

30 Jun 98

Washington Times

A Messenger of Death at Princeton

David S. Oderberg¹

Princeton University has just announced its appointment of the Australian philosopher Peter Singer to the Ira W. DeCamp Professorship of Bioethics at the University Center for Human Values. No doubt this august institution is congratulating itself on its coup, and Prof. Singer quietly pleased at such weighty recognition of his work which has been highly influential in applied ethics for **over 25 years**. And yet, there will be many people deeply disturbed by this appointment, particularly by the message it sends to the most vulnerable members of society.

The USA has been largely insulated from the controversy surrounding Prof. Singer's work. There he is seen mainly as a crusader for animal rights (though he does not in fact believe in rights) and the environment. This, however, is but one aspect of his philosophical activity. It is for his other work that he has been dogged by controversy wherever he goes, in Britain, Germany, Switzerland, Austria and of course in Australia, where he has been called that country's "most notorious messenger of death" by the Catholic archbishop of Singer's home town of Melbourne and denounced by some of Australia's leading rabbis.

It is Mr. Singer's writings and speeches on eugenics, euthanasia and the rights of babies, children, the elderly and the disabled, and the (lack of) value of human life in general, that are the focus of attention in so many countries. In the late 1980s a major international philosophy conference in Austria had to be cancelled because of protests by disabled groups and threats to disrupt the proceedings. In **1996** demonstrators tried to storm a

¹ David S. Oderberg is lecturer in Philosophy at the University of Reading, England and author of *The Metaphysics of Identity Over Time* (1993)

building in Bonn, Germany, where Prof. Singer was launching his latest book. Young protesters, some in wheelchairs, chanted "Singer out!" Three parliamentarians from Chancellor Kohl's Christian Democratic Party compared Mr. Singer to Hitler's henchman, Martin Bormann. Prof. Singer can now hardly speak on the Continent without being assailed by the protests of the disabled, who sometimes chain themselves to barricades outside his lecture venues.

Several weeks ago controversy flared in the British media (not for the first time) as Mr. Singer arrived for a series of lectures. He was denounced as "the man who would kill disabled babies," and described as a threat to civilized human values. Now, given that he has just been appointed to a chair at Princeton's Center for Human Values, and assuming that such a prestigious university is not deliberately setting out to *undermine* human values, one must ask: Who is right, Princeton or the protesters?

Consider the evidence. Prof. Singer has said in print, time and again, that disabled babies and children have no right to life. Indeed, only human beings with "lives worth living" are worthy of serious protection, and even *they* have no right to life as such, since talk of rights is, he says, "a convenient political shorthand" for "the era of thirty-second TV news clips". As he argues in his notorious book *Should the Baby Live?*, if a human being has a life not worth living, it can be permissible, and sometimes even a duty, to kill such a one.

One might be forgiven for thinking Mr. Singer only has in mind babies and infants with serious disabilities. (Babies and infants, by the way, are not real *persons* for him because they are not "rational and self-aware"; they don't even reach first base as far as moral value goes.) However, he goes further. Even an infant with a condition as mild as hemophilia can be killed if killing her has no "adverse effects on others." In other words, if the parents, and society at large, want the hemophiliac baby dead because she is a burden on them, then killing her does no wrong. If the parents go ahead and produce another, this time healthy (or "normal") baby, then far from the dead baby's having been murdered, the sum total of human happiness has been *increased* by the killing and subsequent replacement.

Indeed, Prof. Singer believes all "non-persons" are, in his words, "replaceable," much like chickens and other farmyard animals (his analogy). Infants, whether "defective" or not, are not "normal human

beings". (Mr. Singer deleted the word "defective" from the second edition of his famous book *Practical Ethics*.) Newborn babies have, in his own explicit and unbelievable analogy, the same moral value as snails. And lest anyone think it is just the young who are at risk in Singer's bizarre ethical universe, note that he is a champion of euthanasia for any adult whose life is "not worth living!"

For instance, elderly people might be allowed to opt out of being killed should they ever become "senile elderly patients," if this will prevent elderly people living in fear. But if the "balance of advantage" requires it, their opt-out should be overridden. In other words, not only is he a champion of voluntary euthanasia, and of non-voluntary euthanasia (for "non-persons" in supposedly irreversible comas and the like), but he favors also *involuntary* killing of anyone who has become a burden on their families, on the health care system, or on the state.

I have only scratched the surface of the dark moral world of Prof. Peter Singer. His advocacy of the harvesting of organs from disabled babies could also be mentioned. There is his championing of eugenics. Also his sinister idea that babies should only be admitted into the community as citizens in a ceremony one month after birth. Why one month and not two, or ten? That is anyone's guess.

If anyone thinks that all this is disturbingly reminiscent of the Nazis' own notorious euthanasia and eugenics program for "life unworthy of life" (*lebensunwerten Lebens*), they would not be far from the truth. Many academics, politicians, religious figures, advocates for the disabled or the elderly and other right-thinking people are appalled at Prof. Singer's ideas and see similar sinister overtones. If Princeton University believes it is advancing respect for human values by its appointment of Prof. Singer, perhaps it should examine his views a little more closely.

Author receives his mail at

David S Oderberg • Dept of Philosophy, U of Reading • Reading RG6 6AA • England

d.s.oderberg@reading.ac.uk