

LETTERS

Letter to the Editor:

Reflections of a Physicist on the Philosophy of Intellectual Disability

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This letter responds to the review by Dick Sobsey in *JEMH*, Vol. 6 (2011) of the book “The Face of Intellectual Disability: Philosophical Reflections” by Licia Carlson (Indiana University Press, 2010). Both the review and the book refer to a larger context for this topic than simply just who might be qualified to render “unbiased perspectives” on the topic of intellectual disability (ID). Both bring in concepts of personhood, “humanhood,” and suffering as foundations for serious dialogue on ID. Thomistic philosophy is my starting point for developing arguments featuring true premises, valid propositional reasoning, and true conclusions based on sound logic. This process of thinking is modulated by my ability as a scientist to conduct inquiry by means of the scientific method starting with an hypothesis, continuing with collecting evidence for its truthfulness via experiments or other tests, and ending with findings and conclusions.

Accordingly, rather than basing my arguments on traditional categories such as value, intention, or duty, I base them on the true identity of who a particular human person is. In a sense, then, this could be called an ontological argument in the ontic sense of the metaphysics of being as *ens* and its relations. Whether a person, who is a composite creature of body and spirit, has an ID, that one is still a person with a unique, irrepeatable identity. Further, only a person can know his or her identity; others cannot tell that one the truth in this matter. Social relations can assist one in a personal journey towards knowing who he or she is, but cannot convey the idea of who one is. Therefore, only the one with an ID can have an unbiased perspective on who he or she is.

This point is crucial, as thinking (or learning) by a person along rational lines towards true conclusions that are worthy of belief by others and indeed can benefit society as a whole can be structured as a series of steps starting with *identity*, continuing on sequentially with *idea*, *inquiry*, *invention*, and *innovation* and ending with an outcome of *importance* to society.

Suffering in the short-term can interrupt this process of thinking. For example, pain, whether physical or moral, can distract one from an objective assessment of a particular matter. However, in the long-term, suffering can also focus and concentrate one’s thinking process to enable one to identify the errors that tend to crop up through formerly unrecognized or improperly evaluated bias introduced by one’s own beliefs, attitudes, and assumptions. One by one, then, the suffering thinker may detect each and every flaw

in his or her thinking until every error of fallacy of inclusion or exclusion is removed from the reasoning string that then becomes internally consistent. Loosely expressed, in terms of the language of statistics all Type I and Type II errors can be detected and removed.

Thus, to exclude participation of a person with an ID from developing philosophically based arguments and systems of thought on what constitutes, for example, a human person whether one has an ID or not – that would be irrational. This is expressed by a sentence in a quotation in the front material in Prof. Carlson’s book from French philosopher Michel Foucault’s *The Masked Philosopher*¹: “The displacement and transformation of frameworks of thinking, the changing of received values and all the work that has been done to think otherwise, to do something else, to become other than what one is – that, too, is philosophy.” This is especially true when one seeks to replace a false sense of self that one had been, or tried to be, in response to what others including critics had told that one to be, with a sense of the true self that he or she really knows oneself to be. This false sense of self, as narrative or *idem* identity, can be transformed by suffering to experiencing a sense of a true self or *ipse* identity. Its expression to others then can also be accordingly transformed. To paraphrase the title of a 2010 work edited by Eva Feder Kittay at Stony Brook University along with Licia Carlson now at Providence College, ID or cognitive disability definitely poses a challenge to future developments in moral philosophy.²

Footnotes

1. Michel Foucault, “The Masked Philosopher,” Ch. 20 in *Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings 1977–1984*, edited with Introduction by L.D. Kritzman, reprint edition (New York: Routledge, 1990).
2. *Cognitive Disability and Its Challenge to Moral Philosophy* edited by E.F. Kittay and L. Carlson (Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).

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