
MORAL PHILOSOPHY, DISABILITY, AND INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

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... the history of society's formal methods of dealing with people with disabilities can be summed up in two words: segregation and inequality.¹

Independence, except in some particular actions and functions, is a fiction.²

Disability and dependence are integral to the human experience and yet have been largely marginalized or denigrated within Western philosophy. Joining a growing counter narrative from the disability studies movement, several mainstream moral philosophers are helping to redress this error. In this essay I will discuss ideas from four such writers; Eva Kittay, Leslie Pickering Francis, Anita Silvers, and Alasdair MacIntyre, that I believe help foreground and elevate the moral centrality of disability and dependence. I argue that this work helps rearticulate an understanding of human dignity and virtue in a way that illuminates the ethical imperative of inclusive education.

The focus on independence and rationality as exclusively definitive of personhood and citizenship has had a widely pernicious affect on the value and dignity of people with disabilities. This dismissive orientation has a history in philosophy dating from Aristotle and Plato and continuing even within the critical tradition. Not only is it unjust to dependants and dependency workers but as Alasdair MacIntyre argues it actually distorts moral development and limits the capacity for “independent reason” itself.³

Disability has historically played a central role signifying otherness and justifying discrimination and segregation among other subordinate groups. In the past, assumed tendencies to feeble mindedness, mental illness, and other disabilities have been associated with certain races and ethnic groups. Disability has figured not just in arguments against the equality of women and minorities but also in arguments supporting equality for marginalized groups. Instead of challenging the notion that disability justified political inequality, groups argued that they did not have the disabilities attributed to them and therefore deserved full rights of citizenship.⁴

In varying forms and degrees segregation of people with disabilities in schools remains the norm rather than the exception. In spite of substantial progress and landmark legislation in 1975 (EHA), 1990, 1997, and 2004 (IDEA), fully inclusive education in schools remains elusive. As Linda Ware

puts it, “. . . on the whole inclusion in the school context is neither uniformly understood, readily accepted, nor willingly acted upon.”⁵

The recent emergence of the disability rights movement and the disability studies discourse has done much to challenge this orientation. Grounded in the socio-political model of disability it understands disability not as a private matter or medical condition but as a central cultural signifier of inferiority. Its goal is to unmask how disability functions as such within literature, history, social policy, popular culture, education, and philosophy. In doing so it draws upon critical and postmodern discourse in cultural studies, feminism, as well as race, ethnic, and gay and lesbian studies. It often takes the form of literary and cultural criticism as it examines cultural attitudes, antagonisms, and insecurities that are based in disability.⁶

Despite the increasing scope and influence of disability studies, issues of disability and dependency tend to remain at the periphery of educational and moral philosophy. This is largely true even within contemporary critical discourse. For example, Nirmala Erevelles argues that “radical theorists of difference” by-and-large have failed to articulate a systematic analysis of disability. “Often their perfunctory acknowledgement of disability reflects the add-and-stir policy . . .”⁷ More specifically, profound cognitive disability (the “extremes of the IQ distribution curve”) is a category of difference that stands as a kind of boundary condition and limit of critical analysis. As Phillip Ferguson points out, the condition of profound mental retardation serves to foreground the extent to which the implicit assumption of rational agency continues to define the limits of personhood. “The challenge of profound mental retardation is precisely how close it seems to come to the absence of agency.”⁸

The writings of two contemporary moral philosophers, Jeff McMahan and Peter Singer, are revealing in the way they take severe mental retardation to its seemingly logical conclusion as a kind of limit condition. In *Rethinking Life and Death* Singer argues that in the case of severe disability /mental retardation, infanticide should be an option. He rejects what he calls speciesism, arguing that a being is a member of the human species does not preclude taking that being’s life: “. . . we should recognize that the fact that being a human, and alive, does not in itself tell us whether it is wrong to take that being’s life.”⁹

In “Cognitive Disability, Misfortune, and Justice” and *The Ethics of Killing*¹⁰ Jeff McMahan takes a similar position. Consistent with the tradition within Western philosophy he holds that the moral status of personhood is not determined by mere species membership, but by the intrinsic properties of certain psychological and rational capacities. These capacities include autonomy, reason, and independence and also capacities he terms “prudential unity relations” and “time-relative interests.” By these he means the ability to govern and discipline oneself by the use of reason in terms of one’s future. His

argument is that there are humans who are at the margins of personhood, such as the congenitally severely mentally retarded (the “CSMR”) who lack requisite psychological and rational capacities. The CSMR appear to have a weak or non-existent sense of self and no prudential connections to the past and future and thus, like animals, fall below the threshold of personhood. It follows then that the death or killing of such individuals does not carry the same moral significance as those above the threshold (full moral persons). His point is that this kind of two-tiered morality is necessary to properly understand the ethics of killing non-human and human animals.¹¹

Eva Kittay has articulated a powerful rebuttal to this position. She points out the arguments articulated by Singer and McMahan are similar to those that have been used to justify racism and ethnocentrism. This kind of dichotomous conceptualization that divides humans into two distinct groups – those that do and do not possess intrinsic properties that make them fully human -- is usually employed in the service of domination. That is, as one group defines itself as the exclusive possessors of certain desirable intrinsic properties (“us”) it serves to legitimize relations of unequal power, privilege, and status over the other (“them”).

This essentialistic two-tiered moral hierarchy is not unique to Singer and McMahan. Aristotle held that the capacity to act from rational deliberation is an essential element and a necessary condition for citizenship (not available to women or slaves). Likewise Kant argued that it is human rational agency rather than mere species membership that is the essence and foundation of dignity for moral beings. It is the fact that humans are rational and capable of determining their own duty that they must be accorded respect as ends-in-themselves rather than means to ends. And because mere species membership is not the salient factor, those who fall below the level of these rational capabilities are not necessarily accorded this dignity and respect as ends-in-themselves.¹²

Kittay’s argument rebuts the intrinsic properties position. She points out that the notion that we should make a moral distinction between human beings who have or do not have intrinsic properties such as rationality is arbitrary and dangerous. She argues that it is human relationships rather than rationality that are definitive of personhood. She states “. . .being a person has little to do with rationality and everything to do with relationships—to our world and to those in it.”¹³ Rather than intrinsic properties, human identities are built upon and defined within social roles and relationships such as those of parenthood. These relationships are an integral part of the broad matrix of social practices and roles, and constitutive of our moral universe.

Clearly this relational view of the self and morality is not unique to Kittay. Its roots are in Hegel, Wittgenstein, Dewey, Viloshonov, and Butler. It is a position that is common to communitarians, and much of critical and postmodern discourse. However, it is significant that this perspective is rarely if

ever applied to or deemed relevant to disability and dependence. And yet, this issue gives the relational view of the self a particularly clear and compelling relevance.

Kittay acknowledges rationality and the capacity to determine one's own good are in fact quite useful, but she denies that they are either necessary or sufficient qualities of moral parity or personhood. For example, why should other qualities, such as empathy, the capacity to give and receive love and care, and kindness not be at least as important? For example Kittay's daughter Sesha has profound mental retardation and yet exhibits many of these qualities. As she describes her:

[Sesha is] . . . an individual whose rational capacities are difficult to determine because she lacks speech but who has the capacity to enjoy life, to share her joy through her smiles and laughter, to embrace those who show her love and care, and to bring joy to all whose lives she touches—an individual who, through her warmth, her serene and harmonious spirit, and her infectious love of life enriches the lives of others and who has never acted maliciously or tried to harm anyone. Whether or not she would know what it means to determine her own good may be in doubt, but the good she brings into the world is not.¹⁴

In the broadest sense all humans are dependent. Although our dependencies may not always be as hypervisible as those with disabilities, we are in a relationship of dependence for all of society's functions and needs, e.g. food production, transportation, and work.¹⁵ For example relationships of dependence characterize the acquisition and use of human language and knowledge. As Barbara Rogoff argues:

. . . knowledge itself originates within an interaction process . . . between the infant himself and other, more mature, human individuals who already possess shared understandings with other communicating beings. . . . in short, the child only achieves a fully articulated knowledge of his world, in a cognitive sense, as he becomes involved in social interactions with other communicating human beings.¹⁶

Cognition is itself only possible with the use of collaboratively developed cultural tools. As Gavriel Solomon puts it, "People think in conjunction and partnership with others and with the help of culturally provided tools and implements."¹⁷

Again, as Kittay points out, when the dependency needs are highlighted in one group and masked in the other it creates a fiction that can both marginalize and demonize. "...[It] turns those whose dependence cannot

be masked into pariahs, or makes them objects of disdain or pity.”¹⁸ It is a fiction that effectively obscures the facts of the human experience. Human beings are in fact not independent but are inextricably dependent on one another. It is dependency that is constitutive of who we are. In the process of obscuring dependence the dependencies of illness, old age, and infancy have been effectively privatized. They have become hidden and discounted to the point that we tend to avoid our collective responsibilities for them.

Kittay proposes a different definition of personhood. She argues that although species membership is central, personhood is about connection to, and engagement with, other persons. It is the capacity to sustain human relationships, and to have a life others could imagine as their own. As she puts it “. . . we do not become a person without the engagement of other persons—their care, as well as their recognition of the uniqueness and the connectedness of our human agency”¹⁹ This recognition of the relational nature of personhood affirms the belief that within each human there is on some level “someone home.”

This is similar to the principle of the “least dangerous assumption.” It holds that in the absence of conclusive data, “. . . decisions ought to be based on assumptions which, if incorrect, will have the least dangerous effect.”²⁰ In the case of profound mental retardation acting on the assumption that there is “no one home” has historically led to some very frightening consequences. On the other hand, acting on the assumption that personhood consists in the capacity to sustain human relationships encourages us to cultivate and enlarge our relational connections and thus our own humanity.

Anita Silvers and Leslie Pickering Francis take a similar position. They rebut a different element of the Singer/McMahan position, arguing that concepts of independent agency and individually scripted ideas of the good are illusory. In their analysis, the liberal concept of the good actually encompasses three claims: pluralism, subjectivism, and independence. The good is plural in that there is no unitary conception of the good. It is subjective in that conceptions of the good express individual preferences, desires and values. The claim of independence involves the assumption that individuals must formulate their own conception of the good independently - by themselves. Silver and Francis point out, however, that the claim of independence is not tenable. The argument that independence is definitive of personhood is undermined by the fact that humans in fact *do not* formulate their own social identities or conceptions of the good in isolation – they cannot help but do so collectively – in relationships of dependence. That these identities are socially constructed within the ubiquitous social frameworks of class, race, gender, ethnicity, work, family, friends, etc. is hardly debatable. In fact, human identity is meaningless outside such frameworks. Since conceptions of the good and decisions to act (agency) are unavoidably both dependent on a prior sense of self (a social identity), neither can be seen as independent. In fact, dependent agency

(interdependent agency) is the rule rather than exception.²¹

Silvers and Francis go on to argue that we should revise our understanding of independence to recognize that as people cooperate they are mutually dependent rather than independent. In this sense the concept of dependent agency is more accurate than that of independent agency. This is consistent with a concept called wide agency, which has emerged recently within cognitive science.²² That is, agency is not the sole possession of an individual brain, it is dispersed outside the body. A related concept developed by Edwin Hutchins and others is based on the psychology of Vygotsky and is called distributed cognition. It holds that cognitive processes may be distributed across the members of a social group, between internal and external material or environmental structures, and through time (e.g. current concepts, discoveries and events build upon earlier ones).²³

The concepts distributed cognition and wide agency have compelling relevance for people with mental retardation like Sessa Kittay. Dependent agency in the form of choice can be expressed through collaboration with a trusted ally or support from a family member or a close friend. For example, people with cognitive disabilities can communicate to indicate their preferences by pointing to pictures or drawings. This activity can also take the form of making various sounds, jumping up and down, laughing, and hugging. The role of the collaborator is to interpret those expressions in a longitudinal context and piece them together into a social script or personalized conception of the good. Dependent persons may need assistance in formulation of these social scripts – i.e., long term plans for the future. However it must be noted that persons without disabilities are similar in that they also do not compose social scripts by themselves. *“As with people who are not disabled, writing the scripts of identity is not an individual but a social process.”*²⁴

Alasdair MacIntyre amplifies and extends the arguments outlined by Kittay, Silver and Francis. Instead of making dependence a disqualification, he identifies it as a virtue. In his most recent book *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues*, he locates dependency and disability at the center of human life and defines them as the very preconditions of rationality.²⁵ MacIntyre stipulates that any ethical theory must take account of three central aspects of human existence: the fact that humans are animals, that they are dependent, and that they are rational. Philosophers largely have overlooked the first two and overemphasized the latter. In so doing they have in effect failed to acknowledge the full range of human life experience – dependence in infancy, old age and disability. So central are these realities of life that absence signals a fundamental error in Western philosophy (especially within liberalism).²⁶

[They] are so evidently of singular importance that it might seem that no account of the human condition . . . could avoid

giving them a central place. Yet the history of Western moral philosophy suggests otherwise. Plato to Moore and since [they have received] only passing reference.²⁷

Human beings are able on occasion to ignore or conceal from themselves this fact, perhaps by thinking of themselves Lockean persons, or Cartesian minds, or even as Platonic souls.²⁸

MacIntyre argues that Aristotle is typical of Western philosophers in affirming the superiority of self-sufficiency in the autonomous subject and denial of the reality and significance of human dependency and vulnerability. “Aristotle thus anticipated Smith and a great many others – in incorporating into moral philosophy the standpoint of those who have taken themselves to be self-sufficiently superior. . .and . . .in being unable to give due recognition to affliction and to dependence.”²⁹

MacIntyre’s thesis is that through dependence (not independence) humans learn how to be rational and ethical. The care humans and animals provide for their dependants is the crucial element in sustaining their lives. And yet it is only humans that have the capacity to remember infancy and anticipate aging and death. They are able to acknowledge their past and future need for care from others. A crucial element of this care involves receiving what is needed to become practical reasoners, to gain an adequate sense of self – the ability to stand back from our immediate desires, to imagine a variety of possible futures and be able to rationally choose between them. This is not just a sudden realization, a snap decision, or strictly theoretical choice, but the result of life-long habits -- the emergence of virtues. These virtues do not simply spontaneously pop up like mushrooms. They require the kind of day to day activities in networks of giving and receiving within specific practices such as schooling.³⁰

This process involves individuals becoming capable of transcending their “motivational set” to achieve independent practical reasoning. It requires the intellectual and moral virtues, and this in turn requires a conscious recognition of dependence. As he puts it “Acknowledgement of dependence is the key to independence. For one consequence of failure to break free such captivity may be an inability even to acquire sense of oneself as an independent person with one’s own unity as an agent.”³¹

For MacIntyre, the kind of respect that is required to sustain community is the recognition that each of us is someone from whom we can learn about our individual good and our common good. This respect is based on the belief that people with disabilities are individuals that have lessons to teach us that will be unavailable any other place. We owe care and respect even to those who we would otherwise deem incapable. “It will build upon that regard for each individual, however badly disabled. . .[as] someone from whom we

*may learn and may have to learn about our common good and our own good, . . . that we will not be able to learn elsewhere.*³²

Again, MacIntyre stresses that we learn this not primarily through logical analysis or by theoretical reflection, but through “everyday shared activities” – and the conscious evaluation of activities inherent within specific practices. An apt example is the process of schooling. If we fail to learn what we need from such activities and practices it is a result of three kinds of failure: 1. an inability to separate ourselves from desires, 2. a lack of adequate self-knowledge, and 3. a failure to acknowledge our dependence on others (interdependence).³³

MacIntyre reflects on what we can learn from a person with odd behavior, extremely disfigured body parts, or a swollen and liquid exuding face. Our horror at such sights and preoccupation with pretending we do not notice such people actually diminishes our rationality, the very capacity for independent reasoning. It presents an obstacle to our ability to interact rationally with such persons as human beings. It leads us to assume we have nothing to learn from them. However, as he points out, we do in fact have important things to learn. First, we can learn a lesson about the nature and extent of the distortion of our personal value judgments, the value we invest in our own and others’ physical appearance and presentation. This “othering” process – so basic to human existence -- demonstrates what MacIntyre calls a lack of self-knowledge, an inability to exercise critical judgment, the inability to separate ourselves from feelings of horror, revulsion, pity, or disgust. This inability to see our own lack of self-knowledge likely obscures important qualities in others. Our narrow fixation on physical appearance and presentation leaves us unable to identify, much less comprehend, the virtues of courage and grace that are often hard won responses to disability, disfigurement, and dependency. Our inability to identify and comprehend these virtues of acknowledged dependence in turn greatly diminishes our propensity and ability to practice them. This becomes especially relevant as we in turn become disabled or experience the normal aging process.³⁴

MacIntyre points out that although these errors in practical reasoning appear to be simply personal attitudes and reactions, they in fact emanate from dominant social norms. Plainly the generation and reproduction of these “social norms” are at the heart of the educational process in general and schooling practices in particular. For MacIntyre the purpose of education is to cultivate these virtues of acknowledged dependence (interdependence) to transform both egoistic and altruistic impulses to an inclination toward both the common good and our individual good. However, as he acknowledges, this transformation is impossible without significant changes in power structures. In this sense MacIntyre’s conception succinctly illustrates and exemplifies challenges to and goals of inclusive education.

MacIntyre argues one does not acquire the virtues of acknowledged dependence (interdependence) or become capable of independent reason except through relations and networks of giving and receiving care of dependence. What kind of care is thus required? Here again the reference to disability and dependency is central to MacIntyre's conception of virtue. "Good parental care is defined in part by reference to the possibility of the affliction of their children by serious disability."³⁵ The practices of parenting and inclusive schooling must be characterized by unconditional care. The virtues here must be in important respects unconditional. It has to be the pledge "How ever things turn out I will be there for you." It must be "... a systematic refusal to treat the child in a way proportional to its qualities and aptitudes."³⁶

In this respect, it is people with disabilities and their care givers who stand as examples; as they help us learn the nature of these virtues: "... it is the parents of the seriously disabled who are the paradigms of good motherhood and good fatherhood as such. They provide the model for and the key to the work of all parents."³⁷ The commitment to the morality of caring expressed in "I will be there for you" regardless of your "qualities and aptitudes" stands in starkest contrast to that of Singer and McMahan.

However, this commitment is far from the norm within our present education system. Children and youth with disabilities are routinely excluded from the mainstream and caught within a segregationist system of "special" and "regular" education. This dual system is grounded in long held philosophical assumptions about dependence and the accompanying cultural stereotypes that define disability as an individual "exceptionality" or personal tragedy and by serve to perpetuate the present system. This is rooted in the way that disability, vulnerability, and dependency have been conceptualized within the broad spectrum of philosophical discourse and Western culture in general.

MacIntyre's understanding sheds a different light on the inclusion and exclusion of people with disabilities. Generally the concern has been how we can overcome the difficulties and problems caused by including people with disabilities among "us." MacIntyre effectively reverses this question, by redirecting our gaze to those temporarily without disabilities – to the moral and epistemological implications of exclusion on the development of virtue and practical reason. Recognizing that we become capable of "independent reason" only as we learn the virtues of acknowledged dependence (interdependence) recasts the issue of inclusion as an ethical and developmental imperative. Continuing to maintain schools and classrooms in which disability is removed, hidden, or merely tolerated not only restricts cognitive development, it teaches a negative moral lesson to young children while diminishing moral capacity of the entire community.

MacIntyre, Francis, Silvers, and Kittay illuminate some of the ways in which traditional conceptions of disability and dependence constitute a failure "... of inclusiveness that [is] both theoretical and practical."³⁸ Their work

helps to correct a long-standing omission and distortion within moral philosophy and expands our vision of the humanity, value, and dignity of people in all stages and conditions of life.

NOTES

¹ Senator Lowell Weicker, with Barry Sussman, *Maverick: A life in politics* (Boston: Little Brown, 1995), 163.

² Eva Feder Kittay, “When Caring Is Just and Justice Is Caring: Justice and Mental Retardation” in *Public Culture* 13, no. 3 (2001), 570.

³ Alasdair MacIntyre, *Dependent rational animals: why human beings need the virtues* (Chicago: Open Court, 1999).

⁴ Douglas Baynton, “Disability and the justification of inequality in American history,” in *The new disability history: American perspectives*, eds. K.P. Longmore and L. Umansky (New York: University Press, 2001), 564.

⁵ Linda Ware, “Sunflowers, enchantment and empires: reflections on inclusive education in the United States,” in *Inclusive education : policy, contexts and comparative perspectives*, eds. Felicity Armstrong, Derrick Armstrong and Len Barton (London: D. Fulton Publishers, 2000), 44.

⁶ Susan Gabel, *Disability studies in education: Readings in theory and method* (New York: P. Lang, 2005).

⁷ Nirmala Erevelles, “Rewriting critical pedagogy from the periphery,” in *Disability studies in education* (2005), 67.

⁸ Phillip Ferguson, “The social construction of mental retardation,” *Social Policy* 18, no.1 (1987), 51-56.

⁹ Peter Singer, *Rethinking life & death: the collapse of our traditional ethics* (New York : St. Martin's Press, 1994), 105.

¹⁰ Jeff McMahan, “Cognitive Disability, Misfortune, and Justice” *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 25, (1996), 3–35; Jeff McMahan, *The Ethics of Killing: Problems at the Margins of Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

¹¹ *Ibid.* This concept is similar to what Martha Nussbaum terms "Aristotelian essentialism."

¹² Kittay, “When Caring is Just and Justice is Caring,” 570.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 222.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Barbara Rogoff, “Cognition as a collaborative process” in *The Handbook of child psychology*, 5th ed. (1998), 438.

¹⁷ Gavriel Salomon, *Distributed cognitions: Psychological and educational considerations*. (Cambridge: University Press, 1993).

¹⁸ Kittay, “When Caring is Just and Justice is Caring,” 570.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 568.

²⁰ Ann Donnellan, “The criterion of the least dangerous assumption,” *Behavioral Disorders*, 9 (1984), 141-150.

²¹ Leslie Pickering Francis and Anita Silvers, “Liberalism and Individually Scripted Ideas of the Good: Meeting the Challenge of Dependent Agency,” *Social Theory and Practice* 33, no. 2 (2007).

²² Daniel Dennett, *Kinds of Minds* (New York: Basic Books, 1996), 134-35.

²³ Edwin Hutchins, *Cognition in the Wild* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995).

²⁴ Leslie Pickering Francis and Anita Silvers, “Liberalism and Individually Scripted Ideas of the Good,” *Social Theory and Practice* 33, no. 2 (2007), 328.

²⁵ Alasdair MacIntyre, *Dependent rational animals: why human beings need the virtues* (Chicago: Open Court, 1999).

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 1.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 83.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 2.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*, 85.

³² *Ibid.*, 136.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 91.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 90.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 91.

³⁸ Leslie Pickering Francis and Anita Silvers, Liberalism and Individually Scripted Ideas of the Good, 328 (2007).
