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Midterm Project

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**Perception…**

Perception is the way we construct our own reality from external stimuli. Perception is how we choose to see the world. No two people see the world in the same way. That is not to say everyone experiences totally different things, but rather different aspects of these things. While perception may seem unimportant, in reality there are significant corollary effects due to perceptions of individuals as well as general groups of people. This essay will primarily focus on perception, specifically devoting attention to the perception Peter Singer has of people with disabilities.

**The Perceiver…**

The perceptual process will be influenced by the perceiver’s values, attitudes and experiences.

**Perceiver 1**: My name is Nicole Giannetti. I’m 20 years old, and I’m currently a biology major at Haverford College. My mind is like a sponge, soaking up every ounce of knowledge I can get my hands on but also constantly changing shape, changing perceptions. I’m being molded into a biologist, learning how to think and how to act like a biologist.

**Perceiver 2:** Peter Singer is 70 years old, and is currently a professor of Bioethics at Princeton University. After receiving his B.A from the University of Melbourne, Singer went on to achieve a Bachelors of Philosophy at the prestigious University of Oxford. From Singer’s impressive resume, it comes as no surprise that he is one of the world’s leading moral philosophers. Unlike that of a typical young college student, Singer is stuck in his own beliefs; his mind has solidified.

*Peter Singer and I come from two very different academic backgrounds and are at two very different stages in life, therefore our perceptions will vary. However, the degree in which our perceptions vary has lead me to writing this essay.*

**Why Peter Singer?**

My first introduction to Peter Singer was from Harriet McBryde Johnson’s New York Times article, *Unspeakable Conversations.* In her article, Johnson writes about her experience spending a day at Princeton University, where she challenged Peter Singer’s contention that severely disabled infants could be ethically euthanized. Johnson was born with a degenerative neuromuscular disease that left her paralyzed, therefore I found it truly amazing and brave that Johnson could come face-to-face with a man who devalued her life due to her disabilities. In the article, Johnson does not downplay the harsh realities that come with living with a disability, but asserts that those struggles do not take value away from a person’s life. “To justify my hopes that Peter Singer’s theoretical world- and it’s entirely logical extensions- won’t become real, I’ll invoke the muck and mess and undeniable reality of disabled lives **well** lived. That’s the best I can do right now.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

After reading Johnson’s article, I was outraged that Singer actually believed that it is ethical to kill disabled infants. However, Johnson argued that by allowing yourself to dehumanize Singer was to fall into the same web Singer is caught in. Instead of completely tearing apart Singer, I decided the more respectful approach would be to do further research on Singer and his ideologies.

**Taking Life: Humans**

In an excerpt from Peter Singer’s *Practical Ethics* called “Taking Life: Humans” I found Singer’s genuine perceptions on disabilities and how disabilities affect one’s quality of life. Singer begins by arguing that being a human being, in the sense of a member of the species Homo sapiens, has no relevance in “wrongness of killing; it is rather, characteristics like rationality, autonomy, and self-consciousness that make a difference.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Singer believes that rationality, autonomy, and self-consciousness is what makes a person, therefore anyone lacking those qualities is not considered a person and it is ethical to kill them if a person chooses to do so.

***We have all be there before- one situation and two people interpreting them completely different.***

Here is one such situation in which two people are interpreting the same thing very differently. As it turns out Peter Singer and I have two very different views on the ethics of killing. Coming from a predominantly scientific background, I don’t believe that you can exclude a human being from being a person or not due to three subjective characteristics. Human beings are 99.9% genetically the same, so doesn’t that make us all persons? We are all made up of the same exact amino acids, which are further assorted into almost identical sequences; therefore I see it that all humans are persons. Although I’ve emphasized on the biological similarities between humans, to me part of being a person also includes the mind. All human beings have a mind that allows them to process feelings such as pain. However, ultimately it is not our different definitions of what being a “person” means that has created a lot of animosity for me towards Peter Singer. It is the way Singer uses his definition of being a person to decide whether or not it is ethical to killing a human being.

“When the death of a disabled infant will lead to the birth of another infant with better prospects of a happy life, the total amount of happiness will be greater if the disabled infant is killed. The loss of happy life for the first infant is outweighed by the gain of a happier life for the second.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

Above is a quote from Singer’s “Taking Life: Human”. Singer approaches the ethical issue surrounding infanticide from a utilitarian perspective. Singer believes that only the consequences of a given act determine right from wrong. Therefore, actions are morally right if they increase happiness and decrease pain for the greatest number of people. This promotion of the devaluation of disabled people stands on no empirical basis, but rather on rational philosophy. I find it concerning to use rationality as a means for

maximizing happiness because society does not function on Peter Singer’s utilitarian paradigm. Societal happiness is also dependent on a person’s life being lived to its full capacity, regardless of maximizing happiness for the many.

“It may still be objected that to replace either a fetus or a newborn infant is wrong because it suggests to disabled people living today that their lives are less worth living than the lives of people who are not disabled. Yet it is surely flying in the face of reality to deny that, on average, this is so.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

As well, Singer solely relies on hypotheticals to defend his reasoning as to why he believes that the quality of life for a disabled person is not equal to that of a nondisabled person. Again, my background in the natural sciences causes a big divide between Peter Singer and me. I find it absurd that he makes such controversial statements without trying to back them up with any empirical evidence.

**The Root of My Outrage**

Singer’s controversial concept of personhood has important implications for people with disabilities. Singer believes that people with severe disabilities should not be considered persons, and therefore should have no legal rights to their own lives. As well, Singer argues that people with less severe disabilities who are still considered persons, may still have a lower quality of life compared to people who are not disabled and therefore it may be desirable to remove them from society so that resources can be used for someone with a perceived potential to achieve more in life. Singer is mistakenly devaluing the lives of millions of peoples simply because they are disabled. As a professor at a prestigious university, Singer is teaching the potential future leaders of our world that it is acceptable to discriminate against those who do not fit a set of standards.

1. Johnson, Harriet McBryde. “Unspeakable Conversations.” In *Too Late to Die Young,* 228.New York. Henry Holt and Company, 2005 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Singer, Peter [*https://www.utilitarian.net/singer/by/1993----.htm*](https://www.utilitarian.net/singer/by/1993----.htm)*,* n.p., n.d., Web. 5 March 2017 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)