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Noblesse N'Oblige Pas:  
President Bush and the Ethic of Privilege  
A review of *The President of Good and Evil* by Peter Singer

by  
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Conservative commentators howled when, in 1998, Princeton University named Peter Singer DeCamp Professor in its Center for Human Values. This bioethicist takes nothing as sacred or tabooed—not the distinction of humans and animals or the sacredness of all forms of human life. He examines our assumptions about such matters and disturbs their unchallenged roots. Singer holds outrageously disturbing views on the nature of human life, his critics protested, that threaten the moral values of our young. Harry T. Shapiro, then Princeton's president, took time to defend Singer's appointment to head off those who were preparing hemlock or worse to withhold gifts to Princeton. Steve Forbes, for example, promised to do the latter in order to prove his conservative credentials during the 2000 Republican presidential primaries.

In *The President of Good and Evil*, Peter Singer once again takes a very controversial view. He posits that President George W. Bush is sincere in the ethical values underpinning his decisions. He then conducts a thorough and thoughtful examination of those ethics. He begins with ground very familiar for him—the nature of human life—to examine the President's decision on stem cell research, perhaps his best research and thought out one. Singer expands that examination to a broader look at the President's pursuit of a culture of life. Other chapters similarly take four or five specific policy initiatives and then examine the ethical basis of each initiative and a thread uniting those initiatives around broad areas—justice and opportunity, freedom, faith, war, international relations, the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, and the US world dominance.

Bush, Singer concludes, is not consistent within any ethical framework. He defends individual rights on stem cell research but denies *habeas*

*corpus* for “enemy combatants.” His utilitarian principles are in play in promises to increased funds to fight AIDS in Africa but absent in his opposition to physician-assisted suicide or the medical use of marijuana. Ostensibly, this born-again Christian could claim Christian ethics. He certainly speaks often about the sacredness of human life and God-given rights. However, his invasion of Afghanistan does not meet the Christian criteria of a just war and the doctrine of preventive war, such as the invasion of Iraq, flatly contradicts them. To be fair, however, inconsistency is not a terribly telling criticism; few of us are consistent in our beliefs and often hold conflicting views.

Far more disturbing than some inconsistency, Singer warns, is the President’s consistent reliance on his instinctive or intuitive sense of right and wrong in making policy decisions. This is very troubling for Singer because he believes that President Bush’s ethics come not from a set of well-considered principles based on self-reflection and serious thought but from the clarity of an adolescent. President Bush, Singer contends, does not reach simplicity by navigating the whitewater of complexity but by never entering them.

Singer’s strongest criticism of the President’s ethic goes to what Singer considers the heart of being human—reflective self-awareness. However, “Reflection and critical thought are...not something that Bush relishes” (p. 211). His lack of these features permits the President strong convictions and misplaced values, just as many adolescents. He may insist on truthfulness in small matters but show a “gross misunderstanding of the moral requirements of honesty,” Singer argues (p. 217). The now infamous sixteen words of the 2003 State of the Union Message, “the British government has learned that Saddam Hussein recently sought significant quantities of uranium from Africa,” represent, for Singer, the art of putting the literal truth in the service of dishonesty.

Those who view the President’s moral development in this arrested manner will welcome a thorough examination and refutation of Bush’s apparently principled positions. For them, Singer will be more than an academic Michael Moore but just as satisfying. Likewise, readers of the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* will find familiar evidence carefully marshaled to make a convincing, scholarly case that there is no unifying or even substantial set of values shoring up the President’s ethics or policies.

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Is this enough, however? Why even bother to pretend that the President is thoughtful and principled just to refute that assertion? Singer pegged this perspective in his description of the “cynical view” of the President’s ethics, which he rejected but with which I began. “To take Bush’s ethical views seriously, to subject them to a reasoned critique and try to fit them into a coherent ethical framework, is...to treat them more seriously than they deserve” (p. 219).

After reading the book, I remain cynical. Why take President Bush’s ethics seriously? We have had previous presidents who could parse the truth at the cost of honesty depending on what the meaning of “is” is. Certainly, Presidents Clinton and Kennedy behaved like immature adolescents in their sexual affairs. Like them, President Bush’s views would not merit serious attention at all except for his position.

Their consequences make a president’s ethics a serious matter. Consequences go to the heart of politics as a vocation according to Max Weber, whom Singer does not mention, unfortunately. The ethical shortcomings of Bush’s policies are clearest not for their inconsistency or their place on Lawrence Kohlberg’s scale of moral development but when measured by Weber’s ethic of responsibility.

IN HIS WORLD WAR I ESSAY, “POLITICS AS A VOCATION,” Weber argues that an ethic of ultimate ends “just does not *ask* for consequences.” “The believer in an ethic of ultimate ends feels ‘responsible’ only for seeing to it that the flame of pure intentions is not quenched.” He dealt with the complexity of Christian pacifism and rejected it. The ethic of responsibility requires “one has to give an account of the foreseeable results of one’s actions.” Thus it prohibits blind allegiance to radical Christian pacifism, or any ultimate end, because of its foreseeable adverse consequences. Responding to aggression by turning the other cheek would abrogate the ethic of responsibility for the ethic of ultimate ends. Intentions cannot outweigh the consideration of the foreseeable consequences of our actions in the vocation of politics.

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There is a counterpart to this mix of intention and consequences in the ethic of everyday life. The strictest ethical test is to judge our actions for their consequence on others and to judge others' actions towards us by their intentions. In contrast, the laxest is the opposite—a stress on good intentions and denial of the consequences of our actions.

By the consistent avoidance of the consequences of his actions and invoking good intentions despite bad outcomes, President Bush falls on the laxer side of this measure of moral development. Again, George W. Bush's avoidance of consequences and insistence on intentions would be of little importance except that as President of the United States, they have much more disturbing shortcomings than conventional pubescent misjudgment.

Singer sets up the contrast of intentions and consequences, well. Whether or not President Bush intends to bankrupt the US so that it can no longer afford social and regulatory programs, the consequences of record deficits and increased military spending make cuts in these programs a logical and foreseeable consequence. Similarly, while it may be the intention of the President to defend the United States against terrorist attacks, the consequence of policies of incarceration without due process undermines the U.S. heritage of a civil liberties upheld by an independent judiciary (p. 88). The consequence of preventive war doctrine, whatever its intent, restores the "might makes right" principle of international relations. The consequence of unilateral military action undermines international efforts at peace and nonproliferation of weapons. The consequence of invoking God on our side against evil puts us in the mindset of Islamic fundamentalist terrorists. The consequences of withdrawing from international agreements prolong the inequitable squandering of the earth's resources on an unsustainable pattern of economic activity and consumption; and so on and so on.

Obviously, it would be hard to win an election on a platform of these consequences. Thus, the consequences of policies, and here other administrations share some blame, are denied or ignored. (As I write, Republicans at their national convention are celebrating the liberation of Afghanistan and Iraq and the prospect of their stable, democratic development. As I revise, news emerged of a report to the President, at the time of the convention, that the best that the best hope for Iraq in the near

future is unsteady stability and the worst outcome civil war.) When consequences cannot be denied or ignored, intentions are substituted for them. No matter what the evidence of torture at Abu Ghraib prison in Baghdad—events that came to light too late for inclusion in Singer’s book—the White House and Pentagon never intended them and are thus not responsible for them.

This brings us to a central question: Are we to believe that President Bush’s denial of foreseeable consequences comes from his effort to deceive the American people or from genuine innocence—an unwillingness or inability to accept the consequences of failed policies. Singer ducks this question. “Sincerely held or not, Bush’s ethic is woefully inadequate” (p. 225). One gets a little further with Paul Krugman’s judgment. In *The Great Unraveling*, Krugman argues that President Bush is simply a good CEO for a board that understands and wants many undesirable consequences such as an impoverished national government and the cessation of almost all social programs and policies. His neoconservative advisors and their supporters understand and welcome their intended consequences of the President’s policies. Their ethic of ultimate ends includes their vision of a radical restructuring of US social and foreign policies that serves as their ethic of responsibility. Singer cites Krugman’s work often and seems sympathetic with his view.

But, if we are concerned with the ethics of President Bush, this begs the question: What responsibility do CEOs have for the consequences of policy whether their own or others? May President Bush insist sincerely that he has no responsibility for the bad consequences of the policies of his administration?

I believe that he can make these claims sincerely. He can be truthful in denying foreseeable consequences, if he does not have the honesty to inquire about them, one of Singer’s most telling comments about the President’s morality. His lack of reflection keeps him safe from the complexity of matters beyond his interest and thus from some of the responsibility for the foreseeable consequence of his decisions. Illustratively, the President’s religious views incline to the simplicity of Manichaeism, a Christian heresy that polarizes the world into good and evil, rather than the complexity of the Sermon on the Mount and the commandment to turn the other cheek, with which Weber grappled.

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This brings us beyond Singer's assertion of an underdeveloped morality to a highly developed and consistent ethic. The President seems to combine the ethic of ultimate ends with a total lack of ethic of responsibility into an ethic of privilege—the ability, based on selective perception and wishful thinking, to define matters as one wants to see them and then to ignore the consequences of one's actions. This ethic marks his youth and career—admission to prestigious universities despite mediocre academic achievement; a cavalier National Air Guard duty; acquisition of wealth despite business failures; failed and deficit-ridden policies in Texas; as well as the events that Singer portrays so well. Simply put, a highly developed ethic of privilege implies that privilege does not oblige. The privileged have no obligation for the deleterious consequences of their actions or beliefs, including of course the implications of this one. At its highest stages of development, this ethic of privilege permits the President to be sincere and irresponsible.

At the end of these considerations, we come face to face with two questions: How did this poorly-principled man become president? If the serious negative consequences of his poorly principled policies are so obvious, why does he have an excellent chance to be re-elected? The answers have to do with those who share, enthusiastically or reluctantly, the ethic of privilege with the President.

A five to four majority of the US Supreme Court embraced that ethic enthusiastically in its decision that made George W. Bush president. The Court took the equal protection clause designed to establish and protect the voting rights of African-Americans, applied it to hinder a true account of voting results, and then refused to accept its own decision as a precedent for other cases.

The recount process, in its features here described, is inconsistent with the minimum procedures necessary to protect the fundamental right of each voter in the special instance of a statewide recount under the authority of a single state judicial officer. Our consideration is limited to the present circumstances, for the problem of equal protection in election processes generally presents many complexities.

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Behind the legal language is the clear statement of an ethic of privilege: things are as we say they are, we will stay on the simple side of the complexity of the equal protection of rights, and the consequence of our action is not binding on us.

The ethic of privilege got George W. Bush into the White House but can it keep him there? Perhaps so. There are those of real privilege who also abide by the ethic and will support the President. However, few Americans have such a highly developed ethic of privilege as President Bush because his degree of privilege is beyond the ordinary experience of Americans. Why then might these ordinary voters join him in the ethic of privilege?

The simplicity of action based on firm, common sense convictions has appeal to ordinary people. If President Bush does not have a high degree of moral judgment, as Singer argues, he resembles a conventional degree of development, that is the ordinary stage of development. His penchant for simplicity without reflection and a world of stark rights and wrongs has appeal to some, who may also prefer matters to be uncomplicated.

This simplicity has less appeal to those who understand there is responsibility for foreseeable consequences in a world with grey as well as black and white. Even among them, however, the President may find some support because a well-developed ethic of privilege gives him a great degree of self-confidence expressed primarily in affability. Fred Greenstein, a political scientist and scholar on presidents, points to the President's "aptitude for the personal side of politics." Greenstein compares President Bush to Lyndon Johnson and terms him "congenitally gregarious" with hallmarks of "exceptional sociability" and a "bantering manner." He just seems too nice to be so wrong. The President has unshakeable conviction in the ethic of privilege. His own life is an embodied narrative that selective perception and wishful thinking—sincere irresponsibility—do not impede one from becoming president of the United States.

His uncomplicated views and sociability permit President Bush to embody exceedingly well a narrative of other American values that obviously appeal to a great many voters. Leadership scholars such as Howard Gardner and Ronald Heifetz help us understand that the ordinary narrative

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of the Bush presidency—including the ethic of privilege—saves us the task of bringing our values into line with our practices. The ordinary narrative does not ask the consequences of our actions for our values. What happens when you leave programs unfunded or under funded and program funds unspent? Rather, it explains our actions in terms of the highest esteem we hold for ourselves. Our intentions—to leave no child behind, to achieve clean skies, to fight poverty through a special millennium fund, to reconstruct Iraq, or to combat AIDS in Africa with record amounts of assistance—suffice. We have to go no further than our intentions in the ordinary narrative of American actions. In his interview with Arab television stations, for example, President Bush found the torture in Abu Ghraib prison abhorrent. But assured the people of the Arab nations, “the actions of these few people do not reflect the hearts of the American people...This is not America.”

Yet what America is the President describing? Certainly, it could not be found in Texas when the then-Governor George Bush executed 152 inmates including juvenile offenders and a mentally retarded man. That America is in the company of China, Iran, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Yemen. The America that George Bush offers is one where our intentions shield us from the consequences of our actions. He assures us that bad things do not happen but if they do, they happen only because bad people did them or only to people—such as the Texas 152—who had it coming to them. This is a very comforting narrative.

George Bush enjoys his electoral prospects because he exudes the ethic of privilege and entices us to join him there. We are invited to think wishfully that government services can improve and increase with less taxes; that today’s debt will never come due or impinge on our children’s welfare; that the growing inequalities of income have no negative consequences for democracy or the middle class; that military might can order the world the way we want it; that disturbing evidence of environmental damage can be safely ignored; that social problems have their origins in the people with them and not in social conditions; that racist policies may be overcome with race blind policies; etc. Within an ethic of privilege, selective perception means that we don’t have to examine or reflect on our actions. In Weber’s terms, the ethic of privilege’s ultimate end is to keep us free from an ethic of responsibility.

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A variant of the ethic of privilege may be necessary for many Americans to support the President. The presidency, being the primary elected office of our national government, serves as a national symbol. Ordinary Americans may privilege President Bush as they would any president as the occupant of the highest office of their government. Their perception may become selective, or selected from them, when President Bush cannot find his way to the end of a sentence. As when he embarrassingly bemoaned that “Too many OB-GYNs aren’t able to practice their love with women all across this country” because of medical malpractice suits. Understandably, ordinary Americans may prefer to think that we have invested the power of our nation in a man with greater clarity of thought than expression. Likewise, they may prefer to think wishfully that the President had meaning other than the clear articulation of the ethic of privilege when he argued against John Kerry’s plan to roll back the tax cuts for the most wealthy Americans because “real rich people figure out how to dodge taxes.”

The ethic of privilege has special appeal now, a time of fear. People are less inclined to aspire to higher forms of moral reflection, argument or action, when they fear physical violence. In such a time, there is some comfort to live in a world of stark contrasts—good and evil, right and wrong—and its simplicity. The foreseeable consequences of President Bush’s policies make running for reelection difficult except for the extraordinary willingness of ordinary people, afraid for their safety, to make their safety an ultimate end with less regard for the ethic of responsibility. Preventing terrorist attacks may outweigh considerations of other policies—education, environment, civil liberties—and their outcomes.

Part of the substantial appeal of President Bush may be the appeal of the ethic of privilege in a frightening world whose terror exceeds our understanding. At such time, an us/them world may be reassuring. Likewise, it may be comforting to invoke the privilege of exceptionalism, which the Supreme Court used to make him President. We can use force against others without assuming that we have established an example for others to follow against us. The ethic of privilege violates Kant’s ethical imperative “act always as if the maxim of your actions were to be a universal law” (p. 213) but it also makes the world a simpler place if you do not look beyond the intentions of our actions.

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Peter Singer's thoughtful consideration can yield some disturbing insights. In this case, the President's instinctive ethical judgments yield an unreflective ethic of privilege—ultimate values sincerely held but insufficiently thought out and without responsibility for the consequences of actions taken on their behalf. The ethic of privilege offers a truly disturbing invitation to escape from the freedom to reflect on the consequences of our actions in the presidential election of 2004 and from the responsibility for our actions.

Unfortunately, the ethic of privilege is what it is because it is not available to ordinary people. The only parts of the ethic of privilege that ordinary people share are the opportunities to distinguish themselves from others—including gays and lesbians—in terms of good and evil and not to ask or reflect on the foreseeable consequences of that action. President Bush's ethic of privilege permits us, ordinary Americans, to become privileged by defending a freedom that, ironically, we dare not use lest we become one of "them" or the victims of those who envy our too-risky-to-use freedoms. It is easier, of course, to dismiss disturbing thoughts like these than to consider them. That was the advice Singer's conservative critics gave to Princeton. That consideration is the safeguard of democracy and, Singer would remind us, the expression of reflective self-awareness that makes us fully human. Ultimately then, the election of 2004 entails the ethics of responsibility of ordinary Americans as much if not more than the ethics of George W. Bush.

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