Boldly going

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On the bridge of the starship *Enterprise* all eyes bored into the captain, who was locked in the most difficult negotiations of his career in space. Once again the *Enterprise* had found new life. The bald captain, determined to establish peaceful relations with it, bent all efforts to the task. Everything was on the table. At that very moment he had agreed to decommission all vacuum cleaners in the Alpha Quadrant! Why? Because the dust mites he was bargaining with had demanded it. That point conceded, the captain took a break and ordered a cup of tea from the wall, ‘Earl Grey, hot.’

Peter Singer belongs on the *Enterprise*. Members of its crew treat microbes with respect and eat energy, not matter. They have eradicated poverty by converting energy into matter in replicators from whence the tea came. This is the world Peter Singer wants.

Many moral philosophers are more interested in logic than life. They parse arguments, define terms, imagine impossible dilemmas involving trees, but they never draw a conclusion about life. In this company Peter Singer is exceptional. He discusses real events, not hypothetical ones. He uses terms in their ordinary meaning. Most of all he draws conclusions. His criterion of judgment is the consequences of actions for he is a modern utilitarian.

Four themes dominate this collection. They are animal rights, euthanasia, Third World poverty, and the environment. Singer is relentlessly on the side of the angels.

This volume collects from Singer’s work between 1972 and 1998. The twenty-five excerpts divide into five sections on: the nature of ethics, the species barrier, the value of human life, ethics and self-interest, and autobiographical notes. There is a short introduction from Singer. The pages are replete with authentic examples, free of thought-experiments of moral philosophy. The book reads itself. No wonder he is *déclassé* among his kind: to the technically accomplished minds of many philosophy departments, Singer is a polemicist, not a scholar. Many here would say the same of economists who engage in public debate and draw conclusions about economies rather than models.

Among his causes is vegetarianism for which he supplies a recipe. Eat that tofu! His argument is double: first, inflicting pain on a being that experiences it is wrong. Animals experience pain. We must stop hurting them. Second, ending the life of a creature, even if painlessly, that (probably) wants to continue to live is wrong. ‘We must stop killing
animals,’ he concludes. The parenthesis indicate that the second point is a more tenuous than the first. For all I know soybeans want to live, too. I have no evidence to the contrary, and that is one measure Singer uses in other contexts.

Singer is bloodless when he suggests the illustration of a fire in a school, and then concedes ‘most parents would rescue their own child’ (p. 268) rather than rescue ten others at the expense of their own child. Such a preference puzzles him. Obviously rescuing ten is better than one, and so if only one rescue is possible, a rational person must sacrifice the one child for the ten.

What made Singer a cause célèbre is euthanasia. If the husband is doomed and suffering agonies because medical science can prolong but not save or improve his life, let him decide to end it, and let it happen with dignity. It is an argument that will be accepted in a few years, but now it has strident opponents. As long as voluntary euthanasia is impossible spouses, nurses, and doctors will go through their own hells watching such patients writhe in agony for days, weeks, and months on end.

Singer argues that the termination of life may also occur where there is no volition, for example, terribly deformed new born babies that heroic surgeons fill with implants like a Star Trek Borg to keep alive for a day, a week, a month of primordial suffering. Here he becomes a target of the Right to Life lobby, a more deadly enemy than Species 848 on Star Trek.

The argument against euthanasia is the slippery slope. If a society permits euthanasia in a small number of well-defined cases with a stringent test for volition, the practice would slip beyond those limits. We must never start down the slope because we cannot stop. Yes, any barrier is arbitrary and will be challenged. Our law schools produce bright challengers every year. Why limit volition to adults? Why limit euthanasia to terminal diseases when burn patients suffer far more pain than almost anyone else? Challenges will occur.

All social limits are barriers set on the slopes surrounding the hilltops on which communities rest. We set barriers where we think best in everything from the conditions for ‘L’ plates for young drivers to the distinction between manslaughter and murder. Barriers are as strong as the social consensus that builds them. Resistance need not be futile even on a slippery slope.

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Singer’s voice of reason gets under the skin, yet I wondered how George Orwell would review this book. Orwell would want Singer to concentrate on human beings. He would ask Singer to shine his intellect on promoting peace in the Balkans, the Middle East, Northern Ireland, Rwanda, and the like. He would want Singer to articulate a case for caring about AIDS and HIV victims in remote parts of the world. He would ask Singer to
explain what we can do about child and slave labour around the world. Rather than arguing for chicken liberation, Orwell would ask Singer to oppose the arms trade, Papal fanaticism, territorial irredentism, nuclear missiles, chemical weapons, and so on. He would conclude that eating tofu does not solve these problems.

If Singer is a member of the *Enterprise* crew, he would have to be the tin man, Mr. Data, with neither a heart nor soul. Unlike Mr. Data, Singer seems happy boldly to go that way.

Professor Michael Jackson started teaching applied ethics at The University of Sydney in 1974. In 1989 the Royal Institute of Public Administration gave him with the Bicentennial Sir George Murray Medal for his work on ethics. He is a counsellor of the International Institute for Ethics of Ottawa and convenor of the business section of the International Leadership Association of Washington, D.C.