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Portraits of Disability and Difference
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A Defense of Disabled Lives

Within the current pandemic, the lack of regard for disabled lives in society has become all too apparent as hospitals, politicians, and everyday people alike discuss how to supposedly save the most lives without accounting for those being left out of the discussion. Though written before the pandemic, the argument that bioethics philosopher Peter Singer establishes against the lives of disabled infants in his work, *Taking Life*, highlights this underlying ableism and bias against disabled people which exists in healthcare. Singer argues that new parents should have the option to kill a disabled child upon birth, attempting to support his point from two perspectives: that of disabled people and the parents of disabled children, two positions which he notably does not hold. In contrast to his points, however, Harriet McBryde Johnson, a lawyer and disability activist with spina bifida, and Chris Gabbard, an English professor and father of a disabled son, argue from the lived experiences of both someone with a disability and the parent of a disabled child. McBryde Johnson argues through her book, *Too Late to Die Young*, that disability does not preclude happiness and Gabbard through his article, "A Life Beyond Reason," uses pathos to demonstrate his parental love which Singer so easily dismissed in his argument. By employing rhetorical strategies of ethos, pathos, and logos in their arguments against Singer, Gabbard and McBryde Johnson establish a strong defense of the lives of disabled individuals against those who would seek to destroy them.

Singer begins his argument against the lives of disabled infants from the stance of the parents of disabled children, claiming that these parents would be disappointed that their child is not able-bodied and should therefore be allowed to kill them. He argues that "there is a difference...in the attitudes of the parents" based on whether their child is born with a disability (Singer). He describes this "difference" by stating that the birth of an able-bodied child is "a happy event for the parents," and that "a natural affection begins to bind the parents to [the child]" while the birth of a disabled child "turn[s] the normally joyful event of birth into a threat to the happiness of the parents, and any other children they may have." (Singer). Here, Singer attempts to show the audience the perspective of the parents of a disabled child, arguing that the ability or disability of a child at birth drastically impacts the feelings of happiness and excitement present in the parents. However, Singer's argument, as Gabbard points out in his article, "A Life Beyond Reason," fails to reflect the lived experience of a parent whose child is born with disabilities. While Singer takes a strictly logic-based approach to the subject of disabled infanticide, as Gabbard argues, this is not an area where a logic-based strategy for argument is appropriate. In this way, while Singer uses logic to argue against the lives of disabled infants, his argument fails to account for the actual, lived experience of parents and makes undue assumptions about parents' perceptions of their newborn infants.

In response to Singer's argument against the lives of disabled children, Gabbard writes from the perspective of a parent with a disabled child, using pathos and ethos to refute Singer's assumption that parents of disabled children would be disappointed or burdened by their offspring. Gabbard begins his argument by establishing the context

for his opinions on logos and disability, describing to the reader how he "grew up prizing intellectual aptitude...and destesting 'poor mental function' " (Gabbard). He goes on to state that he "obtained [his] doctorate at Stanford in 18th-century British literature—the age of reason" (Gabbard). Through this description of his previous relationship with logic and reason, Gabbard uses ethos to establish his history of devaluing intellectual disability before meeting his son, emphasizing the power of that meeting to change his long-held opinions about disability.

Gabbard begins the main part of his argument against Singer's beliefs on infanticide by employing the literary strategy of pathos as he describes the first time he met his son. Gabbard tells the readers how he saw "[his] son, asleep or unconscious, on a ventilator, motionless under a heat lamp, tubes and wires everywhere, monitors alongside his steel and transparent-plastic crib," but how, despite the medical equipment, "what most stirred [him] was the way [August] resembled [him]." Gabbard begins the passage by describing what most people outside of his family, including figures like Singer, would notice first about his son: the medical equipment indicative of August's disability. However, Gabbard finishes the passage by describing the true shock that he felt, not at the medical equipment, but at the way August reminded Gabbard of himself. In this way, Gabbard uses pathos to prove to the reader that, against Singer's beliefs, parental love can indeed extend to children who do not look like their parents and that the presence of a disability in a child does not inherently make them any less valued by their parents. Gabbard concludes by stating his direct opposition to Singer's beliefs about parental care, telling the reader how "a person such as Peter Singer well may conclude, reasonably, that I have become overpowered by parental sentiment. So

be it. I can live with that. There are limits to reason" (Gabbard). In this way, Gabbard demonstrates that not only is Singer wrong in his assumption that parents will only care about whether it is logical to love their child, but also that this power of parental love is strong enough to overcome his previous assumptions and values about disability.

Singer moves his argument to the perspective of doctors working with disabled children in hospitals, using them as a secondary source and way to establish ethos in his argument in an attempt to support his claims that disabled people have a lower quality of life. He states that these doctors "believe that the lives of the worst affected children are so miserable that it is wrong to resort to surgery to keep them alive" (Singer). In this case, while Singer does make an attempt to employ ethos in his argument by finding a source more connected to disabled infants, he still fails to understand the biases present in these individuals. Assuming that most doctors working with children with spina bifida do not themselves have the condition, it is not possible for them to understand how the children feel about their own disability and quality of life. Additionally, Singer's argument fails to acknowledge the years of systemic ableism woven into the medical profession and the incredibly low value it places on disabled lives. By failing to acknowledge the bias in his sources, Singer's argument is again made invalid.

In her essay "Unspeakable Conversations," McBryde Johnson uses a combination of all three rhetorical strategies—pathos, logos, and ethos—to argue that quality of life is not dependent upon ability and that disability should not be viewed as a burden on the lives of disabled people. McBryde Johnson opens her defense with a strong hook to engage the reader, stating that "he insists he doesn't want to kill me"

when referring to her conversations with Singer (McBryde Johnson). Throughout her argument, McBryde Johnson makes frequent use of these kinds of storytelling techniques to bring the otherwise incredibly theoretical and complex issue of infanticide and disability rights to a broader audience in a digestible way. In this way, she greatly differs from Singer's strategy of using a perspective which is so deeply entrenched in the theoretical and hypothetical that it starts to become too detached from the world to be relevant. McBryde Johnson instead makes use of pathos in her writing to continue to engage the audience even as her argument takes a more logical approach. After bringing in her audience with pathos, McBryde Johnson uses logic and ethos in her argument against Singer, stating how she "disagree[s] with his jurisprudential assumptions" (McBryde Johnson). Additionally, she states that "illogic is not a sufficient reason to change the law." By citing his "jurisprudential assumptions" and her own experience as a lawyer, McBryde Johnson both demonstrates her own experience as a lawyer and the flaws in Singer's logic as he attempts to argue from a legal perspective. McBryde Johnson therefore supports her claim that the lives of disabled infants should not be treated as replaceable while making use of logos and ethos to strengthen her argument.

Finally, McBryde Johnson makes use of logos in order to counter the most illogical aspect of Singer's argument: the fact that he is attempting to portray disabled lives as having a lower quality of life than their able-bodied counterparts without having experienced a disabled life. She states how the "heart of [her] argument," is simply that "the presence or absence of a disability doesn't predict quality of life" (McBryde Johnson). In this statement, McBryde Johnson manages to make use of both pathos

and logos at the same time, as she logically argues that disability does not significantly impact quality of life, while stating the fact in simple and understandable terms without attempting to delve into theoretical rabbit holes. By doing this, McBryde Johnson keeps her audience engaged with her argument and presents them with a very logical answer to the question of whether the lives of disabled infants should hold value, demonstrating how she makes powerful use of both pathos and logos to support her argument.

In this way, despite Singer's attempts to argue from the perspective of disabled people and their parents, his arguments fall short and are easily refuted by Gabbard and McBryde Johnson's lived experiences within those identities. Through their use of pathos, ethos, and logos, Gabbard and McBryde Johnson establish a powerful counter argument and defense of disabled lives in order to prove that disabled people should not be treated as expendable. Though immense bias still exists within the medical profession, and this bias has become ever more apparent in the current pandemic, the arguments and work of people like Gabbard and McBryde Johnson continue to reshape public perception of disability into a more realistic and equal vision.

Works Cited

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