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Peter Singer Settles In, And Princeton Looks Deeper; Furor Over the Philosopher Fades Though Some Discomfort Lingers

By DEBRA GALANT
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PETER SINGER was discussing his career one day recently when a spider suddenly began crawling across his neat desk. Another person might have smashed it or swept it away almost reflexively.

But then again, this was the Dr. Singer who literally wrote the book on the rights of non-humans, "Animal Liberation," in which he argued that every sentient creature deserves equal consideration for the opportunity to continue living, without suffering.

"Sentient?" a visitor asked.

"Maybe," Dr. Singer responded, lifting the spider with a stack of papers and depositing it ever so carefully outside his window. "Spiders I would give the benefit of the doubt."

It has been almost two years since Princeton University announced that it had lured the philosopher from Australia, and six months since he arrived on campus amid cameras and microphones and a swarm of protesters representing advocates for the disabled and foes of abortion.

The furor has largely subsided, though Dr. Singer's controversial beliefs have aroused enough potential enemies that the university provided him with a scanner to check suspicious-looking mail. Through it all, Dr. Singer has managed to settle in, giving lectures, attending lunches and dinners and -- between e-mails -- considering humanity's larger questions: life, death and free trade.

Dr. Singer's gentle reaction to the spider was a logical extension of his ethical beliefs, though he admitted that he would swat at a mosquito, sentient or not. Equal consideration, after all, does not necessary mean an equal outcome.

"Just because it's sentient, it doesn't mean it has a right to life," he said. Besides, since the swatted mosquito will most likely die instantly, "it's not going to suffer."

Such is the hair-splitting world of Peter Singer, animal rights activist and Ira W. DeCamp professor of bioethics at the University Center for Human Values.

Dr. Singer's detractors might be surprised by his beneficent view toward arachnids. More likely, however, they would be appalled, for Dr. Singer has become widely known and reviled for his position that newborn humans are not sentient, and that under certain circumstances, parents should have the right to end the life of an infant born with severe disabilities.

It is hard to imagine, in a society so absorbed with the lives of athletes and movie stars, that the arrival of the former director of the Center of Human Bioethics at Monash University in Australia would attract so much attention. But that is exactly what happened, and has continued to create a public relations nightmare for his new employer. It would seem that Josef Mengele rather than Dr. Singer -- the grandson of Holocaust victims himself -- was being described by the shrieking headlines: "Philosophy of Death" (The Washington Post), "The Dangerous Philosopher" (The New Yorker), "Singer's Final Solution" (U.S. News & World Report) and "Dangerous Words" (Princeton Alumni Weekly).

Indeed, Princeton is so wary of attention that its chief spokesman, Justin Harmon, tries to shoo away reporters at the mere mention of Peter Singer.

The controversy reached its height at Princeton last September when the billionaire publisher

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Steve Forbes -- a university trustee and alumnus who at the time was seeking the Republican presidential nomination -- announced during an anti-Singer rally that he would cut off all his contributions to Princeton until the philosopher left. With equal vehemence, Princeton's trustees responded by defending the appointment in terms of academic freedom.

"The university does not take positions or alter positions because of the flow of contributions or the threat of cutting them off," said Robert Rawson, chairman of the executive committee for the university's board of trustees.

All this fuss over a philosopher?

Certainly, over the millennia, people like Socrates, Machiavelli, Adam Smith and Karl Marx have argued the fundamental questions of human life, stated their ideas boldly -- and changed the world. But in the 20th century, academic philosophers have largely quibbled over abstract -- even sterile -- intellectual inquiries.

In epistemology, for example, the branch of philosophy concerned with the underpinnings of knowledge, questions like, "How do we know that there is really a table in this room?" can be, and are, debated endlessly.

Peter Singer has never had a lot of patience for such discussions, especially when millions of people are dying all over the world. "There's no amount of argument that would make a difference to our lives if we can't be sure that there's a table between us now," he said.

His impatience with such inquiries has not only fueled a spectacular career, but has actually changed the questions being asked in ivory towers.

He made his mark as a 25-year-old philosopher with two academic articles, both of which appeared in 1972. "Moral Experts" took the view -- considered quite radical at the time -- that moral philosophers ought to get into the nitty gritty of defining right and wrong. The article that put him on the intellectual map, however, was "Famine, Affluence and Morality," written about the 1971 famine in East Bengal, in which Dr. Singer contended that distance should not be a factor in moral action. People fortunate enough to live in affluent societies, he argued, should give up most of their luxuries and share their wealth with the world's impoverished.

"It's one of the most famous articles written in moral philosophy," said Gilbert Harman, a philosophy professor at Princeton. "It's in almost any ethics anthology."

Dr. Singer made his mark outside of academia with "Animal Liberation," published in 1975, in which he introduced the term "speciesist" and gave lurid details of the farm practices that produce meat and eggs and argued that everyone should become a vegetarian.

But it his work in bioethics -- and his views about when human life begins and ends -- that has created the most controversy.

Peter Singer is unflinching when it comes to his beliefs, and doesn't bother to sugarcoat them. At a guest lecture he gave last month to biology students here, Dr. Singer reiterated his view that it is ethical for parents to withdraw life support from an infant born with severe disabilities -- a view with which many doctors and bioethicists agree. But where some think Dr. Singer crosses the line is in his argument that it is only a "minor step" -- and equally ethical -- to end the infant's life by lethal injection. "The effect is ultimately the same" and in fact, by ending suffering sooner, it may even be more humane, he argued.

There have been two rallies at Princeton to protest the appointment of Dr. Singer. The first, last April, drew about 250 people, according to Chris Benek, an organizer of the event who is a second-year divinity student at the Princeton Seminary, which is not part of Princeton University. The one that included Mr. Forbes took place in September, the day of Dr. Singer's first lecture on campus, and it drew 400 protesters, Mr. Benek said. Both New Jersey Right to Life, an anti-abortion group, and Not Dead Yet, a radical disability-rights group based in Illinois, sent representatives.

Now that most of the outside protesters have moved on, the keeper of the anti-Singer flame here is Mr. Benek. He organized a group called Princeton Students Against Infanticide, which he says has 50 members, although he declined to divulge any names. Between talking to other activists around the country and responding to reporters, Mr. Benek's monthly phone bill can run as high as \$400. In addition, he has a web site -- www.geocities.com/Athens/Agora/2900/

new.html -- that discusses the Singer appointment at length. Mr. Benek said he subsisted on noodles all summer to pay expenses for the rally last April.

"My life's turned upside down," he said. "I didn't think I'd be pulling money out of my own pocket. I didn't think my dorm room was going to become the headquarters for a national organization almost."

For all of his activity, Mr. Benek admits that he has never spoken with Peter Singer and he does not question the philosopher's right to hold controversial views. But Mr. Benek nonetheless thinks it is wrong for Princeton to sponsor a professor with such notions.

"They've done a pretty good job of brainwashing students that this is what academic freedom really is," he said. "All I can really do is pray for Peter Singer, that he'll come around."

Kai Chan, a graduate student in Princeton's department of ecology and evolutionary biology, has also changed his life because of Peter Singer. Mr. Chan had been toying with the idea of becoming a vegetarian for four years, but kept putting it off because he found beans and other vegetarian fare too gassy. He finally gave up meat in late September, after reading the descriptions of farm life in "Animal Liberation."

"I was reduced to tears, really," he said. "I was so upset at myself for not having switched earlier."

Mr. Chan also persuaded his fiancée in Toronto to make the switch, and his mother is on her way, too. He is now trying to get Princeton's dining halls to use eggs from free-range hens and has been searching for vendors who can supply the eggs in liquid form.

Mr. Chan, who is doing his graduate thesis on biodiversity, also managed to snag Dr. Singer as one of his advisors. That's no minor feat, considering that Dr. Singer's time is at a premium; each week, he gets two to five invitations to speak. For his part, Mr. Chan got the professor's attention by attending his lectures, paying attention and asking probing questions.

"I knew that I had to be vocal for him to have an interest in working with me," he said. The strategy succeeded.

Most remarkably, especially for a graduate student with a limited income, Mr. Chan has decided to follow the Peter Singer's example of donating 20 percent of his income to charity (Dr. Singer recommends a basic guideline of 10 percent in his book "Practical Ethics"). "My life is incredibly different," he said. "I'm really grateful to Peter."

Peter Singer comes off far different in person than he does in his writing. In his writing, the philosopher, understandably, is often dogmatic. In his books and articles, he obliterates opposing arguments with withering prose. In his introduction to "Animal Liberation," for example, Dr. Singer lets readers know he is not arguing out of any special affection for pets. He disparages the term "animal lover" by comparing it with the racist term "nigger lover."

Animals do not deserve protection because they are cuddly or cute, he argues: "When the United States Defense Department finds that its use of beagles to test lethal gases has evoked a howl of protest and offers to use rats instead, I am not appeased."

In fact, Dr. Singer took in some emancipated laboratory rats as pets when his children were small. His family's only other pet was a stray cat.

Peter Singer also looks different in person than his pictures suggest. His book jackets show a younger man with a bushy moustache staring at the camera in a defiant pose. Even in a photograph, it looks as if he could see straight into a person's soul and detect the moral weaknesses.

But now, at the age of 53 and in the flesh, he looks different. Clean-shaven, with glasses and an unruly halo of hair rimming a balding head, he comes across as thoughtful and sometimes quietly bemused rather than angry or judgmental.

If Peter Singer has X-ray vision for ethical flaws, he restrains his reaction to an ironic smile. Indeed, the ironic smile was Dr. Singer's only visible reaction when a biology student sitting next to him at dinner explained that she had been inducing epilepsy in laboratory rats to test various cures.

Dr. Singer's understatement is probably the biggest surprise to Princetonians who, after reading about him, had every right to expect a firebrand. Roger Mosely, a retired surgeon at Princeton Hospital, who serves on its ethics committee, first saw Dr. Singer at the lecture for biology students in mid-February. Afterward, he joined the professor and the other guest lecturer for refreshments at the Nassau Inn.

"He seemed very modest and quiet," Dr. Mosely recalled. "I don't know whether I expected a firecracker. He seemed like a regular guy."

Peter Singer also seemed like a regular guy -- a regular philosopher at least -- at the weekly lunch seminar for Fellows at the University Center for Human Values, which is the department to which he reports. At the lunch table (portobello mushroom sandwiches were offered, along with salmon), Dr. Singer did not sit in any position of authority, and in fact was a great deal quieter in the critique of a colleague's paper than most of his peers.

"We sit around the table and we're all equal colleagues," said Amy Gutmann, the center's director.

Although Dr. Gutmann said she understood how one might expect Peter Singer to be "impatient with people who profoundly disagree with him," he has in fact turned out to be anything but. "Peter's a terrific colleague," she said. "He's smart and articulate and thoughtful and open and responsive and tremendously giving in time and energy."

Dr. Gutmann -- who confesses to being a "foody" -- doesn't feel any obligation to refrain from eating meat, either in front of Peter Singer or on her own, any more than she would be expected to agree with every one of his arguments. If Peter Singer, or anyone else, had a corner on the truth, "we'd only need one philosopher," she said.

Nor does Peter Singer always live up to his own ethical standards. For instance, he does not give every cent of his disposable income to alleviate suffering overseas, even though that is what "Famine, Affluence and Morality" calls for. In addition to keeping an apartment in Princeton, he lives in New York City with his wife on weekends enjoying theater and music. All of this, of course, costs a good bit of money and is not strictly, from a survival sense, necessary.

"Living an ethical life is not an all-or-nothing thing," he says.

Richard Just, editor in chief of the Daily Princetonian, the student newspaper, is enrolled in Dr. Singer's undergraduate lecture class, "Practical Ethics," this semester, as are several other members of the newspaper staff.

Peter Singer is a celebrity on campus -- like Toni Morrison and Joyce Carol Oates -- with instant name recognition. For today's students, attending Princeton and not signing up for Dr. Singer's class would be like being at the Institute for Advanced Studies in 1940's and never meeting Albert Einstein.

Daniel Weiss, a religion major, had never heard of Dr. Singer when a friend e-mailed him the summer before last with news of the bioethicist's appointment. Mr. Weiss quickly worked on catching up, reading "Practical Ethics" and "Animal Liberation" before Dr. Singer's arrival. He has invited Dr. Singer to his vegetarian co-op twice, and Dr. Singer has had the junior to dinner at the Center for Human Values. That dinner, clearly, was one of the most exalted occasions in Mr. Weiss's Princeton career.

Macauley Peterson, another junior, said friends were excited when they first heard he had signed up for one of Dr. Singer's classes. Now, after several lectures, the sense of celebrity and wonder has worn off. Although Mr. Peterson, a philosophy major, finds Dr. Singer thought-provoking, "it just seems like another class," he said.

Many students at Princeton seem, to some degree, to have been affected by Dr. Singer's presence. Mr. Just, a public policy major at the Woodrow Wilson School, said he did not usually get into deep discussions with his roommate, a mechanical engineering major. But the two have found themselves "staying up all night talking about bioethics," Mr. Just said.

In October, students here waited in line for hours to get seats at a debate between Dr. Singer and Adrienne Asch, a professor of biology, ethics and the politics of human reproduction at Wellesley College. Among the topics discussed with Dr. Asch, who is blind, was Dr. Singer's advocacy of euthanasia for infants with severe disabilities.

"I think having Peter Singer here has been really good for campus," Mr. Just said. "There aren't many intellectual things to cause people to line up in advance."

But has Princeton been good for Peter Singer? While it has taken him across the world from his three grown daughters, his perch here certainly gives him a better take on American life. And that is not an inconsiderable advantage for someone writing about contemporary ethical issues ranging from genetic research to self-interest.

"America is a kind of dominant cultural presence," Dr. Singer said. "The epitome of modern trends. The way things are likely to go."

One of Dr. Singer's favorite subjects, after all, is the emptiness of a life spent merely acquiring things. In this regard, Dr. Singer still has a lot to learn. For instance, he doesn't own a car, and had never even heard of those meccas of acquisitiveness, Costco and the Price Club. He did take a bus to Ikea once, but was unimpressed by the veneer on the furniture -- though he did end up buying some things.

And he finds himself a sucker for American yard sales, even though -- or perhaps because -- they're such brilliant symbols of American wastefulness. "They throw out this amazing amount of stuff," he said.

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