

**The President of Good & Evil: The Ethics of George W. Bush**

Peter Singer

New York: Dutton, 2004, 280 pp. \$25 h.c. 0-525-94813-9

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Peter Singer just might be the world's most important controversial philosopher. Since becoming known to the world for his defense of animal rights he has led the way to redefine applied ethics not as an embarrassment to "real" philosophers but as a vital work in progress to which concerned philosophers should contribute their expertise. In so doing he has stirred sometimes heated debate within and beyond his discipline because of various conclusions he arrives at via his global approach to ethics, applied ethics, health care ethics, and such special topics as evolution, the Holocaust, and globalization itself. In this his latest book he offers a meticulous critique of the ethics of the president of the United States—in an election year. The book is accordingly time-sensitive, inescapably partisan, and as such ephemeral, as are other books that take the 2000-2004 administration to task. It is not ephemeral, however, if this means having no significance after the November 2004 election. For it shows the reader how an ethicist's expertise can shed light on a lived problem which concerns millions of people—in this instance, truth and objectivity in government.

Singer assesses the ethical import of Bush's public declarations for the most part by applying his preference-utilitarian approach, about which he says in "A Philosophical Self-Portrait" ([www.PeterSingerLinks.com](http://www.PeterSingerLinks.com)): "I approach each issue by seeking the solution that has the best consequences for all affected. By best consequences, I understand that which satisfies the most preferences, weighted [in] accordance with the strength of the preferences." Another aspect of his approach that is important here as it was in his *One World: The Ethics of Globalization* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2002) is his attribution of moral significance to all organisms on this planet, including the non-human. He thereby undercuts any sociopolitical claim that the nation-state constitutes the moral parameters of a leader's ethical responsibility.

The book is divided into two parts, which correspond roughly to Bush's ethical views regarding domestic policy and regarding foreign policy. Following careful analyses of Bush's statements about issues in each of these areas a concluding chapter articulates a critique of Bush's ethics. In Part I Singer reflects on ethical considerations associated with tax policy, government interference with value-of-life decisions regarding stem cell research, capital punishment, assisted suicide, civil and human rights of citizens and non-citizens, and the place of religion in public debate. In Part II he first examines Bush's stance on various issues in international law, e.g., regarding treaties and trade agreements, then focuses on Bush's military actions in Afghanistan and Iraq, and finally adds reflections about US imperialism and about Bush's ethics.

Topics discussed in Part I involve positions on domestic and to some extent foreign policy issues that the Bush administration adopted during its first two years in office. He faults Bush administration stances on tax cuts in light of John

Locke's views, on assisted suicide in light of Oregon voters' preferences, on capital punishment in light of Illinois Governor George Ryan's commutation of death sentences. Regarding killing, he shows inconsistencies in Bush's stances on stem cells, capital punishment, war, and torture of prisoners. He cites several accounts of just war theory and Tom Paine on individual liberty, and asserts that a cost-benefit analysis discredits Ronald Dworkin's "go gently" defense of torture. He defends the secularist standards of public justification to oppose accepting faith-based reasons in public discourse.

In Part II, Singer first addresses non-war aspects of Bush's isolationist foreign policy, e.g., regarding trade regulations, HIV/AIDS prevention, the International Criminal Court, and climate change. His focus, though, is on the morality of Bush's war decisions, and he concludes that both the invasion of Afghanistan and that of Iraq fail the proportionality and the last resort tests of just war theory. Regarding Iraq, he takes each of the two principal reasons the Bush Administration put forward (self-defense against WMDs and a humanitarian intervention against a tyrant) and finds that neither sufficiently outweighs the harm done to the UN and international law as well as to Iraq's people and property. He then equates Bush's preemptive policy towards other nations with a Hobbesian state-of-nature in which might makes right. In conclusion, he characterizes Bush's ethics as a kind of intuitionism that chooses between polar opposites after the fashion of Kohlberg's conventional stage, said to be common among young boys, and resorts to deliberate deception as endorsed by the Machiavellian rationale of Leo Strauss and his followers in the Bush Administration.

As Singer moves through these various topics he draws on an abundance of carefully researched statements which add weight to his normative assessment. To meet an early 2004 publication date, however, he had to cut off this research at the end of 2003, so his assessment of US policy is sometimes less pointed than would be appropriate in light of later developments, e.g., revelations about torture directives, the US Supreme Court's assigning of rights to uncharged "enemy combatants," the activation of and report by a 9/11 task force, ongoing fatalities in Iraq before and after "transfer of sovereignty," politicization of the gay marriage issue and of the use of voting machines in the 2004 presidential election. These time-related limitations are, of course, unavoidable. Less so, however, is Singer's reluctance to tie George W. Bush himself to the geopolitical motivation behind the two invasions he authorized (222-224). This is a bit ironic, since Singer had no difficulty attributing just such motivation to Nigerian leaders in his *One World* (104-105). Moreover, the thesis that the US/UK military actions would never have occurred except for a previously set strategy to control petroleum resources was by his manuscript submission deadline already well documented, as was the involvement of both Bush and Cheney and many of their top aides in the oil industry. Bush himself may be a well-meaning person, as Singer would like to believe, but if so then perhaps he has been a dupe for others whose intentions are less pure.

No doubt Bush's ethics, as Singer concludes, are simplistic and inconsistent. Beyond that, however, the only aspect of reality they seriously consider are what large campaign contributors want and expect him to do. This being the case, a global utilitarian seeking best outcomes must surely include these

corporate priorities in the calculus of preferences. For Bush is not in fact a thirteen-year-old boy. He is an adult with access to earth-shattering power. He is, in legal terminology, a principal who is responsible for whatever his agents do in his name. As such he is morally responsible for any harm his decisions have unleashed even if he somehow excludes such negative data from his consciousness. Thus, on the basis of his whole-earth utilitarian calculus, Singer faults Bush for being lax about excessive "collateral damage" in Afghanistan and in Iraq (56-58). On this basis he develops his proportionality argument that the invasion of Afghanistan was not morally justifiable (153). Nor, he concludes, was the invasion of Iraq, but in this case he feeds factors other than just body counts into the calculus before declaring that this invasion's negative impact on international law outweighs the claimed advantage of (illegally) effecting a "regime change" (174). Via such considerations Singer in effect expands upon the problematic of Westphalian nationhood that he dealt with in his *One World*.

The main problem with this courageous study of Bush's ethics is one Singer has consciously dealt with for years, namely, how difficult it is for a philosopher to address the ethical aspects of a subject the facts of which specialists have not yet fully established. Even so, this book is suitable for use in a course concerned with the psychological processing of ethical norms and/or the external pressures on such processing. It also raises important questions about the place of religious beliefs in political decision-making (see works I cite in *Teaching Philosophy* 27:1 [March 2004]: 68). And it could add an important dimension to such courses as practical ethics (using, e.g., Singer's work with that title, 2nd ed. 1993), ethics and rhetoric, or ethics and public policy, e.g., combining this book with *One World*.

To be fully informed about all the issues on which George W. Bush has expressed an ethical position would require extensive reading in many fields of study. Fine texts are available on bioethics and environmental ethics, including several in each field by Singer, notably his *Rethinking Life and Death* (New York: St. Martin's, 1994). Regarding foreign policy matters, much information is available online, including United Nations documents, and of course there are numerous treatises on international law and on human rights, as well as timely articles in *Foreign Affairs* and other journals. For the geopolitical background to Bush's wars, see works I cite in *Teaching Philosophy* 27:2 (June 2004): 183-184. For a singularly insightful overview of the philosophical legitimacy of practical reasoning, see Stephen Toulmin, *Return to Reason* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001).

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