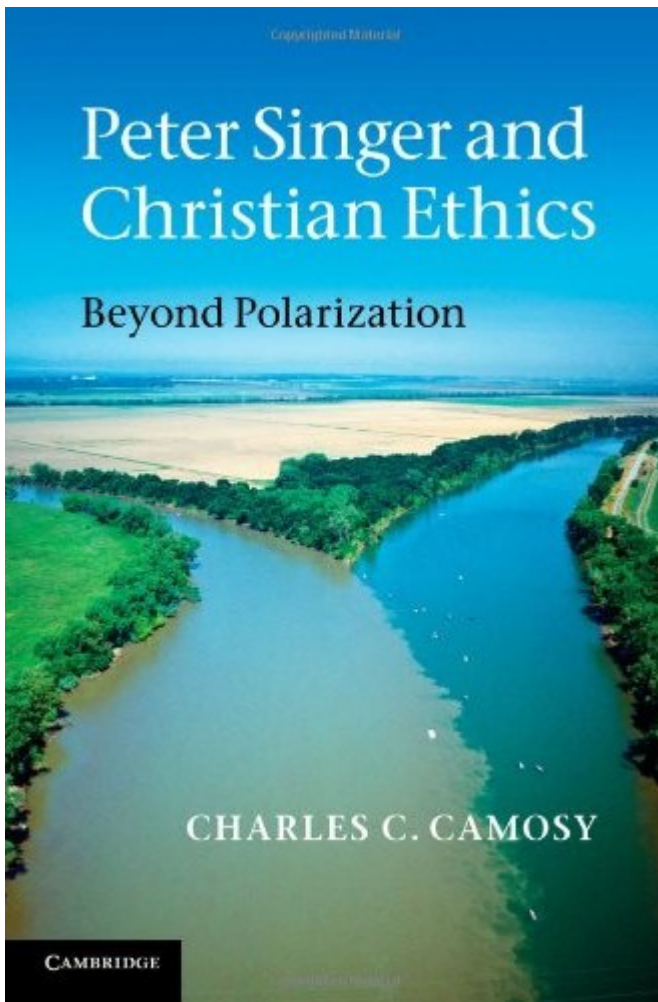


Peter Singer and Christian Ethics, by Charles C. Camosy

reviewed by [Brian Volck](#) in the [December 26, 2012](#) issue

In Review



Peter Singer and Christian Ethics

by Charles C. Camosy
Cambridge University Press

Stanley Hauerwas argues that the deepest enemy of Christianity in North America is not atheism, but an undemanding sentimentality that many Christians apparently prefer to serious theological reflection. Sentimentality has made Christianity so

superficial and boring, Hauerwas insists, that we can't even produce interesting atheists.

As Oscar Wilde observed, "A sentimentalist is one who desires to have the luxury of an emotion without paying for it." Sentimental stories and images—Richard Paul Evans's heartwarming Christmas fiction or Warner Sallman's Jesus with those big, lovable eyes—tell us to feel deeply without providing adequate cause. And such made-to-order emotion can suddenly pivot from oceanic approval to its shadowy twin, demonizing condemnation, in the same way that an alcoholic on a drinking binge may turn from weeping to rage in a heartbeat. Part of the appeal of sentimentality is its glib simplicity. In demanding a specific emotional response, it bypasses complexity for vague generalizations, rigid certainties and hasty assumptions about others' intentions, as does much of what passes for political rhetoric these days.

It is this polarized backdrop that makes author Charles Camosy's task so audacious: as a Catholic moral theologian, Camosy thoughtfully engages the work of the controversial and often condemned ethicist Peter Singer, the Australian-born professor of bioethics at Princeton University whose consistent application of secular preference utilitarianism (the idea that right action is that which fulfills the choosing individual's interests) leads him to advocate for selective infanticide, active euthanasia and nonhuman animal rights. A wide range of critics, from advocates for disabled persons to the Nazi hunter Simon Wiesenthal, have loudly demanded that Singer be deprived of a public forum for his ideas.

Because Singer sees himself as leading a "Copernican revolution" against a religiously informed sanctity-of-life ethic, any conversation between him and Catholic moral teaching, popularly viewed as the most rigid expression of Christian ethics, would seem a nonstarter at best. But Camosy goes a long way toward demonstrating that such conversations are not only possible but potentially fruitful to both parties.

Camosy's approach is key. Most important, in the best traditions of Christian ethical discourse, he treats Singer as a person worthy of respect. He quotes Singer's words in the context of his thought, noting not only Singer's conclusions but how he arrived at them. Camosy also frequently refers to Catholic moral and social teaching, revealing a rich and nuanced tradition of reflection. His goal is not to show that he and Singer are somehow saying the same thing, but rather to learn where they

agree, how they disagree, why such disagreements—while real and significant—are surprisingly “narrow and interesting,” and how an ongoing conversation might enhance each one’s arguments and lead to limited but significant patches of common ground. Throughout, Camosy never shies away from approaching hard cases head-on or pointing out interpretive errors and holes in Singer’s arguments.

It helps that Camosy and Singer both write within the Anglo-American tradition of analytic philosophy. They speak the same language, emphasizing clarity of argument and analysis of terminology, even though they arrive at different conclusions. Part of what makes Singer so challenging, even to those who support some of his positions, is the relentless consistency in his movement from initial assumptions and provisional judgments to logical ends. Camosy doesn’t disagree with Singer’s method, but he passionately rejects many of his judgments. This might sound too technical for the average reader, but both Singer and Camosy write lucidly, making complex arguments available to nonacademics who are uncomfortable with dense philosophical language.

In the chapter on abortion, for instance, Camosy starts by outlining Singer’s argument that neither fetuses nor newborns have sufficient rationality, self-consciousness and expressive capacity to be considered persons, though Singer has no problem calling them human. The moral chasm between this and the Catholic Church’s teaching that even early embryos deserve special protection seems too fundamental for anything but trivial or momentary agreement.

Yet by carefully attending to the substance and language of these rival accounts, Camosy demonstrates considerable and often surprising areas of alignment, including agreement that killing persons is wrong, that pro-choice privacy arguments beg the question of moral status, that the *Roe v. Wade* decision is flawed, that birth is not a significant enough change in the fetus’s status to warrant changes in moral and legal protection, and that appeals to unintended consequences of making abortion illegal are poor guides to deciding public policy.

For Camosy, the central disagreement between Singer and the church is over the moral status of the fetus. Even here, careful analysis reveals areas of agreement, with the decisive rupture occurring over the difference between active and passive potential. Readers may argue with Camosy’s interpretations and conclusions, but he gives nonacademics the tools necessary to grasp the complexity and nuances in this typically overheated debate.

Camosy takes a similar approach in chapters on euthanasia, shared duties to the poor and the status of nonhuman animals. Surprises are in store for those, like me, who have imagined that they know all that Singer and the church have to say on these matters. Some readers may be unaware of the richness of Catholic teaching on the relationship of humans to the rest of creation. Those who see Singer only as “the dangerous philosopher” may be surprised to learn of his suspicion of consumerism and limitless autonomy, or about his emphatic argument that the world’s materially comfortable minority must surrender some of their wealth (Singer suggests 10 percent!) to serve those in absolute poverty.

Only after these considerations of applied ethics does Camosy turn his attention to ethical theory. Here again, he finds common ground without losing sight of decisive differences in Singer’s and the Catholic Church’s moral anthropologies, particularly over the question of whether persons are reducible to their relevant interests. A late chapter considers recent changes in Singer’s thinking, including openness to the notion that some things and actions have objective moral value apart from human preferences.

The book concludes by considering how Singer and Christian ethicists might clarify one another’s thinking and practice. Singer, Camosy suggests, can prod Christians toward a surprisingly rich understanding of a consistent ethic of life that acknowledges the moral value of all life, including that of nonhuman animals, and strengthens the Christian presumption against violence and for aiding those in dire need. Christian ethics, in turn, can push Singer to broaden his nascent recognition of objective moral value and his critique of consumerist autonomy, and perhaps even to revise his more controversial positions. Camosy warns that by emphasizing the great differences between Singer’s ethics and Christian moral theology, Christians oversimplify, demonize and all too easily dismiss someone who is not only an interesting atheist and worthy debating partner, but a potential ally in some important causes.

Some readers may find Camosy overgenerous or too prone to interpret Catholic teaching in ways congenial to his search for common ground. Others may object to his treating Singer’s ethical conclusions as anything but a sequence of abominations unfit for public consideration. Yet Camosy’s approach of respectfully but critically examining Singer’s positions, acknowledging strengths and identifying failures could serve as a fruitful model for engagement in a polarized world, where sentimentality and caricature too often replace thoughtful debate.