Denaturalizing Cognitive Disability: Considering Dehumanization and Difference

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ABSTRACT

Cognitively disabled people are pervasively marginalized in theoretical work and social-political life. Although more than fifty years of social activism and critical theoretical work has politicized and radically reframed the experience of disability, those effects seem to extend only tenuously to cognitively disabled people. Historical practices of dehumanization, and eugenicist conflations of cognitive ability with human value, continue to influence attitudes toward those who are cognitively, intellectually and communicatively atypical. Perceptions of these atypicalities are sufficiently insensitive to individual variation that the assumption of radical difference is global and total, and cognitively disabled people continue to be set apart as specially and naturally different and inferior. In this paper, I sketch a conceptual architecture of dehumanization and its relation to the qualitative and quantitative understandings of cognitive disability, with reference to historical instances. In doing so, I aim to denaturalize cognitive disability so that it can be more fully theorized from a critical disability perspective.

Introduction

Cognitively disabled people – those with cognitive atypicalities affecting capacities such as reasoning, memory, comprehension and language – are pervasively marginalized in (or excluded from) theoretical work and social-political life. Although more than fifty years of social activism and critical theoretical work has politicized and radically reframed the experience of disability, those effects seem to extend only tenuously to cognitively disabled people. Those considered cognitively subnormal remain segregated, their separateness still (passively or explicitly) seen as the natural result of their intrinsic incapacities, rather than a product of dehumanization and historical injustice. This paper aims to provide additional argumentation, resources and motivation for a fuller inclusion of cognitively disabled people within critical studies of disability. I argue that historical practices of dehumanization, and eugenicist conflations of cognitive ability and

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human value, continue to influence attitudes toward those who are cognitively, intellectually and communicatively atypical. Perceptions of these atypicalities are sufficiently insensitive to individual variation that the assumption of radical difference is global and total, and cognitively disabled people continue to be set apart as specially and naturally different and inferior. I argue for this conceptual and historical claim by sketching a conceptual architecture of dehumanization alongside the qualitative and quantitative understandings of cognitive disability, with reference to historical instances. In doing so, I aim to denaturalize cognitive disability so that it can be more fully theorized from a critical disability perspective.

1. "Cognitive Disability" and Other Notes on Terminology

For current purposes, "cognitive disability" is a social-political sortal, not a medical one. This is both a methodological choice and a political reflection on how I believe this term is implicitly used in practice. "Cognitive disability" here includes any condition impacting significantly upon cognition in that it affects capacities including memory, comprehension, calculation, learning capacity, and language. It refers to those classified as deviating significantly from statistical or population norms of these and associated capacities (or who are assumed to lack those capacities) and whose observed cognitive, intellectual and communicative characteristics are ascribed meanings which place them at severe social disadvantage. Cognitive disability thus covers conditions often referred to as "intellectual disability", "cognitive impairment", or "developmental disability", among them Down syndrome, Fragile X Syndrome, acquired brain injuries (ABIs), and dementia. These many and varied conditions differ from one another in terms of their underlying causes, age of onset, diagnostic criteria, and behavioral indicators. Each is internally heterogeneous; there are often significant differences in individual manifestations of each condition. In referring to cognitively disabled people, I am referring to people with a very wide range of cognitive and communicative capacities, levels of (in)dependence, and medical diagnoses. This is because, as an externally applied, social-political designator, cognitive disability picks out those who are perceived as cognitively subnormal and whose social-political status reflects that assumption of subnormalcy. This social-political status entails their social-political exclusion and is largely insensitive to individual variation and diagnostic criteria. Thus, cognitively disabled people are those who experience marginalization, exclusion, oppression and

abuse because of the negative meanings applied to their (perceived or actual) cognitive atypicalities. The question of how people with (sometimes very profound) limitations or atypicalities in their memory, cognition, reasoning and language use can justly and appropriately be included in our communities and our theorizing is complex. However, that question cannot productively be asked until we reckon with why they are presumed excluded in the first place. This paper aims at that reckoning.

A brief note on other terms: as already seen above, I will sometimes refer to "cognitive atypicalities". I take this to mean differences in the aforementioned cognitive features (such as memory or comprehension) which are atypical *in relation to* population averages. I will also sometimes use the terms "subnormal" and "subnormalcy"; terms which are loaded with historical cruelties and which, I acknowledge, some people may wince at seeing in print. I believe the social-political status of cognitively disabled people reflects a widespread belief that they are not only *other than* cognitively normal, but *less than* cognitively normal. This assumption of subnormalcy is fundamentally enmeshed with their dehumanization, and it is precisely that enmeshment which I aim to confront. Choosing a less abrasive term risks diverting that confrontation. It may be that, following Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's use of "normate" (Garland-Thomson, 2017/1997), I should instead use "cognitively subnormate"; given that "cognitively normal" is itself a political claim, and the cognitive norm is itself a social and historical contingency. However, to retain focus on the extent to which popular assumptions about cognitive disability are drenched through with histories of dehumanization, I will retain a limited and qualified use of "subnormal" and "subnormalcy", for current purposes.

2. Cognitive Disability within Critical Studies of Disability

This use of "cognitive disability" aligns with recent critical approaches to disability more broadly, within which disability is generally understood to be a structural social disadvantage resulting from the meanings ascribed to observed-atypical bodily characteristics (such as atypical mobility, d/Deafness, or congenital limb differences). Disability is a phenomenon which emerges at the junction between the body and the social world, not merely a politically neutral abnormality of the individual body. The emergence of this critical understanding of disability has seen it change from a medical sortal (where "disabled people" refers to those with bodily abnormalities) to a social-political sortal (where "disabled people"

refers to those structurally socially disadvantaged because of the social meanings ascribed to differences in bodily characteristics)[1]. However, cognitive disability, as a subject of critical study, and cognitively disabled people, as subjects within our communities, legal frameworks and academic analyses, have often been sidelined and neglected, even within critical studies of disability (Carlson, 2019; Wieseler, 2022). Thus, while this paper is situated within that ongoing discourse, it aims to provide additional argumentation, resources and motivation for a more thorough-going incorporation of cognitive disability into broader disability critique. Cognitive disability is still arguably seen more as a feature of the individual than as a social-political phenomenon which emerges at the junction between the person and the social world. This is what is meant here by "denaturalizing" cognitive disability: it means that this assumed apolitical, natural separateness will be explicitly contextualized and rejected.

3. Denaturalizing Cognitive Disability

Cognitively disabled people are subject to legal, social and ethical codes which are considered wrongful if applied to any other social group. It has been clearly and repeatedly shown that – once provided with appropriate supports – they frequently far surpass what was previously expected of them (Bérubé, 2009); yet those supports are often refused or under-resourced as cognitively disabled people continue to be viewed as an unnecessary social burden (Malpas, 2009); as a faulty and unwanted strand of the human species (Wilson, 2021). Cognitively disabled people are not only marginalized in how we think about our communities; they are often physically segregated from our communities across social, educational, professional and recreational spaces.[2] They experience staggeringly high rates of physical and sexual abuse. They have often been afforded a lesser moral status, denied personhood, denied agency, and – to different degrees - considered less than fully human (Carlson, 2023). These considerations and denials have varied in different social and historical contexts. They differ in their conceptual underpinnings. In what follows, I argue that throughout these variations, cognitively disabled people have been consistently and pervasively

[1] For recent reviews, see: Ellis, Garland-Thomson, Kent, & Robertson, 2018 and Reynolds, 2022.

[2] The extent of segregation in each of these contexts of course varies internationally, according to differing histories of institutionalization and industrialization, differing approaches to and availability of educational and social care systems, and local cultural factors.

dehumanized. As this is both a historical and a conceptual claim, I will present a conceptual analysis of different forms of dehumanization alongside historical instances of practices and treatments which stem from it. I will present animalization, objectification, and infantilization as three forms of dehumanization to which cognitively disabled people are susceptible. I will then connect these forms of dehumanization to Licia Carlson's assessment of the categorization of cognitive disability in qualitative and quantitative terms (Carlson, 2010). In doing so, I will give some background to the development of intelligence testing and the categorization of mental defectiveness and intellectual inferiority, and the entanglement of these processes with eugenics and dehumanization. This historical and conceptual exposition is presented here in order to establish that pervasive assumptions about cognitive disability are rooted in dehumanizing and abusive social and political processes, rather than being grounded in natural, biological realities.

4. Dehumanization

This section provides a brief overview of current philosophical approaches to dehumanization.[3] I add to existing analyses by considering dehumanization through three processes: objectification, animalization, and infantilization. These processes can affect many different social groups, and motivations and outcomes may vary in different contexts. In what follows, I do not suggest any universal application. My focus is on providing a conceptual and historical background to the dehumanization of cognitively disabled people, to facilitate the denaturalization of cognitive disability (and thereby motivate the full inclusion of cognitively disabled people within critical approaches to disability more broadly).

[3] This brief overview centers on recent work explicitly naming "dehumanization" as the phenomenon under discussion. However, much of this work rests on landmark earlier texts which discussed the phenomenon even while the term "dehumanization" may not have been used: Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) and Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) are two notable examples (my thanks to an anonymous reviewer for this point). It is notable also that while foundational work on philosophy and cognitive disability (referenced in this section) has often been directly concerned with dehumanization, the phenomenon is not always named as such: for example, see Kittay & Crary (2009), Carlson (2010). Licia Carlson has recently explicitly connected philosophical work on cognitive disability with dehumanization studies (2023).

Philosophical consideration of dehumanization has come together relatively recently, much of it drawing on existing research on the topic from the social and cognitive sciences (Kronfeldner, 2012). Within the developing multidisciplinary field of Dehumanization Studies, most philosophical analyses maintain a broadly psychological approach to the concept, proposing that dehumanization occurs via mental or psychological processes when a person or group come to be thought of as less than fully human (Livingstone Smith, 2011; Hund, et al., 2015; Kronfeldner, 2021; Carlson, 2023), and thereby ascribed a lesser value. As they are, through this process, pushed outside the human moral community, their abuse, neglect, or even their extermination can seem morally permissible, desirable, or morally irrelevant: often, abuse is not recognized *as abuse* if the target is dehumanized. Broadly, understandings of dehumanization combine two elements. The first is ontological, in that the target is conceived of as being, in some sense, outside the boundaries of the human community (or outside the boundaries of the human species).[4] The second is hierarchical, in that the target is of lesser importance or worth: not merely *other than* human, but *less than* human.[5] Understanding the conceptual underpinnings of dehumanizing acts and behaviors seems to facilitate a better account of egregious abuses such as genocide, slavery, eugenics, and gendered violence than simply understanding such abuses as the result of discriminatory beliefs. Understanding what is going on at a conceptual level in these cases may then allow us to identify dehumanization in other, previously unremarked contexts.

However – although it is not always referred to as such – most existing philosophical discourse on dehumanization is focused on animalization. Animalization is certainly a pervasive and distinctive form of dehumanization, but it is not the only process by which some marked group is considered less than fully human. Below, in addition to animalization, I consider both objectification and infantilization as processes of dehumanization. I propose that dehumanized groups may be considered other than and less than fully human through one of

[4] This synopsis necessarily simplifies what are diverse interpretations of this core claim: for further reading, see Carlson, 2023; Jackson, 2020; Kronfeldner, 2021; Livingstone-Smith, 2011; Mikkola, 2016.

[5] Mari Mikkola's account of dehumanization (2016) differs in that she views dehumanization as a feature of acts or ways of treating others, rather than a conceptual or psychological process. However, most accounts use examples of such acts and treatments to develop and illustrate their positions.

these three processes, or by a combination of processes.[6] Additionally, I stress that both the ontological and hierarchical elements of dehumanization denote variable states of hybridity: the dehumanized other is never wholly transformed into an animal, or an object, or from an adult into an infant. Even when a group has been profoundly animalized, for example, it is their putative state of hybridity (which ascribes them the qualities of beasts yet includes the recognition that they are, in some sense, human) that represents such an affront to those who consider themselves exemplars of the human species. Dehumanization is always partial, and its extent and repercussions are variable. Dehumanization creates a zone of suspension, where the targets are suspended between morally relevant categories and, consequently, norms of care, protection, and legal consideration may themselves be suspended. Children and animals may have a superior status and greater protection than animalized or infantilized people.[7]

Cognitively disabled people have been dehumanized through all three of the processes discussed here: objectification, animalization, and infantilization. This not only marks cognitively disabled people as a marginalized and oppressed social group but also continues to motivate the widespread exclusion of cognitively disabled people from theoretical consideration and everyday life. These forms of dehumanization also connect to the conceptualization of cognitive disability itself in either qualitative or quantitative terms: I will explore this connection in section 7.

4.1 Objectification

Objectification has primarily been discussed in feminist philosophy and is seen as a process primarily (or exclusively) affecting women. Women are objectified when their personhood, subjectivity or (sometimes) their cognitive capacity is diminished or disregarded, and they are thereby reduced to physical bodies without full moral standing. They are of lesser worth and status than men, re-

[6] There may also be other processes which could be usefully explored within frameworks of dehumanization: for example, characterizations of cognitive disability in terms of spiritual possession, and the portrayal of autistic people as robotic or akin to computers.

[7] It should be acknowledged here that despite the egregious repercussions of dehumanization, this zone of suspension can become a site of liberatory creativity for those who are dehumanized. This has been explored by Joshua Bennett in relation to anti-Black animalization (2020), and by Sunaura Taylor in relation to animalization and disability (2016).

duced to an instrumental role; considered a "mere means", rather than recognized as autonomous agents. (Papadaki, 2010) When women are conceived of as being physically human but internally less than human and somewhat akin to inert objects, it becomes reasonable to exclude them from full moral consideration or from participation in civil and professional life. Processes of dehumanization remove marked groups from full membership in the human moral community; this enables the acts and behaviors which follow. Ethical norms and values can be suspended or reconsidered for those outside the sphere of human moral concern. Once women are objectified, they can be treated as property and used as instruments or as mere bodies without this causing psychological resistance on the part of the dehumanizer.

While objectification has primarily been discussed in the context of sexism, misogyny, and gender-based discrimination and violence, cognitively disabled people are also susceptible to objectification. This is particularly so in the case of cognitively disabled people with very limited communicative capacities, those with profound brain injuries, and people in advanced stages of dementia. The once-common practice of referring to such people as cabbages or vegetables was not merely an example of insensitive language. This language reflects a conceptualization of the target as a living but unconscious object. Characterizations of dementia and Alzheimer's often portray those with the conditions as hollow shells - as bodies which have lost their personal identity (Jongsma & Schweda, 2018; McNess, 2017). While this may reflect the sense of loss experienced by family members, or the communicative gulf between non-disabled carers and their cognitively disabled clients, such language and characterizations are nonetheless dehumanizing in that they portray the target as less than fully human. Where this conceptualization is taken as an obvious reflection of biological reality (as has, in other contexts, been the case with the objectification of women), it risks rendering permissible acts and behaviors which would otherwise be morally egregious.

There are further parallels between the much-theorized objectification of women and the (largely yet-to-be-theorized) objectification of cognitively disabled people. Cognitively disabled adults may be employed in assisted employment schemes which pay a fraction of the legal minimum wage and include few of the standard legal employment protections, even where the cognitively disabled adult does the same work as their non-disabled colleagues (Butterworth et al., 2024; Dearing, 2020). This is arguably an instance of instrumentalization, where the reduced worth and status of the cognitively disabled person permits

their use as an instrument of industry, without this entailing their consideration as an autonomous, fully human employee. As they have a diminished human status, they are not fully included in the sphere of human rights, including employment rights otherwise taken as universal. Finally, cognitively disabled adults (across multiple regions and legal jurisdictions) experience sexual abuse at a far higher rate than their non-disabled peers (Bjornsdottir et al. 2017; Fitzgerald & Withers, 2011). Objectification turns its targets into mere bodies which can be used for sexual ends without regard to their personal wishes (or to wider ethical norms of human interaction). As has been the case in gendered violence against women, the cultural pervasiveness of a dehumanizing concept means that egregious acts and behaviors are not only rendered invisible: those who object or protest at their treatment are disregarded, as their dehumanization includes a diminishment or erasure of their status as epistemic agents, and their testimony is thereby neutralized. This effect is compounded in the case of cognitively disabled women.

4.2 Animalization

Most existing theorizing on dehumanization concerns animalization, to the extent that animalization is often what is meant by the term dehumanization itself. Animalization is intimately connected to racialization and shares conceptual roots with hierarchical structures of value, within which humans are understood as having greater worth than animals. The entanglement of race, cognitive inferiority, and evolutionary theory can serve, and has served, to conceptualize certain groups as being closer to animals than others – and to conceive of them as fundamentally inferior by that proximity (Livingstone Smith, 2011). Reflecting both the ontological and hierarchical aspects of dehumanization mentioned earlier, the division of humans into separate "races" included a racial hierarchy, arranged according to their supposed evolutionary status. For example, enslaved peoples from the African continent were portrayed not only as a separate race to white Europeans, but as a lesser form of life which straddled the evolutionary line between human and animal. Instances of ethnic cleansing and genocide are repeatedly preceded by the animalization of the target group. The rhetorical construction of a marked group as rats, insects, or other vermin, can discursively enable their dehumanization and promote their extermination. Animalization is not mere name-calling: as with the example in the previous section of referring

to some cognitively disabled people as "vegetables", the linguistic act of creating associations between certain humans and (certain) animals can reveal an existing conceptualization of a group as less than fully human, or/and it can promote the development of a less-than-human status (Livingstone Smith, 2011). While it is perhaps psychologically impossible to think of another human as literally a rat, or a pig, or a cockroach, an animalizing discourse draws their fully human status into question: while they may remain outwardly, physically human, their personhood or personal identity may become hybridized with that of an animal.

Cognitive variations and atypicalities are dispersed throughout the human species (not keyed as specific to a particular region or ethnic group), yet racialization is nonetheless entangled with cognitive disability. Colonized and subjugated populations were frequently categorized as cognitively inferior or cognitively impaired. Most such populations were also racialized, and racialization itself prominently includes assumptions of cognitive inferiority or subnormalcy: often, the racialized other is naturally and fundamentally less intelligent, less rational, less literate, and less cognitively capable (Carlson, 2023). In tandem with racialized groups being assumed to be cognitively inferior, cognitively disabled people were, in some cases, racialized: in the original identification of Down syndrome, John Langdon Downs named it "Mongolism" or "Mongoloid syndrome", with reference to one of the supposed (and naturally inferior) human "races" (Carlson, 2010).

The association between cognitively disabled people and animals often draws on the assumption that there are similar cognitive capacities across both groups. The same assumption is apparent historically when associating racialized groups and animals. Within theoretical work at least, this is now a rare and transparently political association to make in the case of racialized groups, yet the association between animals and cognitively disabled people remains a legitimate area of enquiry within academic philosophy, particularly animal ethics. Cognitive disabilities have served as a "rhetorical stable" for theorists seeking to draw out inconsistencies and hypocrisies in human attitudes toward non-human animals (Crary, 2019; Scotton, 2019). Arguments for elevating the moral status of animals often turn on the association between (some) animals and (some) cognitively disabled people: one common claim is that apes have higher cognitive capacities than a group referred to as "the severely mentally retarded", and that apes should therefore have a greater moral status than humans so classified (see Crary, 2019, for a review). In response to the challenge that such

comparisons reinscribe the animalization of cognitively disabled people, it is argued that this is not possible when the speaker holds animals in high regard (Kittay, 2019). However, previous instances of animalization have also been perpetrated by those who held (at least some) animals in high regard (as was the case with Nazis and their dogs (Kittay, 2019)). While humans occupy one ethically relevant domain, and animals occupy another, animalized humans seem to have no secure ethical status. As I stated earlier, dehumanization is always partial. To be conceived of as neither fully human nor fully animal leaves one outside dominant domains of moral consideration: animalized humans typically inspire revulsion, even in contexts where animals themselves are beloved. As can be seen from the actions which have followed from historical instances of animalization, this neither/nor hybridity can facilitate treatment which would otherwise be resisted if the targets were either human or animal. Animalizing rhetoric, comparisons, and words "carry the historical accretions of their usage" (Kittay, 2019: 129), and while comparisons between humans and animals are only contingently – not necessarily – negative (requiring for their negativity the prior assumption that animals are inferior to humans), arguments which mobilize this comparison in the service of animals nonetheless threaten to reinforce the historically persistent conceptualization of cognitively disabled humans as animal-like, or comparable to animals.[8]

When humans are animalized, they are ascribed a lesser value than those considered fully human. As they are, through this animalization, pushed outside the human moral community, their abuse, neglect, or even their extermination can seem morally permissible, desirable, or simply morally irrelevant. In conceiving of others as internally part-animal, evolutionarily closer to animals, or random emergences from an animal-proximate earlier stage of evolution, we can separate them from our sphere of moral or social concern. Cognitively disabled people have been, and continue to be susceptible to animalization, especially where they have limited or atypical communication (such as noisemaking or grunting), and high physical support needs. These atypical communicative and bodily features exacerbate the association between cognitively disabled people and animals (even where such an association is passive or subconscious), an association which is exacerbated by explicit comparison of certain cognitive capacities in animals and cognitively disabled people. However,

[8] For a thorough consideration of these issues, see Kittay & Carlson, 2010.

outside of animal ethics, it is perhaps now typical to avoid making such comparisons, at least explicitly. While I will later argue that animalization remains a pervasive influence, infantilization seems to be the most dominant and widespread contemporary conceptualization affecting cognitively disabled people. This is the third form of dehumanization I will outline, after which I will bring this analysis of dehumanization together with qualitative and quantitative understandings of cognitive disability.

4.3 Infantilization

When an adult is infantilized, they are conceived of as having the subjectivity or personhood of a child: they are understood to be a child in the body of an adult. This seems to be the dominant, socially pervasive conceptualization of cognitively disabled adults. Adults who develop dementia are said to have "returned to childhood", or to be in a "second childhood" (Jongsma & Schweda, 2018). Adults with congenital cognitive conditions such as Down syndrome are conceived of as "perpetual children" (Wong, 2002: 108). Infantilization pushes adults back down a presumed-linear developmental chain which runs from adulthood down through adolescence, through childhood and back to infancy. Thus, infantilization pushes an adult *toward* infancy, though they may not, in the end, be perceived as infants; they may be conceived of and treated as older children, or even young adolescents (Flynn, 2021). The connection to infancy highlights the importance of speech as an indicator of rationality and personhood. The development of speech is tied inextricably in both humanist and post-humanist discourse to the development of rationality, and rationality is – on most accounts – fundamental to being human. Above even physical development, "speech is an enactment of reason, and therefore of human identity" (St. Pierre, 2015). When adults are conceived of as being closer on the developmental scale to infancy than to adulthood, their position on this scale is tied closely to their capacity for language use, as this is the key indicator of their cognitive capacities. Physical disability, old age, racialization, and gender can all serve as triggers for infantilization. In these cases, infantilization can be resisted and overcome through the target groups' assertions and demonstrations of their cognitive and communicative normalcy (alongside other modes of political resistance). In the case of cognitively disabled adults, infantilization has an ontological heft which makes it seem like a natural and appropriate mode of engagement: it is assumed that cognitively disabled adults simply *are* children in the oversized bodies of adults.

The assumption that infantilization is a natural and appropriate approach to cognitively disabled people means that (as with other cases of dehumanization), infantilization is not recognized as harmful, despite evidence documenting those harms (Brady et al., 2014; Capri & Swartz, 2017; Flynn, 2021; Salari, 2006).[9] With cognitive disability, infantilization is pervasively naturalized, in part because the subjectivities and perspectives of cognitively disabled adults are poorly understood; they are different to non-disabled adults, but the nature of that difference has not yet been adequately conceptualized. The concept "child" is the nearest available concept which seems to fit their cognitive abilities and modes of expression; thus "child" acts as the "metaphoric grounding" (Hepworth, 1996: 425) of infantilization. As cognitively disabled people are typically unable to resist their infantilization in the same way as non-disabled people (by asserting or demonstrating a statistically typical level of cognitive functioning) and as non-disabled people lack the conceptual resources to understand them correctly, the application of the concept "child" becomes permanent and global. They are conceived of as children in ways that outstrip any connection to cognitive capacity. They are conceived of as *perpetual* children. This process is implicated in and exacerbated by mental age theory, through which a cognitively disabled adult has ascribed a child-equivalent "mental age" as an approximate judgement of their aggregate cognitive capacities. As I believe mental age theory has played a significant role in naturalizing the infantilization of cognitively disabled people, I will here outline it in brief and critique its reliability.

5. "Decontextualized, Singular Brains" and Mental Age Theory

The concept of mental age was introduced by Alfred Binet in the early twentieth century as part of his system of intelligence testing. A mental age was assigned based on a person's test results when compared to average test scores for different age ranges in the general population (Martin & McFerran, 2017). Although intended to improve pedagogical approaches for children, Binet's system was adopted to categorize asylum inmates, "trapping [them] in a state of perpetual childhood" (Ilyes, 2020: 5), and reconfigured to work alongside concepts of intelligence and intelligence testing rooted in white supremacy (Stubblefield, 2010). It became a core tool of the eugenics movement, with people graded on

[9] Infantilized adults have been shown to have worse care outcomes, decline in cognitive capacities, higher levels of aggression and resistance to care, higher rates of depression and increased social withdrawal.

their "feeblemindedness" according to the Binetian test scores: those assigned a mental age of less than twelve were often deemed unfit to reproduce, forcibly sterilized, and confined to institutions. (Trent, 2017; Wilson, 2021). Although the testing and assessment process has since broadened to include cognitive, adaptive, emotional and communicative testing, these tests are today still scored against general population standards (Carlson, 2010; Harris, 2010), and these population standards remain foundationally shaped by racialized discrimination, gender, culture, and class. Specific mental ages continue to be formally and informally assigned to cognitively disabled people and mental age theory remains a significant feature in popular conceptions of cognitively disabled adults (Silverman, 2018).

Assigning a mental age to an adult is problematic for a number of reasons. The test assessments themselves can give only an estimate of a person's cognitive, communicative, or adaptive abilities, and test outcomes can be negatively influenced by the test environment and the style and pace of the assessment. Outcomes are distorted by assumptions made about the person being tested before the assessment even begins: for example, Black youth are more likely to be deemed cognitively impaired (Stubblefield, 2010) and females are less likely to be diagnosed with some conditions, such as autism (Driver & Chester, 2021). Assessments of mental age are profoundly shaped by the social and historical context of the assessment. Such assessments are contingent – that is, they are shaped by circumstance – in fundamentally significant ways, yet they are typically assumed to be objective assessments of the intrinsic abilities of the subject. The test outcome is taken to be an assessment of the "properties of decontextualized, singular brains" (Fein, 2020: 64), rather than reflections on the historical periods, political and social climates, and the environment and networks within which the assessed persons are situated. Historically, as supports and attitudes have changed, so too have the assessment outcomes (Harris, 2010; Stubblefield, 2010; Trent, 2017; Wong, 2010). This is well illustrated in the case of Down syndrome, where assessment predictions relating to everything from literacy to life expectancy have radically changed since the mid-twentieth century. The chromosomal variation and physical typicalities of Down syndrome have not changed, yet the presumed abilities - cognitive and otherwise – of people with Down syndrome have expanded in line with expansions of the social supports available, to the point that "we simply do not know what the range of functioning looks like" (Bérubé, 2009). Ascriptions of mental age continue

to uphold a popular picture of cognitive disability as natural, individual, and relatively static, but rather than being acontextual assessments of the capacities of "decontextualized, singular brains", assessments which lead to a designated mental age are fundamentally shaped by social and historical circumstance.

Although cognitively disabled adults may be conceived of *as* children, and in some ways treated *like* children, their social and political status is markedly different from that of actual children. They are excluded from the social and personal practices of adulthood; segregated in their social, educational and personal lives. Their social and political status imposes severe limits on their opportunities for recreation, employment, education, relationships, and sociality; that they do not somehow surpass those limits is then often taken as proof that they are intrinsically unable to do so. Infantilized cognitively disabled people are neither adults nor children and therefore cannot benefit from the social or legal protections of either group. As with animalization and objectification, infantilization pushes its targets outside the sphere of human moral concern.

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These three processes of dehumanization (objectification, animalization, and infantilization) can be seen to produce similar effects: dehumanized groups are no longer subject to the same moral, ethical, epistemic, or legal norms and protections afforded to everyone else. They are essentially, intrinsically different to – and fundamentally *lesser than* – other members of the species. The putative reason for their dehumanization is naturalized, so that their marginalization, oppression and abuse are ethically unremarkable or naturally justified. In the final section, I connect these processes of dehumanization to Licia Carlson's analysis of understandings of cognitive disability in qualitative and quantitative terms (2010). In doing so, I aim to set out some variations in the background assumptions which serve to exclude cognitively disabled people from theoretical consideration and everyday life; showing that this exclusion is grounded in the naturalization of a contingent social-political sortal.

6. Qualitative and Quantitative Understandings of Cognitive Disability

The three processes of dehumanization in the previous sections can be seen to track understandings of cognitive disability, which have historically followed qualitative and quantitative explanatory strategies. In qualitative understandings

of cognitive disability, cognitively disabled people have a different essential *quality* to humans (Carlson, 2010, 2023). In quantitative understandings of cognitive disability, cognitively disabled people have a diminished or inferior *quantity* of human capacities (such as language or reasoning). These two explanatory strategies connect conceptually and historically to the dehumanization of cognitively disabled people via the processes discussed above. The qualitative understanding sees cognitively disabled people as a different kind of creature, more like an animal or object than a human; the quantitative understanding sees them as humans who failed to develop past an infant state.

In the previous section, I suggested that infantilization is now the socially dominant conceptualization of cognitively disabled people. The quantitative strategy might therefore be the most useful when considering cognitively disabled people's current social-political status. However, although the qualitative strategy leans into now largely obsolete scientific understandings of species in terms of natural kinds, I suspect it nonetheless continues to exert a significant influence. In what follows, I will present first the qualitative and then the quantitative understandings of cognitive disability, alongside their cognate processes of dehumanization, and then consider how both feed into the naturalization of cognitive disability and the widespread exclusion of cognitively disabled people. While these elements may combine in different measures across different contexts, it is analytically necessary to recognize the distinctions between different processes of dehumanization and understandings of cognitive disability in order to get a clear grip on the background assumptions which may be operative in any given context.

The explanation of cognitive disability in qualitative terms emerged at the junction of evolutionary science and social theory in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. As a conceptual pillar of imperial and colonial projects, the division of the human species into evolutionarily different races naturalized and justified oppressive social power relations. Within this intellectual and ideological environment, proponents of eugenics, as both a science and a social movement, contributed centrally to the construction of the "idiot". The "idiot" was cognitively subnormal, morally degenerate, and represented both a social menace and a burden to the economy. "Idiocy" was intrinsic to the person and believed to be heritable: it was a condition of the poor and the lower classes, who reproduced degeneracy and threatened to thereby cause the degeneracy of the human species. In (primarily) the United States, Canada, and Europe, resi-

dential institutions emerged to house and thereby segregate those deemed cognitively subnormal from the rest of the population. Mass institutionalization ran parallel to eugenicist practices of forced and involuntary sterilization, denial of healthcare, and widespread institutional abuse (Carlson, 2010; Ilyes, 2020: Trent, 2017; Wilson, 2018).

The justification for these practices came, in part, from scientific claims about the nature of idiocy and of idiots. Those deemed cognitively subnormal (on a scale which ran from imbecile, to moron, to low-grade idiot, based on deeply racist and classist assessments of cognitive ability) were considered intrinsically different to normal humans. They were defective examples of the species, different in kind to fully functioning members. Importantly, their defectiveness, and the qualitative understanding itself, portrayed a static state. The difference in kind was global, intrinsic, and unalterable. This did not, in itself, entail the animalization of cognitively disabled people. The qualitative explanatory strategy did, however, serve to push those so marked outside of the distinctly human moral community. As they were pervasively rhetorically animalized – compared to dogs, pigs, vermin – their difference frequently came to be conceptualized along animalistic lines (Carlson, 2023). The implications of these conceptualizations are clear: any number of abuses have been perpetuated and regarded as ethically irrelevant because the target group are – naturally and intrinsically – not subject to the same norms and protections as the fully human. They are assumed to lack the kinds of capacities taken as necessary for social or political participation; additionally, through their animalization, they are conflated with creatures not generally taken to have relevant capacities of their own. This qualitative way of framing and explaining those deemed cognitively subnormal has arguably greatly diminished in prevalence and influence, along with those associated claims purportedly demonstrating that the human species is made up of distinct races. However, I suggest that the qualitative understanding of cognitive disability, and the associated process of animalization, still undergird the exclusion of cognitively disabled people. I return to this point in the Conclusion. The quantitative understanding of cognitive disability emerged to explain cognitive disability as a failure to develop beyond childhood. Historically, this explanatory change was promoted on the basis that it would result in better treatment: one superintendent of a residential institution for "mental defectives" is said to have "infantilized as an act of advocacy" (Ilyes, 2020, p. 5), apparently believing institutionalized adults would be better protected and less likely to be abused if they were understood as children rather than animals (Carlson, 2010).

The quantitative picture represents cognitive disability "according to a temporal scale or chronology, and thus the "idiot" becomes interpreted against the backdrop of childhood more generally" (Carlson, 2010, p. 30). "Feebleminded-ness" was explained as a condition of human development "differing from others not in kind, but in degree only, - as merely having feeble mind... like that of little children" (Howe, qtd. in Carlson, 2010, p.30). In this view, "idiocy is akin to infancy, insofar as it is the lowest point of development of our human potential" (Carlson, 2010, p. 29). The introduction of "feeblemindedness" as a replacement for "idiocy" was intended to assert this difference and was initially a dynamic (rather than static) representation of cognitive disability: in presenting cognitively disabled people as children, the intention was to encourage the provision of education and support. Where previous conceptions of idiocy saw it as a static condition, the feeble mind could be encouraged to learn and develop, as a child might learn and develop.

This conceptual shift incorporates an acknowledgement that social and environmental factors influence the capacities of people designated cognitively subnormal: their subnormalcy, then, might not be entirely natural and intrinsic, but could be at least partly dependent on extrinsic factors. However, this acknowledgement did not necessarily disconnect cognitively disabled people from the qualitative explanatory model. It was – and is – conceptually consistent to view cognitively disabled people as intrinsically different in kind while acknowledging that their cognitive or social capacities can be altered by extrinsic factors. Relatedly, the quantitative model (while it may most obviously map onto infantilization) does not immunize cognitively disabled people from animalization. Animals can also be trained and improved: even contemporary interventions such as Applied Behavioral Therapy, which are used with (or on) cognitively disabled youth, are criticized on the basis that their methods mimic animal training far more so than they do the education of children. A quantitative understanding of cognitive disability does at least potentially improve upon a qualitative understanding: in portraying cognitively disabled adults as "little children", advocates intended to appeal to a sense of charity for a group of humans who were socially vulnerable and in need of continuous support. Yet this appeal to charity (which remains pervasive today) maintains the assumption that this group of people are marginalized and disadvantaged because of something which is defective about them as individuals, rather than seeing their marginalization and abuse as something which is actively enacted by the society around

them and conceptually justified by ableist (and arguably eugenicist) assumptions about human value.

The qualitative and quantitative understandings of cognitive disability are not necessarily distinct from one another; on the contrary, both seem to influence the current social-political position of cognitively disabled people. Their position reflects the assumption that there is something *intrinsically lacking* in them as individuals (an assumption which includes both qualitative and quantitative elements) and that the ethically appropriate response to them is one of charity. Their marginalization and exclusion are seen as a natural consequence of their intrinsic inability to function in mainstream societies. Certainly, conditions such as Down syndrome, Fragile X syndrome, dementia, and ABIs entail – to widely varying degrees – differences in language use, memory, literacy, numeracy, and reasoning, as compared to predominant cognitive norms. I do not deny that such differences are present in cognitive disability; nor that, in many cases, relative impairment of cognitive and communicative capacities may be profound. However, as with other marked intraspecies differences which can be and have been used to naturalize (and thereby justify) structural oppression and abuse, at issue is not difference, and how differences should be accommodated. Rather, at issue is the historically sedimented, contingent meanings which are externally ascribed to difference, and the repercussions of those meanings for people affected.

7. Dehumanization, Mistaken Categorization & Cognitive Disability

Dehumanization combines both ontological and hierarchical elements: a group of humans, identified through some marked difference, are considered *other than* and *less than* fully human. Above, I outlined what I take to be three common processes of dehumanization: objectification, animalization, and infantilization. These dehumanizing processes create a state of hybridity where the target is neither fully human nor fully animal, neither fully human nor entirely inert, neither an adult nor a child. This inferior hybrid status places the target in a subtly or dramatically different category from the rest of humanity or pushes them outside the bounds of the human moral community entirely. Then, attitudes, laws, abuses, and actions that would otherwise be considered morally egregious can be seen as morally permissible, morally irrelevant, or morally justified, because a marked intra-species difference is taken to render one group naturally and in-

trinsically inferior to another. Where one group is understood as fully, paradigmatically human, and the other is not, an asymmetrical power relationship is natural rather than political: thus, the processes of objectification, animalization, and infantilization naturalize social injustice and oppression.

In historical cases of groups dehumanized on the basis of ethnicity, sex or gender, class, or physical disability, their alleged cognitive inferiority was (putatively) scientifically justified and thereby naturalized. To a significant (though far from universal) extent, this assumed inferiority and its scientific justification are now understood to be socially and historically contingent political constructions, developed to justify unequal social power by grounding it in a naturally given, immutable biological reality. In these cases, the assumption that a particular group has reduced or impaired cognitive abilities involves "mistaken categorization" (Wilson, 2017): due to discriminatory (or false) beliefs, people are mistakenly categorized as cognitively impaired. During the period of mass institutionalization in the early twentieth century, many people committed to institutions for idiocy and madness were cases of mistaken categorization: people assessed by discriminatory eugenicist metrics and deemed cognitively subnormal, due to inbuilt biases about gender, race, class, and physical atypicality (Trent, 2017; Wilson, 2017). Even today, multiply-marginalized and socially vulnerable groups are at higher risk of mistaken categorization.

Is there a relevant difference between the case of cognitive disability discussed in this paper and the cases of race, gender, class, and physical disability? While we might deplore mistreatment and injustice in any case, the remaining issue is this: unlike mistaken categorizations on the basis of race, gender, class or physical atypicality, assumed cognitive subnormalcy is not discriminatory or suspect in the case of cognitive disability. Categorizing someone with an intellectual or cognitive impairment – such as dementia, Down syndrome, or an acquired brain injury – as cognitively inferior to statistically typical adult human norms is not a case of mistaken categorization. People with conditions which affect cognition, reasoning, language, and memory simply have statistically lower cognitive capacities relative to population averages. While people with such conditions have been unjustly dehumanized, their categorization as cognitively subnormal is not in itself mistaken.

I do not argue that conditions such as those mentioned above are entirely socially constructed or that all people have equal cognitive abilities and should be engaged with in the same way. As already noted, the question of how people with (sometimes very profound) limitations or atypicalities in memory,

cognition, reasoning and language use can be included in our communities and our theorizing is complex. Some conditions result in significant cognitive variations from statistical norms, and those variations can have profound effects in terms of communication, dependency, and agency. However, while those effects are highly variable, and their extent can be dramatically socially and historically contingent, the near total exclusion of anyone with a perceivable cognitive or intellectual atypicality from almost every facet of social and political life is largely insensitive to individual variation and contingency. This seems to indicate that they are marked as different in kind, not merely variably different in degree. This tallies with the eugenicist conflation of cognitive ability and human value. Certainly, some people will always rank below population norms on cognitive tests - to varying degrees, resulting from myriad causes and influences – and according to that ranking they may, in a narrow and qualified sense, be classed as cognitively "sub-normal". Yet, when they are treated as unworthy of sociality, relationships, or equal legal protection; rendered unworthy of consideration both in theory and in practice; when their exclusion is assumed and their mistreatment disregarded, then there is something more to explain than mere deviation from statistical cognitive norms.

Above, I outlined the qualitative and quantitative explanatory strategies for cognitive disability. I proposed that the qualitative understanding, which sees cognitively disabled people as different in kind (different in their human quality) to the fully human, approximately parallels animalizing and objectifying processes of dehumanization. The quantitative understanding sees cognitively disabled people as different in the quantity of human traits they possess, conceptually tracking infantilization as a dehumanizing process. As the pervasive, widespread exclusion of cognitively disabled people seems largely unconcerned with the variability and contingency of individual capacities, it seems to run more closely to a qualitative understanding, whereby cognitively disabled people are seen as naturally and intrinsically distinct. However, as I have discussed, the qualitative and quantitative explanatory strategies are not mutually exclusive, and a person or group may be subject to more than one process of dehumanization simultaneously. It remains conceptually consistent to view cognitively disabled people as intrinsically different in kind while acknowledging that their cognitive or social capacities can be altered by extrinsic factors. Elements of both the qualitative and quantitative explanatory strategies, as well as the remnants of animalization and the current ubiquity of infantilization, contribute to the ongoing near-total exclusion from mainstream social, professional and recreational

life of anyone perceived as cognitively disabled: an exclusion which is neither reflective of nor responsive to individual deviations from statistical norms. While these elements combine in various measures across various contexts, it is nonetheless analytically necessary to recognize the distinctions between different processes of dehumanization and understandings of cognitive disability. We must be able to pick these elements apart so that we can recognize which elements are influencing operative claims about cognitive disability and assumptions about the abilities and value of cognitively disabled people in a given context. I have attempted here to provide some conceptual and historical contextualization of cognitive disability, as a social-political sortal, to help enable such analysis.

8. Conclusion

Historical practices of dehumanization, and eugenicist conflations of cognitive ability with human value, continue to influence attitudes toward those who are cognitively, intellectually and communicatively atypical. Perceptions of these atypicalities are sufficiently insensitive to individual variation that the assumption of radical difference is global and total, and cognitively disabled people continue to be set apart as specially and naturally different and inferior. They are excluded not merely because of some naturally deficient cognitive skillset, but because of the abiding influence of dehumanizing assumptions about their putative proximity to animals, objects, and infants. I have argued this claim by sketching out a conceptual architecture of dehumanization and the qualitative and quantitative understandings of cognitive disability, with reference to historical instances. In doing so, I have aimed to denaturalize cognitive disability so that it can be more fully theorized from a critical disability perspective. I take it that this contribution continues what Jonathan Sterne calls "the standard work of critique – showing what is obvious is ideological and what is considered to be transcendental is actually contingent; [by providing] genealogies of things that appear to be given" (Sterne, 2021: 196). This critique aims toward a reckoning with the issues affecting cognitively disabled people, and with their profound, widespread and frequently unquestioned marginalization in theoretical work and social-political life. In so doing, it has attempted to provide some of the argumentation, resources and motivation for a fuller inclusion of cognitively disabled people within critical studies of disability.

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