

# BOOK REVIEW

## The Face of Intellectual Disability: Philosophical Reflections

**Author: Licia Carlson**

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**Reviewed By: Dick Sobsey**

**John Dossetor Health Ethics Centre, University of Alberta, Canada**

Human intellectual disability has special and somewhat unique topic as the subject of scholarly study in philosophy and ethics. Intellectual abilities and disabilities are naturally heterogeneous and distributed along multiple continua, but have been artificially dichotomized into rigid categories, in much the same way as race has been. Like gender and many other human characteristics, philosophers have sometimes discussed questions regarding who has epistemological authority to present arguments on philosophical understanding and ethical treatment of people with disabilities. What makes people with intellectual disabilities different as a class, however, is that those with the most severe intellectual disabilities do not present philosophical arguments on their own behalf, and those with milder intellectual disabilities are typically disadvantaged in presenting philosophical positions. Furthermore, there have been arguments advanced in philosophy that the voices of parents, advocates, and any others with close personal relationships with anyone with an intellectual disability should be silenced or dismissed as privileged knowledge or sentimentality.

Such arguments are problematic because once we dichotomize the world into the intellectually able and the intellectually unable or disabled, we must admit that there is as at least as much potential for bias due to group non-membership as on the basis group membership. Arguing that only those without intellectual disabilities and without any close personal experience with individuals with intellectual disabilities can render unbiased perspectives is equivalent to arguing that in order for a fair and proper understanding of the significance of being a woman, it is necessary to silence not only the voices of women but also the voices of men who have daughters or other close relationships with women. It is not very different than asserting that in order to ensure a fair trial for the member of a racial minority, we must systematically eliminate not only any member of that minority but also anyone who has a close relationship with a member of that minority.

Silencing the voices of parents is far from new. Toronto psychiatrist and long-time editor of the *The American Journal of Psychiatry*, C.B. Farrar, in arguing for euthanasia of children with severe

disabilities at the age of five identifies parents love for their children with severe disabilities as a morbid obsession which mental health professionals must strive to eliminate:

That is precisely the psychiatric problem this overlengthy discussion has been trying to get at, namely the "fondness" of the parents of an idiot and the "want" that he should be kept alive. (Farrar, 1942, p. 143)

Thus, the voices of parents were discounted as irrational ravings resulting from a psychiatric disorder. Simply taking the position that their children should not be killed was presented as adequate evidence of the parents' mental disorder.

While oppression based on gender, race, and even physical disabilities has been challenged in recent years, the oppression of people with intellectual disabilities by the intellectually advantaged has remained virtually unchallenged in philosophy, medicine, and mental health until now. Licia Carlson in her book, *The faces of intellectual disability: Philosophical reflections*, challenges this oppression, drawing on the work of philosophers such as Eva Kitay and Peter Byrne, who are parents of children with disabilities, and Anita Silvers, who has a physical disability, as authorities on the meaning and significance of intellectual disability. While I would have liked to see her go further considering the work of philosophers and ethicists such as Jean Vanier and Stanley Hauerwas, who have written extensively on how personal connections with individuals with intellectual disabilities have informed their philosophy, I suspect that she intentionally avoided their work because of its religious tone, which might result in even greater alienation of many contemporary philosophers.

Of course, Carlson's book covers more territory than a mere examination of who has a right to an opinion about intellectual disability. There is a good discussion of the use of the concept of intellectual disability in ethical discourse on animal rights versus human rights, which leads to a consideration of how humanhood and personhood should be conceptualized. In addition, she explores the nature of suffering in the context of intellectual disability in another excellent chapter. Both these chapters provide the foundation for serious deliberation on complex topics. In her

conclusion, Carlson points toward disconnects and dissonances in current literature in philosophy and ethics and points to these as rockfaces for future work in philosophy.

There are also chapters that recount some of the history of institutionalization of people with intellectual disabilities and gender stereotypes that existed in that context. These chapters are thought provoking and include some interesting insights, but not as compelling as the rest of the book. Carlson freely acknowledges that she is not a historian and that the history she presents is incomplete. However, some of the historical information is inaccurate or misleading, and these inaccuracies undermine some of the analysis. For example, she implies that female attendants and residents did the majority of caregiving in institutional settings. This was not actually the case during the greater part of the institutional age. Institutional life was almost entirely sexually segregated. Males almost exclusively provided the care of male inmates and females almost exclusively provided the care of female inmates. About 50% more males than females were institutionalized, and as a result, there were at least as many males as females involved in caregiving. Although many of the male caregivers were under the supervision of female middle managers, who served as matrons, men provided most of the direct care of males. While this inaccuracy weakens some of her argument that serves as a basis for the gendered caregiving stereotypes, the stereotypes she presents appear to be generally valid.

Overall, this is a thought provoking and engaging text that begins to fill the gap between the limited ways in which intellectual disability has been addressed in philosophy and a broader understanding of the issue. It is a clearly written book that makes what otherwise might be difficult concepts accessible to a wide range of readers and provides good summaries of much of the existing philosophical literature. I recommend it highly.

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### Reference:

Farrar, C.B. (1942-1943). Euthanasia. *The American Journal of Psychiatry*, 99, 141-143.

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