	M E T A	1 6 0 0	B	Dispatch: 15.7.09	Journal: META	CE: Bindu
	Journal Name	Manuscript No.		Author Received:	No. of pages: 22	PE: Chris/Deepa

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 Journal compilation © 2009 Metaphilosophy LLC and Blackwell Publishing Ltd
 Published by Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 9600 Garsington Road, Oxford OX4 2DQ, UK, and
 350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148, USA
 METAPHILOSOPHY
 Vol. ■■, No. ■■, ■■ 2009
 0026-1068

**THE PERSONAL IS PHILOSOPHICAL IS POLITICAL: A
 PHILOSOPHER AND MOTHER OF A COGNITIVELY DISABLED
 PERSON SENDS NOTES FROM THE BATTLEFIELD**

EVA FEDER KITTAY

Abstract: Having encountered landmines in offering a critique of philosophy based on my experience as the mother of a cognitively disabled daughter, I ask, “Should I continue?” I defend the idea that pursuing this project is of a piece with the invisible care labor that is done by people with disabilities and their families. The value of attempting to influence philosophical conceptions of cognitive disability by virtue of this experience is justified by an inextricable relationship between the personal, the political and the philosophical. If one grants that the “special relationship” between mother and child requires moral recognition, then I need first to make vivid the case that this relationship in the case of a child who lacks some “normal capacities” is indistinguishable from any mother-child relationship. If this is so, then I believe I can make a case that has as its conclusion that the moral personhood of even the severely cognitively disabled must be granted. Moreover, such recognition, I argue, necessitates the recognition of others who bear no special relationships to the child.

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Keywords: cognitive disability, mental retardation, intellectual disability, care, justice, motherhood, animal rights, personhood.

Introduction

An op-ed piece in the *Washington Post*, written in the wake of the Baby Doe case, began: “The one thing a child does is make a philosopher out of a parent” (Cohen 1982, B1).

Well, what if you already are a philosopher and are raising a child with severe physical and cognitive disabilities? As a philosopher who is the mother of a wonderful woman with severe intellectual disabilities, I finally determined that I should subject philosophical treatments of cognitive disability to a critique based on my knowledge and personal experience as a mother. It is this experience that has informed much of my writing already. The work that I had done on an ethic of care and the practice of caregiving comes out of my personal engagement with the care for an entirely dependent person. Furthermore, my teaching of ethics and social and political thought always ran up against an untruth: that all humans

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1 distinctively human. Nonpersons include all other sentient beings—the
2 sorts of beings that vegetarians typically do not eat. In the nonperson
3 category, he argues, we may or may not include human beings whose
4 cognitive capacity has not yet developed, such as fetuses and infants, and
5 those children and adults whose cognitive capacities have been so
6 diminished—through illness or injury—that they can reliably be said to
7 have neither a strong continuity of self, nor a capacity to project
8 themselves into the future, nor an ability to appreciate the higher
9 pleasures we associate with being human, and so forth. In the case of
10 infants, we recognize a capacity to develop these intrinsic properties that
11 will allow us to see these individuals as potential persons. In the case of
12 those who have lost the capacities, their former possession of properties
13 that made us once recognize these individuals as persons may arguably
14 give them the right to the same moral standing as persons.

15 There is one category of human nonpersons whose inviolability and
16 right to justice we cannot argue for on the basis of their potential or on
17 the basis of their former personhood, and that is the “the congenitally
18 severely mentally retarded.” Therefore this group presents itself as a
19 seemingly less difficult group to cite when arguing that moral status
20 should be assigned not on the basis of species membership but on the
21 basis of intrinsic psychological capacities, foremost among which is
22 higher-level cognition. It is these capacities, he argues, that should
23 determine whether an individual is due justice and whether it is as bad
24 to kill that individual as it is to “kill one of us.” My daughter, according
25 to this reasoning, has no grounds to claim justice, and it is less bad to kill
26 her than to kill “one of us.”

27 In making my case against a conclusion that seems to me so self-evidently
28 abhorrent—the basis for an argument *ad absurdum*, not a thesis to main-
29 tain—I try to keep my arguments tight, my interpretations clean and correct,
30 my reasoning clear of the emotional turmoil I feel as I read McMahan’s
31 words. McMahan responds. He thinks that we are arguing past each other;
32 that I have missed what his arguments are meant to show; that I have taken
33 things out of context. But fundamentally he isn’t backing away from the
34 central thesis I am attacking. He just thinks that I have failed to show where
35 the argument goes wrong and that my admittedly provisional and tentative
36 alternative will not hold up. (Although his criticism is as sketchy as is my
37 offering.) Most of the others sit silent. Those who do speak up do so in order
38 to defend McMahan and attack me for attacking McMahan. I had, in fact,
39 made the inflammatory claim that McMahan’s arguments exemplify how
40 philosophical bioethics can itself be unethical in its methodology and import.
41 (Something I return to below.)

42 Where were my defenders? As I left the meeting, I thought, “What am I
43 doing in this profession?” What, I wondered, was I doing in a discipline
44 that thought it appropriate to question the full worth of a portion of
45 humanity, one that happened to include my own daughter? A discipline

whose practitioners sat on the sidelines as I fought to defend her moral worth and that of those like her?

By the time I got on the plane, I was determined to resign at the semester's end. By the time I got off the plane, I had decided not to leave but to attempt to change this venerable hoary profession—at least to give it a good try.

This current collection of essays is the culmination of that Stony Brook conference. This essay, however, was written after the conference. It is a meditation on the conversation that closed the conference, and it is a reflection on my dual role: philosopher, and also stakeholder in the philosophical debate—though not just any stakeholder, but a mother. Can one do good philosophy, be practically efficacious, and keep intact the relationship of mother and child, or are the difficulties in this project insurmountable? Are there philosophical and practical payoffs in making philosophy this personal—and do they justify the personal costs of the effort?

What Is the Problem? Why Try to Change the Profession?

What is it philosophers have said about cognitive disability that I found so appalling that I was ready to jettison a career of more than thirty years? Here is how Licia Carlson summarized her quest, while still an undergraduate volunteering at a local center for people with intellectual disabilities, to discover what philosophers had to say on the topic: “Plato decreed that ‘defective babies’ should be left to die. Locke and Kant defined those who lack reason as less than human. And most troubling of all, when I looked for contemporary discussions about this group, most of the references I found were in discussions of animal rights, asking pointedly whether the ‘severely mentally retarded’ could be distinguished from non-human animals in any meaningful sense” (Carlson forthcoming).

A passage in Jeff McMahan’s work illustrates some of these disturbing claims:

It is arguable, however, that a further effect of our partiality for members of our own species is a tendency to decreased sensitivity to the lives and well-being of those sentient beings that are not members of our species.

One can discern an analogous phenomenon in the case of nationalism . . . [where] the sense of solidarity among members . . . motivates them. . . . But the powerful sense of collective identity within a nation is often achieved by contrasting an idealized conception of the national character with caricatures of other nations, whose members are regarded as less important or worthy or, in many cases, are dehumanized and despised as inferior or even odious. . . . In places such as Yugoslavia and its former provinces—the result is often brutality and atrocity on an enormous scale. . . .

I believe our treatment of the severely retarded and our treatment of animals follows a similar pattern. While our sense of kinship with the severely retarded moves us to treat them with great solicitude, our perception of animals as radically “other” numbs our sensitivity to them. . . . When one compares the relatively small number of severely retarded human beings who benefit from our

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1 solicitude with the vast number of animals who suffer at our hands, it is
2 impossible to avoid the conclusion that the good effects of our species-based
3 partiality are greatly outweighed by the bad.

(McMahan 2003, 221–22)

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6 Again, imagine being the mother of a child with severe intellectual
7 disabilities reading within the pages of a philosophical text such state-
8 ments as: “I have argued that the cognitively impaired are not badly off in
9 the sense relevant to justice and indeed do not come within the scope of
10 comparative (and, by extension, noncomparative) principles of justice.
11 Not only do they not have special priority as a matter of justice, but their
12 claims on us seem even weaker than those of most other human beings”
13 (McMahan 1996, 31). After outlining three possible conclusions to his
14 argument, McMahan gives as the third “that the treatment of animals is
15 governed by stronger constraints than we have traditionally supposed,
16 while the treatment of the cognitively impaired is in some respects subject
17 to weaker constraints than we have traditionally supposed.” And he
18 concludes: “The third seems the only reasonable option” (McMahan
19 2003, 31). Reasonable? To whom? Certainly not to me.

20 For a mother of a severely cognitively impaired child, the impact of
21 such an argument is devastating. How can I begin to tell you what it feels
22 like to read texts in which one’s child is compared, in all seriousness and
23 with philosophical authority, to a dog, pig, rat, and most flatteringly a
24 chimp; how corrosive these comparisons are, how they mock those
25 relationships that affirm who we are and why we care?

26 I am no stranger to a beloved animal. I have had dogs I have loved,
27 dogs I have mourned for. But as dog lovers who become parents can tell
28 you, much as we adore our hounds, there is no comparison between the
29 feelings for a beloved child of normal capacities and those for a beloved
30 canine. And I can tell you that there is also no comparison when that
31 child has intellectual disabilities.

32 If the demands of philosophical inquiry are so painful in this respect,
33 why continue to engage the issue? Why not just quit—or quit working in
34 this area of philosophy? Why try to change the profession with respect to
35 issues of cognitive disability? To respond, it is useful to draw an analogy
36 with the situation of women who entered the field of philosophy in the
37 heady days of the women’s liberation movement. These women were
38 intellectuals who wished to align their intellectual pursuits with the
39 persons they are and with the position they occupy in the world. The
40 political atmosphere made especially evident sexist presumptions that
41 have long been predominant in philosophy, but these women chose not to
42 pass over these presumptions as aberrations, holdovers from more
43 patriarchal times. Instead, they—much like Mary Wollstonecraft and
44 Simone de Beauvoir before them—asked how philosophical inquiry itself
45 might be distorted by the false beliefs about women. They believed that

1 limiting a field to those who live similar lives diminishes its truth and
 2 usefulness, yielding at best partial truths, at worst distortions of central
 3 concepts. For those of us who have fallen in love with philosophy, turning
 4 away without falling out of love seems a poor way of treating a lover.

5 Moreover, by tackling problematic assumptions of philosophy, those
 6 previously underrepresented in the field help to clarify and unmask
 7 political views that predominate beyond philosophy. In matters dealing
 8 with cognitive disability, philosophical positions formed in the absence of
 9 any representation either by people with disabilities or by their families
 10 find their way, via bioethics, into health-care and policy decisions. Such
 11 positions have posed the possibility of truly deleterious consequences.
 12 Finally, philosophy, when approached critically, may have something
 13 important to offer in the striving for the just and caring treatment of those
 14 who have been outside its scope. If you think that philosophical inquiry is
 15 both intrinsically and instrumentally important, then to leave it to its
 16 ignorance and prejudices is a poor option indeed.

17 But there is another reason as well. When Sara Ruddick describes the
 18 practice of mothering, a central feature is socializing the child for acceptance
 19 into society. The mother with a disabled child hears this requirement
 20 somewhat differently from most (Ruddick 1989). For her, socialization
 21 for acceptance means that you have both to help the child make her way in
 22 the world given her disabilities *and* to help shape a world that will accept
 23 her. My daughter, Sesha, will never walk the halls of academe, but when
 24 what happens within these halls has the potential to affect her, then I as an
 25 academic have an obligation to socialize academe to accept my daughter.
 26 Such “care” may seem to be far from the daily care that her fully dependent
 27 body requires, and it may appear to be far-fetched to call this “care,” but it
 28 is part and parcel of that labor of love that we do as parents, especially
 29 parents of disabled children—more still in the case of those who are so
 30 disabled that they cannot speak for themselves, a defining condition for
 31 those who are severely intellectually disabled.

32 The disability scholar and biomedical ethicist Jackie Leach Scully
 33 speaks of a form of discrimination against people with disabilities that
 34 resists legislative measures. For this she uses the term “disablism” and
 35 says, “People who are nonconsciously or unconsciously disablism do not
 36 recognize themselves as in any way discriminatory; their disablism is often
 37 unintentional, and persists through unexamined, lingering cultural stereo-
 38 types about disabled lives” (Scully 2008, 2).² She shows how disabled
 39 people cope, “manage,” or even in some cases are forced to “manipulate”

40 ² “Disablism” should include those who try to sharply distinguish an impairment and a
 41 disability, as does McMahan when he claims that the “radically cognitively limited” are not
 42 disabled, for social conditions have nothing to do with this limitation (see McMahan 2009,
 43 included in this collection). For a critique of such a reading of the social model of disability
 44 by one of its formulators, see Shakespeare and Watson 2001.

1 these less-than-conscious forms of disablement in their daily interactions,
2 and she calls this “management” the “invisible labor of disabled people.”
3 Family members of disabled people also do such invisible labor. It is part
4 of the labor involved in the socialization for acceptance that mothers of
5 disabled children do when they work to socialize the world to meet their
6 child. In deciding to write about my disabled daughter in the context of
7 philosophy, I not only am engaged in this labor but am working to make
8 some of this labor visible. My efforts deploy philosophical reasoning and
9 are directed at philosophers and philosophical texts, but they are also part
10 of mothering, of doing that otherwise invisible work managing “the
11 disablist” so that those who live with disability can live better.

12 13 14 **The Challenges**

15 What are the specific challenges facing someone in my position? There are
16 essentially two. The first is to overcome the anger and revulsion that one
17 feels when encountering the view that one’s disabled child—or child with
18 a particular disability—is less worthy of dignity, of life, of concern or
19 justice than others. What does this labor look like? As I was writing the
20 paper that I delivered at that philosophical workshop of which I spoke at
21 the start of this essay, a paper that required a very careful reading of
22 McMahan’s *Ethics of Killing*, I would return to my daughter, Sesha, and
23 find myself trying to analyze the features that differentiated her from the
24 nonhuman animals with whom she was being compared, features that
25 would make her worthy of personhood. As I did so, I would simultane-
26 ously shrink away in disgust from such reflection.

27 Now consider what it means to make these comparisons. Comparisons
28 always involve the positing of at least a partial identity. We compare by
29 matching up features or aspects of something, and then regard those
30 features that do not align themselves as the differentia. In scientific inquiries
31 we do compare humans and nonhuman animals, matching humans and
32 animals feature by feature, either to differentiate what is definitively human
33 or to ascertain what we share with fellow animals. But such comparisons
34 exist against an understanding that man and beast are distinct—however
35 alike we may be in certain respects. When, in contrast, comparisons are
36 made with pernicious intent, as when African Americans are compared to
37 apes, or Jews are analogized to parasites or called dogs, the object is to
38 reduce the human to the nonhuman, to strip away those aspects of human
39 beings that connect these human beings more closely to other human
40 animals than to nonhuman animals. As the cognitive psychologist Amos
41 Tversky pointed out, the predicate “is like” is not symmetrical (Tversky
42 1977). When we assert that A is like B, we take B as the template—its
43 features are salient—and the features of A not found in B lose their salience.
44 That is, if B is characterized by the features x , y , and z , then we come to see
45 A only in terms of its similarity with respect to x , y , and z , even if in other

contexts A's features, *a*, *b*, and *c*, are the salient ones. The pernicious reductive comparisons between humans and nonhuman animals take such an asymmetrical form.

Thus, to respond to the challenge to articulate the differences between a human animal with significantly curtailed cognitive capacities and a relatively intelligent nonhuman animal means that one first has to see the former as the latter. That is the moment of revulsion. Relating with that stance to my daughter as my daughter is an impossibility. Note that this response has little to do with the affection one might feel for a nonhuman animal. Remember that the Nazis expressed a great affection for nonhuman animals and were deeply attached to their dogs. But that did not keep them from calling Jews "*Hunde*."

Imagine, if you can, taking the person that you love as much as you love anything in this world, your beloved child, and looking at her with the comparative measure of a dog or a rat or a chimp or a pig. This thought is still worse than Bernard Williams's famous "one thought too many"—that is, the thought of the husband who thinks he needs a justification to save his own wife when faced with the choice of saving her or someone else (Williams 1976, 214). And I had to fight that one thought, one thought too many and too hideous, interposing itself between my daughter and me in order to preserve the fulgent sweetness of her being.

But without that thought, how could I answer the skeptics? And if I sensed the comparison cutting me off from my own daughter, then imagine the wedge the process of juxtaposing the cognitively disabled and the nonhuman animal would place between a person with severe cognitive disabilities and those who lack any familiarity with such individuals. In the case of the theorist the wedge may be merely conceptual, but it has the potential to translate into one with horrific consequences on a practical level.³

Of course, a part of the experience I am describing involves the paradox of trying to study another subject, and in so doing turn a subject into an object. I was studying my daughter and my relationship to her, and such study does seem to require an objectification that is at odds with the relationship of two subjects. But what makes this particular case so toxic is that the relentless comparisons of my daughter to a nonhuman animal, this dehumanization, is in itself the objectification of her, and it is I who am required to be the objectifier in order to see how to refute the offensive claims.⁴ No one who aspires to be "a good parent," to fulfill the basic duty of a parent, can but revolt against the dehumanization or the moral demotion of one's own child. Added to this insult is the fact that,

³ I thank Licia Carlson for this point.

⁴ Addressing me, Licia Carlson has made the following insightful point: "Though unlike in *your* case (having to turn a subject into an object), in philosophical discourse she's never been a subject. It's almost a different *kind* of objectifying when one confirms an object of study as an object (and whose subjectivity has been dismissed, and really never posited in the first place)" (personal communication).

historically, giving the cognitively disabled the “face of the beast” has permitted so much abuse and neglect (even of people whom we would not today treat as cognitively disabled) (Carlson forthcoming). Such abuse continues unabated in some quarters even today.⁵ The history comes alive each time the comparison gets made.

Epistemic Responsibility and Credibility

It might be supposed that I have just demonstrated the impossibility of a mother being able to ascertain objectively the truth about the moral status of her own child, where that moral status is not one she would want to affirm. But is it possible to say that the intimacy of parent and child and the parent’s caring labor gives us not a lesser grasp of the moral truth but a greater one—a truth born of the labor of the hand and heart as well as the mind (Smith 1987)? I believe it can.

In another work I have argued that Peter Singer and Jeff McMahan fail to adhere to what I take as fundamental ethical precepts that philosophers need to uphold in their philosophizing (Kittay 2008). These are, first, *epistemic responsibility*: know the subject that you are using to make a philosophical point; and, second, *epistemic modesty*: know what you don’t know.⁶ These two principles serve to indicate the paradoxical position of a philosopher with affinitive relations to a cognitively impaired individual who inquires into the validity of morally demoting such individuals to nonpersonhood.

Epistemic Responsibility: Empirical Adequacy

As I have already noted, if *anyone* might be accused of epistemic irresponsibility, it may seem to be the mother, not the philosophers whose conceptual and personal distance from the subject matter lend them a degree of objectivity. After all, it is mother whose emotional investment may skew her judgment. But let us think again. Let us ask: Of whom are philosophers such as Singer and McMahan actually speaking when they invoke the “severely mentally retarded” or the “radically cognitively impaired”? To whom do they refer?

Singer (1996) asks us to think about a “special institution” for the retarded that is found in the Netherlands. Here mentally retarded

⁵ The state of Texas continues the practice of employing state institutions to warehouse mentally disabled individuals. According to an Associated Press article reported by MSNBC, “In Texas, officials verified 465 incidents of abuse or neglect against mentally disabled people in state care in fiscal year 2007. Over a three-month period this summer, the state opened at least 500 new cases with similar allegations, according to federal investigators” (Associated Press 2009).

⁶ The others are *humility*: resist the arrogant imposition of your own values on others, and *accountability*: pay attention to the consequences of your philosophizing (see Kittay 2008).

1 individuals are confined, but live a life without many of the usual constraints
 2 of such institutions. They are free to wander about, form associations with
 3 one another, engage in sexual activity, and have and raise children who
 4 result from sexual encounters. Residents indicate their desires and wants
 5 with grunts and gestures, raise their children, pick leaders, get elderly
 6 females to help with raising the little ones. From Singer's description it
 7 appears that they possess no physical problems, other than their cognitive
 8 deficits. Close to the end of the description, he notes that when one of the
 9 residents kills another, the death is not treated as would be the death of a
 10 nonresident, and the killer is not thought to have done the same sort of
 11 injury. This "special institution" for the retarded, it turns out, is not for
 12 people at all, but (gasp!) for chimpanzees. From the description we are
 13 meant to think that the behavior of the chimps is adequate to a description
 14 of a group of retarded persons, and so to conclude that both populations
 15 share the same morally relevant attributes.⁷

16 The description, however, is suspect because human impairments are
 17 multiple, so one rarely sees a population of people with intellectual
 18 disabilities as uniform as those of the chimpanzees in Singer's zoo. While
 19 deficits in a population of retarded persons would vary considerably, the
 20 residents of Singer's community are pretty much alike and function at the
 21 same level. Singer can paint such a picture precisely because he is speaking
 22 of chimpanzees without the deficits characteristic of the severely cogni-
 23 tively impaired human. To borrow from Tolstoy, "All unimpaired
 24 humans are alike; each human with a severe impairment is impaired after
 25 its own fashion."⁸ We can retain some characteristically human capacities
 26 and lose others. What's lost and what is retained constrains the extent to
 27 which, and how fully, we are able partake in scope of human existence
 28 and the panoply of human possibilities.⁹

29 It is most unlikely that one could have a community of humans who all
 30 have the same cognitive impairments, who all function at the same level,
 31 and who together can function as a community without the assistance of
 32 humans without such impairments.¹⁰

33 ⁷ Incidentally, it seems that chimps do not take the killing of one of them as lightly as
 34 Singer implies. See the description by Frans de Waal (2006, 47) of the murder of Luit at the
 35 Arnhem zoo in the Netherlands. This inaccuracy should make us wary of the empirical
 36 adequacy of Singer's account of both chimpanzees and humans with retardation (see below).

37 ⁸ The original passage from Tolstoy is of course: "All happy families are alike but an
 38 unhappy family is unhappy after its own fashion" (1954, 13).

39 ⁹ It is worth observing that what one considers as falling within the scope of human
 40 existence is not a notion that is clearly defined. Some may consider the dependency of
 41 infancy, significant disability, illness of frail old age as conditions that are part of our
 42 "animal" and not our human existence. See Kittay 1999, MacIntyre 1999, and Nussbaum
 43 2006 for an opposing view.

44 ¹⁰ This would be true even if all the residents had the same syndrome, say Down, as
 45 Down will not express itself to the same extent and in the same way in each case. The
 46 scenario also presumes the children of residents would have the same genetic condition. Even

1 The empirical inadequacy of this example feeds a conceptual fallacy. It
2 is as if one were to say that an automobile that has lost a wheel, and hence
3 is three-wheeled, is functionally (and in the case of the human-chimp
4 example morally) equivalent to a motorized tricycle. Both, after all, are
5 motorized vehicles with three wheels, except, of course, that cars were
6 designed to function with four wheels, and the loss of a wheel is a
7 significant impairment. Without at least a minimal acquaintance with cars
8 and tricycles, a conceptualization of the two vehicles as functionally
9 equivalent seems reasonable enough. With the appropriate knowledge the
10 error is self-evident.

11 I point to this example of Singer's "community for retarded people"
12 because it indicates that its author has very little knowledge of people
13 with the sorts of impairments about whom he purports to speak. Now this
14 is a thought experiment, and so it can surely include counterfactual
15 elements. What is counterfactual, however, is exactly what is at stake in
16 the example—that is, whether chimps are functionally indistinct (in ways
17 that count morally) from mentally retarded humans. So it cannot be
18 effective in proving that very point without begging the question. As
19 Singer is an astute philosopher, it is probably more likely that he erred in
20 the empirical claims embedded in the example than in the form of
21 argumentation. Moreover, the example *depends* on the ignorance of
22 what mental retardation in humans looks like.

23 The sense that it is unnecessary to acquaint oneself sufficiently with the
24 empirical realities of mental retardation is no less evident in the work of
25 McMahan. McMahan defines the severely mentally retarded (in a note,
26 he excludes the mildly and moderately retarded and those whose
27 incapacity is a result of brain injury after birth) as human beings "who
28 not only lack self-consciousness but are almost entirely unresponsive to
29 their environment and to other people" (1996, 5). He also says, "The
30 profoundly cognitively impaired are incapable . . . of deep personal and
31 social relations, creativity and achievement, the attainment of the highest
32 forms of knowledge, aesthetic pleasures, and so on" (1996, 8).

33 This is seriously misinformed. Most severely retarded people can speak
34 at least a few words and can be and are involved in activities and
35 relationships. Even "profoundly mentally retarded" individuals are far
36 from being unresponsive to their environment and to other people. My
37 daughter, Sesha, was diagnosed as having severe to profound retardation.
38 She is enormously responsive, forming deep personal relationships with
39 her family and her long-standing caregivers and friendly relations with
40 her therapists and teachers, more distant relatives, and our friends. I have
41 written quite a bit about her love of music, especially but not exclusively
42 classical symphonic music, with the master of this form, Beethoven, being

43 in the genetic syndromes like Down, although a higher than usual proportion of Down
44 parents will have Down children, most will be unaffected (Bovicelli et al. 1982).

on the top of her list. So much for the assertion that persons with severe mental retardation cannot experience aesthetic pleasures!¹¹

Since writing the article in which I counter McMahan's claims and arguments, I experienced one of the most profound learning experiences of my life. My daughter now lives in a group home with five other people who are all considered to be severely mentally retarded, and have been so since birth. Two of her housemates lost their fathers within the period of a month. One, a young woman diagnosed with Rett's syndrome, would be found sitting with tears streaming down her face after she was told that her father was extremely ill and would die. In the case of the other, a young man who invariably greets me with a huge smile, I was witness to the howling, wailing grief minutes after his mother and sister informed him of the death of his father. He waited till they left before he began his heart-wrenching sobbing. They most likely left not knowing what he had understood, and only learned of his response when they later spoke to the staff.¹² We are speaking here of the capacity to understand the very abstract concept of death, the death of a beloved person. So much for cavalier claims that the severely retarded cannot form profound attachments.

McMahan has other characterizations of the congenitally severely mentally retarded. In *The Ethics of Killing* he sometimes speaks of them having the capacities of a chimp, in other places he maintains that they have psychological capacities equivalent to those of a dog.

What Sesha can do, she does as a human would do, though frequently imperfectly; but it is humanly imperfect, not canine perfect. However, even with all Sesha cannot do and seems not to be able to comprehend, her response to music and her sensitivity to people are remarkably intact—or more correctly, quite simply remarkable. What a discordant set of abilities and disabilities she exhibits!

Epistemic Modesty: Know What You Don't Know

The lack of epistemic modesty on these issues was on exhibition at the Stony Brook conference in an interchange between Singer and me. It came at the end of a talk where he argued that many nonhuman animals have cognitive capacities that exceed those of people with severe cognitive disabilities, and that for this reason the two groups are morally on par. He also maintained that he would have more in common with an alien from outer space who was sitting here cleverly disguised as a human than with someone with severe cognitive disabilities. At the end of his talk I

¹¹ McMahan (2008) raised the bar for the appreciation of aesthetic pleasures where he identified these as capacities such as the ability to understand the "complexity of a Bach fugue." I worry that many who would otherwise make it over the bar easily might now find themselves among the radically cognitively impaired.

¹² It is not unreasonable, in the case of this young man, that he held back his grief to spare his mother and sister.

noted that he had taken his students on a field trip to a neonatal unit in New Brunswick, which is approximately half an hour away from Princeton University where he teaches, presumably to learn that physi-

cians#
quietly believe that they should not be keeping some of these neonates alive. Here all one sees of cognitive disability is a tiny creature, more fetus than infant, lying in a bubble-like environment, with tubes coming out of all the infant's orifices and monitors ringing, clinking, and clanging. To offer a different picture, I invited him to come and visit the Center for Discovery, a community composed of group homes for people with very significant and multiple disabilities approximately two hours from New York City (and an additional hour from Princeton, New Jersey), which is now home to my daughter, Sesha. Here people with cognitive disabilities live flourishing lives, work, and are well cared for, not warehoused. The discussion conversation went like this:

Eva Kittay: Peter, next time you take your students on a field trip, won't you bring them to the Center for Discovery?

Peter Singer: It's a little further than New Brunswick.

EK: It can be arranged, and I would be happy to personally arrange it. I don't know how much you can see in one visit. I want you to see some of these people that you are talking about. You bring your students to the neonatal unit; I would just like equal time for the Center for Discovery. . . .

PS: . . . I would like you to tell me what it is—just in terms of the argument that I presented—what it is that I would see there that would challenge the argument that I presented.

EK: Well, where do I start? You would see, for one thing, the difference between . . . what you have in common with the folks who live there and—what was the comparison that you made?—with a Martian, or with a pig, or a chimpanzee. (I have to say chimpanzee is the most flattering of the comparisons that are made.) That's what you would see. How much you see is also what you bring to the situation. I'm not sure what you'd see. But it would at least be a beginning.¹³

What is especially salient in our exchange is that in all their writings about people with significant cognitive impairments, philosophers such as Singer and McMahan presume to know the cognitive capacities of the people they write about, when, as I have attempted to demonstrate, they

¹³ Quoted from the transcript of the conference proceedings, available at https://podcast.ic.sunysb.edu//blojsom_resources/meta/phicdc/16-PETER_Singer_Q%26A.mp4. Singer counters that if he visits the center, then I should visit a place where chimpanzees employ sign language. I respond that I am willing, and invite us each to find ways of defending the moral status of those we care passionately about without diminishing the moral standing of the other group.

1 know virtually nothing at all. And they fail to acknowledge their
 2 ignorance. They do not know what they do not know, nor do they
 3 appear to take any concrete steps to rectify the situation, because they
 4 presume that they have nothing to learn that is of moral significance. It
 5 suffices, they believe, to know some bare facts about the deficits in
 6 question.

7 Now what cognitive capacities Sesha possesses I do not know, nor do
 8 others. And it is hubris to presume to know. I am often surprised find out
 9 that Sesha has understood something or is capable of something I did not
 10 expect. These surprises can only keep coming when she and her friends
 11 are treated in a manner based not on the limitations we know they have
 12 but on our understanding that *our* knowledge is limited. If my daughter's
 13 housemates had not been told of their fathers' death on the premise that
 14 they cannot possibly understand the concept of death, we never would
 15 have known that they could have a grief as full and as profound as any I
 16 have seen or experienced.

17 It is easy enough to say that I am "blinded by love," that because of my
 18 attachment to my daughter and to her friends I fail to see these folks as
 19 the sad specimens they are. I fail to appreciate how superior apes or pigs
 20 are in terms of any relevant moral characteristics. But it is because I see
 21 Sesha close up, because I have a deep and intimate relationship with her,
 22 that I am able to see what is hidden from those who are not privileged
 23 enough to see her when she opens up to another. It is because I was in her
 24 group home that I could witness the young man's overwhelmingly clear
 25 expression of his grief when he heard of his father's death. As critics of an
 26 unadulterated objectivity, a view from nowhere, have repeated, there is no
 27 view from nowhere. If my position as Sesha's mother skews my epistemic
 28 relation to questions of cognitive disability, the distance that McMahan
 29 and Singer maintain skews it in another direction.

30 Evelyn Fox Keller, in her study *A Feeling for the Organism*, discusses
 31 the methodology of the Nobel-winning scientist Barbara McClintock,
 32 who made startling discoveries concerning the transmission of genetic
 33 material in maize:

34 Inevitably, "seeing" entails a form of subjectivity, an act of imagination, a way
 35 of looking that is necessarily in part determined by some private perspective. In
 36 ordinary life, these private perspectives seldom emerge as discrepancies; the
 37 level of shared vision required of people to cooperate is usually met. But
 38 science and art alike make tougher demands on intersubjectivity [than does
 39 ordinary life, where intersubjectivity merely requires that we cooperate]: both
 40 are crucially dependent on internal visions, committed to conveying what the
 41 everyday eye cannot see. (Keller 2003, 150)

42 Keller goes on to argue that McClintock's "feeling for the organism,"
 43 the close personal attentiveness that McClintock devoted to the entities
 44 that she studied, allowed a personal internal vision to see what the

1 “everyday eye,” which in some cases are the eyes of other scientists as
 2 well as lay people, could not perceive. One can say the same of someone
 3 who is in close contact with a dependent person, especially a person who
 4 is limited in his or her communicative skills. The close attentive eye
 5 needed to care for the dependent individual gives rise to perceptual
 6 capabilities that are not shared by those who have at best a glancing
 7 acquaintance.

8 In primatology, the value of subjective interaction with the individuals
 9 studied made the work of Jane Goodall seem hopelessly naïve. She writes
 10 in her memoir: “As I had not had an undergraduate science education I
 11 didn’t realize that animals were not supposed to have personalities, or to
 12 think, or to feel emotions or pain. I had no idea that it would have been
 13 more appropriate to assign each of the chimpanzees a number rather than
 14 a name by which I got to know him or her” (Goodall 2000, 14). Today, of
 15 course, it is standard practice to name chimpanzees. If Goodall had not
 16 lived with her chimps and given them proper names (and for both she was
 17 at first condemned and ignored), we would have continued with the poor
 18 understanding we previously had of these beings. Note that these are
 19 discoveries that Singer and McMahan depend on and do not seek to
 20 impeach. Yet it is no less true that without a strong affective bond with
 21 people with severe cognitive disabilities, we often fail to get a glimpse into
 22 the lives of these persons.

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23 The epistemic position I am relying on maybe be called, with Sandra
 24 Harding, “strong objectivity” which, she says, “starts thought in the
 25 perspective from the life of the Other, allowing the Other to gaze back
 26 ‘shamelessly’ at the self who had reserved for himself the right to gaze
 27 anonymously at whomsoever he chooses. . . . Strong objectivity requires
 28 that we investigate the relation between subject and object rather than
 29 deny the existence of, or seek unilateral control over, this relation”
 30 (Harding 1991, 150, 152). It is this relation between “subject” and
 31 “object” which is at the heart of the inquiry I have here embarked
 32 upon, and which, as Harding’s rhetoric suggests, has important political
 33 implications. The question is whether my knowledge can be recognized as
 34 such, whether my voice can be heard, or whether a patronizing response
 35 to the injured mother absolves the parties of any damage that may result
 36 from policies formulated on the basis of the denial of the moral
 37 personhood of individuals who do not have a place at the table where
 38 their fates may be decided.

39 As we will see in the following section, my own authority (as a
 40 philosopher and as one knowledgeable enough to speak about the moral
 41 status of people with severe cognitive impairments) is effectively ques-
 42 tioned even as recognition is accorded the “special relationship” of
 43 mother and child. I hope to provide an argument that takes this
 44 recognition and turns the tables on opponents of the moral personhood
 45 of people with severe cognitive disabilities. Such recognition, I will argue,

effectively settles the case in favor of the moral personhood of people with severe cognitive disabilities.

Why the Personal Is Philosophical Is Political

Now should anyone think that no one—not even a philosopher—would pointedly ask a parent how his or her child differs from a nonhuman animal, say a pig, let us look at this interchange between Singer, McMahan, and myself, on the last session of the last day of the Stony Brook conference.

Peter Singer (directed at Eva Kittay): . . . You've said a couple of times and you said it just again in response to the last question that you think that Jeff [McMahan] doesn't have the empirical stuff right, and you also said that in response to my comparison between humans and nonhuman animals. You put up Jeff's comments [in which McMahan puts forward a list of comparisons between "radically cognitively impaired" humans and nonhuman animals and then says] and so on and so forth. . . . [T]hen you said that "we can't wave our hands and then say and so on, because there is so much more to what it is to be human." You've said that a couple of times. So I am just wanting to ask you: Well, can you tell us some of these morally significant psychological capacities in which you think that human beings, and let's talk about real ones, so the ones who are "profoundly mentally retarded," to use that term, in which they are superior to . . . you sort of said, maybe chimpanzees and great apes are different . . . so let's say in which they are superior to pigs or dogs or animals of that sort. (*Eva Kittay responds by shaking her head.*) It's a factual question. You can't just shake your head. You have to put up or stop saying that.

EK: Peter, . . . you asked me how is Sessa different from a—what did you say—a pig? And [when I shook my head] you said, well, it's a factual question, "put up or shut up." The first thing I have to do when you ask me that question, is I have to get over . . . a feeling of nausea. It's not that I'm not able to answer it intellectually, it's that I can't even get to the point emotionally, where I can answer that question. (*Pause.*) Most of the time. When I say you can't just wave your hand and say "and so on," it's because there is *so much* to being human. There's the touch, there's the feel, there's the hug, there's the smile, . . . there are so many ways of interacting. I don't think you need philosophy for this. You need a *very good writer*. . . . [T]his is why I just reject . . . [the] . . . idea that you [should] base moral standing on a list of cognitive capacities, or psychological capacities, or any kind of capacities. Because what it is to be human is not a bundle of capacities. It's a way that you are, a way you are in the world, a way you are with another. And I could adore my pig; I could dote on my pig. It would be something entirely different. And if you can't get that; if you can't understand that, then I'm not sure exactly what it is that you want to hear from me that I could tell you. . . . I'll keep trying because I think this is a very important.

Jeff McMahan: Let me say something on behalf of Peter's [Singer's] point of view here. . . . Peter has not said anything to deny the significance of a mother's relation to her own child. Nothing, as far as I can tell. The question here is a

1 question about what moral demands there are on other people. And the fact
 2 that you, Eva, have a relation with your daughter doesn't necessarily give other
 3 people the same set of reasons that you have to respond to your daughter in
 4 certain ways and to treat your daughter in certain ways. The question is what is
 5 it about people like your daughter that makes moral demands on other people
 6 that nonhuman animals cannot make on any of us. That is the question that
 7 Peter is asking. He's not denying that you have a special relation to your
 8 daughter and that that is very significant for you in your life, significant for her,
 9 and so on, and that that's true of many other people. Or again to get you to
 10 look at George Pitcher's book [Pitcher 1997] or many other books (*EK*: I've
 11 read it; in fact it's a very good book) that indicate that these relations—some
 12 attenuated version of these relations—I wouldn't claim and I'm sure George
 13 Pitcher wouldn't claim that his relation to his dogs was as deep or as significant
 14 or as objectively important as your relationship to your daughter. Nobody's
 15 saying that. I will also say, though, that (*long pause*). You know, Peter and I
 16 didn't come here to hurt anybody's feelings. We're here to try to understand
 17 things better. I think that Peter and I engage in a fair amount of voluntary self-
 18 censorship. I'm trying very hard not to say anything offensive, something
 19 hurtful. I'm profoundly averse to making people miserable.

20 *EK*: I know you're not trying to hurt anyone's feelings. I know Peter isn't
 21 trying to hurt anyone's feelings. That's not what it's about. For me, it's not
 22 what I am experiencing, it's what your writings might mean for public policy.
 23 That's what concerns me. And that's not just about my daughter.¹⁴

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24 Before I turn to my conclusion, it is worth observing a number of points
 25 about the dialogue I have just recounted. My comments about what it is
 26 to be human are cast entirely in relational terms. I am attempting to steer
 27 the discussion away from the only criteria of moral worth that Singer and
 28 McMahan are willing to hear—namely, “a set of morally significant
 29 psychological properties” possessed by all humans and not by nonhuman
 30 animals. My point of contention is with the very idea of a list of attributes
 31 as the basis of moral personhood, and although it is one that I repeat in
 32 my writings, in the commentary I gave at the conference, and in my
 33 responses during the Q&A session, that contention is never joined.
 34 Granted that I may not have made my case well. But that was not at
 35 issue for Singer and McMahan, because they could not be dissuaded from
 36 the idea that there *must* be such a list of morally significant psychological
 37 properties and were not willing even to engage the question.

38 The second point worth noting is that the discussion is hijacked, in a
 39 sense. It is turned away from the genuine point of contention to a cloaked
 40 and patronizing apology for hurting the feelings of a mother: “Of course
 41 you love your child, and we do a great deal of ‘self-censorship’ to avoid
 42 making any one ‘miserable.’” Perhaps I courted this response by speaking

14 Quoted from the transcript of the conference proceedings, available at https://podcast.ic.sunysb.edu//blojsom_resources/meta/phicdc/36-KITTAY%3AMcMAHAN_Q%26A.mp4

1 of finding the comparisons that Singer was asking me to make nauseating
 2 and speaking of the psychological cost of engaging in this debate. To
 3 conclude this essay, then, I want to justify these sorts of statements by
 4 explaining why they are not thinly veiled attempts to censor Singer,
 5 McMahan, and others who hold this position, and why they are not pleas
 6 for apologies from those who induce these strong responses.

7 In fact, in responding, McMahan, unwittingly I believe, comes to grant
 8 a consideration which is indispensable to my own argument and in which
 9 these bits of self-confession actually play a part. Consider one of the last
 10 remarks that McMahan makes. He maintains that his and Singer's aim is
 11 not to deny the special relationship between my daughter and me, or the
 12 claims she has on me as her mother. It is rather to ask why she has any
 13 claims on "the rest of us" that other nonhuman animals fail to have.

14 I now see how I must reply. If McMahan and others acknowledge the
 15 special relationship that is constituted by parenthood, and if they can grant
 16 that the parent of a child with the severe cognitive impairments has a deeper
 17 and morally and objectively more significant relationship with that child
 18 than does a pet owner with his beloved pet, then I believe that a number of
 19 implications suggest that the recognition of the child as possessing moral
 20 personhood must follow.

21 I as a parent have obligations to fulfill toward any child of mine.
 22 Following Sarah Ruddick, we can say that what a child "demands" of its
 23 parent is to assure that the child's life is protected, that the child's
 24 development and growth are fostered, and, as I have already pointed out,
 25 that the child can find social acceptance. Now, no parent with a child of
 26 typical capacities can do this in a vacuum. Every parent needs access to
 27 certain resources to fulfill its obligations to its child, ones that are at least
 28 partially supplied by the larger society. Every parent needs schools and
 29 other social institutions to ensure that her child can develop her capacities,
 30 whatever those capacities may be. Every parent needs to work with both the
 31 child and the social world that the child enters to ensure that the child will
 32 grow into a member who is granted respect and who can develop a sense of
 33 self-respect. No child is simply the parent's own private matter. If
 34 McMahan and Singer claim to honor my relationship to my child and to
 35 grant its moral significance, then they cannot with any consistency grant the
 36 means to fulfill parental obligations to one parent and deny them to another
 37 parent based on some set of features of the child, for these are what all
 38 parents need to fulfill their ethical responsibilities to their children regardless
 39 of their capacities and needs.

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40 Now what sorts of things are important to the parent qua parent?
 41 Foremost is the need that the wider society recognize the worth and
 42 worthiness of the child. It is incoherent to grant the special relationship I
 43 have with my daughter and then to turn around and say, "But that
 44 daughter has no moral hold on anyone but her parent." Her parent
 45 cannot fulfill her role as parent, unless others also have an acknowledged

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1 moral responsibility to the child—a moral responsibility on par with the
 2 one it has to anyone’s child. But it is not for *my* sake that I want my child
 3 recognized. It is for *her* sake. That is the nature of the parental relation-
 4 ship. It’s not that I want people to care about Sesha because I care about
 5 her. It’s that I cannot give her the care it is my duty to provide if others do
 6 not respect her as a being worthy of the same care as is due to any child.

7 Reflecting on this last point reveals part of my motive—one that may
 8 even have been hidden to myself—in laying bare the intensity of my
 9 relationship to a daughter who has such profound intellectual disabilities,
 10 and the depth of my revulsion to the sorts of arguments made by Singer and
 11 McMahan. I am effectively *showing* what it is impossible to argue. That
 12 Sesha is as much a daughter as is any other beloved daughter to a loving
 13 parent. That in showing this, I am carrying out my role as her primary
 14 caregiver, because I am attempting to win for my daughter the respect and
 15 regard that other mothers try to secure for their children. When McMahan
 16 directed his distress at making someone miserable to me, the apology
 17 misfired, because it was not for my sake that I wanted the mother-child
 18 relationship acknowledged. It was for my daughter’s sake. What our
 19 morally significant relationship and my caring work reveals is that whatever
 20 is due to the child of another mother is due to my child, regardless of any of
 21 her particular features or “morally significant psychological properties.”
 22 Whether or not she possesses these, or possesses them in excess of those of a
 23 pet dog, McMahan himself grants that the relationship between my
 24 daughter and me is present only in an attenuated form in the case of a
 25 dog owner who has the deepest affection for his pet. In carrying out a public
 26 display of caring in the philosophical context, I am engaged in a philoso-
 27 phical disputation, a point that was actually conceded when McMahan
 28 granted the difference between my relationship with my daughter and
 29 George Pitcher’s relationship to his dog.

30 In addition, in carrying out this public form of personal caring I am
 31 engaged in an act with potential political consequences—attempting to
 32 secure for my daughter just treatment and moral protection. For moral
 33 personhood is, as many of the essays in this collection demonstrate,
 34 importantly connected with ability to make claims of justice and receive
 35 the resources and protections that justice is meant to guarantee. The
 36 strategy is then evident, for I have been attempting to affirm in this essay
 37 that the personal is philosophical, and the philosophical is political. The
 38 “philosophical” is the unacknowledged middle term in the equation that
 39 feminists have championed, namely, “the personal is political.”

40 The personal is political in still another sense in the case of my project.
 41 For if I as a mother require that my work of mothering is only possible
 42 when the wider society can grant the moral worth of my child, then this is
 43 no less true of any child, regardless of his capacities and, importantly,
 44 regardless of whether a person with severe cognitive disabilities is still
 45 being cared for by his mother, or was ever raised by his biological mother.

1 Each child needs to be cared for by some mothering figure(s), and so the
2 requirement is no less true.

3 Philosopher Naomi Scheman, after the discussion between Singer,
4 McMahan, and myself has taken place, states what I as a mother cannot
5 say: "It's not just that Eva cares about Sesha, *I* care about Sesha . . . and I
6 don't *know* Sesha. . . . Sesha is Eva's daughter and that is a fact about her
7 that affects the sort of being *she* is." She continues: "I adopted a feral cat.
8 Once I adopted the cat she is no longer a feral cat, she is a different sort of
9 being. It is not that you cannot now do certain things to her that you
10 couldn't do before because it would hurt me, it's because you can't do
11 certain kinds of things to her because *now she is a different kind of being*"
12 (emphasis in the original).¹⁵ The difference between Naomi Scheman's cat
13 and Sesha or any other human with cognitive disabilities, however, is that
14 human beings do not long survive as feral beings. We human beings are the
15 sorts of beings we are because we are cared for by other human beings, and
16 the human being's ontological status and corresponding moral status need
17 to be acknowledged by the larger society that makes possible the work of
18 those who do the caring required to sustain us. That is what we each require
19 if we are some mother's child, and we are *all* some mother's child.



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