

EUTHANASIA IN THE AGE OF GENETIC ENGINEERING

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Synopsis—The Australian philosopher, Professor Peter Singer, was invited to hold several lectures in the Federal Republic of Germany in June, 1989. Owing to widespread public protest, particularly from women's groups, organizations for the handicapped, and church groups, among others, the invitations were revoked and Singer's public talks prevented from taking place. In the following article, Singer's work and ethical standpoint is briefly described, as well as the response and opposition in the FRG.

Synopsis—Der australische Philosoph, Prof. Peter Singer wurde eingeladen im Juni 1989 mehrere Vorträge in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland zu halten. Aufgrund des breiten Protestes von Frauen und Behinderten-initiativen, kirchlichen Verbänden u.a. mussten die Einladungen zurückgenommen werden und sein öffentliches Auftreten wurde verhindert. Eine kurze Beschreibung des Forschungsansatzes und der ethischen Positionen von Singer, sowie des Widerstandes gegen seine Aktivitäten in der BRD sind Inhalt dieses Artikels.

Professor Peter Singer, Director of the Centre for Human Bioethics at Monash University in Melbourne, Australia, was to speak on June 9th, 1989, at the University of Dortmund, following an invitation by two professors of the Department of Special Education and Rehabilitation for the Mentally and Physically Handicapped. The lecture was announced with the title "Do severely handicapped newborns have a right to life" (with no question—mark in the original announcement).

At a European Symposium entitled "Biotechnology-Ethics-Mental Handicaps" to be held in Marburg, Singer planned to lecture under the heading "Choosing between lives: A defence." The following institutions participated in the planning and realization of this conference: the Federal Ministry for Youth, Family Affairs, Women and Health; the International League of Societies for the Mentally Handicapped (ILSMH), Brussels; the International Association for the Scientific Study of Mental Deficiency

(IASSMD); the Federal Association of Lifesupport for the Mentally Handicapped, FRG (Bundesvereinigung Lebenshilfe für geistig Behinderte).

Professor Singer has published numerous books and articles on the issue of the moral status of embryos, newborn infants, and handicapped adults. His argumentation stems from a qualitative evaluation of human life and on that basis he has formulated the following standpoints:

1. All infants lack self-consciousness, rationality, and autonomy and therefore have a less strong claim to life than other members of our species who possess them. Up to the age of 28 days, it therefore would be legitimate to deny the same legal protection as given to other members of the community. It would be legitimate for severely handicapped infants to be killed (Kuhse & Singer, 1985; Singer, 1979).

2. The same argument applies for people of any age if they permanently lack these capabilities due to sickness, old age, or the effects of accidents (Singer, 1979).

3. While human embryos belong to the species *Homo Sapiens*, they are incapable of feeling pain, therefore it is legitimate to

experiment upon them. Fetuses up to the age of 20 weeks also may not feel pain and so objections to research upon them made on the basis of their capacity for experience are unfounded (Kuhse & Singer, 1988).

In his book entitled *Practical Ethics* (published as *Praktische Ethik* by Reklam Verlag, Stuttgart, 1984), Singer culminated his arguments in defense of 'nonvoluntary euthanasia' with the statement that ' . . . killing a defective infant is not morally equivalent to killing a person. Very often it is not wrong at all' (Singer 1979, p. 138).

Protest against Peter Singer's planned lectures in the FRG were voiced by Handicapped Students' Organizations, the Federal Association of Handicapped and Initiatives for Cripples (the term consciously used by some groups of handicapped people), university professors, women's groups, parents of handicapped children, church organizations, FINRRAGE affiliates, union members, and the German Society for Social Psychiatry. Public attention was drawn to these events and the issues raised in numerous publications, protest letters to the organizers, and institutions involved, as well as public meetings and discussions. Finally, Singer's invitations to speak in Dortmund and Marburg were withdrawn.

Critical protest was aimed, however, not only at Singer, but also at the university professors and institutions who invited him' to speak. A large public meeting was held in Marburg, after Singer had been asked not to appear, to criticize the entire content of the planned conference. An information flier written and distributed by several critical groups formulated their view:

Behind the seemingly harmless title of this conference lie shocking intentions. The basic issue to be discussed at this symposium is the right to life of handicapped persons. Euthanasia is to be a matter for scholarly debates. . . . Lectures on "Euthanasia—for handicapped newborns?" or "Pre-natal

diagnosis, interruptio and sterilization of the mentally handicapped from a genetic perspective" are part of the program. We do not consider such debates about biotechnology, ethics and mental handicaps to be scholarly chit-chat of no further consequence. We observe that such discussions are taking place throughout the world and are now reaching the FRG. Killing handicapped people is supposed to become a publicly discussed issue here, as well. The taboo which has existed since the end of national socialism is to be broken, the right to kill justified morally, economically and legally.

The association 'Lebenshilfe' has since become the object of public criticism, which has provoked an internal debate. A central aspect of this debate is the issue of historical continuity, in particular with regard to the participation of the association Lebenshilfe in euthanasia programs in Nazi Germany. Lebenshilfe has been called upon to take an unequivocal stand against eugenic concepts and euthanasia programs.

As a result of these discussions and public protests, the entire symposium in Marburg was finally cancelled. At the University of Dortmund, the discussion also did not end after Singer's invitation was withdrawn. At a protest meeting there, representatives of several participating organizations called on the university to revoke the Professorship of Dr. Christoph Anstötz who had invited Singer. Professor Anstötz's own publications show that the right to life of handicapped or sick is questioned not only by Singer. In one article, Anstötz evaluates human life according to its own utility and usefulness—"scientifically" defined as preference utilitarianism—and compares on this basis the value of human lives (especially the handicapped) and animal life (Anstötz, 1988).

Professor Anstötz prefers to not formulate the practical consequences resulting from his ideas and simply refers

to the work of Peter Singer. Mothers of handicapped children, organizations which represent the parents of the handicapped and institutions which work with these children emphasized that it cannot be tolerated that a professor with such attitudes be responsible for educating future teachers and educators of the handicapped. The university dean responsible for this department announced publicly that the department rejected Singer's concepts and intended to review the positions of the professors who invited him.

The significance of these protests and debates lies not only in the fact that they were successful in preventing Professor Singer's lectures. Thanks to the participation of handicapped men, women, and children and of mothers of handicapped children, a fact that is denied by many human geneticists, physicians, and philosophers was publicly manifested: to be handicapped or ill is not equal to being the victim of a medically-defined, inescapable form of "suffering" and "misfortune." To be handicapped or ill must be seen as a process, which can allow handicapped and nonhandicapped persons to live together and share learning, living, and experience.

The contribution made by Ulla Keienburg, mother of a handicapped child, at one of the public meetings expressed this view impressively:

"I feel fear. I feel courage.
I feel courage, when I look into my son's face.
I feel fear, when others look at him with fear.
I feel courage, when I watch his imaginative games.
I feel fear, that others may find it

senseless. . . .

I feel courage, when I see his inventiveness.
I feel fear, that others will consider it to be crazy. . . .
I feel courage, when I see how people simply accept Johannes.
I feel fear, that we will be branded "worthless"
I feel fear, that conditions will revive as they were 50 years ago.
I feel fear, because I don't want Johannes to depend on the few people who take him seriously, to let him be as he is.
I feel fear, that I must always be afraid that science will draw the line. . . .
I feel fear, that I might not always be strong enough to resist such trends.
I renew my courage, when I see you here and feel that you are resisting, too.
Then I feel the promise of a full life together with all people.

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