

# Peter Singer's coming to Rhodes! What are your views about it?

Below are *my* views about the Peter Singer event on Rhodes's campus. Any reactions you have to what I say below should come to me ([sampson@rhodes.edu](mailto:sampson@rhodes.edu)). I welcome all emails—supporting, challenging, outraged, etc. And if I'm in the office, I'm happy to chat about it. If you don't want to stand in front of this door for a long time while you read, feel free to take a picture so you can read and reflect later. (If you're reading this in another context, this was first written to post on my office door.)

—

## The Most Famous and Influential Philosopher is Speaking at Rhodes

Peter Singer, the most famous and influential philosopher on the planet, leading voice of the animal liberation and effective altruism movements, has agreed to give a talk at Rhodes—just as he has at hundreds of other universities across the globe, without hiccup, over his 50-year career. Philosophy departments everywhere are jealous of us. But many non-philosophy faculty here at Rhodes are upset, outraged even. They're seeking to have the event canceled because of his philosophical views. They think that his views have no place on a college campus. Never mind that those same views have appeared over-and-over again in the best peer-reviewed journals and book publishers in the discipline. Never mind that those views have made him among the most cited philosophers of all time, with literally hundreds of thousands of books, articles, dissertations, and class periods devoted to his work. Never mind that he teaches at Princeton and routinely gives talks at places such as Oxford, Harvard, Stanford, Google, and TED. Never mind that his writings and ideas regularly appear in venues such as the *New York Times*, *The New Yorker*, *Vox*, *The Atlantic*, and *The Guardian*. Never mind that in September 2021, he was awarded the \$1 million Berggruen Prize, given annually to a thinker whose ideas have “profoundly shaped human self-understanding and advancement in a rapidly changing world”, half of which he immediately gave to a charity alleviating global poverty and half of which he will donate later after getting input from the public. And never mind that his work has led to the creation of literally dozens of charitable organizations, each devoted to using every dollar they receive as cost-effectively as possible to alleviate the suffering of the global poor. Apparently certain members of the non-philosophy faculty at Rhodes know something that everyone else at these esteemed institutions doesn't: Peter Singer's ideas are so beyond-the-pale that he should not be allowed to speak at Rhodes, or any university (why would Rhodes be special?), and anyone who thinks otherwise ought to be ashamed of themselves. What do these non-philosophy faculty members know that everyone else doesn't?

## Responsible Intellectual Engagement

First rule of responsible intellectual engagement and argumentation: If you're going to criticize someone for the views they hold, you had better represent those views accurately. If I'm outraged at you because (I claim) you said that all white people should die, but what you really said is that white people sometimes say and do racist things, then I have made the mistake. Not you. My outrage is unjustified. You don't owe anyone an apology. I owe you an apology for egregiously misrepresenting

you and your views. Objection: Are you saying that outrage for a perceived (but not actual) harm can be unjustified? Reply: Yes.

### **Peter Singer's Views**

Peter Singer has argued that it is permissible for *the parents* of *infants* with *severe* (and therefore very rare) cognitive or physical disabilities—disabilities so debilitating or so painful that their life would bring about more pain and suffering than happiness—to authorize doctors to euthanize those infants.

That's a controversial, even disturbing, view. If that's what you're upset about, fine! That *is* his view and that *is* disturbing for many people. I don't want to convince you not to be outraged about that. (Though I hope you'll agree that that view, shared by an overwhelming number of philosophers and non-philosophers alike, does not disqualify him from speaking at Rhodes.)

### **Not Peter Singer's Views**

Singer has never advocated for anything approaching the “genocide”, “extermination”, “slaughter”, “forced sterilization”, or “targeting” of people with disabilities. He has not suggested that it's permissible to kill a person or an infant on the grounds that they have some disability or other. He has not argued that we should “debate the right of people with disabilities to exist”. He has not argued that people with disabilities are “defined by their disability and whatever ‘pain or suffering’ they may endure”. He has not questioned the “basic humanity” of people with disabilities or even severely disabled infants. It is false that “His work rests on the assumption that disabled people are defined through [their] suffering and lack.” He has not “implied that it was impossible to sexually assault severely disabled people.” He has never been interested in “debating whether disabled people [as a class] are people.”

Note how the misrepresentation happens. Singer says something about a very specific, and very rare, kind of disabled human being—*infants* with *severe* and extraordinarily *rare* disabilities. That claim then gets distorted into a statement about *all* or *most* people with disabilities. He made no claims about people with a wheelchair, deafness, blindness, autism, ADHD, mental illness, and the thousands of other disabilities a human being can have. Indeed, he thinks that the overwhelming majority of disabled people (all that are not severely disabled infants) are obviously capable of living flourishing lives and should receive the same respect and moral consideration as anyone else.

### **“OK, but why would he say that about infants with severe disabilities?”**

The standard procedure in Australian hospitals, at the time Singer first made his remarks, was to remove all support from severely disabled infants to let them die “naturally” of dehydration or starvation. He thought this was monstrous. He thought it much more humane to actively euthanize them to spare them the indescribable suffering of a slow death by lack of nutrition. Let me say that again: *Peter Singer developed views on this topic precisely because he thinks that infants with severe disabilities matter morally.* When no one else was speaking on behalf of these infants, he did.

### **“But Singer's views are harmful to people with disabilities”**

It has been claimed that bringing Peter Singer to campus harms people with disabilities at Rhodes. But how many members of the Rhodes community does Peter Singer think it is permissible to kill? To answer this question we need only to ask: How many members of the Rhodes community are

infants with severe cognitive or physical disabilities—disabilities so extreme that their life is likely to bring them, or their parents, more pain than happiness? I'll venture a guess: Zero. Certainly zero students, zero faculty, zero staff. Not one.

But maybe Singer's views about severely disabled infants will be seen by some people at Rhodes as a license to abuse disabled members of the Rhodes community. After all, we know first-hand that philosophers' claims are often badly misunderstood and distorted—intentionally or accidentally. But notice that the claim that bringing Singer to Rhodes makes Rhodes unsafe for disabled people is an empirical claim—a claim about the probability of violence toward people with disabilities—that we can check. And that claim is false. If it were true, we would expect to see a disproportionate number of violent attacks against disabled people wherever Singer expresses his views. Singer teaches at Princeton on a regular basis. Is Princeton overrun with violence against people with disabilities? Are such crimes even more prevalent at Princeton than other universities? No. Indeed, I'm willing to wager that Princeton is among the safest places on the planet for people with disabilities. Singer has given public lectures at hundreds of universities over his 50-year career. Does the rate of violence against people with disabilities increase shortly after a Singer visit? No. What, then, is the evidence that Singer's view harms or risks harming people with disabilities? Your guess is as good as mine.

But perhaps the (admittedly false) misrepresentations of Singer's views make people with disabilities at Rhodes feel uncomfortable. I obviously can't speak to whether that claim is true. But, if it is, then the solution to that problem seems to be approaching the people badly misrepresenting his views and asking them to please stop. For it is *they* who are making people with disabilities at Rhodes uncomfortable.

### **“Trust the experts! Well...except in this case!”**

As we know, many people reject the claims of medical experts and scientists on the basis of their own do-it-yourself “research”. Such research is usually a series of Google searches for precisely what one wants to hear. To such independent “researchers”, academics routinely reply: “Trust the experts! A non-expert's best, and most sincere, attempts to jump into dense, complex, temporally extended academic debates by means of ‘research’ are bound to go awry.” And the academics are right. These “researchers” have none of the background or tools necessary to understand the issues in such a short period of time.

But many of those objecting to Singer's visit had never heard of him, or his work, until they received an email objecting to his visit. (One faculty member wrote me an email objecting to Peter *Springer's* visit—didn't even get the name right.) They then hopped on Google, Twitter, etc. looking for anything that might confirm what they already “knew”—that Singer's a moral monster. Sure, they had to sift through a bunch of stuff about him being an advocate for the global poor, animals, and immigrants. But they found what they were looking for. “Look at this sentence I found! Sure sounds bad!” Sure he's written innumerable books, journal articles, and opinion pieces about innumerable topics—so much that one could not possibly, in the span of a week, understand the nuances and motivations of Singer's views. But, for some reason, certain members of the Rhodes faculty judged that the “trust the experts” advice didn't apply in this case. In this case, apparently, a Google search, a cup of coffee, and a good heart is all you need to get to the bottom of things.

What do the *actual* experts about Singer's views—Singer himself and those who have read and taught his work for decades—say? As I've said, Singer and his views have, for decades, been widely published, widely solicited, widely taught, widely cited, and widely respected among philosophers. Philosophers, almost universally (there is almost always an exception), do not believe that Singer advocates for the "genocide", "extermination", "slaughter", "forced sterilization", or "targeting" of people with disabilities. Or that he thinks it's permissible to kill a person or an infant on the grounds that they have some disability or other. Or any of the other stuff mentioned above in the "Not Peter Singer's Views" section—all of which came from Rhodes faculty members or students. In fact, if you wrote the kinds of accusations people are making of Singer in a paper and sent it to an academic journal in philosophy, it would be returned to you, rejected, with reviewer comments somewhere in the vicinity of "This paper fails at the first task of a philosophy paper—representing one's opponent's views accurately." It is not the least bit controversial among philosophers to have Singer speak on campus. It is an honor.

**"OK, but maybe the experts are wrong in this case, and the non-experts are right. Or maybe philosophers are just moral monsters."**

Yeah. Maybe that's it.