

A date for your diaries – Professor Peter Singer on Ethics and Technology

A public lecture at WIPO

On Friday 8 June 2018, Professor Peter Singer will give a Public Lecture on Ethics and Technology at the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO).

SARAH JORDAN, DEPUTY EDITOR

Described by the New Yorker magazine as the “most influential living philosopher”, Peter Singer is Professor of Bioethics at Princeton University and Laureate Professor at the University of Melbourne. He has written or edited over 40 books on topics ranging from altruism, bioethics, animal liberation, and the environment. He advocates utilitarianism, defined by Oxford dictionaries as “the doctrine that an action is right in so far as it promotes happiness, and that the greatest happiness of the greatest number should be the guiding principle of conduct”. He is co-founder of the association “The Life You Can Save”, based on the precepts of his book of the same name. It recommends non-profit organizations that have been shown to be highly effective in improving the lives of people living in extreme poverty, and encourages more effective giving. He tells us in very practical terms just what we can do to achieve this aim in a 2013 TED talk entitled “The why and how of effective altruism”, viewed to date by 1.6 million persons.

Professor Singer kindly granted me an interview on his forthcoming lecture, using a technological tool that we all take for granted in the developed world – Skype.

Professor Singer, could you give UN Special readers some insight into the aspects of ethics and technology that you will develop and expand upon in your lecture?

I’m interested in what the affluent world ought to be doing for the developing world and that’s clearly relevant to technology and intellectual property. There are issues about how we can make technology available at a price that people in developing countries can afford and particularly technologies that are important for them – a few years ago we had this issue with regard to antiretroviral drugs for HIV/AIDs, for example, and we need to ensure that the protection of intellectual property benefits the world as a whole. This is also a concern of the United Nations. The consequences of nationalistic policies such as Trump’s “America First” are serious.

My starting point is ethics, but this can be applied to technology – how can technology make development aid more effective in helping help people in extreme poverty, for example.

Is ethics training a good idea in your opinion – in the workplace or for young people?

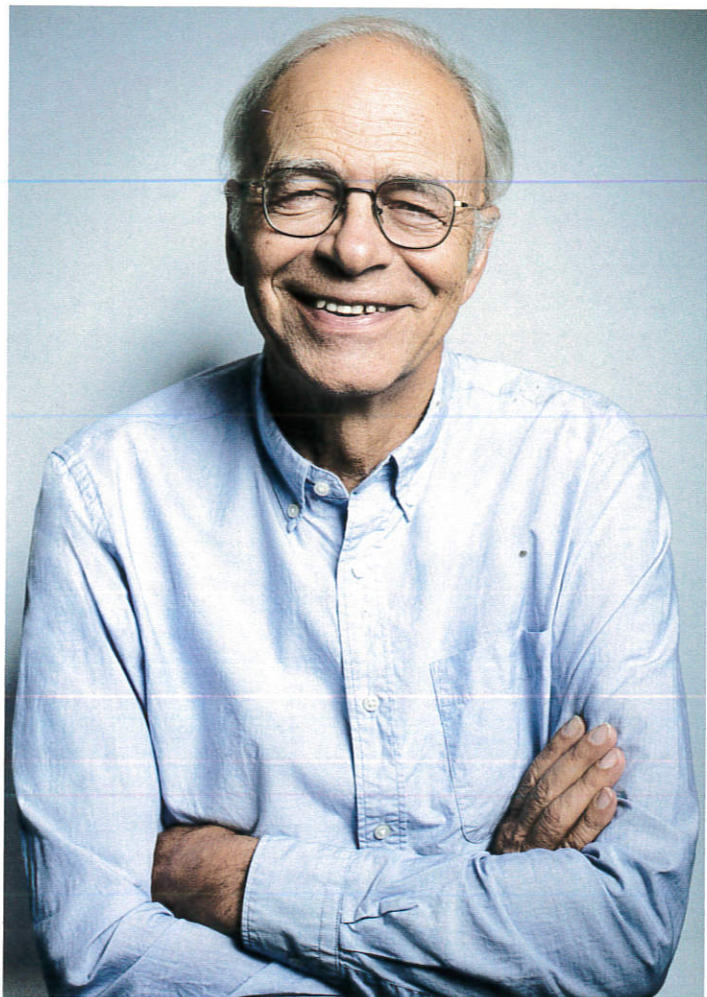
I prefer the term education to training. At work, when you join an organization, I would like to see something meaningful

that really stimulates people to discuss... not just choosing the right answer to multiple choice questions and moving onto the next one. Ethics should be more than that. Young people need to think about ethical questions too. It’s good to know about the history of thinkers and ideas – as it is about the history of just about anything for that matter – but for young people to think about problems and ask themselves questions is better. Career choices, for example: What am I going to do with my life? How can I make a positive difference to the world? Or what should I eat? Am I complicit in a system that causes immense suffering to billions of animals and aggravates climate change? I would like to challenge students to think for themselves rather than to ask them what Kant thought.

Can you tell readers more about the association “The Life You Can Save”, which you co-founded?

“The Life You Can Save” was founded in 2013 with the aim of making it easier for people to donate to the most effective charities. We present visitors to our website with a selection of charities that are recommended on the basis of the three E’s – evidence, efficiency and execution.

The annual report for 2017 has just been published and it is encouraging because it shows



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Professor Peter Singer.

that the ratio between what we spend and the giving we direct to the most highly effective charities is 1:12. Our aim is to grow and to continue to re-direct a substantial proportion of the very large sums given for philanthropic purposes to the most effective organizations, where it can do hundreds of times more good than it often otherwise does.

Many of the charities we have selected use technology – the Against Malaria Foundation, for example, distributes long-lasting

insecticidal bed nets against malaria and smartphone technology to monitor their distribution. GiveDirectly is a charity that provides mobile phones to enable money to be transferred to some of the poorest people in East Africa. Ninety percent of what people donate goes directly to those who need it. Kenyans can pay for more things with their mobile phones than Americans can! This is essential to them because rural populations do not have easy access to banks. In agriculture, the One Acre Fund frees small farmers

ETHICS, TECHNOLOGY, AND THE FUTURE OF HUMANITY

WIPO Public Lecture by Professor Peter Singer

Friday 8 June 2018, 10.00^{a.m.} at WIPO

(34, Ch. des Colombettes, 1211 Geneva, www.wipo.org)

Languages

English/French (simultaneous interpretation)

The lecture is open to all: members of the diplomatic community, staff of the United Nations and specialized agencies, NGOs with consultative status to WIPO and the UN, interested citizens.

Attendance is free of charge, registration is required.

For registration and/or information, please send an e-mail to publiclecture@wipo.int

from dependence on unscrupulous people who cheat them on agricultural prices. Through a mobile phone app, they have knowledge of the market price for their produce and thus more bargaining power when they sell it. Development Media International uses technology for radio and TV campaigns on health issues to change behaviours and save lives...

Technology in general has tremendous potential for good, but potential for harm too. I am interested in how societies will cope with Artificial Intelligence and the unemployment it will inevitably lead to. There are trials underway in East Africa on universal basic income, but is there the political will to make this happen on a large scale? No place will be immune from automatization. These are interesting problems to think about.

And the role of the United Nations in all this?

I think the UN is a vital institution – it's very important that

the world works collectively. One of my books, on globalisation, is called *One World* (2002) and it was recently updated – the new edition is called *One World Now*. In it, I argue for the importance of global institutions working together on issues such as climate change, trade, development aid and humanitarian interventions to prevent genocide and crimes against humanity. These are world concerns that are also UN concerns. I very much regret that events such as the election of Trump have undermined global initiatives in all these important areas. I think we need to work hard to try to reverse that trend.

Professor Singer thank you. We look forward to welcoming you to Geneva in June and to hearing more about these very important issues. ■

For further information:
www.thelifeyoucanlive.org

For practical information about the public lecture: www.wipo.org

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