

Dear colleagues,

I write to express my extreme displeasure at the invitation of Prof. Peter Singer to speak as part of “Pandemic Ethics” on September 29<sup>th</sup>. While I embrace the exchange of ideas that occurs at a liberal-arts college, Prof. Singer’s work is well-known and deeply disturbing to me and other disabled people for a simple and profound reason.

Simply put, Prof. Singer has repeatedly suggested that disabled people are not fully human. In his influential 1979 book *Practical Ethics*, Prof. Singer suggested that it is ethical for parents to kill infants with disabilities, including *spina bifida*, due to the constraints caused by such conditions. In one infamous quote, Singer argued that killing “**defective infants...cannot be equated with killing normal human beings, or any other self-conscious beings.**” His work rests on the assumption that disabled people are defined through our suffering and lack, an ableist notion that the disabled community has more roundly condemned as we have specifically criticized Singer’s work and its effects.

These are not opinions that Prof. Singer has altered or rescinded; in fact, he has reiterated and expanded them in recent years. In 2009 in the *New York Times*, [he suggested that withholding health care from disabled people was both ethically rational and sound health policy](#). In 2015, he went even further, suggesting that it was “reasonable” for insurance to deny treatment to disabled infants, thus “[intentionally ending their lives.](#)” In another *New York Times* op-ed, this time in 2017, he [implied that it was impossible to sexually assault severely disabled people](#) because their decreased ability to communicate meant that consent could not be obtained verbally. In a [2021 interview with the Journal of Practical Ethics](#), Singer asked “why someone would deny that the life of a profoundly intellectually disabled human being is of less value than the life of a normal human being. Most people think that the life of a dog or a pig is of less value than the life of a normal human being. **On what basis, then, could they hold that the life of a profoundly intellectually disabled human being with intellectual capacities inferior to those of a dog or a pig is of equal value to the life of a normal human being?**” In the same interview, he said that he would never adopt a child with Down syndrome because “**For me, the knowledge that my child would not be likely to develop into a person whom I could treat as an equal**, in every sense of the word, who would never be able to have children of his or her own, who I could not expect to grow up to be a fully independent adult, and with whom I could expect to have conversations about only a limited range of topics **would greatly reduce my joy in raising my child and watching him or her develop.**” And, in [a 2021 New Yorker interview](#), he offered that “It’s not true to say that I support euthanasia for disabled infants. It’s not true that I think that disabled infants ought to be killed. **I think the parents ought to have that option.**”

As evidenced by these comments, this is not an obscure or arcane footnote in Prof. Singer’s career. It is, in fact, a centerpiece, even warranting an extended section on his [Wikipedia](#) page. His comments have earned significant repudiation, including from [disabled scholar Harriet McBryde Johnson](#), [journalist and critic Stella Young](#), [National Federation of the Blind president Marc Maurer](#), and [disability-rights organizations](#) throughout the world, who have [condemned his remarks](#) and [protested](#) at his events as recently as 2020. (In fact, [the controversy itself has merited debate in philosophical journals.](#)) I am thus confident that those who have invited him are aware of this controversy and has either decided it is unimportant or perhaps contributes to his noteworthy status.

I am saddened and unsettled by the message it sends to disabled members of our community. I am one of that community. Peter Singer’s name is infuriating to many of us both because of his dogged insistence on the legitimacy of debating whether disabled people are people, and by the legitimacy that such a position gives to those who more broadly dehumanize us. As Stella Young wrote in 2012, “Singer’s views about the hypothetical are not hypothetical at all. While he may see value in the life I’m living now, and may even treat me as an equal, he still believes that on the balance of things, parents and doctors should be given the choice to end lives like mine before they get tricky. For me, and for many other people with disabilities, it’s personal.” It certainly is to me.

I have been in conversation with others who are angered and dismayed. I call on all of us to consider these well-documented views and their relationship to Rhodes College’s vision and commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion. I urge all of us to think about this aspect of Prof. Singer’s career when discussing the event with students and others. And I hope we will all continue to take steps to be more aware and supportive of the experiences of disabled people. I hope you are all doing well and hanging in there.

Best,  
Charles