

Thinking About Morality with Peter Singer (Ep.12)

CH 00:32

Welcome to another episode of Conversations with Coleman. Before I introduce today's guest, I just want to thank everyone who's supporting the podcast. Thanks to you, I'm now able to outsource the grunt work and focus on preparing for guests. If you'd like to support the podcast, go to my website, colemanhughes.org.

CH 00:52

My guest today is Peter Singer. Peter Singer is an Australian moral philosopher. He's a professor of bioethics at Princeton University, and a laureate professor at the Centre for Applied Philosophy and Public Ethics at the University of Melbourne. He specialises in applied ethics, and approaches ethical issues from a secular, utilitarian perspective. He's known in particular for his book Animal Liberation, in which he argues in favour of veganism, and his essay Famine, Affluence and Morality, in which he argues in favour of donating to help the global poor.

CH 01:30

We talk about whether moral obligations depend on where you happen to be in the world. Talk about whether human happiness is comparative or absolute. Talk about Tyler Cowen's book Stubborn Attachments. We talk about hedonic adaptation and whether the human race is happier now than it was 1000 years ago. We talk about judging figures from the past and taking down statues.

CH 02:00

And I drag Peter into American politics by asking him how a consequentialist should view a problem with such a small body count, such as unarmed Americans killed by the police. So without further ado, Peter Singer. Welcome to another episode of conversations with Coleman. My guest today is Peter Singer. Peter, thanks so much for coming on the show.

PS 02:28

You're very welcome. Coleman. Happy to be on your show.

Coleman 02:31

Yes, we spoke about a week ago on The Comedy Cellar podcast about a wide range of issues. And I want to go over a few of those without boring you by rehashing all the same topics. But, just to start, can you give people a, who you know, who may not know you, a quick summary of who you are and how you describe what you do?

PS 02:53

Yeah, sure. Um, I'm a professor of bioethics at Princeton University- I've held that position for just over 20 years. As your listeners can probably tell from my accent, I'm Australian by background. I grew up in Australia, studied at Oxford University, and taught at NYU for a little while, went back to Australia, and then came to Princeton, as I said, about 20 years ago. I'm probably best known for my book, Animal Liberation, which some people credited with having triggered the modern animal rights movement.

PS 03:26

And certainly that's continued to be one of my major interests in trying to get better treatment for animals, particularly for farm animals, since that's the vast majority of animals we abuse. But also quite early in my career, I wrote an article called Famine, Affluence, and Morality, which is about what we people living in affluent countries, at least those of us who have some money to spare for things that we don't really need, ought to be doing to help people in extreme poverty in low income countries.

PS 03:56

And that article got reprinted a lot and has had some influence in the effective altruism movement, which is a more recent movement. And as part of that, I wrote a book called The Life You Can Save, which started, led to the starting of a charity with the same name that recommends the most effective organisations helping people in extreme poverty.

Coleman 04:18

You give a very understated account of your own feats, I think. As I told you last week, your book Animal Liberation had a big influence on me when I was maybe 16 or 17. I would say it's one of the three or four books that persuaded me to pursue a philosophy degree because just the style of reasoning, you know, it just became clear to me that there are, there are two types of people: there are people who assume that their base gut instinct about right and wrong is worth respecting completely and not challenging, and then there's there are people who distrust their initial gut reaction and want to reason things through.

CH 05:00

And I remember, in particular, the argument from Animal Liberation that seemed, you know, it's one of those arguments that just seems obvious the, the moment you hear it, but you wouldn't necessarily think, unless it's said explicitly, is that, you know, the ability to reason on the part of an animal should make relatively little, if any, difference to our ability or the requirement that we care about its well being; it's really the capacity to suffer and flourish that should matter. And, you know, anyway, that's just to say I think that style of reasoning about right and wrong was very important to me, you know, as a young, budding philosophy major, so, so thank you for that.

PS 05:45

Great, I'm very happy if I had an influence in bringing you to philosophy. That's a, that's terrific. And it's always encouraging to me, actually, to hear that people do respond to arguments- as you say, not everybody does. But when people respond to a philosophical argument, to the point of actually changing something that's very close and personal, like what we eat, which affects us every day, more than once a day, I think that's a tremendous testament to the power of philosophy and the importance of the subject.

Coleman 06:13

Yeah, absolutely. I want to talk a little bit about the other half of your most prominent parts of your legacy that you mentioned- your argument about giving money to charity, from Famine, Affluence, and Morality. Can you briefly describe that? I'm sure you've done it 1000 times.

PS 06:33

Sure, yeah. So in this original article that I mentioned, Famine, Affluence, and Morality, I was concerned with a particular crisis that was unfolding then, this was, I wrote it in 1971. The crisis that led to the formation of the nation of Bangladesh, which previous to that was East Pakistan, part of Pakistan. And they have been on an autonomy movement, which democratically elected party in favour of more autonomy. And the Pakistani army brutally repressed that movement, so brutally that 9 million people from East Pakistan fled across the border into India.

PS 07:12

And India, which was a much poorer country then than it is today, was faced with the enormous task of housing, feeding, providing sanitation for 9 million refugees. And, of course, they appeal to the Western nations for assistance, and some assistance was forthcoming, but not nearly enough. So it was in that context that I want to ask myself the question: what do we, what what should we be doing? Is it okay for us to just go on with our normal lives while there are these 9 million people who may not be able to get the necessities of life?

PS 07:50

And, of course, it's true that neither I nor my other friends were in any way responsible for this situation. But, still, that didn't answer the question of whether we ought to be helping. And to illustrate that I use this little story of walking past a pond and seeing that a child has fallen into the pond. It's not your child, you're not responsible for the child in any way, but you seem to be the only person close enough to rescue the child and prevent the child drowning.

PS 08:23

Now, there's no danger to you here because you know that this is a shallow pond and you can stand up in it. But, there is some inconvenience and some expense, because you're going to ruin your clothes, you just happened to be wearing really nice clothes to go somewhere important. So, so you'll be up for a couple of hundred dollars anyway.

PS 08:40

And then I ask the reader, and I've subsequently asked many audiences: so would it be okay to just say this child is not my responsibility, and I don't want to be up for the expense of replacing my clothes, so I'm going to ignore the child? And pretty much everybody that I posed that question to says, that would definitely not be okay. And, in fact, that would be completely wrong, an awful thing to do, to put a cost of your clothes above a child's life.

PS 08:40

But then, if that's true, if we, if that would be an awful thing to do, does the fact that the child is not in front of us, but is in another country far away, the fact that we have to use some organisation to help that or lead to help the child, do those factors themselves mean that we don't have the same moral obligation or that it's not an awful thing to do to ignore the plight of children who are, or adults for that matter, who are dying far away who we could help? And my answer is, well, no, none of those factors really make a crucial moral difference. So, I think that we ought to be doing something significant to help people in extreme poverty. Of course, you can ask well, how much. That's a further question. But certainly, it's not enough to just wash our hands of it and say, that's not my responsibility.

CH 10:00

I've encountered one kind of critique of this argument from a professor of a class I recently took. And I wonder if you've encountered it. It's more of an attitude than a specific argument. But it's just the sense that the, the injunction to give in faraway places where you can't see is just a way of avoiding your more immediate responsibilities to your local neighbourhood.

CH 10:26

Say, if you know there are problems in your city that you could donate to, the very fact that you live in that city gives you a special obligation to donate there. And, you know, the desire to just send a cheque to someplace far away where you don't have to think about it somehow represents a, a failing. Have you ever encountered that, and what do you think of it if so?

PS 10:51

I don't think I've encountered the argument that it's a failing; I've encountered the argument that we ought to be doing something locally as well. But, I don't see, you know, even if, let's, let's say, for the moment, we accept that we ought to be doing something locally- I don't see that that absolves you from also doing something further away. I don't see why it replaces that obligation. Now, if the people locally were just as needy, and if you could help them just as effectively, by which I mean that \$1 given locally would go just as far as a \$1 given in a low income country far away, then I would accept this, you know.

PS 11:33

But I wouldn't see it as an obligation to give locally; I would just see it as an obligation to give where you can give most effectively. And if it is most effective to give locally, sure, give locally. But, I think the facts are very different from that. If you're living in the United States, then, in fact, your your dollars don't go very far. Because, essentially, it costs more for people to feed and house themselves than it does the the poverty line in the United States for a family of four, I think, if I remember rightly, is around \$23,000, which, you know, is not very much to live on in the United States.

PS 12:13

But the World Bank's extreme poverty line is about \$2 a day. So, let's say \$750 a year. So obviously, if you're helping somebody on \$750 a year, and you give them, let's say, \$750 a year, \$750, you've made a huge difference to them. You've doubled their annual income. You've enabled them to buy things now that they couldn't possibly afford previously, because you can't save very much if you're just living on \$2 a day.

PS 12:47

Whereas if you go \$750 to a family living in poverty in the United States, it really wouldn't make a huge difference, certainly not a life transforming difference for them, as it can in other countries. So to me, that fact overrides any particular obligations that you have to give locally.

CH 13:06

How does inequality factor into all of this? Because implicit in your argument is the idea that, you know, to some extent, poverty correlates with unhappiness in some kind of causal way such that, you know, giving money moves the needle on some deeper principle that we care about, like happiness, or well being or, or whatever you might want to call it, and how inequality might affect that deeper principle is something I often think about.

CH 13:40

Because there's a, there's an, I think, a huge literature that sort of argues over the question of whether a person's happiness is a function of their relative status. And, you know, whether that's their relative status to their people in their immediate surroundings, or their country, or the world, or whether it's a function of their absolute status. And depending on which one is right, and in what ways they're right, that would seem to have implications for how you would want to give charitably. Does that, does that question make sense? And if so, do you have a position on that?

PS 14:17

The question certainly makes sense. So, I'm not really interested in inequality, per se, that is I, I think that inequality can have many bad consequences, including, perhaps the fact that even people who are relatively poor in a wealthy society, although they have enough to have all of the necessities of life, may be less happy than they would be if the society were more egalitarian. So, I think that's relevant, and that's a good reason for making the society more equal.

PS 14:56

Also, of course, if you have vast discrepancies of a wealth as we do in the United States, and if you have laws that allow money to be used politically, as again, the United States has, then you get tremendous inequalities of power as well, which is very damaging for democracy, I think. So there are good reasons why a more equal society is better, but not just in itself. For example, I don't think that levelling down, which would maybe be another way of producing equality, is in itself a good thing.

PS 15:31

Now, do I think that relative poverty or absolute poverty is more important for happiness? Well, I think they're both relevant. But I think that it's absolute poverty, that is, the World Bank's definition of extreme poverty, which really means not having enough income to reliably be able to meet your basic needs, needs for food, shelter, be limited amount of medical care- I think that that's more crucial, particularly to suffering, right?

PS 16:03

When you talk about happiness, I tend to focus on the negative, on, on suffering and reducing suffering more than on increasing happiness, partly because I think that we have a better handle on how to do

that. And we can do it less expensively than it takes to increase happiness. So, when you're talking about reducing suffering, then I think helping people who don't have enough to meet their basic needs is the best, the most provable, and certainly the most cost effective way of doing that.

CH 16:38

So, this gets into some interesting trade offs. And I mentioned Tyler Cowen's book on our, on our last podcast, The Comedy Cellar podcast, but I want to sort of re ask that question and ask it slightly differently. But let me just first give a summary of what I'm talking about for, for the audience. Tyler Cowen wrote a book called Stubborn Attachments, in which he argues that we have a moral obligation to increase GDP as much as possible without violating human rights, and while also mitigating the effects of climate change and trying to prevent nuclear war.

CH 17:17

But the bulk of the book is dedicated to arguing why GDP growth is important. And the way he does that is by essentially doing what you did in *Famine, Affluence, and Morality* with regard to the dimension of space, which is to say, your argument was that the number of miles between you and another person shouldn't diminish your obligation to them. What Cowen does in this book is, you know, the number of years away that you are from a person, a person who's yet unborn, also doesn't diminish your obligation to them. And so, given that GDP functions in terms of compound growth, a point 0.1% change in the GDP rate will mean over the course of 100 years that the world is much, much wealthier 100 years from now than it would have been with a slightly lower rate.

CH 18:17

And so, what he ends up arguing is that if, if given a trade off between reducing inequality, for example, through a welfare programme that has a negative effect on GDP, and maximising GDP, we actually have a moral obligation to do the second, because we are, we would essentially, you know, if we didn't, we would be sacrificing many, the wealth of many, many future people, for the poverty of a smaller number of people that are alive today. So, I'm curious with regard to your reflections on inequality, just now, if you think that argument makes sense at all, and how you view that issue- the issue of you know, long time spans in general.

PS 19:06

I agree with Tyler Cowen that we should not discount the future per se. Of course, the future may be uncertain, and we may not know what effect we'll have on the future. So, we can discount that. For example, Nicholas Stern, the English economist who wrote about climate change some years ago, discounted the future by a very small amount on the basis of the fact that they may not be a future, that there may be a nuclear war or large asteroid may collide with our planet or something like that.

PS 19:39

There's a chance, but only a very small one, that there just won't be any people around in 100 years. And then, of course, if we sacrifice the poor today for the benefit of the future tomorrow, we'll have sacrificed in vain. So, I think his discount was something like a quarter of 1% per annum, much less than economists often discount the future by. And I think that's reasonable, but, but you shouldn't discount the future just because it's the future- and Cowen is right about that.

PS 20:07

Just as we should care equally about people wherever they are, so we should care equally about people whenever they are, as long as we know that they are, and as long as we know that we can make a difference in their lives. Now, the other question that's raised by Cowen's argument, of course, is does an increase in GDP make people happier or better off? And if so, how does that compare with how the welfare programme that you mentioned in your example makes people happier and better off?

PS 20:40

And I suppose it would be possible to argue that if people are really poor now, you make a bigger difference to their well-being than increasing the GDP of people who are already wealthy. Because we assume that GDP is increasing, people in 100 years will be far wealthier than we are, then I suppose you can raise the question. And suppose that the GDP was, did increase, as you say, by that point, 1%, and over a century that made a large difference- would they still be that much happier off? In other words, would having, I'm not sure what the figures are, but would having a GDP that was 10 times as much as, when I say ours, I mean, that of African countries, make people happier than having one that was five times higher than ours?

PS 21:29

So I think you need to ask all of those questions. But it's possible; it's possible that the answers come out in the way that Cowen suggests. And if it does, then there's a powerful case for saying that's what we ought to do. But I just think you ought to be pretty rigorous in scrutinising those assumptions, because, obviously, there are assumptions that are going to hurt people, the people who don't get the welfare programme.

PS 21:55

And before you hurt the concrete people living now, you need to be very sure that you're going to benefit, although there's a very high probability that you'll benefit people in the future. We've had a lot of long-term planning that has come unstuck in some economies, in some parts over the past century or so. So, we want to be forewarned about that possibility.

CH 22:18

So I want to talk a little bit more about happiness, and happiness over long time spans. I think one important piece to put in here is the idea of hedonic adaptation, which, you know, basically says that one becomes, as one becomes accustomed to new circumstances, one's expectations rise to meet those better circumstances. And you know, what, you don't end up getting as much pleasure from the same amount of whatever it is, whether it's an activity or, or food, or drugs, or sex, you know, whatever, just insert the pleasurable activity.

CH 23:02

As you do more of it, your, your expectations for what you expect rise in lockstep with your reality, or at least rise to some extent with your reality. And, if you really take that idea seriously, I think there's no there's no doubt that, to some extent, this is a fact of human psychology- our minds do work this way with regard to many pleasures, including the pleasures that come from increased wealth. It's possible to

leave as someone like you've all know, a Harare does, that, you know that the typical human was happier as hunter gatherer tribe than they are today.

CH 23:45

And that, you know, doubling the world's wealth, even if that wealth spread fairly evenly, you know, wouldn't necessarily double the world's happiness or may not even increase it very much. It's possible to lapse into a kind of nihilism about the possibility for humanity as a species to become much happier, short of, you know, avoiding the worst possible kinds of suffering, like, like famine and war. So do you, how do you think about hedonic adaptation and its effect on the possibility of making progress in human flourishing on a global scale?

PS 24:25

Well, hedonic adaptation, I agree, is a, is a fact. And it's one of the things that I had in mind when I said, in response to your question about Tyler Cowen, that it's not so clear to me that people 100 years now are living on 10 times our per capita GDP rather than five times our per capita GDP they're going to be all that much happier. So, I think that's true, but I don't agree with Harare's claim about a hunter gatherer societies. They may have been happy in many ways at many times, no doubt when they were well fed, and that they enjoyed sex as much as we do, although, of course they couldn't avoid the consequences of pregnancy.

PS 25:14

But, I think the, the negatives, the suffering that they had that they could not alleviate, must have been much worse. So, you know, if they injured themselves and broke a bone, then they might be in great pain that couldn't be relieved. And might, you know, the injury might fester and go gangrenous, and they might die a slow and horrible death. Well, I just mentioned, childbirth, or pregnancy and the relationship to sex. So, again, women must have suffered a lot more in childbirth when that went wrong.

PS 25:51

We know that maternal mortality rates were, of course, very high. So, I think that they had a lot of a lot of things went wrong, that we have better solutions for. So I think what our greater wealth and scientific knowledge technology does is to enable us to avoid some of the worst forms of suffering that people used to experience. And not just hunter gatherer societies, but even in the 19th century, suffered horribly from simple things like toothache, which we can generally get attended to pretty rapidly. So, I think that we can make people happier, that I think increasing GDP and, and spreading it around the world does make people happier by reducing severe suffering.

PS 26:42

And that's not something that we ever adapt to, in other words, there isn't but the negative of hedonic adaptation that suffering stops hurting after a while. So, I'm not nihilistic- I think that we can make progress in improving the world and bring everybody up to a certain level. Whether there's then a ceiling on this level by because of hedonic adaptation, that's possible- I couldn't confidently say that that's wrong. But no doubt we'll learn more about that as we get to the situation where we've got everybody, or most people, up to that level, and we don't have to worry about extreme suffering anymore. And we're only thinking about can we increase people's happiness.

CH 27:25

Is there anything that, well, let me put it this way is, you know, your Famine, Affluence and Morality argument about the, you know, saving the drowning child, what it does it is uses a simple thought experiment to show why you as an individual plausibly have a strong moral obligation to do something. Is there anything similar to that that doesn't operate at the scale of an individual but operates at the scale of a nation, in terms of public policy, like a policy that nations plausibly have a very strong obligation to adopt, where the moral logic of it is not extremely difficult or complicated?

PS 28:13

Well, I do think that countries have moral obligations, and they're not always fulfilling them. I think that's particularly for cases where individual actions don't or aren't likely to be sufficiently effective to achieve the goal. And the example that springs to mind as you were talking is, is climate change. So, I think that individuals can and should do things to reduce their carbon footprint, but I don't think that's going to be enough.

PS 28:46

I don't think we'll get enough people in the present situation reducing their carbon footprint to avoid catastrophic climate change. And the way to do that is to have governments provide incentives like carbon tax for avoiding carbon, or cap and trade scheme. And if governments don't do that, then I think we are going to get into a situation where a lot of bad things will happen. You know, you're talking about parallel to the drowning child in the pond, well, we'll have drowning people, perhaps, as sea levels rise and low lying regions are inundated.

PS 29:26

Poor countries have quite a lot of those low lying regions because they, they tend to find river deltas very intensively. River deltas, of course, are very fertile land, but they're low-lying. So, the Mekong Delta is one example, and Bangladesh, the deltas of the great rivers that flow to the sea, in the Gulf of Bengal, low lying areas, the Nile in Egypt. And I think rising sea levels are going to inundate these areas, bring salt into them, which will make them unsuitable farming.

PS 30:01

So that's just one example of how the wealthy nations with their high levels of greenhouse gas emissions are harming poorer people. And we could multiply the examples in many different ways, of course. And, yes, I think that rich countries have obligations, which they are currently not fulfilling- perhaps a couple of exceptions- to rapidly phase out their greenhouse gas emissions and stop harming the nations that they are, the other countries that they're harming at present.

CH 30:32

Okay, so I want to pivot a little bit and steer you into some topics that relate to current events and politics. First off, you've written, I think I've written or I've read an essay of yours, where you talk about judging figures from the past and taking down statues, particularly with regard to Stalin. And, perhaps you remember the essay?

PS 31:01

I think I talked about the statues of Hitler as well.

CH 31:03

That's right. Yeah. So, you know, obviously, in America, we're having, you know, we've been having a perpetual argument about, you know, the easiest version of the tough conversation is with confederate statues, and whether they should come down. And then the harder version of the hard conversation is with founding fathers who owned slaves, to, you know, many of whom own slaves, and to different extents, felt either grooving or ambivalent, or hypocritically disapproving of slavery.

CH 31:44

And this is obviously a symbolic issue; it's not an issue on which lives actually turn. So, you know, I guess I've two questions. The first is just, what do you think about the value of symbols to begin with? You're a, you know, famously, a consequentialist philosopher, you know, and I am, too, which means I base my, I try to base my reasoning about right and wrong on the consequences of actions as concretely as possible.

CH 32:19

So when I think about symbolic issues, sometimes I'm tempted to just not have an opinion. Because, you know, we're not talking about anyone's concrete well-being, or, if we are, it's a kind of psychological well-being that I feel, you know, some, some folks like a statue, some folks don't, and who am I to weigh one over the other? So, so first off, what do you think about the value of symbols, morally speaking, when we talk about statues?

PS 32:48

Uh, you know, like you, I tend to look at future consequences. And I think it depends on to what extent people notice and are affected by the symbols. And one of the, perhaps the ironies of the movement to look at the symbols, is that people notice them more. You know, no doubt there are people in southern cities, maybe African Americans whose ancestors were slaves, who walked past the statues of confederate generals without noticing or thinking about who they were.

PS 33:19

And now they think, hey, wait a minute, my city's got a statue up of somebody who was trying to defend the enslavement of my ancestors. And I don't like that, makes me feel bad when I walk past that. Same thing happened actually with Princeton with Woodrow Wilson. Because I'd been at Princeton for many years before the Black Lives Matter movement brought up the fact that Princeton, that Wilson was a racist who reintroduced segregation into the federal civil service after it had been abandoned, you know, 20 or 30 years after it had gone from the civil service.

PS 33:56

So I imagine there were many African, you know, there's, there's a college called Wilson College at Princeton, which I happen to be a Honorary Fellow, and I sometimes eat in their dining room. There was a huge picture, like a wall poster of, of Woodrow Wilson, on that dining room. And I'm sure many

people walked past it and had no idea, as I had no idea, that that we were walking past a picture of somebody who was a racist who reintroduced segregation into the federal civil service.

PS 34:23

And then Black Lives come along and tell us all this information. Now we can't feel the same about walking past this photo of Wilson to get our lunch. And so, then you guess once people are aware of that, and they're offended and troubled by it, and feel, hey, why is this university honouring somebody who wouldn't have wanted me to even be a student at this university- then I can understand that there's a reason for, for taking this down. So, it's kind of irony that you point to the symbols and they become more relevant to people than they were when they just been part of the background.

Coleman 34:59

Yeah, I think that's a very interesting observation, one that I've also had. And it's possible to take two different attitudes towards it. You might say it's always good to become educated about the ugly parts of a person's legacy, even if what comes along with that is a kind of mental suffering. And I, personally, I have no problem with the status quo being a statue of someone who has skeletons in their closet that nobody knows about, and nobody particularly cares about. But, you know, I've always been fascinated by circumstances where, you know, for example, the group that should be offended, in fact, isn't, but the group that should be offended, or you wouldn't expect to be offended, is offended.

CH 35:52

And I think, you know, recently of the fact that the Washington Redskins, an American football team, is, is finally changing their name after roughly two decades of of being asked by a, you know, a small group of people in the media, and journalists and activism circles, to do so. But, you know, the Washington Post did at least two polls of the Native American community to see what percentage wanted the Redskins to change their name, and both times it was on the order of 10%, and on the order of 90% saying they should keep the name the same.

CH 36:34

And I was always fascinated by that, because, you know, at face value, when I was first told about the Washington Redskins name being problematic, my first reaction was, yeah, that's, that's bad. That, you know, that that must be enormously offensive to Native Americans, you know, not knowing any Native Americans myself. But then to learn that the majority of people in the community don't care, and it's really just a small minority that end up on the op-ed pages, making actually fairly compelling arguments, but nevertheless, a very small minority- how does that, you know, in a situation like that, what is the right move to do? Is it to side with the minority over the majority, because the majority is rather apathetic about the issue or doesn't come up in defence as much, or to just, to just change?

PS 37:26

If it's, if it's apathy on behalf of majority, that is, just the Native Americans were saying, I don't care either way, then you know, it's reasonable to say, well, look, there's a small group who really do care, and if there's nobody particularly is going to mind us getting a new name, maybe getting a new name is, is the best thing to do. If, on the other hand, the majority of the community said, hey, we'd like them being called Redskins, we don't find that an offensive term and we're proud to have, you know, people

of our, of our ethnic group remembered as thought of as part of a football team, you know, maybe they think it shows that we're strong or athletic or something, because presumably, football teams don't name themselves after groups that they think would not be athletic, vigorous, competitive players, you know, if that were the case, then I would say we should go with the majority, because the majority is going to be upset at the change. But if the, you know, if the 90 percent just don't care either way, and 10% care quite intensely, I would give that weight to that 10% who care intensely.

Coleman 38:38

Um, let's talk a little bit more about, let me steer you into a little different territory, which is my hobby horse on this podcast, and, you know, a topic that has been very much in the American media and global media in the past two months, which is the problem of police killings of unarmed civilians. So, I'm among the few people that have tried to make the point that without downplaying the injustice of a policeman or woman killing an unarmed American, that it makes sense to calibrate, at least to some degree, our outrage in proportion to the number of people that are harmed.

CH 39:27

And actually, you know, it reminds me, I recently had Neil deGrasse Tyson on the podcast. And, a few months ago, I believe he got into hot water or in the wake of a school shooting that we had, I think it was a school shooting, where he, he observed how many problems that we don't tend to think about as important claim more lives per year than school shootings, many, many more lives. And he was, as they say, ratioed on Twitter for, for making this point, and ended up, I think, apologising, you know, if not for the content then for saying the wrong thing at the wrong time or being tone deaf or something.

CH 40:19

So I'm among the people that has been routinely tone deaf, I suppose, about the, the point about police killings of unarmed Americans which claim on the order of 40 to 50 lives per year. And, again, it's not that there's no reason to care about that. There, you know, that is a problem- I want to underscore that. But the, the global protest that this has inspired, when we live in a context where we have many problems that- you know that that's, that's on the order of a lightning strike kind of a problem, where I often try to point to the problem of homicide as a problem that just claims thousands of lives a year.

CH 41:05

And that we have, that represents a similar public policy failure to our public policy failure on shooting of unarmed police, but a public policy failure that just claims many more lives in America, at least. This is not true where you live, I believe, and not true in most of Europe. But, so, you know, all that to say, the way I think about this issue has is a straightforward result of consequentialist reasoning. And I wonder to what extent you think about this when you read the news, and to what extent you calibrate your outrage on an issue like police killings of unarmed civilians by the numbers.

PS 41:55

I do think that numbers are relevant, certainly. And, you know, the example that I most often talk about in terms of numbers goes back to the animal movement, where if you ask, where do most of the donations people make to help animals go? The answer is to shelters, and pounds, and rescue operations for dogs and cats- something like maybe 80 to 90% of the money the public gives goes to

those organisations. And where is most of the animals suffering? And the answer, clearly, is farmed animals, particularly, obviously, animals in factory farms, in intensive farms.

PS 42:37

Where, you know, in the United States, we're talking about billions of animals that live their lives indoors in intensive farms every year. And we're talking about a few million abused dogs and cats. So it's, it's a huge difference. And I think, you know, people get outraged by photos of an abused dog or cat because they care about dogs and cats, they love them. And they don't care that much about pigs or chickens. But I think we should be more outraged by the immense amount of suffering that we inflict on billions of chickens and pigs and, in particular, give much more weight to that than we do to the abuse of dogs and cats.

PS 43:19

So, the question is, is something similar or appropriate, something similar going on in the case of the outrage about police killings? And I think possibly it is. And I think here the explanation is not so much that we, you know, as with dogs and cats, that there are certain species that we live with and care about more, it's more that we've had such dramatic and horrifying videos of this happening. I mean, the death of George Floyd was one example, where we see that on video, we see it going on for a long time, we hear him saying he can't breathe, see the police officer having worth maintaining his knee on the neck. And that's just outrageous.

PS 43:59

And then we have these other videos of, was it Rayshard Brooks in Atlanta, who was running away when shot in the back by police after a really non-violent encounter. And you see those videos and you think like, how can people do this; this is horrendous. And that's why people want to do something about it. They want to join in the march. And we have these identifiable victims.

PS 44:25

We can say you know, George, George, George Floyd, Rayshard Brooks, and various others, Trayvon Martin, and go back there. And when you talk about homicides, which I agree is obviously a much larger problem, we don't usually have those videos. Obviously, general murderers don't carry body cams to record what they're doing or they don't do it in public where other people are videoing. And you know, you say it's, it's a, it is a bigger problem, which I think is true, but is it an equally tractable problem?

PS 44:29

Is it something that we know what to do about it? Now to some extent, I think the answer to that is yes. What we need to do about that is get guns off out of the hands of civilians in America. But, you know, we were on that Comedy Cellar programme, and Noam there said something like, yeah, well, good luck with that, as if to say, you know, that's politically impossible in the United States. Now, I don't know enough about US politics to say is that politically impossible over what time period, is it politically impossible.

PS 45:28

It is an extraordinary fact about the United States that it so many people carry guns. And that's completely unlike where I'm speaking from now, in Australia. It's completely unlike Europe, and the United Kingdom, and most other places that I'm familiar with. And that's reflected in the, in the homicide rates, of course, and in the rates of other deaths by shooting, including accidental deaths of children. So that seems to me to be something that is definitely worth campaigning about.

PS 45:55

And it looked like, you know, after the school shooting- what's the name, I forget the name of the school- but you know, that started this big movement, and people were getting out on the streets. And I kind of wish that that had built, gone on and achieved the momentum and the influence that the current Black Lives Matter movement has after the death of George Floyd, because that would have, I think, been a much better thing- it would have actually not only reduced general homicides, but would have reduced police shootings as well, because police would have had less reason to believe that anybody that they stopped is likely to be carrying a gun.

PS 46:31

So, to that extent, I agree with you. But, you know, I do also want to say that I think those videos do demonstrate something really sickening that goes on with the culture in some police forces. And I can well understand that people are outraged by that and they want to stop it.

Coleman 46:49

Yeah, I definitely think the videos are huge, probably the, the main cause of the upswell and concern about this issue, and the rise of smartphones and social media. I just want to say, I think you may have said Rayshard Brooks in Atlanta who got shot shot in the back- I don't think he was shot in the back. He was the one that was turning and pointing his taser at the cop as he got shot. Right.

PS 47:18

Yeah, you're right. But he was some distance from the cop, and I think the cop knew that the taser actually wasn't going to work anymore as I, this is what I read, the tasers only can be used twice and the cop had already use that taser twice. So the cop should have known anyway that the taser was no threat to him.

Coleman 47:37

Yeah. In any event, I think, I think it is, you know, in addition to being a result of the videos, I think it's also a result of ideas. Because, you know, the in the smartphone era, we not only have videos of cops doing awful things to black people, there are those that circulate once every few months, you know, as you mentioned. There are, you know, just as many videos of cops doing those to white people that don't get circulated.

CH 48:12

There are videos of just horrible- you know, I saw a video on Twitter the other day of just a drive-by shooting in a neighbourhood. A guy just walks up, drives up, this man is walking, holding his young daughter's hand- she doesn't look like she can be older than five- and a car pulls up next to him and shoots him dead. This is the kind of thing that happens with regularity in high crime pockets of America,

which happened to be predominantly black. And, you know, there there is video of all of this stuff, but the video that ends up going viral, I think, reflects a pre-existing attitude that people have to care about certain things more than others.

CH 48:59

Because there's just an infinity of video of anything you want. You can, you can fill your whole day up with any particular cause for concern in the modern era. So I think there still is a burden of explaining why this issue is the one that has so deeply rattled the American, and, I guess, frankly, global, moral conscious. And I don't think it's all a bad thing. I think, I think much of what will come out of this is necessary police reforms that have been delayed for decades and opposed by very powerful police unions.

CH 49:41

But I worry about the underlying biases that cause those concerns preventing us from ever coming to grips with the problem of violent crime and homicide in neighbourhoods where the number one cause of death for, for black men in their 20s is homicide and well over 50%, upwards of 80, or 90% of them, go unsolved. So you have this intermess in violence where you your brother gets killed, and you feel like you have to, you have to get the person back, because you're living in a condition where this, the state monopoly on violence basically doesn't obtain. So, I worry about the the underlying bias preventing us from having a serious national movement around that issue, the way that we, for example, had one about drunk driving in the 80s.

PS 50:31

Yeah, I suppose, you know, what's going on there is that if these are killings by African Americans of African Americans, and you start focusing on them, you're pointing to something bad happening in that community, and people will feel, you know, well, particularly white people, will feel well, you know, should I as a white person be holding up bad things that black people are doing to each other, basically. I think that was certainly been an issue here in Australia with indigenous communities, where there was a lot of domestic violence going on, not killing necessarily, but there were a lot of problems, particularly when people are influenced by alcohol, in terms of domestic violence.

PS 51:16

And, for a long time that was not publicised as much as it should be, for exactly those reasons. People didn't want to pick on those who are already a disadvantaged minority. But, in fact, when, when it did start to come out, then many of the indigenous women in particular were spoke up, and we were glad that something had been said about that, and things were being done about it.

CH 51:39

Yeah, I think there's a, you know, around every topic like this, whether it's in indigenous communities in Australia, or black Americans, there's, I think, on the part of many people, a profound discomfort in broaching the topic. And that's, you know, I think it goes back to what I said at the beginning, where, you know, either we trust our discomfort about a subject and just bar off any subject that that elicits discomfort, or we distrust the feeling, you know, your initial gut reaction to a conversation and go

deeper and actually find reasons, or look for reasons why you should care more or less about something.

CH 52:28

I think that, in a nutshell, describes a lot of what you've been concerned with in your career, not about these specific topics, but about not just obeying your first emotional impulse about what it means to be a good person, and you know, which issues deserve your attention. And I do see what we're going through now is a kind of crisis of obeying the first emotional impulse. And to the extent that that causes good things, I think it causes those good things sort of by accident. And so I worry about the long term health of a society that is afraid to look at the uncomfortable issues.

PS 53:13

Yeah, I agree. I think we should be looking at uncomfortable issues. We should be prepared to do that. And that's one of the things that worries me about the kind of online culture of harassment and abuse that occurs when people dare to raise issues that leave them open to, you know, possibly quite unjustifiable attacks of against what they're doing, being hostile or racist, or homophobic, or against trans people, something of that sort.

PS 53:42

And there are too many cases of people who have suffered from that. I see that's one of the reasons why I, together with a couple of colleagues, establishing a journal called the Journal of Controversial Ideas, which will, which will be an academic peer-reviewed journal- so it's not going to accept any kinds of grants that don't have lots of evidence and an argument, but it will enable people who are worried about being harassed for having controversial views to publish under a pseudonym if they wish to do so, which other academic journals generally don't do. So we're trying to ensure that there is a space for controversial ideas that people can publish. As I say, good, well-argued arguments with evidence without risk of sacrificing a career or being personally abused for doing so.

CH 54:33

Yeah, I actually remember seeing that one or two years ago, you know, reading about that idea being in the works. Is that still in the works? What's the timeline on that?

PS 54:43

Yeah, it's actually it's taken a little longer for us to get it established than we hoped, because we want it to be an open access journal so that people can access it without having a library subscription or paying a lot of money. And we found a way of doing that now, and it's we've actually, we now have a call for papers out. So we're accepting papers, and we've got 20 or 30 papers that are currently being submitted and are under review. And none of them have completed the review processes yet. But we're hoping that that will happen within the next couple of months, and we'll start to put some papers out on the website.

CH 55:20

That's awesome. I really look forward to that. Before I let you go, Peter, can you point people to your latest book or the the book your most recently advertising, and point or tell people where they can find you on the internet.

PS 55:38

So the next book that will come out is going to be a book called Why Vegan, which is a collection of some of my past essays. It'll be published by Norton in October. And I will restate some of the things that I've written over the years, with also something recent about the connection, connection between factory farming and pandemics, and wet markets and pandemics. Prior to that, so the other thing that I've been doing is working on Effective Altruism, and with this charity, The Life you Can Save.

PS 56:13

I did a 10th anniversary edition of The Life you Can Save, a new edition. And again, we've we've made that completely free as well. So if you go to thelifeyoucansave.org you can download a digital copy of the book free. You can also get an audio copy free, and the audio has been done by a number of well-known people who've freely donated their time because they support the ideas of the book.

PS 56:38

So people like Kristen Bell, the actress, Paul Simon, the singer songwriter, Stephen Fry, a BBC host. Actually, one of the things I like about the audio is that we have a number of different ways of speaking English in it. We have, I read a chapter in my Australian accent, Stephen Fry has a beautiful English accent. We have Americans. We have Shabana Azmi, who's a very famous Indian actress. We have a Winnie Alma, who's an African woman reading. So I really like the globalism of the audio edition of The Life you Can Save.

CH 57:13

That's awesome. Well, thank you so much. It's been a true pleasure to have you on, and hope to see you again.

PS 57:21

Great, thanks. Been glad to have the opportunity of talking to you about a range of interesting issues. Bye.