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# The Scary Logic of Peter Singer

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Peter Singer, Ira W. DeCamp Professor of Bioethics at the Center for Human Values at Princeton University, is one of the most controversial academics in the world — and deservedly so. His views on human dignity, infanticide, and animal rights are some of the most radical to be found.

In an opinion column published in today's edition of *The New York Times*, Singer addresses the case of a severely disabled girl known only as Ashley. Ashley has been described by her devoted parents as a "pillow baby." She is unable to communicate, to walk, or even to change her position in bed. Even her parents are not sure that she recognizes them. Her mental age has been estimated at three months, even though she is now nine years old.

In an effort to keep her size manageable and to prevent puberty, doctors recently removed her reproductive organs and are treating her with hormones to prevent further growth. These treatments have raised a host of complex ethical issues. Nevertheless, in raising the case of Ashley, Peter Singer is not primarily concerned with those questions of bioethics — he wants to deny her human dignity.

For many years, Singer has argued that membership in the human species should not imply any particular set of rights. He denies that all members of the human species should be recognized as possessing human dignity. He has pushed this argument to the point that he suggests that some animals should possess more rights and be recognized with greater dignity than some humans.

He is an advocate of primate rights and animal rights. He suggests that a pig with its limited pig consciousness may possess greater claim on rights — including a right to live — than an unconscious human being. He has argued that human infants, lacking the ability to communicate or to envision their own future, do not possess any non-negotiable right to life. Therefore, he has argued that infanticide in some cases may be fully appropriate.

In his column published today, "A Convenient Truth," Singer argues that the moral considerations of what is right for Ashley should not be based on the assumption that she possesses human dignity:

*Here's where things get philosophically interesting. We are always ready to find dignity in human beings, including those whose mental age will never exceed that of an infant, but we don't attribute dignity to dogs or cats, though they clearly operate at a more advanced mental level than human infants. Just making that comparison provokes outrage in some quarters. But why should dignity always go together with species membership, no matter what the characteristics of the individual may be?*

Here is how I summarized Singer's position in an earlier article:

*Consider this chilling statement: "If we compare a severely defective human infant with a nonhuman animal, a dog or a pig, for example, we will often find the nonhuman to have superior capacities, both actual and potential, for rationality, self-consciousness, communication, and anything else that can plausibly be considered morally significant."*

*Singer's point is clear—a dog that is able to communicate in a rudimentary way is superior to a human infant who lacks an equal ability to communicate.*

*In his book Practical Ethics, Singer argues, "The fact that a being is a human being, in the sense of a member of the species Homo sapiens, is not relevant to the wrongness of killing it; it is, rather, characteristics like rationality, autonomy,*

*and self-consciousness that make a difference. Infants lack these characteristics. Killing them, therefore, cannot be equated with killing normal human beings, or any other self-conscious beings.”*

*Ponder that statement carefully, for it is a manifesto for killing human infants. Furthermore, Singer presses his case to make clear that he is not limiting his argument to the killing of infants who lack the potential to develop such qualities. “This conclusion is not limited to infants who, because of irreversible intellectual disabilities, will never be rational, self-conscious beings,” Singer clarifies. As in his argument for abortion, Singer asserts “that the potential of a fetus to become a rational, self-conscious being cannot count against killing it at a stage when it lacks these characteristics.”*

This is precisely where the Christian worldview runs into direct and inescapable collision with the postmodern worldview of Peter Singer. In Singer’s world, “defective” infants would have no inherent right to live, but a primate might. As his words make clear, this argument is not actually limited even to “defective” infants but to *all* infants at early stages of life and development.

Christians believe that every single human being possesses full human dignity because every human being is made in the image of God. A worldview that denies the existence of God and thus denies the reality of the image of God has to come up with some other explanation for human dignity — one that lacks essential dignity. Thus, in this worldview, the humans that are thought to *deserve* dignity are recognized as having it, while others are denied the same.

It is not as though we have not seen this logic at work before. Just think of any effort to divide human beings between those who deserve to live and those who do not. Remember the Third Reich?

This is the stuff of nightmares. What does it say that Peter Singer teaches bioethics at Princeton University and that his column was published in today’s edition of *The New York Times*? Someone out there thinks that Peter Singer’s ideas should be the shape of our future. Nightmare anyone?

OTHER RESOURCES: My articles “[Is the Sanctity of Human Life an Outmoded Concept](#)“, (October 13, 2005) and “[The Age of Infanticide: The Culture of Death Marches On](#),” (February 11,2004).

