair of shoes, or a nice home, versus the need that so many people around the world feel? Because the principle of egalitarian would say that I shouldn't live in a nice house, I shouldn't have any pair of shoes. If we made it all completely egalitarian, I could give and give and give, until I lived a life that would be totally out of sorts with the society I'm in. So what's the principle for how to weigh the next dollar? How far does that go?

PETER SINGER: I think that one could end up at quite a demanding standpoint. Not to the point where you no longer have a pair of shoes, because presumably in order to have that nice house you need to earn some income, and you need to work wherever you're working. And if you turn up without shoes, it may put off some of your colleagues or the clients, I don't know whom. So there are minimal standards that you would need to meet, in order to continue to maximize your income, and therefore maximize the amount that you can give away.

But still, that might mean that you could live much, much more modestly than most of us do. I certainly—as Julia said, give away 25 or 30 percent. But I could give away 50 or 60 percent, no doubt, and still live respectably enough to keep my job, and so on.

I think the issue here, in a way, is not so much what is the ideal moral standard, because I think the ideal moral standard is extremely demanding. It's rather: What can we reasonably ask people to do, given the fact that most people don't just decide on the basis of what is the ideal moral standard? There are moral saints who decide that,

perhaps, but most of us are not moral saints.

So, it's a question of what you can reasonably ask people to do, in terms of balancing the moral demands against their own interests and their own comfort. That's really what I was getting at with the table that I mentioned in the book on the website, *The Life You Can Save*, that it's asking people to step up to something that is significant, and that's not too difficult. I say there that if you do that, and you get comfortable with it, then you might go on, you might increase—and I hope that people will, and they'll actually find it a positive experience to be giving.

Think if you simply say "Look, really you shouldn't be spending anything on anything more than basic necessities because the needs of others count as much as your own." Although in a sense that's true, I don't think it's a realistic ethic for the world as it is.

JULIA KENNEDY: I saw a hand up here, and the one back there next.

QUESTION: Stefan Reindl from the Merchant Marine Academy.

I was wondering if you agree more with the idea that it should be a personal choice to assist extreme poverty, or do you think it would be more as a government responsibility to impose, or make it like a tax, like the [Robin Hood tax](#) that they're arguing recently, to assist absolute poverty?

PETER SINGER: Right. What I've been talking about today is really about individual choice. That is, I've been appealing to individuals to think about what we ought to be doing, and to think about where you can step up and make some significant difference.

But I do think that governments also have responsibilities to have aid programs. In fact, all of the governments of the developed nations really do have aid programs of some sort. I think those programs ought to be made more effective.

Often, they get politically slanted, in ways that are not the most effective. For example, for many years, the country that has received the largest share of U.S. aid has been Iraq, which is obviously not one of the poorest countries of the world. But it's a country where the United States has had strong geopolitical interests.

I would like our aid program to be really an aid program and to go to really help those in extreme poverty.

I do think that it should, at least, be maintained. There has been talk in the last few days about drastically cutting it back as part of the deficit reduction program. But the U.S. government aid program is really a very small part of government spending. It's about 1 percent of government spending. So even if you cut it by 50 percent, you're not making a really big difference, and you are going to have a big impact on a lot of poor people in poor countries.

JULIA KENNEDY: I just have a really quick follow-on to that and then we'll go back to the audience questions.

We had [Bill Easterly](#) here last month, who of course was saying that a lot of these aid programs are not effective in any way, and so we need to be responsible about that in our giving. How do you view individual giving, and tracking where your dollars go, and making sure that it's effective?

PETER SINGER: I think Bill Easterly has made some good points in his work about some government aid programs that were not effective, and money that was given through the World Bank that was not effective.

Again, I think we are learning from those criticisms. I think the World Bank is learning more, and is not making the same mistakes. You know, a big organization like that is going to make some mistakes, always. But I think they are getting better.

I'm hoping that the U.S. aid program is getting better. Certainly the [Obama](#) Administration has appointed some new people to look after that and to work with it, and that's very much a hopeful sign.

But I totally agree that we ought to be making sure that the aid we give is as effective as possible. If Bill Easterly's criticisms are heading us in that direction, then all power to him.

QUESTION: Naomi Segal.

Is there any possible scenario that you could imagine sanctioning the death penalty?

PETER SINGER: Is there any possible scenario where I could imagine? Look, if somebody came up with convincing evidence that the death penalty was a uniquely effective deterrent—let's say that for every murderer who was executed, there would be ten fewer murders—then, as a utilitarian, I would have to accept the death penalty. In fact, if the evidence was clear-cut enough and sound enough, even if it was only for every person executed, there were two fewer murderers or one and a half fewer murderers, I guess I would accept it.

But as I read it, there just isn't any such evidence. The evidence, if anything, seems to suggest the other way. Certainly, in the United States, the states that do not have the death penalty have lower murder rates than the states that do have the death penalty. The whole of the European Union, none of those states have the death penalty; they all have lower murder rates than the United States. So the evidence seems to me to be contrary to what I was suggesting.

And, certainly, I don't see other justifications for the death penalty. I don't see the point of punishment as being retribution. I think that is something that is—well, to my mind it's a little primitive really, the idea that somehow you take retribution by taking a life for a life. You can see why, in earlier societies, that was a way of responding to crime. But I would think that we understand a little bit more about the causes of crime, and understand a little bit more about what is really likely to be the best way to respond to it, in terms of having a moral, compassionate, and humane society. The death penalty doesn't seem to be it.

QUESTIONER: What about genocide?

PETER SINGER: I don't really see that genocide is any different in that sense. Certainly, you may want to lock people away who are guilty of those horrible crimes, but I don't really see a need to put them to death.

Again, in Europe we have, of course, now trials relating to genocide in former Yugoslavia. But those people are not being put to death when convicted of those crimes. Nobody there is really clamoring for blood for the blood that has been shed.

QUESTION: Alan Young.

I take it, you feel that each of us has an ethical responsibility to give some of our income, for example, to those who are less privileged than we. Do you think we also have an ethical obligation to work for governmental action that would help alleviate poverty?

PETER SINGER: Yes, I do. Obviously we are citizens of a democracy, which gives us a voice in what our government does. I think it's important that we should be active and concerned citizens, that we should be letting our elected representatives know that foreign aid is an issue that matters to us.

I think one of the reasons why, when Congress is thinking of how would you reduce the deficit—when that question is asked to various contenders for political office, one of the things that they say is, "Well, we could cut foreign aid"—they say that, because they don't see a constituency out there that will jump up and say, "No! Foreign aid is very small already and should not be cut further. The United States is giving less foreign aid than most other wealthy nations in proportion to its income, and that's something we should be ashamed of."

In some of the European nations, there is much more of a constituency that is concerned about foreign aid. And foreign aid becomes a political issue at election time, and politicians compete to improve the foreign aid program. So I think we need to be more like that, if we can, and then I think we'll get a better foreign aid program.

QUESTION: I'm Tom Head from George Fox University.

We've spoken a lot about the ethical issues surrounding how we use some of our income. I wonder how you would frame the ethical issues about how much income we accept to begin with, and, particularly, the extremes of executive compensation that we see.

PETER SINGER: Well, I do think that we have an extraordinary system, where CEOs not only earn millions, but, even if they're fired for not doing a very good job, they walk away with tens of millions. We've seen that very recently, in some cases. That strikes me as extraordinary, and not doing any good, and not providing an incentive for good performance. So I think that there are serious problems with how much we pay people.

But I think that if we had a better sense of the need to do useful things with money, when people have lots of

money, that would alleviate some of that problem.

So I don't really mind [Warren Buffett](#) or [Bill Gates](#), for example, having earned huge amounts of money in the ways that they did, given that they acknowledge that they have a commitment to give away huge amounts. They have initiated this [Giving Pledge for Billionaires](#), pledging to give at least half of their wealth to charity. There are a number of other billionaires who have now signed on to that. In the case of Gates and Buffett in fact, they are giving significantly more than half their wealth.

If there is that strong sense of charitable responsibility that comes with a great deal of wealth, I have far less of a problem than when people have that amount of money, and spend it on enormous yachts and multiple, very large houses, and large private jets, and so on, which is not something that is helping the world—in fact, environmentally often those expenditures are very damaging—and fail to acknowledge the responsibility that comes with great wealth.

JULIA KENNEDY: Well, as we sit here at the Carnegie Council benefiting from someone who recognized the responsibility of great wealth [[Andrew Carnegie](#)], I think that's a great note to end on. So thank you so much, Peter Singer, for your remarks tonight.

PETER SINGER: Thank you.

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