

## Chapter 8

### **Christian Philosophy and Disability Advocacy<sup>1</sup>**

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At my previous institution, there was a quotation on my office door from Parker Palmer's *The Courage to Teach*: "we teach who we are" (Palmer 2007, p. 1). I think that there's something importantly right about this statement. We teach—or at least, this is what we do when we're at our best—what we're passionate about, what we think can make a difference in the lives of our students, what has made a difference in our own lives. But I don't think that this quotation applies only to our pedagogical role as faculty. I think it equally applies to our role as scholars. So to Palmer's original claim I want to add another: "we research who we are." Palmer continues: "teaching, like any truly human activity, emerges from one's inwardness, for better or worse. As I teach [and as I write], I project the condition of my soul onto my students, my subject, and our way of being together" (Palmer 2007, p. 2).

It used to be that those topics and issues I taught and focused my scholarly attention on were those issues that inspired me to pursue philosophy in the first place. One of the first philosophy texts I remember reading in my own undergraduate Introduction to Philosophy course was Alvin Plantinga's *God, Freedom, and Evil*. In it, I encountered the invitation to think long and hard about human freedom, our relationship with our creator, and our misuse of the creator's good gifts.<sup>2</sup> In fact, I still own the copy I purchased in 1994 as a college sophomore. I taught this book so regularly at a previous institution that I was asked by the press to write a blurb for the back cover a more recent edition. And during my first semester on the faculty at

Calvin College, I worked through it with the students in my Intro to Philosophy course here, the very same college where it was written by Plantinga, who also happens to be the previous holder of the Jellema Chair that I currently am entrusted with. Much of my scholarly work to date can be seen as an extension of these topics that first got me interested in philosophy. I've written and edited a number of books on free will and its intersection with issues in philosophy of religion.<sup>3</sup>

But there's a more recent way in which "I research who I am." Ultimately, I want to draw some parallels between this development and Christian philosophy as practiced in the long and storied history of Calvin College. But getting to those parallels will require some autobiographical backstory first.

### **Biographical Backstory**

My wife and I have three lovely—though tiring—children.<sup>4</sup> When our oldest, our son Jameson, was about 6 months old, we realized that he has a number of chromosomal abnormalities that cause him to have multiply disabilities. He's one of currently just under 50 worldwide documented cases of 2p15-16.1 Microdeletion Syndrome—he's missing a small bit of genetic material on the short (p) arm of one copy of his second chromosome.<sup>5</sup>

The first few years of Jameson's life were especially rough because while we knew what he had, we didn't know what it meant. We had a diagnosis, but no prognosis—since at the time of his diagnosis in 2008, we could find no medical literature dealing with his condition. We had lots of support and encouragement—from our friends, from our church, from local and state agencies. We figured how to muddle along in a way that worked for our then growing family. But shortly after he started first grade, lots of things changed. My wife went with a friend, whose son has Down Syndrome, to a meeting about special education hosted by the local Down

Syndrome society. And we learned just how horrible our son's school was at even trying to provide for his education in the way that state and federal law required. We got angry. And then we got involved.

To make what's a fairly long story short, we became advocates. We read up on the law. We learned about best practices. We went to school board meetings and met with trustees. We documented ways our son's education was in violation of laws, in part because we knew more about IDEA (the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) than did the special education staff in the district. We made the district some offers they couldn't refuse.

As I said, we became advocates. But not just for Jameson. Soon we were also advocates for some of Jameson's friends. And for some of our friends' kids. Other children with disabilities at his school, other schools in the district, and even other nearby school districts. As our advocacy efforts expanded over the course of about the year, we started an advocacy company: 22 Advocacy.<sup>6</sup> During the spring of 2015, I had my first ever sabbatical, which I devoted to reading and starting to write about the philosophy of disability. Issues in the philosophy of disability, including how various disabilities affect agency, are at the heart of a lot of my current writing projects.

Having that background—which I hope gives you some small sense of who I am and where my reflections on Christian philosophy to follow are coming from—I now want to turn to the main focus of this chapter. And that is some important parallels that I see between how Christian philosophy has been done, particularly in the tradition I've inherited at Calvin College as best as I understand that tradition, and the kind of advocacy that we've been involved in. It is, in part, these parallels with the kind of advocacy that is so close to my own heart that drew me to

join the philosophy department at Calvin. And they are parallels that I hope will continue in coming years, and that I hope to encourage during my time in the Jellema Chair.

Though there are other parallels, I want to focus on four in particular. Both Christian philosophy and advocacy are: normative, hermeneutically situated, developmental, and communal.

### **Normativity**

For the Christian, our understanding of the world is not normatively neutral. Christianity contains within it a range of claims about (among other things) truth, the good life, the extent and source of value. To be a Christian is to seek to promote and foster a certain kind of life, one that involves (again, among other things) certain religious commitments, both in terms of beliefs and in terms of practices. The Reformed tradition in particular has long emphasized the transformational nature of the Christian faith. We are called, both individually and collectively, to become a certain kind of people—and to help others do so as well. The history of Calvin College—both the philosophy department in particular and also the institution as a whole—is a history of thinking normatively about all aspects of life.<sup>7</sup> Professor Jellema’s own involvement with education and educational policy at both Calvin College and Grand Valley State University can be understood as a kind of activist involvement working to bring about a certain kind of shaping or molding of students. And as those who were shaped by his teaching will attest, he succeeded.<sup>8</sup>

The rich vision of the Christian life can also be seen in Jellema’s students. Alvin Plantinga was perhaps Jellema’s best-known student and assumed his position in the philosophy department when the latter retired. In his widely influential “Advice to Christian Philosophers,”

originally given at his inauguration into the John A. O'Brien chair at the University of Notre Dame, Plantinga writes: "it is part of their task as [specifically] *Christian* philosophers to serve the Christian community. But the Christian community has its own questions, its own concerns, its own topics for investigation, its own agenda" (Plantinga 1998, p. 298). And that agenda, like the Christian faith itself, is not neutral; it's normatively loaded.<sup>9</sup> Christian philosophy presupposes a picture of what matters. And, as part of its agenda, it seeks to help us realize that picture—to transform what we *are* into what we *should be*.

Related here is a point that one finds in both Nick Wolterstorff's recent book *The God We Worship* and Jamie Smith's *You Are What You Love*. In his treatment of the nature of liturgy, Wolterstorff writes that "there is more to liturgy than proclamation" (Wolterstorff 2015, p. 2). The 'content' of liturgy matters; but liturgy is not just about the content of claims made in its proclamation. It's about formation. Similarly, a central theme in one of Jamie Smith's recent books is that Christianity is not just, or perhaps even primarily, about what we know. It's about what we love (Smith 2016). Now, for both Wolterstorff and Smith, the content—the propositions we affirm in our worship and in our lives—shapes the formative element. And our formation in turn shapes the content of our beliefs. (For a related discussion, see Timpe 2017.)

The connection between this characteristic of Christian philosophy and advocacy for those with disabilities should, I think, be obvious. To advocate for something is to work on behalf of an individual or a community.<sup>10</sup> When I advocate for the inclusion of individuals with disabilities into the wider educational environment, it's because I think that their being there is good for them—and good for their typical peers. Inclusion is valuable for the community as a whole, even if it's hard. And so we made sure—sometimes through legal pressure—that our normative vision about the kind of educational access and opportunities students with disabilities

deserved was realized in our school district to the best of our ability. (Like Oskar Schindler in *Schindler's List*, even my best efforts are accompanied by a confession that “I could have done more.”) Our efforts sought to transform not just the children on whose behalf we worked, but their families, the school district, and the wider community and culture that our family was a part of. We seek to pull down oppressive structures, to create in their place communities that we think are worth emulating. We seek to create a culture where, in the words of theologian Amos Yong, “people with disabilities are ... accepted, included, and valued members of the human family regardless of how they measure up to our economic, social, and political conventions” (Yong 2007, p. 182).

### **Situated**

Second, Christian philosophy is hermeneutically situated. I confess that I used to think that one could—and should—do philosophy from a God’s eye-perspective, from what Thomas Nagel has called “the view from nowhere” (Nagel 1989). But over the past few years, I’ve realized that this is neither possible nor desirable. We don’t philosophize from behind a Rawlsian veil of ignorance. Not only do we come to Christian philosophy (indeed, all philosophy) with a normative agenda, but we also come to it with a historical context that shapes our projects, our language, and our interlocutors. The claims we make and the positions we hold—what we advocate for—are informed by time and place. And, I’ve come to accept, it’s also informed by our own personal commitments. As I said before, “we research who we are.” We’re personally committed; we’re invested. I’ve also come to see that it’s often appropriate for us to be emotionally committed, to be caught up in the vision that we’re committed to. And when that vision isn’t realized, when it’s frustrated by outside pressures that, in our admittedly fallible

view, are unjust then we can get angry. And sometimes that anger is appropriate. I wrote about this on a blog that I help administer in which I reflected on the proper role of moral outrage in our philosophical theorizing about disability:

What I found pretty quickly, however, upon digging into the disability literature is that I become outraged by some of the views I encounter. These views aren't just (in my view) wrong, but [are] (again, in my view) morally offensive. To hear individuals claim, for instance, that my son has no moral standing at all (despite never having met him); to ask, apparently in all honesty, if the severely disabled have a right not to be eaten; to discover sterilization of some individuals with disabilities is not only legal but mandatory in some states in some conditions—these, and other views, provoke a very strong visceral reaction.<sup>11</sup>

Mostly from reading feminist and disability studies literatures, but also from continental philosophy of religion, I've learned that it's permissible to be non-neutral—to accept the lenses we read and think through because of our personal situatedness. As J. Aaron Simmons and John Sanders explain:

The theology of absence correctly understands the importance of emphasizing the contingency and contextualism of all human discourse and the importance of viewing religious belief and practice as a risky investment made by existing individuals. (Simmons and Sanders 2015, p. 44)

Though less common among analytic authors, this point can sometimes be found there as well. Consider, for instance, the following from Oliver Crisp:

Often our own thinking is skewed by the time in which we live. We have cultural blinders on, which prevents us from seeing certain things that would have been obvious to people of an earlier generation. Sometimes it is easy to be critical of the views of writers of a bygone era, because we can now see so clearly what they could not. But that works both ways. (Crisp 2016, p. 15)

One of my favorite articles on the philosophy of disability is Eva Feder Kittay's "The Personal is Philosophical is Political." The article is good for a number of reasons, one of which is the title. The personal *is* the philosophical *is* the political. The article's subtitle describes it as "notes from the battlefield." Kittay has an adult child, Sessa, who has a cognitively disability and on whose behalf Eva has had to advocate for over the course of decades. Kittay documents and reflects on a conference on cognitive disability and philosophy that she helped organize at Stony Brook, and particularly a heated exchange during the last session of the conference that she had with Peter Singer and Jeff McMahan, philosophers who don't share her normative views about the value of those with disabilities.

Kittay writes of her philosophical work on disability as full of "emotional turmoil" (Kittay 2010, p. 395) and her experiences engaging existing work on the subject as causing "anger and revulsion" (Kittay 2010, p. 398). Philosophy, we are often told, is dispassionate. "A purely rational endeavor unclouded by messy things like emotions" (Barnes 2016, ix).

But it needn't be so, and perhaps shouldn't be so. One of the things that I appreciate

about Elizabeth Barnes' wonderful book *The Minority Body* is how the preface begins: "This book is personal" (Barnes 2016, ix). She elaborates:

I used to think I couldn't philosophize about disability precisely because the topic is so personal. But on reflection, that's absurd. Disability is a topic that's personal for everyone. The last time I checked, most non-disabled people are pretty personally invested in being non-disabled. The fact that this sort of personal investment is so easy to ignore is one of the more pernicious aspects of philosophy's obsession with objective neutrality. It's easy to confuse the view from normal with the view from nowhere. And then it's uniquely the minority voices which we single out as biased or lacking objectivity. When it comes to disability, I'm not objective. And neither are you. And that's true whether you're disabled or (temporarily) non-disabled. (Barnes 2016, ix)

Barnes's point can be broadened to the claim that we are all invested, though admittedly to varying degrees, in our philosophical views. Objective neutrality is elusive, if ever we manage to grasp it at all. Our philosophical reflections—whether they're about disability or the nature of Christian belief or something else altogether—are informed by time and place. We thus need to be aware of our own limitations and biases, those assumptions and presuppositions we often can't see simply because they're ours. The anger that motivates can also blind. (For a good discussion of both virtuous and vicious expressions of anger, see Cogley 2014 and DeYoung forthcoming.)

I think everyone I know that's become an advocate has done so because of a personal connection with what they're advocating for. Advocacy, like philosophy, doesn't happen from a veil of ignorance. We get involved because we see an injustice that we think needs to be addressed. Being engaged with disability—either by having one or seeing it in the lives of those we're close to or advocating on behalf of those who have them—shapes our hermeneutic, our way of seeking and interpreting the whole of human experience (see Hull 2014, 58-60). But those who don't share our situatedness may not see the lacunas in their thinking that we do. Our job—well, part of our job—is to help them.

Eva Kittay's response to Peter Singer's comparing the cognitively disabled with animals was to invite him to visit the facility her daughter lives in: "I want you to see some of these people that you are talking about... How much you see is also what you bring to the situation" (Kittay 2010, pp. 404f). How much we see—some of what we're even capable of seeing—depends on what we and our histories bring to the situation, what those histories bring to us. Christian philosophers should be helping others—whether that be the general public, other philosophers, or other Christian philosophers—see their own lacunas, see where their situatedness shapes, and perhaps misleads, in ways they don't notice.

## **Developmental**

In virtue of their hermeneutical situatedness, both Christian philosophy and advocacy are also developmental. By this I mean that the particular normative agenda changes as the context develops. Our hermeneutic changes over time. The developmental nature of disability advocacy is clear from even a passing familiarity. US immigration law no longer allows us to keep races out of the US because of a fear of their becoming disabled, as was true in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The

laws from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in Chicago, San Francisco, and other cities that prohibited those with disabilities or other ‘mutilated or deformed bodies’ from even being in public have been removed from the books. Forced sterilizations of the disabled are no longer performed regularly (though the *Buck v. Bell* decision that allowed for such is, lamentably, still part of federal law). Drawing on the civil rights and women’s rights movements, disability advocates were able to achieve very substantial legal ground for the disabled in the 70s, 80s, and 90s. “The [disabilities rights] movement focused on legal efforts to prohibit discrimination in employment and education, access to public spaces and public transportation, and on institutional transformations that better enabled the self-determination of those with disabilities” (Nielsen 2012, p. 161; see also Shapiro 1993). The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) is probably the piece of federal legislation which most changed the legal environment, and wouldn’t have happened without substantial advocacy. And, closer to my own family’s history, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) has provided educational access and opportunities to thousands of disabled children. The fight for such laws no longer dominates advocacy efforts; they now focus on other issues (such as how to best make sure that local school districts actually follow IDEA, in part because many parents, especially disadvantaged parents, don’t know how to insist on the rights of their children—see Timpe forthcoming). In fact, I think that philosophical reflection on disability is presently experiencing its own developmental uncertainty, in part as the movement seeks to expand to equally incorporate cognitive disabilities as well as physical.

The developmental nature of Christian philosophy has been documented in a number of places (see, especially, Swinburne 2005 and Wolterstorff 2009). Christian philosophy is not focused on the same issues as it was in the early days of the Society of Christian Philosophers. This isn’t to say that those earlier issues—the rationality of religious belief, for instance, or how

to understand various divine attributes and the relationship between them—are no longer an issue that Christian philosophers are thinking and writing about. Some are. But the collective focus is now much broader.

Because of its historical nature, the agenda changes over time. The founding agenda of the Society of Christian Philosophers is no longer our agenda. While in response to the positivism of the middle of last century Christian philosophy focused on the rationality of religious belief, today it's much, much broader. Even just within that pocket of Christian philosophy marked out by my current colleagues at Calvin College, they're doing work—good and important work—on gender, on aesthetics, on nature, on liturgy, on the connections between virtues and politics, on postmodern culture, on colonialism, on mysticism, on urbanism. We have inherited a seat at the philosophical table that others previously had to struggle for. And as a result of our inheritance, we're now privileged to address a much broader range of important issues. This is an inheritance we should not take for granted. We have been given much. And to whom much is given, much is required. So in one way, Christian philosophy is reactionary. We react to time and place and personal experience. But the normative vision helps keep it from being *just* reactionary.

Unfortunately, Christian philosophy has sometimes been slower to develop than the larger philosophical culture. (And remember, I don't think development is a bad thing—it's a necessary consequence of the situatedness. The question isn't *if* it's going to develop—the question is *how* it's going to develop.) Questions about social oppression, about gender, about philosophy of race, about disability, about important truths we can learn from the great Chinese and Indian philosophical traditions—these are questions where Christian philosophy might be lagging behind other aspects of the philosophical community rather than being a part of the

vanguard. We need to be willing to engage every issue, to shirk from no conversation, to fear no truth. We shouldn't leave power structures as they are—we can change the discipline, change the Church, change the culture.

## **Communal**

Finally, both Christian philosophy and advocacy are inherently communal. If the vision that I've cast for Christian philosophy in this chapter, if advocating for the disabled, were something that each of us—something that *I*—had to do alone, my response would, to be honest, probably be despair. (For excellent discussion of the social nature of the theological virtue of hope as a corrective to despair, see Cobb and Green 2017.) Fortunately, both projects are ones that are communal by nature. By this I mean at least two things: these projects are done communally, and they have communal effects.

First, consider the way in which both projects proceed communally. Christian philosophy is easily communal within this volume. As Plantinga correctly notes, “scholarship is an intensely social activity; we learn our craft from our elders and mentors” (Plantinga 1990, p. 63). I have colleagues whose work I've taught; colleagues I've received grants with; colleagues who have contributed to books I've edited; colleagues whose arguments have changed my own views.

Advocacy is inherently communal as well. The ADA and IDEA were passed because of thousands of people taking to the streets and demanding equality for those with disabilities, because of lawmakers taking on unpopular issues because they saw those issues as good for the disenfranchised, good for the community. And advocacy is communal on a smaller scale—when a mother's concerns are taken more seriously simply because she shows up to an IEP meeting with someone, an advocate, on her side. Sometimes all one has to do to empower others is to sit

beside them and show that they're not on their own.

Both Christian philosophy and advocacy also have communal, or political in Aristotle's sense of that term—effects. I've already touched on how the work of previous Christian philosophers has opened up the space for some of the projects that many of us are now working on. But this work also has impacts on the community—the *polis*—that is the Church. I'm fortunate, both at Calvin and at my previous university, to have colleagues who explicitly aim to address the general public and individuals in local churches, rather than simply taking the academic guild as their only audience.

Similarly, every act of disability advocacy is an act by which we shape the community that those individuals with disability that we love inhabit. It's also worth noting that this formative element is not just individual—it's communal. In shaping individuals we shape the social structures that they're a part of. And the social structures in turn shape the individuals they govern. There's no separating individuals from their communities.

To once again reference her work on behalf of her daughter Sesha, Eva Kittay holds that we're engaged in acts of political formation: “In addition, in carrying out this public form of personal caring I am engaged in an act with potential political consequences—attempting to secure for my daughter just treatment and moral protection” (Kittay 2010, p. 411). And as this example of political formation makes clear, the four points of comparison I've highlighted here are not ultimately separable. We have a communal—a political—vision that is inherently normative that we, as part of a community, are trying to realize for that community. And what we need to do to help realize that vision is shaped by our context, by our hermeneutic, and by those that have gone before us and make possible the position from which we begin.

## **Conclusion**

In closing, I want to note one final similarity between Christian philosophy and disability advocacy—one that I’ve not talked about, but I hope that I’ve illustrated. Christian philosophy and advocacy are not *just* about arguments or truth claims (though they *are* about those); they’re about crafting and living out a vision that invites others to participate with us. Our proclamation can be a kind of speech act whereby we help realize our vision by the utterance of it. When one can stand in front of a school staff at a child’s IEP and say what everyone in the room knows—that this child deserves a free and appropriate public education as guaranteed by state and federal law—such an act can demonstrate the worth and moral value of that child. And sometimes a district realizes that if the child is worth that kind of advocacy, they’re worth the school’s best rather than easiest effort. The best Christian philosophy and the most inspiring acts of advocacy are those that make others—and make me—want to be a part of that vision. May those who call themselves Christian philosophers live up to that calling.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This paper originally began as the inaugural address of my stint in the William Harry Jellema Chair in Philosophy of Religion at Calvin College, given on 10 November 2016. The paper bears marks of this origin in two ways. First, stylistically, this paper retains more of the conversational and informal style of its original than most of my professional writing. Second, on that occasion I sought to locate my own work within the history of Christian philosophy as it has been practiced at Calvin College. While I know that there are other approaches to Christian philosophy, including many that I'm sympathetic with, the present paper still bears the imprint of this context.

<sup>2</sup> One of the things I appreciate about the Reformed tradition of Christian philosophy (though this quality is by no means found only in that tradition) is the way in which it views scholarship as falling under God's sovereignty: "It is a basic Reformed tenet that all of life must be lived from the perspective of Christianity; in particular, then, our scholarly life must be so lived" (Plantinga 1990, p. 5).

<sup>3</sup> For just a few representative samples, see Timpe, Griffith, and Levy 2017; Timpe and Speak, 2016; Timpe 2013; and Timpe 2009.

<sup>4</sup> As of the time that this volume is going to press, Jameson is 10, Emmaline is 7, and Magdalen is 5.

<sup>5</sup> For an overview of 2p 15-16.1 Microdeletion Syndrome, see the summary provided by Unique at <http://www.rarechromo.org/information/Chromosome%20%202/2p15p16.1%20microdeletion%20syndrome%20FTNW.pdf>. For a discussion of his condition in light of some of my philosophical work on agency, see Timpe 2016.

<sup>6</sup> For some of the company's advocacy resources, see <http://kevintimpe.com/22advocacy.html>. The logo for 22 Advocacy, which can be seen at the website mentioned, is designed to reflect the missing part of one copy of Jameson's second chromosome.

<sup>7</sup> As my colleague James K. A. Smith puts it, "to be human is to be animated and oriented by some vision of the good life, some picture of what we think counts as 'flourishing'.... Every

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approach to discipleship and Christian formation assumes an implicit model of what human beings are. While these assumptions usually remain unarticulated, we nonetheless work with some fundamental (though unstated) assumptions about what sorts of creatures we are” (Smith 2016, pp. 11 and 2f). These assumptions can also be problematic, as are John Calvin’s which led him to deny the Eucharist to individuals with cognitive disabilities. One of the things we can and should do, in Nick Wolterstorff’s words, is to “make the implicit explicit” (Wolterstorff 2015, p. 12).

<sup>8</sup> His success can be seen in the student protests consequent on his leaving Calvin, due to a conflict with the then college president Dr. Ralph Stob; see Ryskamp 2000, pp. 103f.

<sup>9</sup> Plantinga’s own work has focused more on how Christian philosophy is not metaphysically neutral, though I also think that it’s not ethically neutral.

<sup>10</sup> The disjunction is always inclusive.

<sup>11</sup> [http://philosophycommons.typepad.com/disability\\_and\\_disadvanta/2015/01/moral-outrage.html](http://philosophycommons.typepad.com/disability_and_disadvanta/2015/01/moral-outrage.html)