

Charles C. Camosy, *Peter Singer
and Christian Ethics: Beyond Polarization.*
New York: Cambridge University Press,
2012. Pp. 284, \$39.95.

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Having myself taken part in what was billed as a “conversation” with Peter Singer in Melbourne’s Anglican Cathedral some months ago, I strongly endorse Charles Camosy’s far more ambitious effort to go “beyond polarization” with his discussion of Singer’s ethical philosophy. Frequently referred to in the book is the May 2011 “Christian Ethics Engages Peter Singer” conference held in Oxford where both Singer and Camosy gave the opening addresses. Camosy underlines that Singer has shown he is prepared to work with Christians in the areas of poverty, the ecology, and animals, and refers to Pope Benedict’s recommendation in *Caritas in Veritate* of “fraternal collaboration”

Claritas: Journal of Dialogue and Culture, Vol. 1, No. 2 (October 2012)
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with all, believers and non-believers, for the achievement of their common goals of peace and justice.

In his *Introduction*, Camosy frankly notes that Singer’s “basic project claims to be one designed to undermine the foundations” supporting the Christian view of the world (3). His biographical sketch reveals a long rabbinical line in Singer’s family, with the tragic loss of three of his four grandparents in the Holocaust. Singer’s parents escaped from Vienna, migrating to Australia where he grew up. Though he attended a Presbyterian high school, at Melbourne University he joined the Rationalist Society, with his principal motive for rejecting God’s existence expressed in his question, “How could the kind of god Christians describe—omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent—have allowed something like the Holocaust to take place?” (5). Since his undergraduate days, Singer has been an activist—against the Vietnam War, for abortion, and later for animal rights.

Rather than seeing Singer’s ethical views as an insurmountable barrier to dialogue, Camosy approvingly quotes a fellow Catholic ethicist, David Hollenbach, SJ: “Differences of vision are not so total that we are destined to remain eternal strangers to one another” (7). He reminds the reader that Aquinas “spent his entire career in intellectual solidarity with the thought of the pagan philosopher Aristotle” (8). Camosy’s method in his discussion of the topics of abortion, euthanasia, our treatment of animals, duties to the poor, and ethical method, will map out in relation to Singer the areas of significant agreement, “the surprisingly narrow disagreement,” and how Singer and the church should “push each other” regarding those narrow areas of disagreement (8).

In Chapter One, *Abortion*, Camosy notes that “both Peter Singer and the Roman Catholic Church believe that *Roe v Wade*

is bad law and both would prefer a legislative approach to the current public policy” (16). Also, “Singer acknowledges, quite plainly, that his arguments about the moral status of the fetus also apply to the newborn baby” (18). Obviously while the church has similarly seen the link between abortion and infanticide, it has drawn completely different moral conclusions (19). However, in order to effect an agreement with Singer, who distinguishes between being a member of the species *Homo sapiens* and being a human person, Camosy seems to overstretch his reading both of John Paul II’s *Evangelium Vitae* and of the 2008 Vatican document, *Dignitas Personae*. Since he refers to the latter document as confirmation that the church does not “commit itself to the position that the embryo has a rational soul” (24), it does no harm to see what *Dignitas Personae* actually says:

Although the presence of the spiritual soul cannot be observed experimentally, the conclusions of science regarding the human embryo give “a valuable indication for discerning by the use of reason a personal presence at the moment of the first appearance of a human life: how could a human individual not be a human person?” Indeed, the reality of the human being for the entire span of life, both before and after birth, does not allow us to posit either a change in nature or a gradation in moral value, since it possesses full anthropological and ethical status. The human embryo has, therefore, from the very beginning, the dignity proper to a person (n. 5).

Camosy rightly finds that both Singer and the church “disagree about the moral value of the potential of the fetus” (27). Camosy defends the personhood of the unborn human on the basis of “the

metaphysical distinction that Aristotle and Reichlin make between active and passive potential” (37). He sees human beings as possessed of an active potential to rationality and self-awareness. These are “essentially present in our natures as the kinds of things we are” (39). Despite this crucial disagreement, Camosy points out that:

Singer has now realized that many of his claims about practical ethics cannot be justified without a fairly strong appeal to metaphysics—with the result that he is now rethinking fundamental aspects of his moral theory (40).

So, along with Singer’s “suspicion of the kind of hyper-autonomy and consumerism which drives the broad support for abortion rights,” Camosy considers Singer may rethink his approach to abortion (40).

In Chapter Two, *Euthanasia*, Camosy notes how Singer and the church:

share skepticism about whether we should use a brain-death criterion for determining when a human organism has died. . . . Remarkably, they also share several conclusions about when one is morally justified in removing life-sustaining treatment, and even when one is justified in using pain medication, which will hasten a patient’s death (43).

There is no difficulty in finding agreement with Singer on not being required to use what the church regards as extraordinary means to prolong life (57–61), but the church does insist on what it calls “ordinary means”—the administration of food and water (whether by natural or artificial means) for those in the so-called

“persistent vegetative state” (63). Still, Camosy quotes a 2009 response of the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith that notes: “in remote places or in situations of extreme poverty, the artificial provision of food and water may be physically impossible;” or “a patient may be unable to assimilate food and drink;” or “[artificial provision] may be excessively burdensome for the patient or may cause significant physical discomfort . . .” (64). Despite these careful qualifications, Camosy’s conclusion perhaps goes too far in light of the much less qualified interpretations it could lead to: “So let us be absolutely clear: the Church claims, along with Singer, that it may be licit to remove patient B’s feeding tube” (65). The question has to do with the word “may.” Indeed, there follows an excellent discussion, based on recent practice in the Netherlands and Oregon, that convincingly argues against Singer’s denial that permitting euthanasia leads to a “slippery slope” from voluntary to involuntary euthanasia (68–79).

The next chapter, *Non-human animals*, includes Singer’s description of the horrendous treatment of animals by factory farms, along with the consequent recommendation by Camosy that we altogether abstain from any meat produced from them. Despite some differences with Singer’s reading of the Christian tradition, Camosy shows how various Catholic writers today fully agree with Singer on respect for non-human animals. However, his attempt to ground the ethical treatment of animals might need a sharper focus. For example, there is his statement that what “non-human animals share with human animals, for Thomas Aquinas, is a spiritual reality or soul” (112). In the Aristotelian tradition, “soul” is a principle of vegetative life in plants, of sensitive life in animals, but only humans have the capacity for intellectual (or spiritual) life. His listing of capacities animals share with humans—consciousness,

rationality, self-awareness, third-order reflection, empathy, and morality (125–26) is a heterogeneous one. Animals are by definition conscious and capable of empathy, but the other four capacities would, I suggest, require radical re-definition if ascribed to animals. Consequently, not every reader will agree when he says “I can find no reason to deny to many of them [non-human animals] a moral status similar to that of human persons” (132). However, such a conclusion is not necessary for a Catholic to fully adhere to Camosy’s final conclusions on abstaining from factory farmed food products and his call for explicit church teaching on the sinfulness of cruelty to animals (135).

Camosy shows in his next chapter, *Duties to the Poor*, that despite differences, Singer and the church are broadly and strongly in agreement: “both approaches react strongly against the violence and injustice that our consumerist and hyper-autonomous culture inflicts on the vulnerable poor” (176). Then in Chapter Five, *Ethical Theory*, he wishes to establish common ground between the church’s moral teaching, which holds certain actions to be intrinsically evil, and Singer’s “preference utilitarianism,” which would include a consideration of the consequences of various actions before judging them good or evil. In a section on “A Common Consequentialist Approach” Camosy quotes John Paul II’s *Veritatis Splendor* which affirms the teleological character of the moral life (187). A key statement in that encyclical rejects “the thesis, characteristic of teleological and proportionalist theories” that it is impossible to qualify as morally evil certain behavior “apart from a consideration of the intention” of the agent.

Camosy’s discussion of this point seems to rely on a re-definition of “teleological” to include the kind of intention that goes beyond the act to its consequences (204). A problem I would have with

this notion is that it does not differentiate between a teleology whose meaning is determined by further considerations beyond the act itself, and a teleology whose goal occurs in a present moment that is simultaneously before eternity—in the sense of Derrida’s famous remark that “deconstruction is Justice.”¹ The reason nothing can excuse evil acts like abortion or euthanasia is that the moment they are committed they are already a lethally grave offence to another human being, whose dignity is rooted in his or her orientation towards divine reality beyond space and time. And the author’s reworking of the notion of the value of human life, treating it as of irreducible rather than infinite value (212), is not the only time in reading Camosy that I felt Singer could have been invited to move beyond analytic philosophy to consider the work of philosophers like Emmanuel Levinas, Jean-Luc Marion and Jacques Derrida. For example, Levinas’ *Totality and Infinity*, in the light of the Holocaust, is best seen as a reaffirmation of the infinite worth of each single human being.

Many readers will find Camosy’s last chapter, *Singer’s Shift?*, a real surprise. He mentions how Oxford moral philosopher Derek Parfit “has apparently convinced Singer to become more open to objectivity in his moral theory” (215). Singer’s recent writings espouse an ethics that “takes a universal point of view” (216). Rather than a metaphysical top-down approach, Camosy gives an excellent summary of Jean Porter’s Thomistic view of human nature from the ground up (226–30), which he convincingly suggests would be acceptable to Singer’s present state in the development of his moral thinking. Camosy shows how Porter’s view of objective

1. Jacques Derrida, “Force of Law: The ‘Mystical Foundation of Authority’” in: *Acts of Religion* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 243.

human flourishing and Singer’s new views are close to coinciding. For Singer, Camosy writes, “Happiness comes when we transcend our inward-looking concerns and instead identify ourselves with ‘the most objective point of view possible’: the point of view of the universe” (233).

Camosy’s *Conclusion* suggests that Singer’s ethics should help push the church to acknowledge the value of all life, human and non-human, to have a presumption against violence and death (though given Singer’s constantly stated views on abortion and euthanasia this might seem unconvincing), and have a presumption for aiding those in need, those dying without aid, and the most vulnerable, including animals (246). Christian ethics should push Singer to clarify his recent move towards an objective ethics and to include a consideration of sexual ethics, given its importance in human existence and the generation of children (247–49).

The common ground Camosy foresees Singer and the church moving together on is their shared critique of the self-centered individualist over against an other-centered lifestyle (251). Camosy has already mentioned collaboration in the eradication of “absolute poverty” and expresses the hope for a rethink on abortion and euthanasia from Singer and his followers (252). So the question is: Has Camosy succeeded in moving the debate with Singer “beyond polarization”? While I have expressed differences with some of his analyses, the generosity of his approach provides a model for dialogue which by that very attempt already moves the ethical debate to the most basic of all contexts, where we respect one another’s views, and are able to learn both from the perceived strengths and limits of the other as well as from the strengths and limits the other may discover in us.