MINDFUL SUBJECTS:
CLASSIFICATION AND COGNITIVE DISABILITY

by

Angela Licia Carlson

A Thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements
for the degree of Ph.D.
Graduate Department of Philosophy
University of Toronto

© Copyright by Angela Licia Carlson 1998
The author has granted a non-exclusive licence allowing the National Library of Canada to reproduce, loan, distribute or sell copies of this thesis in microform, paper or electronic formats.

The author retains ownership of the copyright in this thesis. Neither the thesis nor substantial extracts from it may be printed or otherwise reproduced without the author’s permission.

L’auteur a accordé une licence non exclusive permettant à la Bibliothèque nationale du Canada de reproduire, prêter, distribuer ou vendre des copies de cette thèse sous la forme de microfiche/film, de reproduction sur papier ou sur format électronique.

L’auteur conserve la propriété du droit d’auteur qui protège cette thèse. Ni la thèse ni des extraits substantiels de celle-ci ne doivent être imprimés ou autrement reproduits sans son autorisation.

0-612-35122-X
MINDFUL SUBJECTS: CLASSIFICATION AND COGNITIVE DISABILITY

Ph.D. 1998

Angela Licia Carlson

Philosophy Department, University of Toronto

This dissertation is a call for a philosophical reorientation regarding a particular classification of human beings: mental retardation. Generally, individuals with mental retardation are only discussed in philosophy as moral problems to be solved: are they persons? do they have rights? how ought they be treated? I depart from the traditional approach, and ask a different set of questions about the nature of classification, the effects it has on classified subjects, and the power relations involved in the process of classifying.

This project operates at three theoretical levels: it is at once a philosophical study of classification, an alternative history of mental retardation, and a discussion about the modes and effects of power. In the second and third chapters, I analyze the development of mental retardation as an object of knowledge, and outline a theoretical framework from which to discuss classification generally. A feminist re-examination of this history exposes the power dynamics involved in definitions and practices associated with mental retardation. In identifying five roles that women played in this history, it becomes evident that the development of this classification was inextricably bound with social and political factors, and involved multiple layers of oppression.

In the final chapter, I present a critique of philosophical discourse about cognitive disability. The preceding historical analysis serves as an important backdrop to understand current discussions about the "mentally retarded", and reveals that many
philosophers neither address this history, nor have they escaped it. In applying the analytic approach to classification and power relations developed in earlier chapters, it becomes apparent that many moral philosophers do not address the socially and historically determined nature of mental retardation as a classification. Rather, they assume a medical model which views it as an unproblematic "natural kind". After addressing the problem of philosophical language and definitions, I turn to one argument in particular: the case against speciesism. I argue that the treatment of persons with cognitive disabilities in arguments concerning the moral status of animals relies upon a kind of discrimination I call "cognitive ableism". I conclude by exploring future directions for philosophical work on cognitive disabilities.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my supervisor, Ian Hacking, for the challenging and illuminating conversations which allowed this project to take shape, and for his endless support and encouragement. I thank Kathryn Morgan, my advisor, for her valuable input and her shared enthusiasm for the subject I have chosen. I am also grateful for the Connaught Fellowships and the Ontario Graduate Scholarship that gave me the opportunity and time to complete my work.

To my devoted friends and dearest family, I thank you for your inspiration, your patience, and the many words and silences which have sustained me. Finally, it is to the persons who are both present and absent in these pages, and whose lives have directly and indirectly touched my own, that I offer my deepest gratitude and respect.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

The Status of Mental Retardation ......................................................... 2
The Historical World of Mental Retardation ........................................ 9
  (1) Oppositional Analysis .............................................................. 10
  (2) Feminist Analysis ...................................................................... 12
The Problem of Power ...................................................................... 13

## CHAPTER TWO: MENTAL RETARDATION AS AN OBJECT OF KNOWLEDGE

Institutional Discourse: Preliminary Remarks ................................ .... 20
The Institutional World of Mental Retardation:
  An Analysis of Three Tensions ....................................................... 22
  (1) Qualitative and Quantitative Difference .................................... 25
  (2) Organic/Non-Organic "Idiocy" .................................................. 31
  (3) Static and Dynamic Definitions ............................................... 34
  (4) Treatment and the Static/Dynamic Opposition ......................... 41
Docile Bodies, Docile Minds ............................................................ 49
Visibility and Invisibility: The IQ Test ............................................ 51
  (1) Social Visibility ..................................................................... 52
  (2) Individual Visibility ............................................................... 53
  (3) Etiological Visibility ............................................................... 56

## CHAPTER THREE: PHILOSOPHICAL FEATURES OF CLASSIFICATION:

  AN ANALYTIC INTERLUDE ........................................................... 59
Heterogeneity ................................................................................. 59
Instability ....................................................................................... 62
Prototype Effects ........................................................................... 65

## CHAPTER FOUR: MENTAL RETARDATION AS A GENDERED CLASSIFICATION

Social Groups and Modes of Power ............................................... 71
Five Groups of Women:
(1) "Feebleminded" Women: A Prototype Effect................................. 75
(2) Institutional Caregivers: The Paradox of Inmate Labor.................... 83
(3) Women As Mothers: The Role of Etiology.................................... 91
(4) Female Researchers: Pedigree Studies as Woman's Work............... 98
(5) Female Reformists: Lady Bountiful and the "Dawn of Womanhood"........ 101
Conclusion.................................................................................. 108

CHAPTER FIVE: THE PHILOSOPHICAL WORLD OF MENTAL RETARDATION...................................................... 111
The Language of Moral Philosophy: "Idiocy" Revisited......................... 113
The Problem of Definition................................................................ 120
   (1) External Heterogeneity:
      The Excuse for Slim Definitions.................................................. 121
   (2) Reification............................................................................. 125
   (3) Prototype Effects.................................................................... 131
Distinctness of Kind: Our Philosophical Pets..................................... 134
   (1) Qualitative Difference............................................................ 136
   (2) Animals and the "Mentally Retarded":
      Analogous or Identical?.............................................................. 138
   (3) The Case Against Speciesism: Peter Singer's Animal Liberation..... 141
      i. How the "Cognitively Disabled" Help Prove the Case.............. 142
      ii. Why Choose the "Severely Cognitively Disabled"?................. 146
   (4) Cognitive Ableism vs. Speciesism: A Necessary Choice?............. 155

CONCLUSION.............................................................................. 167
   Bioethics and the Politics of Prevention....................................... 172
   Genetic Visibility and Prenatal Prototypes..................................... 174
   Self-Advocacy and Reverse-Discourse........................................ 179

REFERENCES............................................................................. 184
"Mental retardation...is a serious condition, one that any reasonable person would rather not have. In our terms, the disvalue is objective. This means that we cannot cope with the problem of stigma simply by trying to re-educate people into thinking the condition is not inherently bad. Retardation is not like race or gender stigma. Even the most dedicated and sympathetic advocate for the retarded acknowledges that it is a serious problem....The problem is real. It is so clearly a bad thing to have that we can act as if it were objectively a bad condition."\(^1\)  

-Robert M. Veatch (1986)

"If we had to choose to save the life of a normal human being or an intellectually disabled human being, we would probably choose to save the life of a normal human being....When we consider members of our own species who lack the characteristics of normal humans we can no longer say that their lives are always to be preferred to those of other animals. As long as we remember that we should give the same respect to the lives of animals as we give to the lives of those humans at a similar mental level, we shall not go far wrong."\(^2\)  

-Peter Singer (1995)

This project is a call for a philosophical reorientation with respect to a particular classification of human beings: mental retardation. Most philosophical discourse about persons with cognitive disabilities\(^3\) has been restricted to questions about their moral status (how do they differ from animals? persons?) and how they ought to be treated. As the above quotes suggest, philosophers also make value judgments about the condition itself and the worth of those whom they consider "cognitively disabled". I intend to move out of the realm of moral discourse and ask a different set of questions, not only because I


\(^3\)Though my focus is on "mental retardation" as a particular classification, I will use the terms "cognitively disabled" and "cognitive disability" to refer to the general group of persons and disorders traditionally associated with "mental deficiency". I use this more general term because philosophers often refer to different conditions without qualification, that all involve some kind of cognitive impairment. Thus, the term cognitive disability includes individuals referred to as "brain-damaged", "intellectually disabled", and "mentally retarded". I use quotation marks to indicate that when I refer to the "cognitively disabled", I mean individuals who have been labeled as such. I do not view these categorizations of persons as self-evident or unproblematic.
find them philosophically interesting, but in an attempt to explain why some philosophers deal with the issue of cognitive disability in the ways that they do.

There are numerous questions that can be asked about mental retardation: Is mental retardation "real"? How is it defined, and by whom? What kinds of individuals does it pick out? Does it refer to some "natural kind"? Is it simply a category created for specific political purposes, grouping together individuals who are deviant and undesirable? How is it that mental retardation became a unified category in the first place? What practices contributed to the constitution of the classification and classified subjects? In what follows, I present a philosophical analysis of these questions, organized into four chapters. Chapter Two analyzes the historical emergence of mental retardation as an object of knowledge. From the philosophical analysis of this history, I develop a framework in which to discuss the nature of classification generally, which is outlined in Chapter Three. After this analytic interlude, I re-examine the history of mental retardation as a classification from a feminist perspective in Chapter Four. The final chapter moves into the contemporary philosophical world, and examines the consequences of ignoring questions about the nature of mental retardation as a classification and its classified subjects.

More generally, this dissertation operates at three theoretical levels: it is at once a philosophical study of classification, a history of mental retardation, and a discussion about the modes and effects of power. I will briefly discuss each.

The Status of Mental Retardation

At one level, the answer to the question "Is mental retardation real?" seems obvious. There are clearly real people who have been labeled "mentally retarded" and whose lives have been directly affected by that label. There are individuals who have certain intellectual limitations, some as a result of endogenous biological or genetic causes, others caused by external factors (e.g. poverty, deprivation, pre- or post-natal trauma),
and some for which there is no identifiable cause. There are persons who face significant social barriers, institutionalization, and violence because of their limitations, and/or because of the fact that they are labeled mentally retarded. I do not wish to dispute any of these claims. However, the status of mental retardation as a "natural kind" is still in question. To what extent does "mental retardation" pick out some real deficit or feature of human existence independent of the social, historical and political context? Moral philosophers and theorists of disability⁴ (especially those who espouse what I will call the "social construction" position) have very different responses to this questions.

Anita Silvers observes that much philosophical work on disability still adheres to the medical model of disability, which "conceptualizes the disabled as biologically inferior, and in so conceiving confines such individuals to the role of recipients of benevolence, rather than as persons with social and moral agency."⁵ Chapter Five will confirm that many philosophers, in discussing the "mentally retarded", assume that there is an identifiable, pathological condition which the term "mental retardation" picks out. Operating under this assumption, they go on to discuss whether or not individuals with mental retardation qualify as "persons", what moral status they possess, and how we might solve certain moral, political, and bioethical dilemmas that individuals with this condition pose. Throughout, mental retardation is assumed to be a "natural kind"; its socially and historically determined nature is rarely addressed, and it is taken as an unproblematic "kind".

Many theorists discussing the social construction of disability, on the other hand, maintain that there is a more complicated story to be told than the medical model would have us believe, and argue that the very nature of "disability" is problematic. They call for the abandonment of the individual/pathological/personal tragedy models of disability

⁴I do not mean to suggest that moral philosophers cannot be theorists of disability; however, there is little crossover in the approaches of the two groups that I examine.
which define disability as an exclusive feature of the individual and view persons with disabilities as victims of a terrible tragedy.6

This conceptual reorientation grows out of a changing political climate. Thanks to the disability rights movement and the growing body of theoretical work on disabilities, the perception of the nature of disabilities and the persons who have them is changing.7 With respect to mental retardation specifically, there have been significant changes in the past forty years. The sixties witnessed a driven parents' advocacy movement, government concern about the violation of civil rights, and the beginning of the deinstitutionalization movement.8 This led to a self-advocacy movement which is still very active and thriving today.9

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), the 1990 U. S. federal law that protects persons with physical and mental disabilities from discrimination, is legislative evidence of these changes. Anita Silvers argues that it "represents a reconceptualization of the meaning of 'disability'" that discards the medical model, and understands that "a disabling condition is a state of society itself, not a physical or mental state of a minority of society's members, and that it is the way society is organized rather than personal deficits which disadvantages this minority".10 This departure from the traditional medical or individual trait model can be found in the latest definition proposed by the American

---

8See James W. Trent, Inventing the Feeble Mind: A History of Mental Retardation in the United States (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), Ch. 7.
9Organizations such as People First, an international self-advocacy group, continue to challenge the very notion of mental retardation, and have empowered countless individuals in a variety of ways. See Paul Williams and Bonnie Shoulitz, We Can Speak For Ourselves: Self Advocacy By Mentally Handicapped People (London: Souvenir Press, 1982); Gunnar Dybwad and Hank Bersani Jr. eds., New Voices: Self-Advocacy by People with Disabilities (Cambridge: Brookline Books, 1996).
Association on Mental Retardation (AAMR), the oldest American professional organization devoted to the study of mental retardation. The 1992 edition of its system of classification boasts a "paradigm shift from a view of mental retardation as an absolute trait expressed solely by an individual to an expression of the interaction between the person with limited intellectual functioning and the environment." It defines mental retardation as follows:

Mental retardation refers to substantial limitations in present functioning. It is characterized by significantly subaverage intellectual functioning, existing concurrently with related limitations in two or more of the following applicable adaptive skill areas: communication, self-care, home living, social skills, community use, self-direction, health and safety, functional academics, leisure, and work. Mental retardation manifests before age 18.

According to this new functional definition, "if intellectual limitations have no real effect on functioning, then the person does not have mental retardation." The AAMR has replaced the traditional sub-classifications of mild, moderate, severe and profound retardation with sub-classifications based on "the intensities and patterns of supports systems: intermittent, limited, extensive, and pervasive." "

The reconceptualization of disability, and mental retardation specifically, is both politically and conceptually important, insofar as it is being articulated by persons with disabilities who have historically been an unrecognized minority, and because it challenges

---

11 It was founded in 1876, originally called the "Association of Medical Officers of American Institutions for Idiotic and Feeble-minded Persons". In 1933 it was renamed the "American Association on Mental Deficiency", and in 1988 changed the term "mental deficiency" to "mental retardation". See William Sloan and Harvey A. Stevens, A Century of Concern: A History of the American Association on Mental Deficiency, 1876-1976, (Washington D.C.: The American Association on Mental Deficiency, Inc., 1976).


13 Ibid, 1.


15 Ibid, x. This is a departure from clinical definitions which still portray mental retardation as a pathological condition. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: DSM-IV defines mental retardation as "significantly subaverage general intellectual functioning that is accompanied by significant limitations in adaptive functioning....The onset must occur before age 18 years" (Washington D.C.: American Psychiatric Press, 1994), 39. The ICD-10: International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems defines it as "a reduced level of intellectual functioning resulting in diminished ability to adapt to the daily demands of the normal social environment" (Geneva: World Health Organization, 1994), 227. Both the DSM-IV and the ICD-10 divide the category into subclassifications of mild, moderate, severe, profound, and severity unspecified.
assumptions about the very nature of "disability". Given the important political and theoretical role of discourse on the "social construction of disability", I will focus on one aspect of this literature that I believe requires clarification: the fact that the term "social construction", as it is used with respect to disability, can have a variety of meanings.  

"Construction" can be used both as a verb referring to a process, and as a noun- the product, or construct. Some theorists are concerned with the process by which disability has been shaped. Michael Oliver, in *The Politics of Disablement*, undertakes the project of showing that "disability as a category can only be understood within a framework which suggests that it is culturally produced and socially structured." His book explores the ways in which one is disabled by the social restrictions and oppressive practices of a capitalistic society. Susan Wendell also talks about the *process* by which disability is created: "I call the interaction of the biological and the social to create (or prevent) disability 'the social construction of disability'." She goes on to point out numerous social and cultural factors which construct disability: resource distributions, medical care and practices, the pace of life, expectations of performance, notions of a 'paradigm citizen', lack of realistic cultural representations of disabled individuals, stereotyping. Though much of the literature on disability is restricted to physical disabilities, there have been those who have suggested that mental retardation is the result of a process of social construction. James Trent's book is titled *Inventing the Feeble Mind*, suggesting a process by which the feeble mind was invented. Throughout his history of mental retardation, Trent continually refers to the "cognitive and social construction" of mental retardation. For instance, he discusses the construction of sterilization, names one section of a chapter "Constructing Retarded Children", and defines nineteenth century idiocy as a social and cognitive construct.

---

16 This is by no means a comprehensive survey of the literature.  
17 These reflections have been greatly clarified by Ian Hacking's discussions of social construction in lectures to be published by Harvard University Press as *The Social Construction of What?*.  
18 Oliver, 22.  
20 Ibid, 36-46.
Despite the prevalence of this charge, however, it is never clear how exactly Trent defines "construction", nor does he clarify his distinction between social and cognitive constructs.21

Jane Mercer, in *Labeling the Mentally Retarded*, distinguishes between the clinical and social systems approaches to mental retardation. The former falls under the medical/statistical model that views mental retardation as an individual pathological characteristic which transcends sociocultural groups, while the latter (her position) argues that mental retardation is "an achieved status in a social system and the role played by the person holding that status".22 Again, we get a sense of a process by which disability (in this case mental retardation) is constructed.

The other use of the term "social construction" is as a noun, an entity or thing— the construct itself. Disability as a category can be considered a social construct.23 Disabled individuals and their bodies are said to be constructs: "The disabled individual is an ideological construction related to the core ideology of individualism";24 Wendell describes the construction of the disabled body by the medical authorities; Trent describes the invention of the feeble mind. All of these point to the end product, an object or construct. (Notice that this construct can be an entity, like the feeble-mind or the disabled body, or a concept— the construction of the concept "disability".)

In addition to social construction in the sense of process and product, there is another use in disability literature that suggests social construction is a kind of interpretation. Harlan Lane, in "The Social Construction of Deafness", refers to two "constructions of deafness" which are dominant and compete for shaping deaf people's destinies": deafness as a category of disability, and deafness as designating a member of a linguistic minority.25 In this article, 'social construction' seems to refer to competing interpretations of deafness, not to any object or

---

21I am still unclear as to what exactly he means by "cognitive construct".
23See Oliver, 22.
24Ibid, 58.
process. I think this is the way in which Fine and Asch, in their article "Beyond Pedestals", use the term "social construction", when they claim that experiences are socially constructed:

In the past twenty years both the study and politics of disability have undergone transformation. Activists and scholars have insisted that the disability (the biological condition) be conceptually disentangled from the handicap (the social ramifications) of the condition...Scholars and activists within feminism and disability rights have demonstrated that the experiences of being female or of having a disability are socially constructed; that the biological cannot be understood outside of those contexts and relationships that shape and give meaning to femaleness and to disability. 26

This seems to suggest an interpretive step: a biological condition is given meaning by an ableist society, and the experience of it becomes disabling based on this interpretation. Thus, social construction with regard to disability can refer to the process of construction, the product as construct, or the interpretation of a particular condition.

Though I have chosen not to use the language of social construction in this project, in part because it is subject to so many interpretations, 27 my work grows out of this rich body of literature, and can be seen as an attempt to further specify the mechanisms by which classifications and their subjects are constructed. In an effort to clarify what exactly this "construction" involves, I present an analytic framework which outlines four aspects of classification: heterogeneity, stability, prototype effects, and power relations. This approach raises a number of epistemological issues: the ways and contexts in which mental retardation developed as an object of knowledge with distinct "subjects"; the co-emergence of various techniques and certain "types" of mental retardation; and the relationship between knowledges and practices (there is a complex reciprocity in the history of mental retardation, whereby certain practices often dictated the kind of knowledge that was produced, and particular knowledge claims about the "mentally retarded" influenced the practices aimed at them). Through the definition and application of these analytic tools by which to understand mental retardation as a classification, I intend to clarify some of the ambiguities of the social constructivist paradigm, while

27 I do not see these three meanings of "social construction" as mutually exclusive, nor do I deny their explanatory power and political significance in contemporary literature on disability.
exposing the limitations of an uncritical adherence to the medical model which views mental retardation as a "natural kind". Ultimately, I think the case of mental retardation will show that the dichotomy between "natural kind" and "socially constructed kind" is a false one.

The Historical World of Mental Retardation
"To one set of difficulties, several responses can be made. And most of the time different responses actually are proposed. But what has to be understood is what makes them simultaneously possible: it is the point in which their simultaneity is rooted; it is the soil that can nourish them in all their diversity and sometimes in spite of their contradictions." 28

Mental retardation as an object of knowledge has a complex history which is both fascinating in its own right, and indispensable to an understanding of the contemporary status of this category and our treatment of individuals labeled mentally retarded. 29 My historical analysis of the development of this classification serves three purposes. First, it provides a venue in which I can define and apply my theoretical approach to classification. Secondly, an exploration of this history creates a backdrop for the subsequent discussion of the philosophical world of mental retardation. It will become evident in the fifth chapter that philosophers neither address the history of mental retardation, nor have they escaped it. In many respects, contemporary philosophical discourse about persons labeled mentally retarded is closer to this historical world than to current conceptions of mental retardation in other disciplines (e.g. psychology, sociology, special education). Finally, my analysis addresses two aspects of the history of mental retardation that are not discussed by other historians: the existence and effects of tensions internal to the classification, and the roles women play in this history. I will give a brief overview of each.

29 This project only deals with the history of mental retardation, and the presence of the "mentally retarded" in philosophical discourse. An analysis of the contemporary world of mental retardation according to the framework I present must await future research.
(1) Oppositional Analysis

There is a tendency to present the history of mental retardation as a series of decisive temporal and conceptual shifts. I argue that, though these seem to be discontinuous moments in this history, they rely upon a series of underlying tensions which are internal to the classification itself. To borrow the words of Michel Foucault, I argue that mental retardation can be viewed as "a space of multiple dissensions; a set of different oppositions whose levels and roles must be described." By examining mental retardation in terms of tensions between the qualitative and quantitative, organic and non-organic, curable and incurable, visible and invisible, a different historical picture will emerge.

Many historians divide the history of mental retardation into three distinct eras. The period from 1850-1880 is generally considered a period of optimistic institution building, with the aim of "making the deviant undeviant"; from 1880-1900 there was growing pessimism, a shift to custodialism, to "sheltering the deviant from society"; and from 1900-1920 there was an attempt to "protect society from deviancy", and the view of mental retardation as a menace. However, if one looks closely at this history, there are elements which have persisted throughout. Philip Ferguson's history of the "severely retarded", Abandoned to Their Fate, points to one such feature. He argues that for the most severely disabled groups, the hope for education or training was eclipsed by the sentence of incurability. The notion of "chronicity... the general social status of being judged somehow 'unfixable'”, was firmly entrenched in the conceptions and practices surrounding mental retardation. If one looks at this sub-group, the discontinuous

---

30Michel Foucault, Archaeology of Knowledge, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 155. This is how Foucault describes "discursive formations," which he defines as "systems of dispersion between objects, statements, which have a regularity...a complex group of relations that function as a rule." (74)
moments disappear. For example, the historical shift from education to custodialism, does not apply:

The eventual triumph of a policy of custodialism for mildly and moderately retarded people was, in reality, merely an expansion of the custodial approach that long applied to the most severely retarded population.33

Historians of mental retardation also point to decisive conceptual shifts. One of the most commonly discussed discontinuities is the moment at which idiocy (what we would call "mental retardation" today) is no longer regarded as a homogeneous category, both in terms of its members and cause. Some historians argue that it was not until Down's classification of "Mongolian idiocy" in 1866 that idiocy was considered heterogeneous and "...the unitary concept of mental deficiency was dead."34 Yet in the early writings about idiocy in the mid-nineteenth century, decades before Down's work, various forms of idiocy had been defined and there was clear acknowledgment of its diversity. In his treatise Idiocy and its Treatment by the Physiological Method (1846), which had a profound influence on American thought about mental retardation, the French doctor Edouard Seguin, states: "Since idiocy is ascribed to so many circumstances, taking place at such different periods of the formation of the child, it is not to be expected that it should assume an identical appearance; in fact, on entering a school, the idea of similarity is soon dispelled by the heterogeneous features of the inmates; therefore the same drawing cannot represent them but as a type, after a practical study of the varieties."35 By 1848 the American doctor Samuel Gridley Howe, influenced by Seguin's work, also divided idiocy (which at the time was both the general term for all forms of mental deficiency as well as a sub-classification) into three sub-groups: idiots; fools -"a higher class of idiots'; and simpletons- "the highest class of idiots."36 An analysis of the intricacies of this

33Ibid, 75.
36Samuel Gridley Howe, "On the Causes of Idiocy" (1848) in Collected Papers I, 37.
classification reveals that idiocy was already heterogeneous as it emerged as a distinct social group worthy of attention and treatment.

As Foucault writes in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, there can be "two ways of forming statements, both characterized by certain objects, certain positions of subjectivity, certain concepts and strategic choices."37 At certain times, one side of the conceptual pairs I discuss may have been given priority, though the other was nevertheless present. In other instances, both elements might be equally at play. Though it is tempting to look for resolutions of these apparent dichotomies, the persistence of both sides of these oppositions in the history of mental retardation does not permit this. Many of the "reforms" in this history have been moments when these tensions were apparently resolved. However, as one examines the complex interplay of these oppositions, it becomes evident that these are temporary resolutions, momentary eclipses of one term by the other.

(2) Feminist Analysis

Beverly Thiele argues that one goal of feminist analysis is to render women visible where they have been rendered invisible through various "tricks of the trade" in academic discourse.38 There are many histories of mental retardation from a variety of perspectives: general histories,39 institutional histories,40 a history of the "severely retarded",41 a history of institutions for the "feeble-minded" in the Deep South.42 However, there is no history of mental retardation written specifically about women, nor

---

40 See Trent; Peter Tyor and Leland Bell, Caring for the Retarded in America (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1984).
41 See Ferguson.
is there explicit analysis in existing historical literature of how women were classified and treated differently, how "able-minded" women figure into this history, and the ways in which gender stereotypes influenced definitions of mental retardation and institutional practice. Chapter Four, as a feminist analysis, is a first step in recognizing the roles women have played in this history. Once women become present in this historical analysis, an intricate web of power relations emerges. Drawing upon Iris Marion Young's discussion of oppression and social groups, and Michel Foucault's analysis of power, I will examine the complex relationships between men and women, and "feebleminded" and "able-minded" women, both within and outside of the institution.

I have decided to locate the second and fourth chapters in the historical world of mental retardation because I believe that historians can benefit from an epistemological and feminist approach to the development of this classification. At the same time, an understanding of this history is important for philosophers insofar as it reveals the source of many categories, arguments and attitudes that are present in contemporary philosophical discourse about mental retardation.

The Problem of Power

In my analysis of historical and philosophical discourse about mental retardation, the problem of power is ever-present. Michel Foucault offers a specific approach to the analysis of power in the article "The Subject and Power", that provides an excellent framework from which to address the history of mental retardation. Foucault defines power in terms of action: the exercise of power "is a way in which certain actions may structure the field of other possible actions."43 Power is a relational term, a relation between two agents capable of action, where one agent affects the possibilities of another's actions. Thus, every social relation involves power, not necessarily in the sense of domination, but rather insofar as our actions are constantly shaped by

various individuals and institutions. For Foucault, "A society without power relations can only be an abstraction."44

In remaining faithful to Foucault's conviction that power must be analyzed in terms of its exercise, I discuss specific modes of power as they occur within the history of mental retardation. Chapter Two discusses disciplinary power; Chapter Four examines oppression; Chapter Five deals with cognitive ableism, a form of discrimination that I argue is inherent in much philosophical discourse. Here, however, I will outline the Foucauldian approach to power which informs my work. Though I will not explicitly refer to it the chapters that follow, his framework underlies this project as a whole.

Foucault outlines five points which must be established in an analysis of power. First, power involves *system of differentiations*, differences in status, privilege, economics, culture, competence, which are put into operation by a particular power relationship.45 My historical and philosophical examination of mental retardation reveals a number of ways in which the "mentally retarded" were differentiated from other individuals (e.g. the distinction between "madmen" and "idiots"; "feebleminded" and "able-minded" women; animals and the "mentally retarded"). The "mentally retarded" were also differentiated from each other, and there were complex subdivisions within the category according to various criteria (e.g. hierarchically divided by severity; moral and immoral kinds).

Secondly, power can be analyzed in terms of the "*types of objectives* pursued by those who act upon the actions of others."46 In the context of mental retardation, the second chapter discusses the objectives of both the superintendents and the institutional structure; the fourth chapter explores the underlying objectives of "able-minded" women with respect to their "feebleminded" counterparts, as well as institutional objectives which resulted in the differential treatment of male and female inmates. Though he acknowledges that personal objectives can play a role in the functioning of power, Foucault's notion of "objectives" goes beyond problem of

---

44Ibid., 223.
45Ibid.
46Ibid.
motive; he does not wish to reduce power simply to the intentions of those in power. The complex and insidious ways in which the institutions for the "mentally retarded" functioned reflect Foucault's claim that power is both intentional and non-subjective.47

The third point of analysis is "the means of bringing power relations into being". This might be called the "how" of power: what is involved in exercising power, (e.g. systems of surveillance, according to certain rules etc.).48 An examination of the technologies of power is crucial in understanding the development of mental retardation as an object of knowledge. The following chapters illustrate that there were a host of techniques at play in the definition and treatment of the "mentally retarded". Forms of institutionalization49 which allow power to function must also be analyzed. Much of my historical analysis is devoted to examining the predominant form of power from the mid-nineteenth century to the early decades of the twentieth century: the institutions for the "feebleminded".50 During this period, the institutional buildings themselves took various forms. They were transformed from educational structures to custodial facilities, and then to medical asylums and hospitals, and their internal structure often reflected the dominant classificatory structure at the time (e.g. as the "feebleminded woman" became a separate "type", institutions became increasingly segregated by sex).

The final point of analysis is to examine degrees of rationalization. Power relations depend upon "the effectiveness of the instruments and the certainty of results."51 By rationalization, Foucault means the ways in which power relations are transformed and adjusted to the exigencies of particular situations. The use of unpaid inmate labor under the guise of "education" and "training", which ultimately served the economic needs of the institution, is an example of this dimension of power which I examine at length.

---

48 Subject and Power, 223.
49 Ibid.
50 This was not the only institutionalized discourse, however. Mental retardation was also an object of pedagogical and psychological inquiry, which had their own forms of institutionalized knowledge.
51 Ibid.
These points of analysis of power will be at work throughout this project. I find Foucault’s approach compelling because it ensures against a limited version of power (as either localized in an individual, one institution, or a particular motive) and thus offers a more comprehensive analytical framework. Another important feature of Foucault’s definition of power is the possibility for resistance: where there are multiple points of power, there can be multiple points of resistance.52 Though I do not discuss the notion of resistance, I see this project as a prelude to further philosophical work on the topic of mental retardation which would make room for the many forms of resistance which are, as yet, invisible in historical and philosophical discourse about mental retardation.

---

CHAPTER TWO
MENTAL RETARDATION AS AN OBJECT OF KNOWLEDGE

Many philosophers have investigated the unique, dual position of human beings with regard to classification: we can be both classifiers, and classified. Nelson Goodman's *Ways of Worldmaking*, is about our role as the former. As human classifiers or "world-makers", he says that "we are confined to ways of describing whatever is described."¹ He goes on to state: "Worlds are made and found; knowing is remaking and reporting; discovering laws involves drafting them; recognizing patterns is inventing and imposing them; comprehension and creation go together."² I am interested in the category of mental retardation as a "way of describing" because it reveals a number of features of classification, and illuminates the complex relationship between finding and making, comprehension and creation, when the object of investigation is a human being.

I intend to examine the nature of the classifications which emerged in the United States between the mid-nineteenth century and World War I, in terms of two practices that generated discourse and knowledge about mental retardation: the institutionalization of "idiots"³, and the administration of mental tests. In *The Birth of the Clinic*, Michel Foucault writes that the nineteenth century clinic, "...is a reorganization of the very possibility of a discourse about disease....The clinic appears...as a new outline of the perceptible and statable."⁴ Similarly, the birth of the institutions specifically for "idiots"

²Ibid, 22.
³A note about language: I will be using the terminology that was in use during the historical periods I am discussing. Again, when I place a term in quotes, it refers to individuals who have been assigned that label (e.g. "idiots", "mentally retarded"). Though I will not use quotes when I refer to the conditions themselves (idiocy, mental retardation), it should be understood that I am again referring to historically defined conditions- I do not accept them as unproblematic classifications that pick out some "natural kind".
and the "feebleminded" and the application of IQ tests to this population, shaped the very possibility of what could be observed and said about mental deficiency. It was thanks to these practices that a complex and fascinating world of mental retardation was both found and made, knowledge was remade and reported, patterns were recognized, invented, imposed.

Historically, individuals who were believed to suffer from idiocy have been thought of in a number of different ways: they were viewed as objects of pity, filled with the devil, holy innocents, eternal children, and diseased organisms. Originating from the Greek word "idios", which means "private person", one finds references to "idiots" in Western philosophical and medical literature, often defined in contrast to the "insane". John Locke, in his Essay Concerning Human Understanding, made the following distinction: "Madmen put wrong ideas together, and so make wrong propositions, but argue and reason right from them; but idiots make very few or no propositions, and reason scarce at all." The French alienists addressed idiocy in the context of mental illness, and did not believe it to be curable. Esquirol stated:

Insanity and idiocy differ essentially, or else the principles of all classifications are illusions...The insane man is deprived of possessions which he formerly enjoyed; he is a rich man become poor; the idiot has always been in misery and want. The state of the insane may vary, that of the idiot remains always the same. The one conserves much of the appearance of the complete man, the other retains many traits of infancy...The idiot is such as he has always been, he is all that he can ever be relative to his primitive organization...Idiocy is not a disease, but a condition.

The comparison between mental deficiency and mental illness continued well into the nineteenth and twentieth century, and continues to play a role in the discourse surrounding the classification of mental retardation. To trace parallel and intersecting

7 Quoted in Alfred Binet and Theodore Simon, "Upon the Necessity of Establishing A Scientific Diagnosis of Inferior States of Intelligence" (1916), in Collected Papers I, 337.
histories of idiocy and insanity\(^8\) is a book of its own, and despite its importance in the
development of mental retardation, I will only make occasional references to it in this
chapter. I would like instead to examine the development of American institutions
specifically for "idiots" (as differentiated from the poor and criminal, as well as the
"insane").

What I find of philosophical interest in the segregation of "idiots" are the ways in
which the institutions both directly and indirectly affected the nature of the classifications
which developed. I will argue that the emergence of these facilities and certain types of
individuals was simultaneous. Thanks to these institutions which served as scientific,
pedagogical and moral laboratories, idiocy in all its varieties could be observed, defined
and treated. Michel Foucault's description of the birth of the penitentiary technique and
the delinquent in his history of the modern prison, *Discipline and Punish*, applies to the
institute and the "idiot":

The penitentiary technique and the delinquent are in a sense twin brothers. It is
not true that it was the discovery of the delinquent through a scientific rationality
that introduced into our old prisons the refinement of penitentiary techniques.
Nor is it true that the internal elaboration of penitentiary methods has finally
brought to light the 'objective' existence of a delinquency....They appeared
together, the one extending from the other, as a technological ensemble that forms
and fragments the object to which it applies its instruments.\(^9\)

The various instruments which were applied to the individuals within the facilities (called
"schools", "asylums", "institutions") generated a typology of idiocy by which residents
were classified, fragmented and formed. With the birth of mental testing in the early
twentieth century, the understanding of idiocy changed again, and a new "type" of idiocy
emerged with this new way of gathering and organizing knowledge: the "moron". Far from

---

\(^8\) For histories of idiocy, see Trent; Tyor and Bell; Kanner; Scheerenberger. For histories of insanity see
Howard, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1965); Gerald Grob, *Mental Illness and American Society, 1875-

\(^9\) Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan, (New York:
being discovered as a scientific "objective" condition, the comprehension and creation of "idiots" as both objects and subjects went hand in hand. (The constitution of subjectivity is particularly interesting in the case of idiocy, given that "idiots" were defined by their lack of conscious subjectivity.)

Nelson Goodman claims that "Worldmaking as we know it always starts from worlds already on hand; the making is a remaking". The institutions which developed and multiplied in a few short decades, the proliferation of mental testing, and the types of individuals who were picked out simultaneously, were made from already existent worlds. The custodialization of "idiots" was prefigured in the almshouses, and many of the definitions of idiocy grew out of earlier work on mental illness, pedagogical work with the deaf, dumb and blind, and the philosophical works of Locke and Rousseau. However, the creation of the institutions for "idiots", and the application of IQ tests to this population, mark two distinct moments in the history of mental retardation. *New ways of describing and treating idiocy* came into being. New knowledge about idiocy was produced, and mental retardation in its many incarnations was organized and, in a sense, unified.

**Institutional Discourse: Preliminary Remarks**

In his *History of Sexuality, Vol. I*, Foucault examines the "discursive explosion around sexuality", and analyzes the intimate relationship between discourse, practices and knowledge concerning sexuality. I am looking at the ways the development of institutions for "idiots" and the "feeble-minded" resulted in a "discursive explosion" about mental deficiency. However, the practices and discourses which evolved within the institution must be understood as precisely that: *institutional discourses about idiocy*. As Ferguson rightly points out, "Most mentally retarded people, especially those with severe retardation, continued to live in almshouses, with their families, or elsewhere in the

---

10 Goodman, 5.
community. Perhaps the single overwhelming feature of the changes in institutional policy toward idiocy between 1850 and 1890 was that the vast majority of people labeled idiots and imbeciles were unaffected by those changes in any measurable way. What is interesting about the early institutions for the mentally retarded is that they resulted in a discourse about idiocy which was to lay the foundation for future discourse and policy, yet they did not directly affect great numbers of individuals at that time.

Despite the fact that many individuals remained outside the walls of the institutions, however, the institutional discourse about mental retardation dominated. There is hardly any available first-hand testimony by families or the classified individuals themselves. This is not to say there was not any, but it is not incidental that the majority of the discourse about mental retardation comes from those involved in its study and treatment. One explanation for this is that the individuals who were institutionalized were not simply "objects" of study; they were simultaneously active subjects who took part in the functioning of the institution. Though I will examine this phenomenon at length later in the chapter, the fact that the institutional world produced the subjects who inhabited it suggests that there was little room for alternative discourses to emerge.

Michel Foucault argues that despite the imposition of categories upon individuals, in any power relation a "reverse-discourse" is possible: once a category is formed, members of that group can demand legitimacy using that very classification. Ian Hacking discusses the nature of "human kinds" (as opposed to "natural kinds") in similar terms:

To create new ways of classifying people is also to change how we can think of ourselves, to change our sense of self-worth, even how we remember our own past. This in turn generates a looping effect, because people of the kind behave differently and so are different. Because the kind changes, there is new knowledge to be had about the kind. But that new knowledge in turn becomes part

---

12Ferguson, 61, 76.
13When I turn to the IQ test, it will become evident that, as a technique, mental testing touched many more individual lives, and actually allowed for institutions to do the same.
14In The History of Sexuality, vol. 1, Foucault presents homosexuality as an example of this. (101)
of what is to be known about members of the kind, who change again. This is what I call the looping effect for human kinds". 

What follows is not an exploration of reverse-discourse or looping effects; rather it is an analysis of the discourse generated by experts "from above." Yet this does not deny the existence of what Foucault calls "subjugated knowledges...a whole set of knowledges that have been disqualified as inadequate...naive knowledge, located down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity...disqualified knowledges (like the psychiatric patient, ill person)....A genealogy would be seen as a kind of attempt to emancipate historical knowledges from that subjection". This project is not a "genealogy" in Foucault's sense; however, I analyze this dominant discourse in part to explain how it has succeeded in managing, shaping and defining the lives of its objects, and has constituted them, rather than liberated them, as subjects.

The Institutional World of Mental Retardation: An Analysis of Three Tensions

One of the earliest surviving references to idiocy by American settlers is in a letter Abrose Harmor from the Jamestown settlement wrote to England in 1637, requesting an estate "because of the extra burden of caring for 'Benomie Buck', an idiot, the first in the plantation." Though there were "idiots" before the nineteenth century, there were no institutions specifically for them. However, their institutional history had already begun: "the institutionalization of mentally retarded people in America began with the almshouses in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, not with the first specialized idiot asylums of the 1850's and 1860's." There was little discrimination with regard to segregation, and persons thought to be criminals, paupers, idiots and insane were often

---

16Foucault speaks of power as coming from below, which can constitute points of resistance. History of Sexuality, Vol.1, 94.
18Ferguson, 25.
19Ibid, 24.
housed under the same roof. In the first half of the nineteenth century, however, a process of differentiation took place in which idiocy was recognized as distinct condition, worthy of separate consideration. A humanitarian and legislative campaign got under way to separate "idiots" from other social outcasts, both physically (they were segregated together) and conceptually. In 1824, the New York Secretary of State surveyed poor relief, and reported that "...idiots and lunatics do not receive sufficient care and attention in towns, where no suitable asylums for their reception are established". In 1840, "idiots" and "the insane" were counted by census for the first time. Humanitarian appeals from reformers like Dorthea Dix argued against both the abominable conditions in which "idiots and the insane" were living, and the fact that they had been wrongfully grouped with paupers and criminals:

I come as the advocate of helpless, forgotten, insane, and idiotic men and women; of beings sunk to a condition from which the most unconcerned would start with real horror; of beings wretched in our prisons, more wretched in our almshouses... I cannot but assert that most of the idiotic subjects in the prisons in Massachusetts are unjustly committed, being wholly incapable of doing harm, and none manifesting any disposition either to injure others or to exercise mischievous propensities.

The words of Dorthea Dix echoed the general spirit of reform which permeated New England mid-century. By 1846, a commission was appointed in Massachusetts to investigate the treatment of idiots. Samuel Gridley Howe, a doctor who was working with three blind "idiots" at the Perkins Institution for the Blind, was chairman of the commission. In 1848, under his direction an experimental school for "idiots" opened in South Boston, later named the Massachusetts School for Idiotic and Feeble-minded Youth. In that same year, a private school for "idiots" had been opened by Dr. Hervey B. Wilbur in Barre, Mass.. In the forty years which followed, institutions would open in

---

20bid, 31.
21Dorthea Dix, "Memorial to the Legislature of Massachusetts, 1843", in Collected Papers I, 5, 15.
New York, Pennsylvania, Iowa, Connecticut, Ohio, Minnesota, Indiana, California, Michigan, Maryland, and Nebraska, making a total of 4000 residents by 1888.\textsuperscript{23}

There are three levels at which we can examine this institutional world of idiocy: etiology, definitions and descriptions\textsuperscript{24}, and treatment. In the new institutions for "idiots" which were developed in the second half of the nineteenth century, we find a complex interplay of discourse and practices at each of these levels. For the first time, causes, definitions, descriptions and treatments of idiocy were being discussed and practiced within an organized structure. This is evident in the Constitution of the "Association of Medical Officers of American Institutions of Idiotic and Feeble-minded Persons", the first professional organization devoted to the study and treatment of mental deficiency. In 1876, a meeting was called of the superintendents of the existing institutions for the "feebleminded", and it was decided to form an association, the object of which "...shall be the discussion of all questions relating to the causes, conditions, and statistics of idiocy, and to the management, training and education of idiots and feebleminded persons; it will also lend its influence to the establishment and fostering of institutions for this purpose."\textsuperscript{25} This professional statement reflects the many purposes of the institutions that had already been put in place and which continued to thrive thanks to the efforts of their superintendents. The institution combined the pedagogical, the medical (all superintendents were doctors), and the therapeutic; it became the organizing principle amidst an array of definitions, theories, categories, and proposed treatments.

How did the institution allow mental retardation to remain a unified classification? In order to answer this question, I will analyze institutional discourse and practice in terms of a series of internal, unresolved tensions between the qualitative/quantitative, organic/non-organic, and the curable/incurable. I maintain that the existence of these

\textsuperscript{23}Ibid, xviii.

\textsuperscript{24}I distinguish between definitions, which are intended to characterize and even explain the nature of idiocy, and descriptions that state certain characteristics or symptoms (both visible and invisible) that "idiots" possessed.

\textsuperscript{25}Century of Concern, 1-2.
oppositions within institutional discourse and practices explains why the classifications of mental retardation seem so transient and unstable, but have proved to be so stable and persistent. It is the persistence of these underlying oppositions which has contributed to the surface changes that give the impression that the history of mental retardation has been one of discontinuous moments and reform.

(1) "Man-Child" and "Household Pets": Quantitative and Qualitative Difference

Georges Canguilhem, in The Normal and the Pathological, describes a historical shift from a qualitative to a quantitative conception of disease. He states that, prior to the nineteenth century, disease was understood as ontological (a separate entity which we hope to cure) or dynamic (disease is a disruption of the general equilibrium of human beings); both accounts presented normal and pathological states as heterogeneous. However, in the nineteenth century, disease is understood in quantitative, rather than qualitative terms: "...pathological phenomena found in living organisms are nothing more than quantitative variations, lesser or greater according to corresponding physiological phenomena."26 The influence of this new conception of disease is evident in the way idiocy was defined by many nineteenth century doctors. Edouard Seguin's Idiocy, and its Treatment by the Physiological Method is a testimony to the rise of physiology and the focus on function, rather than anatomical structure.27 After his experiences with a class of "idiots" at Bicêtre, Seguin was convinced that idiocy was not incurable, as many before him had asserted; rather, "most idiots and children proximate to them, may be relieved in a more or less complete measure of their disabilities by the physiological method of education."28

27 Kurt Danziger discusses the emergence of physiology as a new discipline in Constructing the Subject: Historical Origins of Psychological Research (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 25.
28 Seguin, 57.
This belief in the curability, or at least improvability of "most idiots", is grounded in a conception of idiocy as a quantitative, not qualitative difference: it is a question of \textit{degree or intensity}, not \textit{kind}. "Idiots" were considered to be human beings like the rest of us; they were simply at a lower level of development (be it physical, intellectual or moral). In Seguin's words, "He is one of us in mankind, but shut up in an imperfect envelope."\footnote{Ibid, 48.} This belief was echoed by many of the superintendents of the American institutions. Dr. Hervey Wilbur, one of the leading figures in the field, stated: "What is called idiocy is a mental state. This is true no matter what our idea may be of the nature of the mind. It is true, whatever may be the physiological or pathological conditions associated with it. Thus, when we speak of idiocy or imbecility, or fatuity or feeblemindedness, we refer to grades and shades of mental states below the normal standard of human intelligence."\footnote{Quoted in \textit{Century of Concern}, 6.} This quantitative view was embodied in the eventual use of mental tests to classify levels of "feeblemindedness" as various degrees of intelligence, a method that continues to define mental retardation today.\footnote{The IQ score is still a component of many definitions of mental retardation. The DSM-IV, ICD-10, and the AAMR definitions all include the IQ score as a means of determining the level of "subaverage intelligence".} The belief that idiocy is simply a question of "less or more" with respect to various human attributes is, in part, what has allowed for the infantilization of this condition. Seguin was greatly influenced by Rousseau, and it is not coincidental that his definition of idiocy closely resembles the description of infancy in \textit{Emile}. Seguin states: "The idiot moves, feels, understands, wills, but imperfectly; does nothing, thinks of nothing, cares for nothing (extreme cases);...isolated, without associations; a soul shut up in imperfect organs, an innocent."\footnote{Seguin, 29.} Of our human infancy, Rousseau says: "We are born
capable of learning but able to do nothing, knowing nothing. The soul, enchained in imperfect and half-formed organs, does not even have the sentiment of its own existence. The movements and the cries of the child who has just been born are purely mechanical effects, devoid of knowledge and of will."33 Idiocy is akin to infancy, insofar as it is the lowest point of development of our human potential; in fact, Rousseau invites the reader to imagine this condition by introducing the idea of the "man-child": "Let us suppose that a child had at his birth the stature and the strength of a grown man.... This man-child would be a perfect imbecile, an automaton, an immobile and almost insensible statue."34

The parallels between Seguin's description of idiocy and Rousseau's portrait of infancy are striking. Though the language of infantilization did not begin with Rousseau, his expression "man-child" was later used by some superintendents of the American institutions, who referred to their inmates as "man-baby", "woman-baby" and "child-baby."35 The representation of mental retardation as infantile or childlike still exists today. Despite the negative effects of infantilization, however, it does acknowledge the place of "idiots" on the human continuum; they are considered human beings who have simply remained at an early stage of development.36

From the early descriptions of idiocy in the mid-nineteenth century to contemporary definitions, mental retardation has always been based upon the notion of quantitative difference. Internally, it has always been a graded, hierarchical category. And with respect to the mentally "normal", it has been understood as part of a general hierarchy of ability (whether it is defined in physical, intellectual or moral terms) upon which all human beings are placed.

---

34Ibid.
35Quoted in Trent, 104.
36Though I discuss curability and incurability later, it should be pointed out that either notion is consistent with this picture of idiocy as a quantitative difference: the incurables are simply "eternal children" who are incapable of moving beyond their infancy.
Beside this quantitative picture, however, we find the depiction of "idiots" as *qualitatively* different, a separate kind. They are viewed as animal-like, sub-human, or of a different race altogether. Generally, the most severe cases of idiocy were used to illustrate these qualitative differences. They were often described as human only in form, empty shells of humanity. In exclaiming his dismay at the discovery of idiocy in his homeland, Howe writes, "But alas!...[one] finds, even in our fair commonwealth, breathing masses of flesh, fashioned in the shape of men, but shorn of all other human attributes....Idiots of the lowest class are mere organisms, masses of flesh and bone in human shape...."37 In a description of one case, he says, "He is, in form and outline, like a human being but in nothing else."38 However, even the outward shape or form could be inhuman, and betray signs of animality. Howe speaks of the "peculiar look so common with idiots, and which may be better expressed by the word *monkeyish* than any other."39 In some extreme cases, the individual is below the animal kingdom: "Very few cases (we were inclined to think none could) can be found in which a being in human shape is so much below even insects, and so little above a sensitive plant."40 This sub-animal nature was invoked in the appeals to the Pennsylvania government to open a school for "idiots": "Even idiots can be raised, from a condition lower than that of brutes, to the likeness of men."41 Years later, in his famous hereditary study of feeblemindedness, *The Kallikak Family*, H. H. Goddard said of Deborah Kallikak's mother, "Her philosophy of life is the philosophy of the animal. There is no complaining, no irritation at the inequalities of fate. Sickness, pain, childbirth, death- she accepts them all with the same equanimity as she accepts the opportunity of putting a new dress and a gay ribbon on herself."42 In my examination of

---

37 Howe, 37.
38 Ibid, 38.
39 Ibid, 39.
40 Ibid, 37.
41 Potter, Kane, Martin, Wood and Cleaveland, "Education of Idiots: An Appeal to the Citizens of Philadelphia" (1853), in Collected Papers I, 63.
philosophical discourse in Chapter Five, I show that the connection between mental retardation and animality still exists today, and reflects an understanding of the "mentally retarded" as qualitatively different from other human beings.

The relationship between race and mental retardation is far too complex to do it justice here. However, it must be noted that descriptions of idiocy often relied upon racial stereotypes and perceptions of inferiority. As early as Seguin, the allusions to racial characteristics were being made. Though he discredited phrenology as the sole means to diagnose idiocy since many "idiots" had no cranial abnormalities, he did suggest that "...any deviation from the Caucasian type among our children, in respect to [cranial] harmony of [cranial] proportions, must be looked upon, a priori, as representing some anomaly in their faculties." The most explicit marriage of race and mental deficiency is of course, in Down's classification of a sub-species of idiocy which he named "Mongolian idiocy". Chris Borthwick, in his article "Racism, IQ and Down's Syndrome", discusses the complex relationship between race and intellectual inferiority:

The analogy between 'Mongolian idiots' and Mongolians was, of course, insulting to Mongolians, and contributed to their dismissive treatment by Westerners in the colonial era. Analogies, however, point in two directions. If it was insulting to compare Mongolians to people with impaired functioning, it was also insulting to compare people with a disability to the Victorian stereotype of an uncreative, limited, passive race that had ceased its development before the British.

Though allusions to inferior races permeate the discourse about mental retardation, institutional practice tells a very different story. The majority of state and private institutions served the feebleminded white only. Though many states (particularly in the South) campaigned for funds to build separate facilities for African Americans, few were opened. In fact, in all the volumes of the Journal of Psycho-Aesthetics (the Association's professional publication), race (as referring to the African-American

43 Seguin, 39.
45 For an excellent account of the problem of feeblemindedness in the South, see Noll. Only two of the ten institutions that opened in the South in the first four decades of this century had inmates of both races. (89)
population) is only mentioned three times. The institutional form of idiocy I am discussing was primarily white, while most "feebleminded" African-Americans were housed in insane asylums for Blacks or given no provisions at all.46

Qualitative and quantitative portrayals of idiocy operated at the level of definition and description. Though these interpretations coexisted, they reflect two opposing views of the nature of mental retardation. According to the quantitative picture, conditions like idiocy, imbecility and feeblemindedness were defined according to a hierarchical ordering of certain human abilities. Some, like Seguin, took a more holistic approach, evaluating the "trinity" of mobility and sensation; perception and reasoning; and affections and will.47 As the IQ test became popularized, definitions depended entirely upon a numerical score which was thought to represent intelligence. Though the relevant characteristics changed depending on the theorist and the historical period, the underlying assumption was that "idiots" and the "feebleminded" still fell somewhere along the human continuum. At the same time, however, the image of idiocy and feeblemindedness as animalistic, non- or sub-human and racial, was equally powerful. The conviction that "idiots" were qualitatively different from other humans shaped descriptions of bodies and character, as well as technical and "scientific" definitions. Mental retardation has been and continues to be understood both in terms of difference in degree and kind. The early language of infancy, IQ scores, animality, and race helped solidify and perpetuate quantitative and qualitative understandings of idiocy and feeblemindedness. I think Dr. Isaac Kerlin's description of two of his students at the Pennsylvania Training School, illustrates this tension: "Two children have attached themselves to all of us, on account of their infancy and beauty, and are justly entitled to the appellation of 'pets' in our household."48

46Ibid, 89. An examination of the treatment of Blacks who were thought to be feebleminded is a chapter in this history which is, sadly, still waiting to be told.
47Edouard Seguin, "Origin of the Treatment and Training of Idiots" (1866), in Collected Papers 1, 156.
Another tension at work in the classification of mental retardation is between the organic and non-organic. The nature of idiocy and its causes were discussed in terms of organic deficiency, and in terms of the individual's relationship with his/her environment, i.e. non-organic or functional explanations. In one sense, this can be understood as a form of the nature/nurture debate, though both sides are consistently at work in the understanding of mental retardation.

Idiocy was clearly an object of medical knowledge, and its organic nature was discussed by many doctors, from the eighteenth century French alienists to the nineteenth and twentieth century superintendents of American institutions. Seguin defines idiocy as a "specific infirmity of the cranio-spinal axis, produced by deficiency of nutrition in utero and in neo-nati" and goes on to discuss it in terms of its organic and physiological pathology. Howe followed suit, defining grades of idiocy according to the nervous and muscular systems, the power of locomotion and speech, and the affective and intellectual faculties. Further connections were made between idiocy and epilepsy, cretinism, hydrocephaly, microcephaly, encephalitis, paralysis and lesions in the brain. The assortment of organic explanations are too numerous and complex to discuss here. Suffice it to say that the medical gaze upon mental retardation as some kind of natural, anatomical or physiological defect has been a standard approach to its classification.

Simultaneous with these organic definitions and descriptions of idiocy, were classifications based on the individual's relation to his or her environment. Many superintendents designated levels of "feeblemindedness" in pedagogical and vocational

---

49 By "functional" I do not mean physiological, as contrasted with anatomical. I mean it as a way of defining conditions according to the individual's ability to function in certain ways, within a particular environment. This sense of "functional" is contrasted with "biological" or "organic" definitions, which define forms of mental disability in terms of some organic defect, independent of the person's relationship with the environment.

50 Seguin, 29.

51 Howe, 37.
terms. In 1869, the institution for "idiots" in Ohio recognized three distinct classes of "idiots": totally helpless and in need of constant care; incapable of mental training but capable of physical training; and capable of schooling.52 Dr. Hervey Wilbur of the Syracuse asylum recommended that American institutions adopt the following categories: "unimproved/retrograding idiots; moderately improved/good for institutional work; and permanently improved."53 Here again individuals were classified according to their ability to perform within the institution, as opposed to a medical, organic classification. Even in the Rome Asylum for Unteachables, Bernstein classified inmates according to their vocational potential: unable to do any work; capable of self-care only; assist others in some work; usefulness in industrial departments; and good workers.54 The fact that within institutional discourse we find both functional and biological classifications, points to the dual nature of the institution as a place of observation and treatment. Idiocy was defined in organic terms by a medical gaze which observed physical, anatomical, and physiological characteristics. At the same time, the fact that institutions were considered to be both therapeutic and educational facilities55 allowed idiocy to be defined functionally, in terms of the ability to be "trained" and perform institutional work.

This organic/non-organic distinction manifests itself in more complicated terms at the level of etiology. The debate about whether idiocy is caused by nature or nurture has figured in the understanding of mental retardation in various ways. Though endogenous causes of idiocy were identified (including malnutrition, lesions or abnormalities of the brain), it was also thought to be caused and/or influenced by environmental factors. Seguin discusses at length the importance of proper care during infancy, and the vigilance which must be exercised by mothers in looking for signs of idiocy; with proper maternal education the effects of idiocy could be mitigated.56 The entire campaign to build

52 Quoted in Trent, 65.
53 Ibid., 80.
54 Quoted in Ferguson, 118.
55 I discuss the conflation of "training" and "education" later in this chapter.
56 The relationship between women and causes of mental retardation is discussed in the fourth chapter.
institutions for "idiots" was predicated on the belief that environment mattered, and could change the face of idiocy.

The most complex manifestation of this tension has been in the hereditarian explanations of idiocy and feeblemindedness, many of which seem to fall in that gray area between nature and nurture. The role of one's ancestry has been a constant in discourse about mental retardation. Howe asserts a direct relationship between the "sins of parents" and their disabled children: "It may be assumed as certain, that in all cases where children are born deformed, or blind, or deaf, or idiotic, or so imperfectly and feebly organized that they cannot come to maturity under ordinary circumstances...in all such cases the fault lies with the progenitors."57 Though the five causes of "pre-disposition to idiocy" that he gives suggest some kind of causal relationship between the parent's behavior and the child, he is not explicit about the actual biological connection. The five causes are: the low condition of the physical organization, intemperance, self-abuse, intermarriage of relatives, attempts to procure abortions.58 He concludes that, "The moral to be drawn from the existence of the individual idiot is this- he, or his parents, have so far violated the natural laws, so far marred the beautiful organism of the body, that it is an unfit instrument for the manifestation of the powers of the soul."59

The discourse about heredity allows us to see the close connection between etiology and treatment. In Howe's view, the obvious solution to the problem of idiocy was to recognize the "simple, clear and beautiful" laws of nature. If they were "strictly observed, within a few generations "all possibility of its recurrence" could be removed.60 As the connection between parents or ancestors and defective children became more deeply entrenched in the language of biology, this vision of improvability vanishes.

57 Howe, 35.
58 Ibid, 50-59.
59 Ibid, 34.
60 Ibid.
The language of "tainted blood" and "defective germ plasm" gained popularity with the rise of the eugenics movement in the early twentieth century, and approaches to treatment changed accordingly. The hope of prevention through the education of parents, and the possibility of improvement of the "idiots" themselves within the therapeutic world of the institution, began to disappear, and solutions like sterilization appeared. The coexistence of organic and non-organic explanations of mental retardation has affected the classifications and practices aimed at curing, treating, preventing, or eradicating it.

(3) Is Mental Retardation Improvable? Static and Dynamic Definitions

Mental retardation, as a classification, has encompassed a variety of physical, cognitive and behavioral conditions, ranging from mild to severe. As we saw in the preceding section, the nature and ordering of these conditions has been the subject of research and debate, and the varieties of mental retardation which were discussed by superintendents were described qualitatively and quantitatively, and in organic and non-organic terms. Amidst the confusion surrounding the etiology and nature of the many conditions encompassed under the general heading "feebleminded", there is one question that has most directly influenced institutional practice: is mental retardation (in any or all of its forms) curable or at least improvable, or is it an unchangeable condition? In my discussion of this complex issue, I will use the term "static" to refer to conditions which are believed to be incurable or not improvable by any external influences or treatment; "dynamic" conditions are cases which are changeable (either curable or at least improvable) in some way, through medical intervention, physical and/or psychological therapy, training, or education.

61 Though I do not explicitly discuss this complex movement, the eugenics movement directly influenced the classifications and practices surrounding the "feebleminded". For an account of the development of the eugenics movement, see Mark Haller, Eugenics: Hereditary Attitudes in American Thought (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1963); Stephen Jay Gould, The Mismeasure of Man (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1981); Daniel Kevles, In the Name of Eugenics (New York: Knopf, 1985).
This question presents itself at a number of levels. If taken on a case by case basis, one could ask of each individual labeled mentally retarded whether his or her condition is at all improvable, whether he or she could benefit from education, or whether his or her disabilities in whatever form are static and unchangeable. Presumably the answer would depend, in part, on the severity and the cause of the condition, and there would be a different answer for each individual case. More generally, however, we can ask how the classifications of mental retardation were constructed, relying upon its dual image as both a static and dynamic condition. There have always been curables and incurables within the category of feeblemindedness, but these designations have not remained constant. Why were certain "types" considered curable at one time, and incurable at another? An examination of the ways in which these two conceptions influenced the classification and treatment of mental retardation will help illuminate the complex relationship between etiology, definition and treatment within the world of institutional discourse and practice.

Initially it seems that this pair (static/dynamic) might be separated in a number of ways. Static and dynamic conceptions of mental retardation might parallel the distinction between organic and non-organic causes, severe and mild cases, or they might also correspond to historical periods: an age of optimism that views mental retardation as dynamic, followed by an age of pessimism where it is thought to be static. I will argue, instead, that the static and dynamic views of mental retardation are not so easily separated; in fact, this seemingly oppositional pair functions simultaneously.

As far as etiology is concerned, one could draw a parallel between the notions of mental retardation as organic/non-organic and static/dynamic. For example, the following connection could be made: If mental retardation is understood in organic or biological terms, then presumably there are certain immutable limits placed on the possibility of altering the condition (a treatment might exist, but it would have to act upon the biological organism, insofar as the condition is organic; changing the environment alone would not
alter it). If mental retardation is seen as only a function of the individual's environment, then a change in environment would change the condition itself.\(^{62}\) I find this parallel between organic/static and non-organic/dynamic too simplistic. As we shall see, the roles of biology and the environment in explaining mental retardation as static and dynamic are extremely complex in the world of the institution.

The static/dynamic pair might also be seen as corresponding to the opposite poles on the severe-mild continuum. In other words, it seems likely that the more severe a person's condition is, the less likely it is that it would be curable, or even improvable. This is clear when mental retardation is defined in terms of educability. The sub-categories—educable, trainable, incurable—are arranged in order of increasing severity, the latter group being the most severely disabled by their cognitive and physical conditions. Though this picture has persisted throughout its history, we will encounter instances where the mildest forms of feeblemindedness have been considered hopelessly incurable. The dual conception of mental retardation as static and dynamic has functioned at both ends of the mild/severe spectrum.

In the mid-nineteenth century, the growth of institutions for "idiots" was, in part, based on the conviction that these individuals were educable. Seguin departed from Esquirol's belief that "idiots are what they must remain for the rest of their lives"\(^ {63}\) and attempted to improve their condition through education. The following statement illustrates a distinction that was to remain important throughout the history of mental retardation: the difference between cure and improvement. Seguin states, "While waiting for medicine to cure idiots, I have undertaken to see that they participate in the benefits

\(^{62}\)There are many counterexamples to this parallel. For example, the fact that Down's syndrome, a condition responsible for mental retardation, is caused by an incurable chromosomal defect, does not imply that the individuals are incapable of benefiting from education, and are impervious to environmental influences. In fact, many suggest that the mental retardation which accompanies this genetic defect is, in large part due to environmental deprivation and erroneous assumptions about the child's cognitive abilities (see Borthwick).

of education". The concept of a "cure" for mental retardation is not straightforward, and it has presented itself in many guises. Seguin's statement aligns "cure" with a medical view of retardation, while his pedagogical project was aimed at improvement.

Seguin based his physiological method on Locke's empiricism and Rousseau's pedagogy, and devised a program by which "idiots" could be taught through the development of their sensory functions:

The senses, being in man, the doors through which the mind issues and enters, we have treated them in idiots....Some idiots are more afflicted in their minds... and others in their motor and sensory functions, even to the point of paralysis or anesthesia, but in either form their treatment must proceed more from the training of the senses, in order to improve the mind, than from the education of the mind in view of developing the sensory aptitudes.

This sensory training was accompanied by moral training since, for Seguin, "that which most essentially constitutes idiocy is the absence of moral volition, superseded by a negative will". The object of moral training, then, was "changing the negative will into an affirmative one". The success of his pedagogical approach served as a justification for the new residential institutions (many were called "schools" at the time) for "idiots" in the United States, and soon American reformists were reiterating Seguin's belief in the educability of "idiots". An appeal to the citizens of Philadelphia to establish a school for "idiots" in 1853, states "a fact which is destined to become more and more widely known as schools for idiots multiply...that they are proper subjects for Education....It is the torpor of their mental powers that we have to contend with, not absolute incapacity." Here we see idiocy presented as a changeable condition- not an absolute fate.

As these institutions developed, the assumption was that most grades of idiocy could benefit from training in a structured environment. Of course the "higher grades"

---

64 Ibid., 169.
65 Edouard Seguin, "Psycho-Physiological Training of an Idiotic Hand" (1879), Collected Papers I, 163.
66 Seguin, "Origin and Treatment of Training of Idiots", 158.
67 Potter, Kane, Martin, Wood and Cleaveland, 65.
68 These were "total institutions" in Erving Goffman's sense: all aspects of life are conducted in the same place and in the company of a large batch of others, with tight daily schedules and enforced activities that are brought together into a single rational plan purportedly designed to fulfill the official aims of the
were more likely to be the subjects of educational efforts, while the more severe cases were the objects of "training". (The difference between training and education will be addressed later in this chapter.) Finally, there were the cases for whom it was thought no amount of effort could change their condition. Even the most optimistic reformists believed that idiocy was a static condition for those most severely affected. Samuel Gridley Howe acknowledged that improvability should not be confounded with a cure, and that some cases were beyond hope: "We cannot remove idiocy; and we must be careful not to hurt our cause by promising too much in the way of lessening its evils. Idiocy is a terrible, - it is radical, - it is an incurable defect."69 Though this era of institutional growth is often called the "age of optimism", the hope in the educability of "idiots" was tempered by the existence of "chronic" cases, where no improvement or education seemed possible.

The determination of which forms of idiocy were curable and incurable did not remain constant. The taxonomy, from severe to mild (or "low-grade" to "high-grade"), was: idiot, imbecile, and feebleminded. In the early period examined above, an inverse relationship between severity and curability was posited: the more severe one's condition, the less curable one was believed to be; thus, the "idiots" were the hopeless cases, and the "feebleminded" were targets of treatment and education. However, in the early twentieth century, this relationship changed. The highest grades (renamed "morons" by Goddard) were now thought to be impervious to amelioration or cure. In his book on the Kallikak family, Goddard asserts that:

Fortunately for the cause of science, the Kallikak family...[is] not open to argument. They were feebleminded, and no amount of education or good environment can change a feebleminded individual into a normal one, any more than it can change a red-haired stock into a black-haired stock.70

---

69 Cited in Ferguson, 53.
69 Cited in Ferguson, 53.
70 Goddard, 53.
There were a number of reasons for this shift. First, as I will discuss later, the practice of mental testing allowed for a new population of the "high-grade feebleminded" living outside the institution, to be detected. Secondly, the emphasis on heredity made this group appear particularly dangerous because they were free to reproduce and spread feeblemindedness. Finally, there was a perceived association between this group and pressing social ills, such as pauperism, crime, and sexual immorality. One solution to these problems was to segregate the "dangerous" individuals; thus, institutionalization was no longer justified for its pedagogic effects, but to prevent the spread of feeblemindedness. The most mild cases were now presented as the least curable and most in need of permanent segregation, not education. In fact, the lower grades of feeblemindedness were no longer a concern; Goddard writes, "We begin to realize that the idiot is not our greatest problem....It is the moron type that makes for us our greatest problem." In the case of the "moron", a dynamic view of mental retardation as improvable was supplanted by a conviction in the hereditary and static nature of this condition. The proposed treatments reflected this belief: rather than emphasizing the importance of education and training, permanent segregation and sterilization were promoted.

I have demonstrated that the static and dynamic views of mental retardation do not directly map on to the mild/severe continuum. Both mild and severe forms of mental retardation were presented as dynamic, justifying the existence of the institution as a pedagogical and therapeutic instrument. Yet the static character of mental retardation has also been ascribed to both ends of the spectrum: there were always severe cases - the incurables - who merited custodial care, however the mildest forms of feeblemindedness were also deemed incurable as the association with immorality and crime developed.

---

71 See Trent, Tyor and Bell, for a detailed account of the "menace of the feebleminded".
72 Goddard, 101-2.
73 For a history of sterilization, see Philip R. Reilly, The Surgical Solution: A History of Involuntary Sterilization in the United States (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991); Trent, Ch. 6.
Just as there is no clear parallel between dynamic/static and mild/severe forms of mental retardation, it is also an oversimplification to portray a clear historical shift from a dynamic, optimistic view to a static, pessimistic view of feeblemindedness. As I discussed in Chapter One, many historians argue that the dynamic notion of mental retardation as improvable, if not curable, was replaced by a view of this condition as incurable and hopeless. The general claim is that as the "schools" became "asylums" - permanent custodial facilities - the era of hope in the educability of the "mentally retarded" drew to a close. In light of my analysis of both static and dynamic depictions of mental retardation, however, I maintain that this account is oversimplified. Upon closer examination, it becomes clear that the period of "optimism" in the mid-nineteenth century included many custodial cases who were believed to be ineducable, and the age of pessimism witnessed growth in the special education system, predicated on the idea that at least some forms of mental retardation were improvable.

As Ferguson has pointed out, chronic cases were always present, even in the earliest schools for "idiots". It is a mistake to assume that the optimistic educational spirit touched the lives of all persons who were institutionalized. In fact, there were cases for whom the shift from schools to custodial facilities never took place:

In relation to the most severely retarded segment of the population, the nineteenth century cannot be understood as a brief golden age of experiment and reform followed by a gradual slide into custodialism.... When one begins to focus on severe disability, the mid-century institutional 'experiments' can be seen as somewhat self-serving endorsements of the status quo by the founders of the so-called schools. The social policy toward those judged unteachable or incorrigible in the nineteenth century was uninterrupted in its custodial orientation.\(^7\)4

Though the period of optimism focused on improvability, a static conception of mental retardation still existed, and these "hopeless" cases were treated by custodial means.

Conversely, the subsequent period of pessimism, which drew upon the belief that feeblemindedness was a hereditary, unimprovable condition, and is characterized by a

\(^{74}\text{Ferguson, 10.}\)
rise in custodialism, was also a historical period of educational development. In 1896, the American Association on Mental Deficiency reported on the first American day classes for mentally retarded children in Rhode Island. In the years that followed, numerous classes would open for children who were "backward" or "mentally deficient" (the two categories in place by 1900), while the "idiots" and "imbeciles" remained in institutions. Elizabeth Farrel, a teacher in the New York school system, was responsible for promoting "ungraded classes" within the public schools, and was the co-founder and first president of the International Council for Exceptional Children (1922). Because I am concerned with mental retardation as an institutional product, I will not discuss the development of special educational programs in public schools. It is important to note, however, that the period of eugenic fervor and pessimism concerning the "feebleminded" was also a time of growth the special educational system, based on the belief in the educability of certain persons with feeblemindedness. Once again, both static and dynamic views of mental retardation are present.

As we have seen, the static and dynamic conceptions of mental retardation do not directly correspond to the organic/non-organic and mild/severe distinctions, and are not clearly divisible into distinct historical periods. Instead, they have worked in tandem to shape the classification of mental retardation.

(4) Protective and Productive Institutions: Treatment and the Static/Dynamic Opposition

I would like to conclude this section with what I consider the most interesting incarnation of these two conceptions of mental retardation: the complex way that the institutional world, at the level of treatment, relied upon and perpetuated a picture of feeblemindedness as both static and dynamic. Within the walls of the institutions-called

---

75 Safford, 181.
76 Ibid.
77 There was opposition in the Association to the integration of the "feebleminded" in public schools, most likely because the superintendents felt their professional authority threatened. See Century of Concern, 95.
"schools", "life-schools", "asylums"- the discourse of "cure", "training" and "education" was transformed into a set of practices and techniques. The majority of individuals who found themselves within the walls of the institutions for the "feebleminded" were subjected to some kind of therapeutic and reformatory practice.

The concepts of mental retardation as static and dynamic in many ways justified the institution's existence. Insofar as the institution offered a setting in which to study various forms of mental deficiency and experiment with its improvability, it was considered a worthy enterprise. Both static and dynamic cases were housed within the institution, and the presence of all forms of feeblemindedness was crucial for the legitimacy and survival of the professionals who studied and supervised them. As Ferguson states, "What better way to prove scientific expertise than to oversee a diverse asylum population that could be dissected into any number of clinical subdivisions and resorted to as individual therapy goals indicated?" Many superintendents recognized this function of the institution. Seguin maintained that one of the greatest benefits of schools for "idiots" was "...the triple work of improving idiots, of studying human nature from its lowest to its highest manifestations; and of testing on idiots the true physiological means of elevating mankind by education." William Ireland, the medical superintendent for the Home and School for Imbeciles in Scotland, and who was often quoted in the United States, wrote:

Lord Derby has remarked, with his usual philosophic insight,...that 'the greater part of the value of an asylum or hospital consists in its usefulness as a school where the particular complaints there treated may be studied'; and the close study of which such establishments have enabled the resident medical officers to make has been useful in adding much knowledge to an obscure subject, and promises yet to add more.80

---

78Ferguson, 73.
79Seguin, 56.
80William W. Ireland, "On the Diagnosis and Prognosis of Idiocy and Imbecility" (1882), in Collected Papers I, 254.
Charles T. Wilbur, superintendent of the Illinois Institution for the Education of Feebleminded Children and brother of the famous Hervey B. Wilbur (responsible for opening the first private school for "idiots" in the U. S.), reviewed the accomplishments of the institutions forty years after the first was opened, and counted among them: "A large amount of valuable statistical information has been gathered in relation to [idiots]... a plan of organization of institutions and methods and a system of education, have been developed for them.... The causes and prevention of idiocy are being studied and reflected upon, with the hope that society may be benefited thereby." In one sense, then, the institutions were necessary as schools, not just for the "feebleminded", but for the superintendents themselves. In order for "idiots" to be studied and new techniques developed to treat and improve their condition, the institution as a structured and controlled environment was a necessary vehicle. And part of the knowledge generated by institutional discourse was about static and dynamic forms of feeblemindedness, both of which required institutionalization.

i) Institutionalization of the Static

Consider the static forms of feeblemindedness, those cases where there seemed to be no hope of improvement or education. If the institution was a school or place of training, it would seem that these individuals would have no place there. However, their presence was explained and justified in a number of ways. First, it was argued that families could not handle the burden of a feebleminded child, particularly financially. Fernald writes, "Home care of a low grade idiot consumes so much of the working capacity of the wage earner of the household that often the entire family becomes pauperized. Humanity and public policy demand that these families should be relieved of the burden of those helpless idiots." There was also the concern that, if not placed in.

---

82 Century of Concern, 26.
the proper environment, the "idiot's" condition could actually worsen: "If neglected, feeble-minded children deteriorate with fearful rapidity....Were all such children subjected to patient and well-directed nurture through their earlier years, a large proportion of them would doubtless be saved from the abject and disgusting condition in which they are usually found. Such nurture, however, is not to be expected, even in the families of the wealthy....Hence the necessity of special schools."83 Even those with the most hopeless, severe conditions could benefit from institutionalization, for neither rich nor poor parents were equipped with the time and knowledge to properly care for these children. It was crucial to prevent more cases of children- "idiotic at birth"- who, "...because of the ignorance and neglect of their parents have become filthy, gluttonous, lazy, vicious, depraved, and are rapidly sinking into drivel ing idiocy."84

The superintendents' explicit discourse on idiocy presented the institution as the best solution for incurables. However, there was also a self-serving motive for the custodialization of static cases. In his history of the "low-grade" population, Ferguson argues that the institutional population of "incurables" was necessary to explain the superintendents' failure to educate or improve many of their inmates and re-integrate them back into the community. Therefore, "Nineteenth century reformers always ensured the continued existence of a residual population who could not be helped by their reforms."85 The debate over whether these incurable cases should be housed in a separate custodial department of the larger institution, or have their own facilities, confirms this. While some superintendents thought that the presence of unteachables "embarrasses the general management"86 and argued for separate institutions, they were outnumbered by those who accepted the "cottage" or "colony" plan. Eventually, most institutions adopted this

---

83 Potter, Kane, Martin, Wood, and Cleaveland, 64.
84 Ibid, 65.
85 Ferguson, 2-3.
86 Ibid, 70. This statement was made by Wilbur.
approach, and the architecture of the institutions mirrored the dual classification of
custodial (static) and educable (dynamic) cases.

For the most severe cases, then, the institution was considered necessary for their
own sake and for the sake of their families, and it was also in the best interest of the
superintendents to house them in custodial departments. Yet in addition to the lowest-
grade "idiot" whose condition was thought to be immutable, there was another class of
feebleminded individuals who were also portrayed as static, and were housed with the
low-grades in the custodial departments: the "moral imbeciles".87 Beginning in the late
nineteenth century, the high-grade form of feeblemindedness was interpreted as the least
hopeful because, while possessing greater intellectual capacity than the lower grades of
idiocy and imbecility, the "moral imbecile" was afflicted with a permanent moral defect.

In his influential work on moral imbecility, Issac Kerlin (responsible for introducing the
term) underscores the static nature of this condition:

As there are persons in whom we discover a partial or entire absence of
color perception, or of the musical perception, and others who are partially or
entirely destitute of the power of numbers, of distance, of analysis, of logic, or of
any other special faculty,- *nor can the absence be supplied by education,*- so we
have individuals who, from some inherent fault in, or some radical defect of the
receptive centres, are destitute in part and sometimes wholly of the so-called
moral sense, and no environment and no education will supply the deficiency.88

Institutions were necessary to protect society from these dangerous individuals, and to
prevent their propagation. Just as he justified the existence of the institution for the "low-
grade idiot", Fernald asserted its importance for this other group of incurables, who
needed permanent care or they would become vagrants, drunkards, and thieves or, worse,
reproduce their own kind.89 This "brighter class of feebleminded" were not
institutionalized for their own improvement, but for the benefit of society as a whole.

---

87Fernald writes, "In the custodial department are classed also the moral imbeciles and the adults of both
sexes who have graduated from the school department, or are past school age, but cannot safely be trusted,
either for their own good or for the good of the community, out from under strict and judicious
surveillance." In his "Description of American Institutions" (1893), in Collected Papers I, 324.
89Century of Concern, 26.
These static cases justified the existence of the institution as a *protective* instrument in a number of ways. The incarceration of "low-grade idiots" protected them from the injustice of being housed with the poor and the insane, and from being neglected and harmed in an unsuitable family environment. The families of these burdensome cases of idiocy were protected from hardship and financial ruin. Finally, the superintendents themselves were protected from criticisms of failure by the existence of unteachable cases within their institutions. The incarceration of the moral imbecile, on the other hand, protected the rest of society *from* them. The dangers of their immoral and criminal behaviour and the possibility of their propagation were prevented by their custodialization.

ii) Institutionalization of the Dynamic

While the necessity of the institution was justified by the existence of these custodial cases, whose conditions were considered hopelessly static, the institution also relied upon and perpetuated the notion of feeblemindedness as a dynamic condition. The assumption that feeblemindedness was changeable lay at the core of the campaign to build institutions for the "feebleminded". The rhetoric of improvability and educability, and the belief in the importance of a proper environment, pervaded the calls for new facilities. The practices within the institution, which ranged from education and training to supervision and punishment, were predicated upon the belief that the proper environment could *improve* feeblemindedness, and more importantly, make its victims *productive* individuals. Here we find the institution, not as a custodial, protective facility, but as a reformatory and productive one.

Despite the faith in the educability of the "feebleminded" which provided the impetus and justification for the new institutions, the notion of training, not education, dominated institutional practice. There were educational programs for the high-grade inmates, and many in the school departments were instructed "in the ordinary branches of
the common schools. As compared with the education of normal children, it is a difference of degree, and not of kind.\(^90\) However, as Burton Blatt observes, "Ironically, state institutions provided education only for those who didn't belong there- the mildly retarded."\(^91\) Most individuals living in institutions were improved through rigorous training and supervision, the goal of which was productivity. Though some were taught to read and write, Fernald admits that, "The most prominent feature of our educational training today is the attention paid to instruction in industrial occupations and manual labor." \(^92\) Here, education is conflated with training, while Goddard makes an explicit distinction between trainability and educability, the latter being the improvement of intellectual capacity. He concludes, after studying the inmates at his Vineland Training School and analyzing their progress primarily in terms of their score on Binet's intelligence test, that:

> It is evident that our educational treatment must be largely modified. When once we have discovered that a child is stopped in his development it is, of course, useless to attempt to teach him to do anything which requires an intelligence above that which he possesses....It is pretty certain that intelligence develops, as we may say, of itself, and yet we can only utilize and exercise what is there, and do not create anything new by any of our training methods. Here we may conclude that as a rule, feebleminded children are trainable but not improvable in intellectual capacity."\(^93\)

Though superintendents like Fernald and Goddard justified their methods in terms of the mental abilities (and lack thereof) of their "students", the conviction that training was more appropriate than education must also be explained in terms of the institutional need for productive inmates. There was no hiding the economic advantage provided by the use of inmate labor. Fernald writes, "The average running expenses of these institutions have been gradually and largely reduced by this utilization of the industrial abilities of the trained inmates."\(^94\) Even those who could not be taught particular skills,

---

\(^90\)Collected Papers I, 323. Here we see a quantitative portrait of mental retardation.


\(^92\)Fernald, 323.

\(^93\)Henry H. Goddard, "The Improvability of Feeble-minded Children" (1913), in Collected Papers I, 372.

\(^94\)Fernald, 325.
the low-grade cases, were trained in life skills (bathing, feeding, dressing and undressing, cleanliness etc.): "As a result of the kindly but firm discipline, the patient habit-teaching, and the well-ordered institution routine, a large proportion of these children become much less troublesome and disgusting, so much so that the burden and expense of their care and support are materially and permanently lessened."95 Though it was argued that both the mild and severe cases could benefit from "training", it was the institution that ultimately benefited. The educational nature of this labor cannot be separated from its institutional utility.

It is evident that the institution relied upon both static and dynamic depictions of feeblemindedness. In fact, a paradoxical relation between these two supposedly disparate kinds of mental retardation emerges, particularly when we look at the characterization of inmate labor. Outside of the institution, feeblemindedness is considered incurable (no family environment is adequate), hopeless and dangerous (high-grades are a danger to society, and low-grades are in danger from society); it is a static condition. Within the walls of the institution, however, the same condition is seen as improvable. (This paradox is examined more thoroughly in the fourth chapter.) From the lowest to highest forms of mental retardation, disciplinary techniques are employed to make them productive. Even the custodial departments relied upon routines, punishments and physical tasks to prevent the idleness of their inmates. Charles Bernstein, superintendent of the Rome Custodial Asylum for Un teachable Idiots (opened in 1894), writes:

I am convinced that I can do more for a low grade feebleminded boy, who soils himself and is destructive, through one summer's work for such boy with a pile of earth to be moved with pick, shovel and barrow, and a good attendant direct him, than could any teacher working with him in the schoolroom for the same length of time....One-half the happiness in life is in having our minds occupied and in knowing that we are doing useful work, and the feebleminded are no exception to this rule."96

95Ibid. 324.
96Quoted in Ferguson, 121.
There is a double irony in calling inmate labor "useful": the "low-grades" were often given futile tasks simply to keep them busy, while the work performed by "high-grades" was considered useful insofar as it served the purposes of the institution. One wonders what the "other half of the happiness in life" is for the productive "feebleminded" in the institution.

**Docile Bodies, Docile Minds**

In *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Foucault defines "discipline" as "a type of power, a modality for its exercise, comprising a whole set of instruments, techniques, procedures, levels of application, targets." Foucault describes the development of this kind of power in eighteenth and nineteenth century schools, hospitals, factories, military schools, and ultimately, the modern prison. He states that this form of power can be found in specialized institutions (e.g. penitentiaries) as well as institutions that use it toward a particular end (e.g. schools and hospitals). The institutions for the feebleminded, as highly specialized institutions, were clearly examples of this disciplinary power; they monitored, studied, documented, taught, punished and trained their inmates in the hopes of making them into useful human beings.

The institutions which housed all forms of feeblemindedness were "omni-disciplinary", like the modern prison that Foucault describes. He states, "Prison must be an exhaustive disciplinary apparatus: it must assume responsibility for all aspects of the individual, his physical training, his aptitude to work, his everyday conduct, his moral attitude, his state of mind." In many respects, the institution functioned simultaneously as a pedagogical, medical, and moral apparatus.

Foucault also describes how "discipline produces subjected and practiced bodies, 'docile' bodies". In the institutional world of feeblemindedness we find docile bodies

---

99 Ibid, 137.
and docile minds. Fernald writes, "In this 'education by doing' we not only have a very valuable means of exercising and developing the dormant faculties and defective bodies of our pupils, but at the same time we are training them to become capable and useful men and women." Both physically and intellectually, the "feebleminded" were subjected to this form of disciplinary power, and it is arguable that, more important than improvement for their own benefit, the ultimate goal of this power was productivity. In Trent's words, "Educated feeble minds became productive feeble minds."

Foucault says that "Discipline 'makes' individuals; it is the specific technique of power that regards individuals both as objects and as instruments of its exercise". Fernald's characterization of the approach of "education by doing" hints at the performativity that Foucault refers to here. While the "feebleminded" were objects of various techniques and practices (e.g. documentation, examinations, punishments), they were also called upon to take part in the workings of this disciplinary apparatus: they were taught to be productive so that they could work within the institution. The "feebleminded" of all grades were called upon to take part in the functioning of the apparatus for whom they were simultaneously object of study and contributing subjects.

I have examined institutional discourse and practice in terms of a series of oppositions between the qualitative and quantitative, organic and non-organic, and static and dynamic. Though these portrayals of mental retardation might initially have appeared contradictory, they actually operated simultaneously in the world of the institution. These conceptual pairs influenced the creation of categories, the nature of practices, and were continuously invoked by the superintendents who generated "expert" knowledge about feeblemindedness. Yet the institutional world did more than produce knowledge; it also produced a particular kind of human subject. Foucault says that "The prison cannot fail to produce delinquents. It does so by the very existence that it imposes on its

100 Fernald, 323.
101 Trent, 84.
102 Foucault, Discipline and Punish, 170.
inmates". I ask the same question of the institutionalized "feebleminded": to what extent did the structure of institutional life create their "feeble minds", rather than improve them? The institutions, as protective and productive sites of disciplinary power, perpetuated the view of feeblemindedness as both a helplessly static fate, and an improvable, dynamic condition. Both characterizations were indispensable to the survival of institutions, and the production of docile minds and docile bodies.

Visibility and Invisibility: The IQ Test

The institutions for the "feebleminded" that emerged in the late nineteenth century were arguably the most significant means by which knowledge about feeblemindedness was produced and organized. However, in the early twentieth century, another equally significant method of gathering and organizing knowledge about mental retardation emerged: mental testing. Though the relationship between mental retardation and IQ tests is far too complex to do it justice here, I would like to examine it briefly in terms of one additional conceptual pair: visibility and invisibility. Though these notions were at play in the world of the institution, they were significantly transformed by the adoption of mental testing in the United States, thanks to H. H. Goddard's 1910 translation of the Binet-Simon intelligence tests.

The crucial role that the development of mental tests played with respect to mental retardation is ironic in that it legitimized the institutions (according a more scientific status to their classifications of inmates), yet supplanted their epistemological authority; the institution would no longer be the primary site for the production of knowledge about mental retardation. As the use of tests became more widespread, advocacy of parole, community placement, and special classes in the public schools, grew. How did this new "way of finding out" about mental retardation become so

---

103 Ibid, 266.
104 See Gould, Chs. 5-6; Trent, 155-168.
105 Century of Concern, 116.
powerful, and what effects did it have on its classifications? In order to answer this question, let us examine three levels of visibility/invisibility at which this new technique operated: the social, individual and etiological.

(I) Social Visibility

The social visibility of mental retardation has always been and continues to be a focus of attention. The incarceration of "idiots" in asylums far from public view was, in part, an attempt to render feeblemindedness invisible to the rest of the population. Yet a public gaze was simultaneously directed at them from within the walls of the institutions; they were often displayed as forms of entertainment for the general public, and "experts" were able to dissect them with their professional gaze, bringing their defects to light. With the development of the intelligence test, this gaze extended beyond the world of the institution for the feebleminded, to other social institutions where feeblemindedness could be found. Tests were administered in prisons, reformatories, the army, and schools, and the conclusion was that feeblemindedness was a problem that affected many beyond the institutional walls. The intelligence tests heightened the visibility of feeblemindedness: countless prisoners, prostitutes, school children, paupers, and immigrants\textsuperscript{106} were identified as feebleminded. The results of this testing fueled a campaign against the dangers of feeblemindedness by linking it to other social ills (criminality, sexual vice, alcoholism, pauperism), thus making it visible as a social problem.\textsuperscript{107} At the basis of this social visibility, however, was a more fundamental \textit{invisibility} at the level of the feebleminded individual.

\textsuperscript{106}They were usually southern and eastern Europeans.
\textsuperscript{107}The campaigns for institutions in the mid-nineteenth century were far less prominent in the public light than the campaign against the menace of feeblemindedness and the eugenics movement of the early twentieth century.
2) Individual Visibility: The Paradox of the "Moron"

As we saw with the institution, certain "kinds" of individuals emerge hand in hand with new techniques of gathering knowledge about them. This is true of the intelligence test as well; it appeared simultaneously with a "type" of feeblemindedness: the moron.¹⁰⁸ Taken from the Greek word meaning foolish, Goddard named the highest class of feebleminded individuals "morons", and pronounced them the most dangerous class of mental defectives because of their invisibility. Unlike the "idiots" and "imbeciles", who were relatively easily identifiable and whose place had been established within the institution, the moron was able to pass for normal: "These are people of good outward appearance, but of low intelligence, who pass through school without acquiring any efficiency, and then go out into the world and must inevitably fall into some such life as we have pictured."¹⁰⁹ This life was one of criminality and immorality. The moron not only became identified with deviant behaviour; s/he provided a causal explanation for it. Thanks to the numerous tests administered to prisoners and prostitutes, the scores of their intelligence tests confirmed that feeblemindedness in the form of the "moron" (i.e. high-grade intellectual and moral deficiency) had a direct link with criminality:

So we have, as is claimed, partly from statistical studies and partly from careful observation, abundant evidence of the truth of our claim that criminality is often made out of feeblemindedness....Lombroso's famous criminal types, in so far as they were types, may have been types of feeblemindedness on which criminality was grafted by the circumstances of their environment.¹¹⁰

From this passage it is clear that, in one sense, feeblemindedness had become a more fundamental category: it was considered the cause of criminality.

The belief in the criminal and immoral nature of the "moron" reinforced the danger of this particular class, and the success of mental testing in rendering "morons" visible to the public prompted further steps to be taken in treating the problem (e.g. institutional

¹⁰⁸It is interesting that both the technique and the kind were introduced in the United States by H. H. Goddard.
¹⁰⁹Goddard, 56.
segregation and sterilization as means of controlling the spread of feeblemindedness).\textsuperscript{111} Whereas earlier emphasis had been placed on lower grades of mental deficiency ("idiots" and "imbeciles"), all attention was now focused on the "moron", particularly because of the possibility that s/he would reproduce:

[The idiot] is indeed loathsome; he is somewhat difficult to take care of; nevertheless, he lives his life and is done. He does not continue the race with a line of children like himself. Because of his low-grade condition, he never becomes a parent. It is the moron type that makes for us our greatest problem. And when we face the question: 'What is to be done with them...?' we realize that we have a huge problem.\textsuperscript{112}

The moron class of feeblemindedness could not have emerged and gained such prominence without the intelligence test, which was able to pick out individuals who would have otherwise gone undetected. Since the moron's invisibility was believed to have drastic consequences- particularly crime and the propagation of feeblemindedness- the existence of this class of individuals reinforced the necessity and success of these tests. Much like the delinquent and the penitentiary technique that Foucault describes, the "moron" and the IQ test "are in a sense twin brothers....They appeared together."\textsuperscript{113}

Binet's writing confirms this fact that the type and technique came hand in hand. In his criticism of former methods of assessment, he stresses that while lower forms of mental deficiency like idiocy and imbecility are more easily identified by physical signs and pedagogical defects, the "moron" is the most difficult to diagnose by virtue of the invisibility of symptoms, hence the importance of the psychological method (the intelligence tests) over all other approaches:

The physical descriptions of the idiot and the imbeciles that one finds in classic treatises are not always correct; and even if they were, they would not apply in the least to morons. But the morons constitute the majority. It is the morons that must be recognized in the schools where they are confounded with normals; it is

\textsuperscript{111}\textsuperscript{111}See Trent, Chs. 5 and 6.
\textsuperscript{112}\textsuperscript{112}Goddard, 101-2.
\textsuperscript{113}\textsuperscript{113}Foucault, \textit{Discipline and Punish}, 255.
they who offer the greatest obstacle to the work of education. The diagnosis of moronity is at the same time the most important and the most difficult of all.\footnote{Alfred Binet and Theodore Simon, \textit{The Development of Intelligence in Children}, trans. Elizabeth Kite, (Nashville: Williams Printing Company, 1980), 76.}

This statement points to another effect these tests had on the visibility of feeblemindedness: they prompted a shift from defining its nature in terms of visible symptoms and behavior, to representing an invisible capacity—intelligence—in the form of a numerical score. Recall the earlier descriptions of "idiocy" by Howe and Seguin; they relied heavily on anatomical and physiological signs of idiocy. Binet argues that a new classificatory scheme was needed which would \textit{directly} test that which distinguishes feeblemindedness from all other conditions: intellectual defect. He identifies three methods of recognizing inferior states of intelligence: medical, pedagogical and psychological. The medical method studies the anatomical, pathological and physiological signs, and is indirect "because it conjectures [sic] the mental from the physical".\footnote{\textit{Ibid}, 40.} The pedagogical method tests the sum of acquired knowledge, but accumulated knowledge is different from intelligence. Only the psychological method, which "makes direct observations and measurements of the degree of intelligence", can give an accurate assessment of the individual's intellectual defect.\footnote{\textit{Ibid}.} For Binet, judgment was considered the fundamental faculty of intelligence: "To judge well, to comprehend well, to reason well, these are the essential activities of intelligence".\footnote{\textit{Ibid}, 42-43.} Feeblemindedness was no longer understood in terms of Seguin's trinity, "man's...three prominent vital expressions: activity, intelligence and will".\footnote{\textit{Seguin}, 58.} It was reduced to one faculty—intelligence—which was the only thing this new technique measured.

The IQ test was so successful in the United States because it was seen as an effective and scientific way of picking out this new type of individual (the "moron"), and was thought to offer a solution to the limitations of medical and pedagogical methods.
Goddard, in his report on "Feebleminded Children Classified by the Binet Method", echoes the limitations of purely medical classifications:

We should certainly emphasize here what is known to all of you, that the old terms of classification, while of interest to physicians, perhaps, are of no practical value to us, and in accordance with this classification it could be made very clear that for instance a microcephalic child might be a moron, an imbecile or an idiot; a hydrocephalic the same, and so on thru the list. In other words, these words do not help us to know about what the child is capable of in the way of training and development.

The IQ test, according to Binet, Goddard and the many others who promoted it, provided a direct line to the defective intellect which was the defining feature of feeblemindedness. In contrast with the multitude of visible signs of mental deficiency which had failed to provide a clear picture of feeblemindedness, the IQ test was able to definitively fix the level of this elusive, invisible, yet indispensable feature of our humanness: intelligence. In this sense, invisibility triumphed over visibility.

3) Etiological Visibility

The final level at which mental tests affected the visibility of feeblemindedness is at the etiological level. Here, we find a sharp departure from Binet's original intent by Goddard and other Americans, a break which allowed for the tests to flourish and remain the dominant source of knowledge about feeblemindedness. Binet and Simon are explicit about the fact that the intelligence test measures the actual state of intelligence:

Our purpose is to be able to measure the intellectual capacity of a child who is brought to us in order to know whether he is normal or retarded. We should therefore, study his condition at the time and that only. We have nothing to do either with his past history or with his future; consequently we shall neglect his etiology...and we leave unanswered the question of whether this retardation is curable, or even improvable.

120 Binet and Simon, 37.
Walter Fernald's presidential address to the American Association for the Study of Feeblemindedness, illustrates that these tests were put to the opposite use in America:

The theory and practice of mental testing and the discovery of the concept of mental age did more to explain feeblemindedness, to simplify its diagnosis, and to furnish accurate data for training and education, than did all the previous study and research from the time of Seguin [emphasis mine].121

While Binet refused to use his tests to explain etiology or dictate treatment, the IQ tests in the United states became inextricably bound with hereditarian explanations of feeblemindedness and with methods of controlling it.122

Goddard's book *The Kallikak Family* was written as evidence of the connection between intelligence and heredity. He boldly asserts: "If both parents are feeble-minded all the children will be feeble-minded".123 In hereditarian rhetoric, the notion of invisibility arises once again. "Defective germ plasm", or "bad blood", was responsible for mental deficiency, and was passed along from one generation to the next. Since this invisible substance could not be seen any better than "intelligence", techniques were devised to bring it to light. Intelligence tests and family histories could confirm the presence of the invisible cause ("bad blood") and the invisible defect (low intelligence).124

Given the belief in the hereditarian nature of feeblemindedness, a host of treatments and solutions were proposed. Sterilization, segregation, marriage restriction, and immigration laws were all enforced to stop the spread of feeblemindedness. In fact, the two aspects of feeblemindedness which Binet meant to avoid in his development of

---

121*Century of Concern*, 108.
122There is a complex story to be told as to why the IQ test proved so popular in the United States and not in France. The application of these tests to army recruits played a decisive role in its popularization (see Gould, 192-233.) I have argued elsewhere that it was also due to the fact that the problem of feeblemindedness never gained the prominence in France that it did in the American eugenics movement. For discussions of the eugenics movement in France, see Mark Adams ed., *The Wellborn Science: Eugenics in Germany, France, Brazil and Russia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990); Ian Dowbiggin, *Inheriting Madness* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991); Robert A. Nye, *Crime, Madness and Politics in Modern France* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).
123Quoted in Gould, 163.
124These family histories- called pedigree studies- are discussed at greater length in the fourth chapter.
intelligence tests— etiology and treatment— became the focal point of their use in the United States. The actual mental state of the individual seemed far less important than what caused this defect, and what was going to be done about it.

The development of institutions and the implementation of IQ tests profoundly affected the understanding, detection, and treatment of feeblemindedness. As I have shown, the institutional world involved a complex interplay of internal tensions that shaped the nature of classifications and the lives of classified subjects. In examining the effects of the IQ test in terms of social, individual, and etiologic visibility, it is clear that this new method of detection played a significant role in the definition of feeblemindedness. Finally, both the institutions and mental tests altered the way knowledge was gathered and organized, and new "types" of feeblemindedness emerged together with these new techniques and practices.
CHAPTER THREE

PHILOSOPHICAL FEATURES OF CLASSIFICATION: AN ANALYTIC INTERLUDE

As I argued in the introductory chapter, the term "social construction" means too many things with respect to disability to be of use in clarifying the complex category of mental retardation. Instead, I have discussed two ways of generating knowledge about mental retardation- the institution and the IQ test- through a series of conceptual pairs which functioned simultaneously within this classification. In light of this historical analysis, what can be said about the nature of mental retardation as a classification, and what does it reveal about the dynamics of classification generally? Mental retardation is philosophically interesting because it reveals three features of classification: heterogeneity, instability and prototype effects.

(1) Heterogeneity

Mental retardation is a heterogeneous classification, both internally and externally. Internally, it is divided into sub-groups, meaning that there is not just one kind of mental retardation. These subdivisions take two forms: they are ordered hierarchically (I visualize this as a vertical ordering) and horizontally- with discreet kinds existing side by side. There are a number of examples of vertical hierarchies: sub-categories of mental retardation have been defined according to severity, degree of intelligence, and the ability to perform certain functions (e.g. educable, trainable). All of these descriptions organize forms of mental retardation on an ascending scale, where each type possesses less or more of a particular feature.

---

1 I borrow this phrase from Ian Hacking.
The subgroups of mental retardation have also been ordered horizontally as qualitatively different kinds. For example, the "moral imbecile" and the "idiot" were two varieties of feeblemindedness, one with a moral defect, the other suffering from an intellectual defect. Forms of mental retardation were also grouped etiologically (e.g. congenital or non-congenital, endogenous or exogenous). Finally, the "feebleminded" were often classified according to anatomical or physiological phenomena (e.g. Down's "Mongolian idiocy", or "epileptic idiocy").

Both horizontal and vertical sub-classifications of mental retardation were operant in the historical period we have examined, and they signify an internal heterogeneity because they were not mutually exclusive ways of describing and defining. Rather, they coexisted within the broader category as two possible ways of organizing the variety of kinds and degrees of what was then called idiocy or feeblemindedness.

This classification is also externally heterogeneous: mental retardation has been defined in different ways by many different individuals and is an object of knowledge for multiple disciplines. One of the most persistent features of this classification is the lack of consensus about the nature of mental retardation and the continual criticism of existing definitions. Seguin acknowledged this variety but saw no need to address other definitions in his own work: "Its definitions have been so numerous, they are so different from one another, and they have so little bearing on the treatment, that their omission cannot be much felt in a practical treatise." In an article in the *American Journal of Education*, Dr. Brockett, a well-known writer who supported the new schools for "idiots", wrote: "Of the many definitions which writers on the subject have essayed, no one appears entirely

---

2 Though the "moral imbecile" was still thought to be intellectually inferior to a "normal" individual, his or her defining feature was *moral* deficiency.

3 One might argue that my description of internal heterogeneity is really evidence of an external variation; in other words, the vertical and horizontal means of ordering subgroups is simply evidence of different people offering competing definitions. I will maintain the distinction between external and internal, however, given that these multiple subdivisions were often part of one person's classification scheme.

4 Seguin, 29.
free from objection."5 Even sixty years later, Alfred Binet and Theodore Simon address the lack of a proper method of classification, in The Development of Intelligence in Children. Of the three "kinds of error" in diagnosing inferior intellectual states-- ignorance, variable meaning of terms, and method-- they conclude that the last is the most damaging:

In looking closely one can see that the confusion comes principally from a fault in the method of examination. When an alienist finds himself in the presence of a child of inferior intelligence, he... contents himself with taking a subjective impression, an impression as a whole, of his subject, and of making his diagnosis by instinct. 6

It is ironic that Binet's solution to the assessment of intellectual inferiority, in its mutated American form, has generated more criticism than perhaps any other classificatory system of mental deficiency;7 nevertheless, the IQ score is still a part of the definition of mental retardation.8

Amidst competing definitions and methods of diagnosis, some superintendents recognized the limitations of their own classifications, and admitted that the categories they created were not absolute. The history of mental retardation might have evolved differently if more had followed Howe's advice in his acknowledgment of fallibility:

It must not be supposed that all idiotic persons can readily be ranged in one or other of these classes. The highest of the lower class of Idiots can hardly be distinguished from the Fool; the least stupid of Fools can hardly be distinguished from the Simpleton; and the highest among the Simpletons stand very near the level of hundreds who pass in society for feebleminded persons, but still for responsible free agents.... This view of the gradation of intellect should teach us not only humility, but humanity.9

5 L. P. Brockett, "Idiots and the Efforts For Their Improvement" (1856), in Collected Papers I, 78.
6 Binet and Simon, in Collected Papers I, 335.
8 See the DSM-IV, ICD-10 and AAMR definitions of mental retardation.
9 Howe, 49. The final words of this passage are evidence of the sense, even by superintendents, that caring for "idiots" was a benevolent and humanitarian cause.
From the earliest attention given to "idiocy" in the mid-nineteenth century to Binet’s attempt to provide a solid, scientific basis upon which to detect feeblemindedness, there was never a conclusive definition of mental retardation. It is externally heterogeneous insofar as there have always been (and continue to be) numerous competing approaches and descriptions. The early institutions served as an organizing principle for these various types of knowledge, and the multiple roles the institution played—moral, therapeutic, pedagogical, medical—are evidence of this. Throughout its history, mental retardation as an object of knowledge, has never had a permanent residence in any one field; it is an object of medical, psychological, pedagogical, moral, humanitarian and political discourse. Mental retardation was and continues to be a heterogeneous classification, both externally and internally.

2) Instability

A second feature of this classification is closely related to its heterogeneity: mental retardation is what I will call an unstable classification. Part of the reason I chose to abandon the language of social construction is because it is too often applied to all disabilities equally. This takes the form of either a general statement—"Disability is socially constructed"—or the same term is applied to a variety of conditions (e.g. "The social construction of x" where x = deafness, mental retardation, physical disability, etc.) To use the term "social construction" in such general terms obscures important and fundamental differences between particular conditions and their classifications; therefore I have chosen to discuss the ways in which a condition becomes a disability in terms of stable and unstable classifications.

---

10 These disciplines have not always held equal status with respect to mental retardation; one rich area of research would be to examine the historical shifts in the authority of various discourses. Certainly medical discourse dominated in the mid-nineteenth century, and with the rise of genetic explanations of mental retardation, is likely to become even more prominent.
Suppose that \( x \) is a particular human ability or characteristic, and \( x' \) is the lack, diminishment or alteration of that quality. To say that \( x' \) is a disability (\( dx' \)) can mean a number of things: i) the social interpretation or definition given to \( x' \); ii) the restriction of lack of ability to perform certain activities deemed "normal" within society because of \( x' \); and/or iii) the negative consequences of living with \( x' \) in a society which is structured around \( x \) because most people possess and value \( x \), not \( x' \). Though two particular conditions might share the sense in which they are disabilities (\( dx' \)), they may differ with respect to the way in which the condition itself is defined at the level of \( x \) and \( x' \). Consider the following two examples.

As our first example, let \( x = \) sight and \( x' = \) blindness (for the purposes of this example, assume the complete inability to see from birth). Blindness is called and experienced as a disability (\( dx' \)) because it is given a negative social meaning, because it places restrictions on the individual excluding them from "normal" activities, and/or because the blind person suffers harmful consequences as a result of the physical environment, the emphasis or importance placed on sight, and the fact that most people in society are able to see and value this ability.

Take mental retardation as the second example. Like blindness, mental retardation (\( x' \)) can also be understood as a disability (\( dx' \)). However, it is not so clear what exactly \( x \) or \( x' \) refer to in this case. As the preceding pages reveal, \( x \) has been defined as intelligence, moral aptitude, judgment, will, the ability to be educated, etc. Conversely, \( x' \) has been described as lack of intelligence, lower intelligence, negative will, trainability, inability to be educated, moral defect. While we can talk about blindness and mental retardation as disabilities (\( dx' \)), there is a crucial difference between the two examples. In the case of blindness, \( x \) and \( x' \) are defined as sight and a lack or diminishment thereof. Furthermore,

\[\text{Quoted in Wendell, p. 13.}\]
the definition and diagnosis of x and x' have traditionally belonged to the medical domain. (Though many of us could identify blindness in someone else, and an individual without sight would not need a medical diagnosis to recognize this lack of ability, there are no other professional fields directly involved in its definition.) In this sense, blindness is not externally heterogeneous in the same way mental retardation has been. To phrase it differently: no one to my knowledge would dispute that "blindness" refers to some form of visual impairment.

Mental retardation, on the other hand, presents a different case. Neither x nor x' have remained constant in definitions of mental retardation. While blindness has a definition independent of etiology and treatment (i.e. the cause of blindness and its possible treatments do not affect the essence of its definition— the limited or complete inability to see), the very definition of mental retardation has been inextricably bound with theories of its etiology and treatment. All three levels— description, etiology and treatment— have been involved in defining mental retardation as x'. It is not obvious what x and x' mean in the case of mental retardation; in fact, they have referred to different characteristics at various points in history. While blindness as a disability (dx') has been understood and portrayed in various ways, the meanings of x— the ability to see, and x'— the corresponding inability, are not in question. In mental retardation, there has never been one definitive answer to what x and x' stand for. I will call a classification in which the definition of x' is inextricably bound up with etiology and treatment, and where x' is both internally and externally heterogeneous, unstable. A stable classification is one that

---

12I want to stress that I am speaking of blindness as a classification here. Clearly there are many blind persons who wish to challenge the ways in which blindness has been culturally defined and denigrated, and there are competing models by which to understand it (e.g. individual trait/pathological model of disability vs. a social constructivist model).

13This is not to say that medical advances cannot change one's condition. (E.g. a group of researchers at the University of Utah have developed a microchip implant which can allow "blind" persons to see grainy images. "Computer implant in brain gives sight to the blind", London Times, Sat. Sept. 14, 1996.) However, my notion of stability refers to the classification itself, not to the mutability of an individual's condition (which is what I refer to as static or dynamic).
has a clear, indisputable, verifiable definition of x and x', and where x' is at least externally homogeneous.  

Given this distinction, I maintain that it is possible to discuss various classifications in terms of their degrees of stability. The comparison of these two examples should make it clear why the statements "Blindness is socially constructed" and "Mental retardation is socially constructed" do not mean the same thing. While we can speak of both in terms of their social construction as disabilities (including the way they are thought of and experienced as "disabilities" within our society), I argue that mental retardation as a classification is far less stable than blindness. To obscure this difference is to ignore the complex relationship between particular classifications and the social context in which they emerge.

(3) Prototype Effects

Mental retardation is an unstable classification by virtue of its heterogeneity. There is one final feature of this category—perhaps the most interesting one—which arises from its instability: its ability to generate prototype effects. I will discuss this notion, first introduced by Elanor Rosch, as it is presented in George Lakoff's book, *Women, Fire and Other Dangerous Things*. Lakoff proposes an alternative to the "classical theory of categorization". In classical theory, no member of a category has special status, the properties defining the category are shared by all of its members, and "all conceptual categories must be symbols that can designate categories in the real world". Lakoff argues, instead, that the way we formulate categories depends upon features of our human cognition and experience, and that our categories are often asymmetrical. This last quality can be explained in terms of "prototype effects". In a number of experiments, Rosch

---

14 Some might take issue with my characterization of blindness, and argue that it is, in fact, much less stable than I have portrayed it to be.

found that subjects judged certain members more representative of a category than others. For example, a robin was more representative of the category BIRD than a duck; desk chair more representative of CHAIR than rocking chair. 16 Contrary to the classical view of categories, there are often "asymmetries among category members and asymmetric structures within categories." 17 She also found asymmetry in generalization, where "new information about a representative category member is more likely to be generalized to non-representative members than the reverse." 18 I would like to investigate the reasons that these asymmetries have developed in the case of mental retardation.

Insofar as it is a heterogeneous and unstable category, mental retardation has been open to multiple interpretations and definitions. The three levels of description, etiology and treatment have all played a significant role in the way that mental retardation was defined. At certain moments, the focus on one level has allowed for one particular portrait of mental retardation to dominate. For instance, during the eugenics movement, the emphasis was almost exclusively on etiology. The hereditarian explanation of feeblemindedness became the dominant one, and the prototypical feebleminded individual was one who came from a long line of "defectives" and who threatened to perpetuate his or her "bad stock". However, in the early days of the institution, the idea of cure and treatment gained prominence. The belief in the curability and improvability of idiocy overshadowed any talk of cause, and it was less important to give a precise definition of idiocy than it was to place as many "idiots" as possible in schools and begin their education and amelioration. Discourse about mental retardation took place at the level of etiology, description, and treatment, and because of the complex relationship between them, no one explanatory level achieved permanent dominance. The emphasis placed on each particular level at certain times, however, created prototype effects. Another source of asymmetry can be found in the tensions between the organic/non-organic,

---

16 Ibid, 41.
17 Ibid.
18 Ibid, 42.
qualitative/quantitative, static/dynamic, and visible/invisible. These conceptual pairs were always present in the classification of mental retardation; however, certain sides of these oppositions have been stressed, resulting in the perception of one "type" of mental retardation as the best representative of the category. Perhaps the most clear prototype was the "moron" who, in the early decades of the twentieth century, became the symbol of feeblemindedness. In this case, we find a quantitative, organic (intelligence was considered an innate quality), static, invisible case of mental retardation. The combination of these characterizations resulted in the representation of feeblemindedness as, above all, high-grade, hereditary and dangerous.

We also find the phenomenon of asymmetry in generalization, where information about a particular prototypical member gets generalized to the whole group. In the mid-nineteenth century, the evidence that some "idiots" were improvable and perhaps curable was transferred onto the whole population: mild and severe cases alike were placed in the new schools so that they could benefit. Similarly, once the "moron" was viewed as the prototypical example of feeblemindedness, his or her incurability was attributed to the entire population. For example, one prominent superintendent, Walter Fernald, "...emphasized the irreversible aspects, insisting that 'all degrees of congenital mental defect' resulted from 'permanent brain abnormalities'. This meant that a mentally handicapped person lived with an irremediable condition and Fernald argued that little could be done to improve it [emphasis mine]."\textsuperscript{19}

The actual terminology attests to this shift in prototypes. Initially, "idiot" was the generic term for all forms of mental retardation, though it was also the lowest of three sub-groups: idiot, imbecile and feebleminded. As the high-grades became prototypical, the general term changed to "feebleminded" which, like "idiot", was both the generic term, as well as a sub-group (in this case, the highest).\textsuperscript{20} The fact that the officers of the

\textsuperscript{19}Tyor and Bell, 98.
\textsuperscript{20}In 1910 Goddard did rename this group "morons" to avoid terminological confusion, but for at least twenty years, "feebleminded" referred to both the entire category and a particular sub-classification.
Association decided, in 1891, to designate all state institutions as "Institution for Feebleminded Children" (whereas they had previously used the term "idiot") is also indicative of this shift in prototypes. These two prototype effects help explain why historians have discussed this history in terms of the shift from optimism (in the mid-nineteenth century, when the educable "idiot" was prototypical) to pessimism (the early twentieth century, when the incurable "moron" symbolized feeblemindedness).

There is ample evidence (much more than there is room for here) that mental retardation, as a classification, was and still is prone to prototype effects. Yet prototype effects are just that- effects. They are not indicative of fundamental changes to the category as a whole; hence, we find the co-presence of both sides of the conceptual pairs, and mental retardation continues to be discussed at the levels of etiology, description and treatment. No one picture has ever entirely eclipsed the others.

What is fascinating about mental retardation as a classification is its persistence. It is precisely because of, not in spite of, its heterogeneity, instability, and the ability to generate prototype effects, that it has been able to survive for so long. As long as there are "experts" in different disciplines to define them, institutions to house them, schools to teach them, scientists to study them, psychologists to test them, educators to classify them, and people to judge them, the "mentally retarded" will continue to be objects of knowledge.

---

21Century of Concern, 20.
22There is evidence of this today: We have organic definitions of mental retardation based on identifiable genetic defects (e.g. Fragile X, Down's syndrome), yet we also define it according to the ability to function in a particular setting and admit that in a substantial percentage of the cases, there is no known etiology. See Luckasson et. al.
CHAPTER FOUR
MENTAL RETARDATION AS A GENDERED CLASSIFICATION

"This is the dawn. Womanhood shakes off its bondage. It asserts its right to be free. Like begets like. We gather perfect fruit from perfect trees. The race is but an amplification of its mother body, the multiplication of flesh habitations- beautiful and perfected souls akin to the mother soul....When the last fetter falls the evils that have resulted from the suppression of woman's will to freedom will pass. Child slavery, prostitution, feeblemindedness, physical deterioration, hunger, oppression and war will disappear from the earth."

-Margaret Sanger

In the previous chapter, I examined two ways of generating and organizing knowledge about mental retardation: the institution and the IQ test. This historical analysis revealed three features of this classification: it is internally and externally heterogeneous, unstable, and it generates prototype effects. In this chapter, I would like to explore another aspect of the development of mental retardation as an object of knowledge, one which has been given surprisingly little attention: the role of women in this history.

Though there has been much written about the history of mental retardation in the United States, I get a sense from the literature that it is in some sense genderless. From the time idiocy became a focal point in the mid- nineteenth century, through the eugenic fervor surrounding the "feeble-minded" leading up to World War I, both men and women were placed in the new schools and asylums for "idiots", were given IQ tests and placed in special educational programs, and the various categories of mental retardation (idiots, imbeciles, morons, moral imbecile) were applied to both. At first glance, it seems that the

1 "Women" as a category do not appear in the indexes of some histories of mental retardation. See Trent, Tyor and Bell. These histories rarely discuss race either. Adrienne Rich's term "white solipsism" applies to much of the work on mental retardation: it is discussing the history of the white persons labeled mentally retarded, though it does not make this explicit. See "Disloyal to Civilization: Feminism, Racism, Gynephobia," in her On Lies, Secrets, and Silence (New York: Norton, 1979), 299.
discourses and practices regarding the "mentally retarded" affected men and women equally. Upon closer examination, however, the role of women in the history of mental retardation emerges as a complex and important one.

This chapter will be structured around five groups of women that played a part in the historical world of mental retardation. They are: i) "feebleminded women"; ii) institutional caregivers; iii) mothers; iv) researchers; and v) reformists. In discussing these five groups, some of the features of classification I discussed in the previous chapter will emerge (e.g. prototype effects, the relationship between etiology and definition, and techniques of identifying the "feebleminded"). In addition to the insights these five groups will provide into the mechanisms of this classification, the complex relationships between them demand an analysis of power, and raise the issue of oppression with respect to mental retardation.

This chapter is a feminist analysis of mental retardation in three respects. First, this is an attempt to make women visible in a body of historical scholarship which has thus far failed to address the distinct position of women in this history. Secondly, I discuss the ways in which mental retardation functioned as a gendered classification. This involves an examination of the creation of a distinct prototypical form of "female feeblemindedness", and an analysis of the ways Victorian stereotypes of femininity shaped definitions, institutional practice, and the methods of gathering knowledge about

\footnote{Membership in these groups was not mutually exclusive; the overlapping of women's roles is one of the more interesting features of this history. I must also make the following qualification: the groups of women that I discuss in this chapter were white women who were subject to Victorian stereotypes of femininity that only applied to them (i.e. they did not apply to African-American and the Eastern and Southern European immigrant population). Though there were class differences between them (e.g. many of the "feebleminded" women institutionalized were poor, while the researchers and reformists were mostly upper-middle class), this chapter focuses on gender, rather than race and class, as a lens of analysis which applies to this specific population of women. See Sandra Bem, Lenses of Gender: Transforming the Debate on Sexual Inequality (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993).}

\footnote{For a detailed account of how women are rendered invisible in male scholarship, see Beverly Thiele, "Vanishing acts in social and political thought: Tricks of the trade".}

\footnote{I use the term "gendered" in the same way that Sandra Bem discusses the way persons and practices become "gendered". She outlines three "lenses", or "assumptions that reproduce male power": androcentrism, or male-centeredness; gender polarization, where the perceived differences between men and women function as an organizing principle of social life; and biological essentialism, the justification of inequality by appealing to biological accounts of male-female difference. (Bem, 2)}
feeblemindedness. Finally, I address the various forms of oppression in this history, and analyze the complex power relations between groups of women who occupied very different positions with respect to mental retardation. As Elizabeth Spelman writes, "We have to understand what one's oppression 'as a woman' means in each case."  

With the exception of the brief discussion of "disciplinary power" in the institution, the notions of power and oppression were absent in the previous chapter. I purposely provided an account of mental retardation as a classification as it was created and perpetuated "from above" by superintendents, institutional discourse and practice, and mental tests. It was not told from the perspective of active subjects who were classified and oppressed; rather, it discussed them as objects of knowledge. Before I turn to the first group of women, I would like to briefly outline the theoretical basis for my discussions of power and oppression, which draws upon the work of Michel Foucault and Iris Marion Young.

Social Groups and Modes of Power

Though I have examined only one form of power- disciplinary power- as it relates to mental retardation, Foucault explores a variety of forms of power in many of his "histories". He does not believe that one can offer a definition of "Power" independent of its exercise in a particular social context. Thus he defines "the exercise of power as a way in which certain actions may structure a field of other possible actions." For Foucault, power is relational, and an analysis of "power relations" cannot be reduced to the acts and motives of a particular individual; in this respect, it is non-subjective.

---

6Foucault argues that power can come "from above" (one example of this is monarchic power) as well as from below. See The History of Sexuality, 93-4.
7See Foucault, Madness and Civilization, The Birth of the Clinic; Discipline and Punish; History of Sexuality.
8Foucault, "The Subject and Power", 222.
9Foucault, History of Sexuality, 95.
Though power relations are inevitable and "rooted deep in the social nexus",\textsuperscript{10} they are not necessarily oppressive. Domination is one form, for instance, but there are many ways in which "certain actions may structure the field of other possible actions" that are not harmful, and some which give rise to forms of resistance.\textsuperscript{11} Power relations are a fact of social existence: they are inescapable, and "a society without power relations can only be an abstraction". Given the pervasiveness of these relations, what interests Foucault is their role in the process by which "human beings are made subjects".\textsuperscript{12}

The theory of oppression that Young presents in \textit{Justice and the Politics of Difference}, shares a number of things in common with Foucault's definition of power. I interpret her concept of oppression as one mode of power in the Foucauldian sense. Like Foucault's notion of power, Young defines oppression relationally, and does not think there is one essential definition. Her pluralistic approach to defining "five faces of oppression"\textsuperscript{13} shares the Foucauldian conviction that power must be analyzed in its particular forms, which vary depending on the context. Oppression, like power, is also "non-subjective". In an effort to depart from traditional notions of oppression as the "exercise of tyranny by a ruling group",\textsuperscript{14} Young argues that "oppression...refers to systemic constraints on groups that are not necessarily the result of the intentions of a tyrant."\textsuperscript{15}

Though I maintain that the five faces of oppression are modes of power in Foucault's sense, they are not exhaustive of all possible power relations. Foucault emphasizes that power relations need not involve domination, while Young associates domination with oppression. In her introduction she writes, "Oppression and domination

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{10}Foucault, "Subject and Power", 222-3.
\item \textsuperscript{11}Recall the beginning of the previous chapter, where I discuss "reverse-discourse". This would be one form of power relation which is liberating, rather than oppressive.
\item \textsuperscript{12}Ibid, 208.
\item \textsuperscript{13}Iris Marion Young, \textit{Justice and the Politics of Difference} (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990). Ch. 2.
\item \textsuperscript{14}Ibid, 40.
\item \textsuperscript{15}Ibid, 41.
\end{itemize}
should be the primary terms for conceptualizing injustice."\textsuperscript{16} Furthermore, Young's entire project is based on the belief that oppression is avoidable, and while Foucault would agree that specific modes of power can be altered or avoided, he maintains that there will always be some form of power relations at play.

Given this interpretation of oppression as one mode of power in Foucault's sense, I now turn to Young's five faces of oppression. They are: exploitation, marginalization, and powerlessness, which all deal with the social division of labor, cultural imperialism, and violence. Young states that these forms of oppression should be understood as applying to "social groups", not to atomistic, autonomous individuals. She defines a "social group" as "a collective of persons differentiated from at least one other group by cultural norms, practices, or way of life. Members of a group have a specific affinity with another because of their similar experience or way of life."\textsuperscript{17} Young finds that this concept of groups allows for a more thorough and complex analysis of oppression. Rather than the traditional view of oppression as the actions and policies of a few "tyrannical individuals",\textsuperscript{18} her theory defines oppression as a relation between groups.\textsuperscript{19} Her five faces of oppression provide the means by which to evaluate whether a particular social group is oppressed, and in what ways. For the purposes of my discussion, I will focus on the first four forms of oppression, as they apply to the history of mental retardation.\textsuperscript{20}

Drawing upon the Marxist notion of exploitation, Young states: "The central insight expressed in the concept of exploitation...is that this oppression occurs through a steady process of the transfer of the results of the labor of one social group to benefit another."\textsuperscript{21} She points to the work of various feminists who have identified the many

\textsuperscript{16}Ibid, 9.
\textsuperscript{17}Ibid, 43.
\textsuperscript{18}Ibid, 41.
\textsuperscript{19}Ibid, 42.
\textsuperscript{20}There is no question that violence played an enormous role in this history. The corporeal punishment and abhorrent conditions in institutions, forced sterilization, and sexual abuse of inmates are only a few examples. However, my discussion here will not address this form of oppression.
\textsuperscript{21}Ibid, 49.
ways in which women have performed devalued "feminine jobs" for the benefit of those upon whom they are dependent (usually men), thus transferring the results of the labor from one social group to another. In the case of the "feebleminded", it will become apparent that the use of inmate labor was a form of exploitation.

The next two forms of oppression played a role in the lives of both "feebleminded" and "able-minded" women. Marginalization, Young says, is "perhaps the most dangerous form of oppression. A whole category of people is expelled from useful participation in social life and thus potentially subjected to severe material deprivation and even extermination." Young identifies a number of groups that have been marginalized because they cannot contribute to the labor force, including the elderly, the sick, and the disabled. The present chapter reveals that, for the "feebleminded", marginalization occurred at many levels. Powerlessness, the third face of oppression, happens to groups who "lack authority and are those over whom power is exercised without their exercising it". Though this form of oppression is clearly at work in the history of mental retardation, I will argue that Young's definition is not entirely equipped to deal with the complex relationships that operated in the definitions and practices surrounding "feeblemindedness".

The final face of oppression I analyze is "cultural imperialism". Young says, "To experience cultural imperialism means to experience how the dominant meanings of society render the particular perspective of one's own group invisible at the same time as they stereotype one's group and mark it out as the Other." As we shall see, most of the women I discuss suffered this form of oppression at some level. Researchers, reformists, and mothers were oppressed as a result of being women in a predominantly

---

22Ibid.
23Ibid, 53.
24Ibid.
25Ibid, 56.
patriarchal society. The women labeled "feebleminded" experienced cultural imperialism at another level, by virtue of being both female and "feebleminded".

In discussing these instances of exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, and cultural imperialism, it will become clear that the dynamics of oppression had a significant impact on the classification of mental retardation. This new focus on power relations both within and without the institutional world of mental retardation adds an important dimension to this history. While the second chapter focused primarily on the expert/object dichotomy, and examined the ways various "experts" produced knowledge and devised practices to deal with their "object" of study and treatment, an analysis of the five roles women played in this story will begin to reveal the complex relationships between active human subjects.

1) "Feebleminded Women": A Prototype Effect

Mental retardation never became a "female malady" in the way that hysteria and other mental illnesses have become associated with women and feminine characteristics. However, in the first decades of this century, the "feebleminded woman" became representative of the nature and dangers of the category as a whole. The focus on the female form of feeblemindedness is another example of a prototype effect in the history of mental retardation. As we shall see, this asymmetry was largely due to the intersection between conceptions of feeblemindedness and stereotypes of femininity. By virtue of her membership in two socially defined groups - women and the "feebleminded" - the "feebleminded woman" was singled out as a perversion of the former group and a symbol of the latter.

Beginning in the late nineteenth century, there emerged a distinctly gendered class of "mental defectives" who received the attention of doctors, superintendents, legislators

---

and philanthropists: the "feebleminded woman". Evidence of the preoccupation with this new group can be found in numerous places: in written documents concerning the nature of feeblemindedness; the meetings of the American Association for the Study of Feeblemindedness (now the AAMR); in the legislation which passed and provided funds to research and build institutions for these women; and in the number of custodial facilities built explicitly for women. What accounted for this new concern with "feebleminded" women? Why were discussions of gender virtually absent from discourse about mental deficiency until the late nineteenth century?

The emergence of this female class would not have been possible without the new category of "moral imbecility" which, in its early forms, was usually male. As Trent explains:

Before the [Civil] war, moral idiots were almost always male....When superintendents wrote about this type of idiot, their illustrations were of 'boys' who had improved both intellectually and morally under the tutelage of the institution. A decade after the war the discovery of female moral imbeciles, whose moral imbecility included the ability to bear illegitimate children, added a new urgency to the type.

The "moral imbecile"- whom we encountered in the second chapter- was differentiated from the "idiot" and "imbecile" insofar as s/he was far more deficient in the moral faculties than the intellect, while the "idiot" or "imbecile" were simply mentally deficient (and in fact, quite likable morally). This category quickly became prominent because it was more dangerous than idiocy for two reasons. First, "moral imbeciles" were closely linked with crime, pauperism and degeneracy, hence they were considered a menace to society. Isaac Kerlin's typology of "moral imbeciles" confirms this. He divided them into four classes: the alcohol inebriate, the tramp, the prostitute, and the habitual criminal. Furthermore,

---

28 See Collected Papers.
29 See Century of Concern.
30 Trent, 69-77.
31 Ibid., 23.
32 Kerlin, "Moral Imbecility", 308.
there was the added danger that, because of their higher mental functioning, "moral imbeciles" could pass for normal and thus go undetected.

The emergence of female feeblemindedness as a distinct problem relied upon the existing emphasis on the "moral imbecile" (later called the "moron") which, as discussed in the second chapter, already constituted a prototype effect. The "high-grade" forms of feeblemindedness, particularly those associated with moral deficiency, became representative of the category as a whole; and the female incarnation of this type of feeblemindedness became symbolic of this prototypical group, and was considered representative of the dangers of feeblemindedness generally.

The belief that feeblemindedness was hereditary contributed greatly to the new focus on the "feebleminded woman". If mental deficiency was transmissible from one generation to the next, then it was of utmost importance that the "feebleminded" not be allowed to procreate. Women, as the symbols of procreative power, were particularly dangerous: "The sooner you can make people understand that the most economical thing we can do is to shut up every one of these children, especially the female, the more economical it is going to be for every state in the union."33 Much of the focus was upon the tendency of these women to have illegitimate children. Walter Femald (the superintendent for the Massachusetts School for the Feebleminded from 1887-1924) stated in 1893, "There is hardly a poorhouse in this land where there are not two or more feebleminded women with from one to four illegitimate children."34 By 1912, he had made the link between feeblemindedness and immorality in women definitive: "Feebleminded women are almost invariably immoral and if at large usually become carriers of venereal disease or give birth to children who are defective as themselves. The feebleminded woman who marries is twice as prolific as the normal woman."35

33A quote from Dr. G.H.Knight, one of the founding members of the Association, in 1891. Century of Concern, 21.
34Century of Concern, 26.
There are countless passages such as these which describe the dangers of female feeblemindedness. Yet what is striking about this concern is the way that Victorian feminine stereotypes influenced the classification and treatment of these women. In his article, "Denied the Power to Choose the Good: Sexuality and Mental Defect in American Medical Practice, 1850-1920", Peter Tyor argues that "nineteenth century sexual norms and gender roles encouraged physicians to treat deviant female sexual behavior as evidence of mental retardation which warranted stringent measures of social control."36 He shows that women's admission ages and retention time was higher after the 1870's, a fact which reflects the perception of women of childbearing age as the most dangerous. Stereotypical views of female vulnerability only added to the need to protect this class; in Fernald's words, "...a feebleminded girl is exposed as no other girl in the world is exposed. She has not the sense enough to protect herself from the perils to which women are subjected".37

As the Second Annual Report of the Trustees of the New York State Custodial Asylum for Feebleminded Women (1887) stated, "the purpose of the asylum was to take women 'who grade in mind from being erratic to idiotic, one-fifth of whom being mothers from no wedlock' and who because of mental defect were 'ungoverned and easily yielding to lust, denied the power to choose the good, and to see them sheltered from the vices of vicious men.'"38 As these quotes suggest, the problem was not simply the moral deficit in the female "moral imbecile"; by virtue of her womanhood, she was even more vulnerable and in need of protection.

Though this group needed protection, society also needed protection from them; thus, a steady campaign began to segregate these women in all-female institutions, and to separate women from men in already existing asylums. The first custodial facility for

---

37quoted in Tyor, 482.
38Tyor, 480.
women was built in New York in 1878, and many followed. In 1905, four state governors recommended increasing the facilities for "feebleminded" girls or women of childbearing age.

There is no doubt that countless feebleminded men played out their lives in institutions; however, I maintain that gender was a decisive factor in retaining women, insofar as the stereotypes of women as passive and vulnerable deemed "feebleminded" women at even greater risk than men upon leaving the institution. A study (1920's) on paroled inmates at Letchworth Village, for example, concluded that "males are far more successful in extra-institutional adaptation" than the females due to the sexual vulnerability of the "feebleminded" women:

At times of relaxed supervision the girl is the easy prey of unscrupulous persons and, pursued, falls a ready victim to sex delinquencies. The boy, belonging to the aggressive sex, because of his dull wit, cannot successfully compete with his more normal brethren in the game of procreation.

Here again we see the effect of sexual stereotypes: "feebleminded" women, insofar as they are passive, are at greater danger of indulging or "falling prey" to sexual vice; "feebleminded" men, on the other hand, are deprived of their aggressive nature due to their deficiency, and are thus less likely to procreate. In fact, if the procreative potential of women were to be removed, they would be perfectly fine candidates for parole, as the Letchworth study indicates:

These girls who have gone out from our institution and have come back as failures would have been successes if they had been sterilized. They are...

---

39 By the late 1880's, Pennsylvania, Ohio and Illinois all had separate "cottages" or facilities for women of child-bearing age. Trent, 76.
40Century of Concern, 65.
41Letchworth Village, a state institution for mental defectives in Thielle, N.Y., was opened in 1911, and by 1926 had 2,000 patients. Of the 107 men and 148 women paroled, 14 men and 84 women were returned to the institution (5% of the women were returned because they had borne illegitimate children). See Howard W. Potter and Crystal McCollister, "A Resume of Parole Work at Letchworth Village", in Marvin Rosen, Gerald Clark, Marvin Kivitz, A History of Mental Retardation: Collected Papers, Volume 2 (Baltimore: University Park Press, 1976), 137.
42Ibid.
43Trent traces the uses of sterilization, and says that by the 1920's it had become a precondition for parole (Ch. 6).
successes— they have good personalities, but from our standard and the standards of the social workers, they are failures. They cannot go out year after year and keep absolutely straight.\(^{44}\)

Tyor's data supports this reluctance to grant parole to women inmates: women were admitted in greater numbers at childbearing age, and were retained within the institutions for longer periods of time than their male counterparts.\(^ {45}\) Thus, not only were women incarcerated at childbearing age due to the dangers of procreation, but they were refused parole because of their "natural" feminine vulnerability and passivity.

As we have already seen, the "moral imbecile" (male and female) acquired a new name with Goddard's 1910 taxonomy. He coined the term "moron" (which comes from the Greek word moros which means foolish) to refer to the highest grade of "feeblemindedness", which was inextricably linked with immorality and heredity. In Chapter Two I argued that the "moron" became prototypical example of feeblemindedness because of its invisibility and thanks to the ability of IQ tests to identify so many cases of "high-grade" feeblemindedness. However, of this class, the female brand became the most representative. An example of the way in which the feminine incarnation of this class became prominent can be found in Goddard's study of the Kallikak Family. Though both male and female cases of feeblemindedness were identified, the focus on Deborah Kallikak, the feebleminded girl supposedly responsible for this "defective line", contributes to the asymmetrical nature of this category: its female form is infused with significant symbolic power.

The case of Deborah Kallikak became the paradigm example of the "high-grade" class of the feebleminded, and her descent from a long line of bad heredity underscored the dangerous consequences of procreation by the feebleminded. I quote Goddard's description of Deborah at length because I think it exemplifies the prevailing view of the female moron:

\(^{44}\)Potter and McCollister, 143.
\(^{45}\)Tyor, 477.
[Deborah] is a typical illustration of the mentality of a high-grade feeble-minded person, the moron, the delinquent, the kind of girl or woman that fills our reformatories. They are wayward, they get into all sorts of trouble and difficulties, sexually and otherwise.... It is also the history of the same type of girl in the public school. Rather good-looking, bright in appearance, with many attractive ways, the teacher clings to hope, indeed insists that such a girl will come out all right. Our work with Deborah convinces us that such hopes are delusions. Here is a child who has been most carefully guarded. She has been persistently trained since she was eight years old, and yet nothing has been accomplished in the direction of higher intelligence or general education. Today if this young woman were to leave the Institution, she would at once become a prey to the designs of evil men or evil women and would lead a life that would be vicious, immoral, or criminal, though because of her mentality she herself would not be responsible. There is nothing that she might not be led into, because she has no power of control, and all her instincts and appetites are in the direction that would lead to vice.46

Here we see all the features of female feeblemindedness: her sexual immorality, her vulnerability, her dangerous presence outside of the institution, and the hopelessness of education and parole. Because of her mental and moral defect, she is incapable of avoiding the evils and vices which would inevitably cross her path. Deborah's eighty-one years in the Vineland State School attest to the belief that the best fate for these vulnerable women was to remain within the Institution.

A number of factors played a role in the construction of the "feebleminded woman" as a prototype: i) the emergence of moral imbecility as a representative sub-category allowed for the focus upon the immorality of women in particular; ii) the emphasis on heredity and procreation made the segregation and retention of women paramount to avoid the spread of feeblemindedness; iii) the prevailing sexual stereotypes of women as passive, vulnerable procreators; and iv) the efforts by other non-"feebleminded" women to pick out their "feebleminded" counterparts, institutionalize them, and use them to forward their own political agendas. (Though I have not addressed it here, I will discuss this fourth factor at length in the section on "reformists"). In the

46 Goddard, 11-12.
creation of the "feebleminded woman" as prototypical, we see the consequences of being identified in two overlapping social groups that are oppressed.

The "feebleminded" would qualify as a social group according to Young's definition. She distinguishes a social group from an "aggregate- any classification of persons according to some attribute", and argues that while the aggregate model views the individual as ontologically prior to the collective, social groups "constitute individuals" insofar as one's identity is derivative from them.47 As I have shown, it would be difficult to reduce the "mentally retarded" to one common attribute; the many definitions and explanations for "idiocy" and "feeblemindedness" reflect a complex social process by which this group was picked out, and this will become even more evident in what follows. Furthermore, their segregation within institutions, the direct effect their classification has had on the education and treatment they received, and the lack of agency and control they have had over their lives, are all evidence that in a very real sense, their identities have been shaped by their membership in the group labeled the "feebleminded". Young also states that each oppressed group does not necessarily have a corresponding oppressing social group.48 This is certainly the case for the "feebleminded". As the previous chapters have shown, it is impossible to point to one individual, or even one discipline or institution, responsible for the definition and treatment of feeblemindedness. However, Young does say that every oppressed group has a corresponding privileged group, which will become equally clear in the examination of the remaining four groups of women.

Given that the "feebleminded" represent a social group according to Young's definition, in what ways were "feebleminded" women oppressed?

Women labeled "feebleminded" suffered cultural imperialism at a number of levels. The dominant patriarchal stereotypes of (white, middle-class) women as passive, vulnerable, procreative vessels, were applied to "feebleminded" women as well, and in

47 Young, 43, 45.
48 Ibid, 41.
fact justified their incarceration. At the same time, the great importance placed on mental ability and "proper" sexual conduct rendered them invisible, not just insofar as it did not allow them to express their "particular perspective", but in the physical sense. The institutionalization of "feebleminded" women marginalized them, making them completely socially invisible.

In addition to her prototypical status and her oppression as a member of two social groups, we also see in the "feebleminded woman" the instability of this classification. As Tyor rightly suggests, it was sexual misconduct (i.e. birth of an illegitimate child) that became the new "sign" of feeblemindedness; the "feebleminded woman" as a new recognizable type emerged simultaneously with a new diagnostic method. The boundaries which defined the very nature of feeblemindedness were highly permeable: in its female form, the definition and detection of "feeblemindedness" was inseparable from dominant moral codes and expectations.

2) Institutional Caregivers: The Paradox of Inmate Labor

From their birth in the 1840's, the earliest American educational institutions for "idiots" relied upon female labor. Edouard Seguin, the French educator and psychologist whose work at Bicêtre and the Salpêtrière in France inspired the first educational facilities for "idiots" in the United States\textsuperscript{49}, was explicit about the importance of women working in the institution as attendants, teachers and matrons. In his description of the Institution, he explains the duties of each female employee. The attendant must be a gentle caring woman, and given that her nature cannot go beyond that, must defer to the male scientific authority when she runs into trouble:

The attendant cannot be empowered to punish or coerce children, but to help and incite them only; hence the necessity of choosing for that function women very kind, gay, attractive, endowed with open faces, ringing voices, clear eyes, easy movements, and affectionate propensity towards children. These are their

only real power; when it fails they have to refer to their presumed superiors in intelligence, and to borrow of them an authority which cannot be exercised but with a complete knowledge of the physiological anomalies of each case. Thus is spent the time of these good women, who attend to the idiots much in the same manner as the monks of Spain of yore, and the farmers of Ghel later, took care of the insane, with little science, but a great deal of charity.  

Seguin suggests that science was beyond a woman's reach, but her propensity to care, nurture and provide charity made her a perfect candidate for attending to those in need. Similarly, women teachers are not allowed to teach the physical activities; the role of the gymnast was only filled by men: "the gymnast seems to need more than the teacher, the quality of judging the point at which each exercise must be carried by each child, to be physiological and safe." Once again, women are thought unfit to make the more sophisticated decisions which rely upon scientific knowledge of physiology, which lay at the core of Seguin's method.

According to Seguin, the woman who has the most power in the institution is the matron. She is responsible for overseeing the attendants, seeing that each child is well-taken care of, she presides at all the festivities, and examines the children when they are hurt. Yet despite this active role, she is not considered in charge of the institution. The superintendent (who throughout the nineteenth century was almost always a medical doctor) is the man who oversees the entire operation: Seguin states he "is or should be the head. He is supposed to be prepared by special studies to confront the important problem enclosed in the yet mysterious word idiocy." Isaac Kerlin's Manual of Elwyn describes the importance of the matron acting in natural mothering role: "To be true Matrons they should be the centre and example of the ladyhood of the family, the constant friends and helpers of the Superintendents, and the generous and sympathetic

---

50 Seguin, 190.
51 Ibid., 193.
52 Ibid.
foster-mothers of our dependent children". Attendants, teachers and matrons were expected to exhibit and act according to their "natural" feminine capabilities.

As we saw in the second chapter, the institutional world was the primary vehicle for studying and treating idiocy, and the superintendents were responsible for much of the knowledge generated about mental retardation. This power was built into the very structure of the institution, which was patterned explicitly upon the middle-class patriarchal family: superintendent as commanding father, matron and attendants as the caregivers, and the inmates as children. The fact that these institutions, from their inception, exemplified the gender roles of the times, is hardly surprising. Yet there is another feature of the institution which makes this fact far more interesting: as I will illustrate, the use of inmate labor also conformed to these norms.

In his 1893 description of American institutions for the "feebleminded", Walter Fernald explains the division of inmates into two departments: the high-grades were placed in educational facilities (which amounted to training them to work within the institution), while the low-grade idiots, juvenile insane, epileptics and moral imbeciles were placed in the custodial department. Thus, "The daily routine work of a large institution furnishes these trained adults with abundant opportunities for doing simple manual labor, which otherwise would have been done by paid employees." It was both convenient and cheaper for the institution to employ inmates to work for free. Though inmate labor was supposed to serve educational purposes, as Trent says, "it solved the two perennial problems faced by institutions: employee costs and employee retention".

Trent goes on to point out that "All institutions relied almost exclusively on the care of custodial inmates by salaried attendants and higher-functioning inmates." The

---

54 Fernald, 324.
55 Ibid, 324-5.
56 Trent, 105.
57 Ibid, 122.
caregiving, nurturing attendants (mostly female) were not the only women playing that role in the institution; the female inmates themselves were responsible for caring for other, more severely "feebleminded" patients. While the men worked on the farm (many institutions were on large pieces of farmland) and did manual labor, "feebleminded" women learned basket weaving, sewing, nursing, and most importantly, cared for the low-grade idiots and imbeciles. As Fernald states:

Many of these adult females, naturally kind and gentle, have the instinctive feminine love for children, and are of great assistance in caring for the feeble and crippled children in the custodial department.58

As we saw earlier, the reason that women were given the job of attendant was because of their alleged innate feminine capacity to nurture. What is remarkable about the employing of feebleminded women to care for other inmates, as Fernald's statement illustrates, is that the very women who embodied these quintessential female traits were the same women who had given birth to illegitimate children, were considered the "paupers of paupers", and were thought to have perverted the sexual behavioral norms expected of women. Though in need of segregation and protection by virtue of her deficient intellect and moral faculty, the "feebleminded" woman's caregiving nature remained intact.

Here we see the way that static and dynamic conceptions of feeblemindedness operated simultaneously: "high-grade feebleminded" women were unteachable, static cases of moral and intellectual defect if left outside the institution (recall Kerlin's description of this moral defect as indelible), but malleable and ultimately useful workers within. I maintain that the tension between these two portrayals is more than a function of the belief in the therapeutic benefits of institutionalization. It was not simply that within the protective facility, "feebleminded" women could lead worthwhile lives. There were two competing definitions of her very nature: on the one hand, she was inherently morally defective and the birth of an illegitimate child proved her feeblemindedness; on the other hand, she was seen as able to properly care for children- presumably in a morally

58Fernald, 325.
acceptable fashion—which is why she was employed within the institution. Paradoxically, the same women who had perverted the virtues of feminine purity and motherhood in the outside world, were called upon to use them within the walls of the institution. One finds countless examples like the "Sunset Sisters" of the Indiana School, who cared for the "idiots" and "imbeciles" housed in Sunset Cottage: "higher-functioning female inmates, were assigned the care of one or more of these low-grade inmates. Seven days a week, every day of the year, the Sisters fed, changed, bathed and attended to them."59

The mothering role played by these women was in part justified by the infantilization of the "feebleminded" which has been a constant feature of this classification. If all of the adults and children housed within the institution are thought of as children, then it is only natural that they need a mother to care for them. I think the following statement by the superintendent of the Indiana School captures this double vision of the childlike and feminine qualities of the feebleminded:

Most appealing of all the touching sights in an institution, is to see the tenderness and patience exercised by a big overgrown man-baby or woman-baby, towards a tiny child-baby when put in their care. The maternal instinct is almost always present, and is often as strong in the males as in the females; fortunately for them and for us it is much stronger than the sex instinct.60

Here we find a complex blend of definitions and stereotypes: the high-grade feebleminded woman (men, too, have this potential) is at once maternal, childlike, and asexual. The pathological sexual instincts which defined these women as "moral imbeciles" and sanctioned their admittance into the institution have disappeared, and we are left with the touching sign of a woman-baby caring for her child-baby. Thousands of incarcerated women who fulfilled this role were evidence of a goal accomplished, well articulated by the spokeswoman for the feebleminded of her sex, Josephine Lowell: "...these unhappy beings need, first of all, to be taught to be women; they must be induced to love that which

59 Trent, 104.
60 Quoted in Trent, 104-105.
is good and pure, and to wish to resemble it; they must learn all household duties; they must learn to enjoy work....[emphasis mine]"61

The use of feebleminded labor within the institution served a far more insidious purpose than teaching and training these women for rehabilitative purposes. I agree with Tyor that the dramatic rise in the number of women institutionalized as feebleminded for violating sexual norms was also a convenient way of assembling a greater labor force. The fact that the educational and reformative rhetoric surrounding "high-grade" cases was being abandoned at the same time that more of them were being trained to work within the institution62, indicates that a new kind of training was in place: one which served the purposes of the institution. The rhetoric of educability and reform simultaneously created and fulfilled the need for institutional labor, and ensured that the institution could remain a self-perpetuating mechanism.

Evidence of this can be found in the nursing programs developed in the institutions. Trent describes the one at the Rome Asylum in New York: "Bernstein [the superintendent] began a nursing class. By 1925, 38 female inmates had enrolled, 21 completed coursework....The graduates of these nursing programs found employment at their own institution, became nurses and nurses' aides at other county or state institutions."63 The dangers of procreation and immorality, and the fact that moral imbecility was decidedly incurable, ensured that feebleminded women would not be released from the institution; yet they were clearly moral, and educable enough to be taught to be employed within the institution, as nurses, mothers and caregivers, which, as Trent has pointed out, fulfilled both economic and practical demands of the institution. The female "moral imbecile" came to the forefront precisely at that time when the custodial institutions needed her most.

---

62 See Trent, Ch. 5.
63 Ibid, 110.
The "feebleminded" women like the Sunset Sisters and the Rome Asylum attendants were caught in a complex web of stereotypes, rhetoric and institutional needs. Female inmates were viewed simultaneously as caregivers fulfilling their "natural maternal instincts", and as intellectually and morally deficient children. The rhetoric of heredity and menace ensured that they would play the role of "woman-baby" in the institution for the rest of their lives. As the ineducable and dangerous "moron" became prototypical, greater numbers of men and women were being trained to become a permanent labor force in the institution.64

In addition to interpreting the use of inmate labor from the perspective of institutional exigency, we can also analyze it in terms of its oppressive nature. The first three faces of oppression Young defines all deal with the social division of labor, and all are at work within the institution: "feebleminded" women as a group were exploited, marginalized and powerless.

The "feebleminded woman" was exploited insofar as the benefits of her institutional labor were transferred to others. The "low-grade" inmates clearly relied upon her care, but it was the institution which presided over her like a great paternal figure that ultimately benefited. Her labor served the needs of the very structure that limited her freedom. Thus, in addition to exploiting the "feebleminded" woman, the institution contributed to her marginalization.

The "feebleminded" as a class (men and women) were clearly marginalized: their segregation within institutions was a sign of their lack of productivity and inability to contribute to or enhance society. As a result, they were subjected to material deprivation, which "blocks the opportunity to exercise capacities in socially defined and recognized ways."65 However, within the institution, because of their marginalization, they were able to be exploited. The institution provided for basic needs precisely so that the

---

64Ibid, Chs. 4 and 5.
65Young, 54.
"feebleminded" could be trained and expected to "exercise capacities in socially defined and recognized ways". There are multiple layers of oppression at work here, and we can see the interrelation between marginalization and exploitation in the dynamics of institutional and extra-institutional definitions of feeblemindedness.

Young defines the "powerless" as "those over whom power is exercised without their exercising it; the powerless are situated so they must take orders and rarely have the right to give them."66 Perhaps because Young discusses powerlessness primarily in terms of the power relations between professionals/non-professionals, her notion of powerlessness does not accurately describe the power relations within the institution. Furthermore, the hierarchical nature of this model (i.e. rulers/ruled) is at odds with a Foucauldian notion of power as coming from multiple points and with the possibility of resistances.67 To avoid confusion, I will discuss Young's concept of powerlessness in terms of authority (the ability to give orders, make rules and decisions, occupying a respected professional role), and what I call "practical power": performing labor which does not grant one authority (in the above sense), but allows one to directly affect the lives of others. I find this distinction helpful in analyzing the power relations at work in the institution which are not captured by Young's definition of "powerlessness".

Both "feebleminded" and "non-feebleminded" female caregivers lacked authority with respect to the dominant male superintendents, and both were exploited for their "feminine labor". Nevertheless, there was an important difference in the oppression of "feebleminded" women as opposed to their "able-minded" counterparts: the paid female attendant did have authority over the "feebleminded, woman-baby" who cared for the more severely disabled. "Feebleminded" attendants were in a position of practical power, however. With respect to the "low-grades" whom they took care of, they were able to directly affect the lives of these individuals. As Trent says, "the attendant, not the

---

66Young, 50.
67See History of Sexuality, 94-6.
educator or the physician, was, in fact if not in rhetoric, the most crucial actor in the lives of inmates after 1890.\textsuperscript{68} Though the many "feebleminded" women who occupied this role may not have had the authority granted to "able-minded" attendants and superintendents, it would be an oversimplification to say that they were completely "powerless".

The use of inmate labor puts into relief the multiple forms of oppression at work in the institution: exploitation, marginalization, cultural imperialism, and various degrees of "powerlessness" with respect to authority and practical power. More generally, these power relations point to the instability of the classification of feeblemindedness. Depending on her place within and without the institution, the very nature and status of the "feebleminded woman" changed.

3) Women As Mothers: The Role of Etiology

Women have played a role as both inmates and employees of the institutions for the "feebleminded"; they have been painted as both dangers and saviors because of their femininity. I would like to move out of the context of the institution now, and consider the problem of etiology once again. Recall that one characteristic of an unstable classification is that etiologic explanations can directly affect the way the condition is defined and understood. The question "Why?" has mattered much more to the classification of mental retardation than it has to other classifications. One etiologic explanation that was prominent in this history focused specifically on women: "mothers" as a group played an important part in explaining the cause of feeblemindedness.

We have already encountered the issue of motherhood in the context of mental retardation. As discussed earlier, giving birth to an illegitimate child was considered a sign of feeblemindedness, and became integral to the classification and institutionalization of the "feebleminded woman". The assumption that women had a natural capacity to nurture

\textsuperscript{68}Trent, 129.
and fulfill their mothering instincts affected the division of labor within the institutions, and justified the maternal roles of both paid attendants/"matrons" and "high-grade" female inmates. In this section I will discuss the way in which both "feebleminded" and "able-minded" women as mothers were portrayed as responsible for feeblemindedness. Both men and women were identified in pedigree studies\(^6^9\) as the causes of degeneracy; alcoholics, epileptics, sexually immoral men and women alike could pass on the bad blood, the "tainted germ plasm" which would perpetuate and worsen the deficiencies already within the family. Figures of women like Deborah Kallikak certainly reinforced the notion that feeblemindedness was hereditary, but was there anything significant about women spreading this curse? Were mothers and fathers equally at fault for their "feebleminded" children? If we examine the historical world of mental retardation, it becomes clear that there was preoccupation with mothers in particular, and the image of the "bad-mother" played an important part in explaining feeblemindedness.\(^7^0\)

In the context of this discussion of the etiology of mental retardation, a "bad mother" was one who in some way caused her child to be "feebleminded". The paradigmatic case was the Kallikak family, where a good man fathers two families- one with the "feebleminded" girl and the other with a good, "normal" woman. Hasain, in his book \textit{Eugenic Rhetoric in Anglo-American Thought}, links this dual representation of motherhood to the rhetoric of eugenics:

The characterization of American women in hard-line eugenics stories often involved a rhetorical division between those moral women who had good habits and healthy germ plasm and the unhealthy 'shiftless' women who polluted America's genetic pool. Normal women married, had the requisite number of children to perpetuate the race, and raised their children eugenically. Unhealthy or abnormal women were biologically 'feebleminded' or otherwise inferior.\(^7^1\)

\(^7^0\)For a discussion of "mother-blaming" as it manifests itself in a series of "perfect-mother" and "bad-mother" myths, see Paula Caplan's \textit{Don't Blame Mother: Mending the Mother-Daughter Relationship} (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1989).
\(^7^1\)Marouf Arif Hasain, Jr., \textit{The Rhetoric of Eugenics in Anglo-American Thought} (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1996), 81.
This good/bad mother dichotomy can be analyzed at two levels. First, I will explain why the "feebleminded" woman became the symbol of the "bad mother" with respect to the spread of feeblemindedness. Then I will examine how "normal" women could be considered "bad mothers" insofar as they, too, could cause feeblemindedness.

The concept of a "good feebleminded mother" did not exist in the early decades of the twentieth century. According to the hereditarian view of feeblemindedness, "feebleminded" women were likely to spread their tainted germplasm on to their offspring. In the words of Walter Fernald:

[High-grade female imbeciles] are certain to become sexual offenders and to spread venereal disease or to give birth to degenerate children. Their numerous progeny usually become public charges or diseased or neglected children, imbeciles, epileptics, juvenile delinquents, or later as adult paupers or criminals.72

Insofar as "feebleminded" women were seen as directly responsible for producing "degenerate" children, any woman who was "feebleminded" and chose to procreate represented a "bad mother". "Feebleminded mothers" were also symbols of promiscuity and careless procreation. This can be seen clearly in the fact that giving birth to an illegitimate child was considered proof of feeblemindedness. As discussed earlier, this justified the incarceration of many of these women who, ironically, were then put to work as surrogate mothers caring for "low-grade" inmates within the institutions.

Thus, the "feebleminded woman" was the quintessential "bad-mother" in two respects: she symbolized careless and immoral procreation, and represented the danger of spreading tainted germplasm to one's offspring. Yet this image of the bad mother, embodied by the "feebleminded" woman, could be applied to "able-minded" women as well.

The image of the "feebleminded" mother as an immoral, careless procreator, was countered by the myth of the "good, able-minded mother", whose vigilance would prevent her from having a "feebleminded" child. Though there was concern with feebleminded men

72Quoted in Century of Concern, 76-77.
reproducing, the fact that women were the carriers of children and gave birth to them was not an unimportant fact. Many doctors argued that the state of the mother during intercourse "has much power in the formation of the foetus, both in modifying its physical constitution and in determining the character and temperament of its mind."73 "Able-minded" women, as mothers, were considered crucial to the prevention of feeblemindedness.

Seguin identified a number of important ways in which idiocy could be prevented: keeping the woman in good mental and physical health during pregnancy, teaching women the signs of idiocy in their newborns, so they might get immediate attention, and ensuring that the mother gives enough attention and love to the child:

How much more sensible it would be for young couples to try to live according to hygienic rules, to keep the pregnant woman in comfortable conditions...sooner than to act as if relying upon the wisdom of the embryo to feed himself out of no food and to keep himself unmoved amidst the emotions of his mother....[Of the signs of idiocy]Who could watch over the tardy coming of these functions better than a mother, if she were timely advised by a competent physician? The skill of the latter is of no avail without her vigilance, and her zeal may be very blind, even mischievous indeed without his advice; stuttering, squinting and all sorts of bodily defects, besides the perpetuation of the worst symptoms of early idiocy, are too often due to the want of this concerted action of love and knowledge.74

The belief that vigilant mothers, under the guidance of a male physician, could prevent idiocy, or at least mitigate its effects, is evidence of a tension between two competing myths about mothers: that "only the experts know how to raise children", and that "women are born nurturers".75 Seguin's rhetorical question embodies this dual picture of a woman's "natural" capacity to mother, and her dependence on the epistemological authority of the doctor: "Who could watch over the tardy coming of these functions better than a mother, if she were timely advised by a competent physician?"

74Seguin, 60, 62.
75Caplan, 105.
This vigilance could take many forms, and there were concerns among male "experts" that women pursuing higher education and other traditionally "male" goals were endangering their children. Seguin noted that the stress of emancipation had made women more vulnerable to the dangers during pregnancy, and his cautionary words made quite a stir. At the 1887 annual meeting of the Association of Medical Officers of American Institutions of Idiotic and Feebleminded Persons, a prominent Philadelphia lawyer included the following reference to Seguin in his paper entitled "A Medico-Legal Study of Idiocy":

It is rather depressing to those of us who may favor the extension on what is called 'The Sphere of Women' to be told that a modern factor of idiocy has arisen through the influence of gynagogues. This delightful term...is supposed to represent the class of agitators of women's rights. Concerning the result of their labors, Dr. Seguin says, 'We overburden women, they overburden themselves, and choose or accept burdens unfit for them....As soon as women assumed the anxieties pertaining to both sexes they gave birth to children whose like had hardly been met with thirty years ago- insane before their brain could have been deranged by their own exertions- insane, likely, by a reflex action of the nervous exhaustion of their mother. Children gotten under such moral and other pressures cannot truly be said to be born from the union, but rather from the division of their parents; conceived in antagonism, they can only be excessive in their tendencies or monsters in their organization.

The stress on women from pursuing goals thought to be unfit for their sex and constitution was viewed as a cause of idiocy and insanity, of monstrosity and excess.

Feminist historians have pointed to this fact as well. Gordon describes the double standard which was operant at the time: "the very attitudes that were attacked in women-social ambition, desire for wealth - were applauded in men....In order to preserve the 'race' nature had ordained not only a division of labor but an ultimate division of values as well, that required of women absolute selflessness." Thus, a cult of proper motherhood

---

76 For example, connections were made between women's mental activity and allegedly dangerous menstrual disorders. See Judith Walzer Leavitt, ed., Women and Health in America (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984).

77 Century of Concern, 14.

78 Gordon, 140.
developed. Mothers were expected to be vigilant at every stage in order to prevent feeblemindedness in their offspring; in proper procreative habits, low stress and appropriate care during pregnancy, and attentiveness to signs of idiocy post-natally.

This demand for vigilance extended to potential mothers as well. Many popular women's journals (Good Housekeeping, Cosmopolitan, Ladies Home Journal79) reminded "able-minded" women of the hereditarian nature of feeblemindedness, and urged women to investigate the possibility of "defective stock" in their own family background and in their prospective mates. Hasain explains:

Those stories told in women's journals often integrated a variety of eugenical interpretations... On the one hand women were warned that if 'two neurotic taints' were brought together, this would be like 'fire and tinder' in that 'your offspring will be neuropathic- feebleminded or epileptic, or sexually perverted or destined to become insane.' [Cosmopolitan, 1913] Yet at the same time they were asked to educate themselves and their children on the ways that even those without training could follow the rules of heredity. The really good parent was supposed to be a cautious person who checked his or her prospective mates' ancestry and background.80

These magazines not only advised women as to how to avoid "feebleminded" children, but they also reminded them who were the most dangerous in this regard: the "feebleminded" woman. One article in American Magazine in 1913 warned its readers that "the village girls who had illegitimate children might be medically, pedagogically, psychologically or sociologically 'feebleminded'."81 Though all women, from cities or villages, upper or lower class, were at risk, be it from their tainted ancestry, the poor choice of an afflicted mate, or the unfortunate consequences of their drive for emancipation, the "feebleminded" woman still symbolized the prototypical threat.

The female potential to mother played a significant role in the etiologic arguments surrounding feeblemindedness. As we have seen, both "feebleminded" and "able-minded" women could be the cause of feeblemindedness. For the latter, being a "good mother" (i.e.

---

79Hasain, 83.
80Ibid, 84.
81Ibid, 81.
preventing feeblemindedness) meant constant vigilance. Pregnant women were responsible for ensuring a healthy environment, physically and mentally, for the baby in the womb. Mothers of newborns were taught to watch for signs of idiocy, and were urged to give the proper love and attention to avoid adverse consequences.\footnote{Recall from the previous chapter how the inability of mothers to properly care for and provide a good environment for their disabled children justified the need for institutionalization.} The backlash against the women's movement advocated the selfless duty of women to bear and raise children,\footnote{Gordon states that the concern with race suicide, the idea that the white population was in decline and that immigrant and degenerate women were the only ones having babies, created a backlash against the women advocating "voluntary motherhood". The feminist arguments that motherhood would be improved if women were more educated and had control over reproduction through birth control, were reversed by anti-feminists. As greater emphasis was placed on heredity, the emphasis shifted from motherhood as a skilled labor, to viewing women as breeders, whose motherly function was part of nature. (134)} and so-called "liberated" women were warned that they could bring about the birth of a feebleminded baby. Finally, the utmost care was required in selecting one's mate and in investigating one's ancestry, given the hereditary nature of feeblemindedness.

For the women already labeled feebleminded, there was no hope of being a "good mother". However, in one sense the "feebleminded" woman did play a role in preventing the spread of feeblemindedness: she served a symbolic function as the prototypical "bad-mother" against which "able-minded" women could measure themselves. Deborah, the "feebleminded" girl responsible for the entire defective line of Kallikaks, represented the hereditary nature of feeblemindedness, while the institutionalization of countless "feebleminded" women who gave birth to illegitimate children served as a constant reminder as to the dangers of transgression.

These two images of motherhood directly affected the classification of mental retardation at the etiologic level, and were so powerful that it became impossible to think about the causes and prevention of feeblemindedness without taking the mother into consideration. With respect to the two social groups we have been examining (women and the "feebleminded"), it seems that at the level of etiology, the entire social group of women- "feebleminded" or not- was indispensable to an understanding of feeblemindedness, and was implicated in its perpetuation. Fernald's choice of words seem
only too appropriate: "It has been truly said that feeblemindedness is the mother of crime, pauperism and degeneracy." 84

4) Female Researchers: Pedigree Studies as "Woman's Work"

One factor that has contributed to the instability of mental retardation as a classification is the variety of ways it could be diagnosed. As we saw, there was little consensus as to the best method to identify feeblemindedness. However, with different techniques of detection, new "types" of feeblemindedness emerged. As mentioned earlier, one technique which became popular along with IQ tests in the first decades of this century, was the pedigree study. Family histories would be traced in order to confirm the feeblemindedness of a particular individual, and for the general purposes of studying its hereditarian nature.

Numerous pedigree studies were done on "defective families" from the late nineteenth century into the 1920's. Both Goddard's Vineland Training School and the Eugenics Records Office (founded by Charles Davenport in 1910 and funded by Mrs. Harriman, a wealthy philanthropist who gave money to help prevent feeblemindedness) offered training programs for field workers. As Nicole Hahn Rafter points out in her collection and analysis of pedigree studies entitled White Trash: The Eugenic Family Studies, 1877-1919, most of the researchers trained were women. In fact, thousands of women were employed in this new means of gathering knowledge about feeblemindedness. 85

Elizabeth Kite is an important figure, not only as the researcher for the Kallikak book, but because of her general involvement in the development of the category of feeblemindedness. She was Goddard's main field worker, and was responsible for the stories about Deborah Kallikak and her feebleminded ancestry which solidified the sense

---

84 Century of Concern, 76.
85 Hasain, 82.
of women's culpability in the spread of mental deficiency. In addition to the Kallikak study (which, according to Rafter, was the first family study "to realize the potential of the bad-mother theme")\(^\text{86}\), Kite published another study called "The Piney's" (1913) in which she investigates the mentally deficient families in the New Jersey Pine Barrens. This study directly resulted in the construction of an institution for the "mentally deficient" in that area of New Jersey, and contributed to the growing body of work which offered "proof" of the heredity of feeblemindedness. In addition to her role as a researcher, however, she was also responsible for the translation of two influential books into English: Binet's and Simon's *Development of Intelligence in Children*, and *The Intelligence of the Feebleminded*.

Women researchers such as Elizabeth Kite played a significant role in the identification of feebleminded men and women. By virtue of their social status and their position as field workers, these women were allowed entrance into the world of feeblemindedness and were able to make tangible contributions to both conceptual and institutional developments. However, the fact that the role of the researcher was occupied by women is not incidental. As with the institutions, the division of labor in this new method of generating knowledge about feeblemindedness ran along gender lines.

Rafter points out that field work was an opportunity for women to partake in the science of eugenics, but in ways suited to their femininity:

Eugenic field investigation was women's work in several senses. First, it involved intuition and an eye for detail, abilities with which women were thought to be particularly well endowed.... Second, women (perhaps because less intimidating) were better able to elicit personal information from strangers.... Third, in serving as assistants to men such as Goddard and Davenport, field workers elaborated the traditional division of labor.\(^\text{87}\)

There are a number of levels at which this "women's work" can be analyzed. First, it is clear that the definition of this role relied upon dominant stereotypes of women as

\(^{86}\)Rafter, 74.
\(^{87}\)Ibid, 21.
intuitive, personable and subservient. Secondly, these women lacked the authority possessed by their male superiors (usually doctors and superintendents). However, both of these facts also served to empower female researchers. Though their position was defined according to stereotypes of femininity, they were also considered to possess abilities that men lacked:

Because of their supposed emotional and intuitive powers, eugenicists believed that women were more adept than men at quantifying the numbers of the feebleminded. After a few weeks' training, field workers were thought to be able to tell at a glance whether someone had pure or tainted germplasm.88

Here is a case where gender stereotypes directly influenced how feeblemindedness was diagnosed. In a sense, women provided a solution to the problem of etiologic invisibility: they supposedly had the ability to trace lines of "defective stock" and identify the quality of a person's germplasm.

These women occupied an epistemic position similar to the "vigilant mothers" who watched closely for signs of feeblemindedness in their children. For both groups, their alleged ability to "see" these signs was attributed to their feminine intuitiveness, whether it was put to use in the nursery or the interview. However, this authority was mediated by the guidance of a male "expert". Both field work and motherhood, as forms of "woman's work", were defined in contrast to the more authoritative positions occupied by men.

Though they did not have the socially recognized authority of the male superintendents, female researchers had significant epistemological authority insofar as they were given the task of identifying cases of feeblemindedness and tracing histories. They also had significant practical power with respect to the "feebleminded" persons they picked out. As Elizabeth Kite's story illustrates, these studies often had a direct effect on which "feebleminded" persons would be placed in institutions. In this sense, women researchers perpetuated the marginalization of the "feebleminded" by identifying

88Hasain, 82.
them as such, and in doing so, justifying their incarceration. "Feebleminded" women were objects of study, often for fellow women whose "feminine" qualities and "able minds" offered these researchers the opportunity to have a direct effect on their "feebleminded" counterparts.

5) Female Reformists: Lady Bountiful and the "Dawn of Womanhood"

The final group of women, the reformists, also had a hand in the development and perpetuation of the category of feeblemindedness. In this section I will discuss two kinds of reformists: female philanthropists who had a direct effect on the lives of "feebleminded" women; and feminists who exploited the image of the "feebleminded woman" for the purposes of their own political reforms. I place these two types of women in the same category of "reformists" because they share three things with respect to the history of mental retardation. First, unlike field workers and the ("able-minded) women working in the institutions, these women did not work under male supervision; therefore, the power dynamics were different. Secondly, reformists were responsible (in different ways) for promoting negative portraits of "feebleminded" women specifically. This leads to the third point: while at the level of etiology, all women were defined by male authorities as capable of spreading feeblemindedness, the reformists separated themselves from "feebleminded women". They divided the categories of womanhood and motherhood into "us" and "them". As we shall see, the "feebleminded" as a class provided a social cause for philanthropists, and fodder for the arguments of the newly emergent feminist movement. To illustrate these two roles of the reformist, I will focus on a representative of each: the philanthropist, Josephine Shaw Lowell, and the feminist Margaret Sanger.

89I make this distinction for the purposes of my discussion; I am not suggesting that the two groups are mutually exclusive.
Josephine Shaw Lowell was born in 1843 to a good family, married Colonel Charles Russell Lowell at the age of twenty, and was widowed in less than a year. After the death of her husband, she began to develop what would be a forty-year career of public service. In 1876 she was the first woman to be appointed as a commissioner to the New York State Board of Charities, and her thirteen year membership was a fruitful one. She campaigned for the construction of a Reformatory for Women (patterned on the reformatory which opened in Elmira, Mass. in 1887), arguing that women were the cause of many of society's present ills:

One of the most important and most dangerous causes of the increase of crime, pauperism and insanity is unrestrained liberty allowed to vagrant and degraded women...In order to grapple with this gigantic evil and to stop the increase of pauperism, crime and insanity in this community, a reformatory for women, under the management of women...is required.

She explained that there were two separate objectives to be attained: reforming these women, and if that was impossible, cut off all hereditary lines which would transmit pauperism, crime and insanity. She lived to see three state reformatories for women open in Hudson, Albion and Bedford, N.Y.

Clearly, Lowell subscribed to the views of her time concerning the hereditary nature of degeneracy. What sets her apart was her particular concern for women, many of whom were confined in almshouses where they could too easily fall prey to "lustful men". Women who were "feebleminded" (identified by having already given birth to one illegitimate child) required special attention, they needed to be "taught to be women", and this was only possible in an environment isolated from the vices and

91 Stewart, 91-2. As I discuss later, the fact that Lowell wanted these institutions to be run by women suggests that she might also be viewed as an early "feminist". Unfortunately, in this chapter I cannot give the attention needed to fully explore this claim.
92 Ibid.
93 Ibid, 101.
94 Trent, 74.
95 Ibid.
temptations of men. Thus, after appealing to the State Board of Charities, the Board of Trustees of the Syracuse institution agreed to open an experimental facility in Newark for feebleminded women between the ages of sixteen and forty-five (of childbearing age) and the state legislature gave $18,000 for its construction. The State Custodial Asylum for Feeble-Minded Women at Newark first opened as an experimental facility in September of 1878. In response to Lowell's call for "the establishment of further and definite provision for the custodial care and sequestration of idiotic and feeble-minded girls and women, for their protection and the protection of the State", the institution became a permanent custodial facility in 1885.96 By October, 1910 the asylum had 792 inmates, classified according to their degree of intelligence.97

Superintendents believed that the institution was decreasing the number of vagrant, "feebleminded" women on the streets, and thereby containing the spread of feeblemindedness. As J. C. Carson, the president of the Association of Medical Officers reported at their annual meeting (1889):

There are at the present time over 200 of these feeble minded girls and women provided for in this institution....There is no doubt that the propagation of idiocy, which was formerly carried on through the medium of this of weak-minded girls among the homes and poor-houses of our State, will henceforth be materially lessened.98

The influence of Josephine Lowell's campaign was felt beyond the walls of the institution which would have borne her name had she not refused. By the end of the 1880's, institutions in Pennsylvania, Ohio and Illinois built separate cottages for women of childbearing age.99 The intensified threat of "feebleminded" women was clearly reflected in the institutional structure: it was believed that women now needed separate quarters or their own facilities.

96Ibid, 75.
97Stewart, 119.
98Quoted in Trent, 76.
99Ibid, 76.
Lowell's accomplishments in singling out the "weaker" members of her sex and campaigning for their segregation is indicative of the authority and practical power some women had in the sphere of social reform. One need only read the tributes to Lowell after her death (the concluding chapter of Stewart's biography of Lowell) to get a sense of the vast influence she had upon the philanthropic world. In addition to her successes with regard to "feebleminded" and "vagrant" women, she founded the Charity Organization society, which was responsible for coordinating the charitable work done by the myriad of smaller organizations and reform efforts. Her success, however, also reveals her role in the oppression of the "feebleminded".

Anne Firor Scott writes, "American women were as much a part of the larger culture as men were, and while their outsider status may have made them sensitive to some human needs, they shared the unexamined assumptions of their own time about race, class, ethnicity....". To this list we must add mental ability and morality, for Lowell's concern for feebleminded and criminal women certainly echoed the dominant male discourse about feeblemindedness: that it was heritable, dangerous, and in desperate need of containment. Insofar as female philanthropists like Lowell subscribed to the dominant assumptions about the nature and dangers of feeblemindedness, "feebleminded" women suffered cultural imperialism at the hands of both "able-minded" men and women.

Lowell also contributed to the social marginalization of "feebleminded" women, in that she was directly responsible for the construction of new institutions to house them. Furthermore, her statement that "women have proven themselves entirely adequate to the control and management of women", reflects the benefit these institutions could have for "able-minded" women: like field work, it provided women with a new form of labor and authority (they would not only work as attendants and teachers, but as superintendents and physicians). This statement also suggests that Lowell made a sharp division

---

100 Anne Firor Scott, "Women's Voluntary Associations: From Charity to Reform", in McCarthy, Lady Bountiful, 48. (35-54)
101 Trent, 74.
within the general category "woman"; she is referring to two separate groups of women-"able-minded" and "feebleminded". In fact, she stressed that the latter, aberrant breed of women, though in need of assistance and care now, must ultimately be eradicated:

For self-protection, the state should care for these human beings who, having been born, must be supported to the end; but every motive of humanity, justice and self-interest should lead to the extinction of the line as soon as possible.

Here we see the brand of philanthropy Lowell practiced; her concern for her fellow women (and there is little evidence that she would have thought of them in this way) only extended to the current generation. Underlying Lowell’s demands for the construction of institutions for "feebleminded" and "delinquent" women, was the assumption that their segregation would prevent the propagation of their "defective" lines. The boundaries demarcating the "feebleminded" as a social group served to exclude "feebleminded" women from membership in the group of "women" of which Lowell took part; these "defective" members of her sex were in a class separate from her own.

(2) Margaret Sanger

This division between "feebleminded" and non-"feebleminded" women was present in the feminist movement as well. Many feminists around the turn of the century used the rhetoric of eugenics to bolster their causes. However, with respect to "able-minded" women perpetuating feeblemindedness, their arguments departed from the "good/bad mother" myth advanced by male "experts". Rather than focusing on responsible and vigilant procreation/pregnancy/infant care as a means to avoid a "feebleminded" child, these female reformists argued that "voluntary motherhood" was essential to preventing feeblemindedness. The call for women to control their sexuality

---

102 There are parallels here with the contemporary debates surrounding prenatal testing for certain "defects" which produce disabilities and diseases. I discuss this further in the conclusion.
103 Quoted in Stewart, 101.
104 See Hasain, Ch. 4.
and reproduction (particularly through contraception), relied upon arguments concerning the deleterious effects of "able-minded" women having unwanted children. Many feminists played upon the fears of feeblemindedness, and "raised traditional eugenic bogies: that unwanted children would be likely to be inferior; that children also had a right not to be born if they would be weak or deprived or defective". In fact, Gordon says that it would be near impossible to find discussions of voluntary motherhood between 1890 and 1910 which didn't claim that unwanted children were likely to be morally and/or physically defective.

With respect to "feebleminded" women, however, many feminists perpetuated and actually exploited the "bad-mother" myth. Reformists like Margaret Sanger believed in the hereditary nature of feeblemindedness, and argued that "feebleminded" women should not be allowed to reproduce. More generally, feminists equated women's liberation with an overall eugenic effect. Margaret Sanger, in her book Women and the New Race, repeatedly invokes the dangers of feeblemindedness in her call for the emancipation of motherhood. She refers to the number of feebleminded who are not in institutions, "being free to propagate their kind", and claims that the feebleminded "are notoriously prolific in reproduction". With examples of women pleading for help in avoiding defective children, Sanger makes the strong claim that "By all means there should be no children when either mother or father suffers from such diseases as tuberculosis, gonorrhea, epilepsy, insanity, drunkenness and mental disorders." The solution, she believes, lies in the freedom of motherhood:

We must set motherhood free....Motherhood works in wondrous ways. It refuses to bring forth weaklings, refuses to bring forth slaves....It withholds the unfit, brings forth the fit....Instinctively it avoids all those things which

---

105 Gordon, 144.
106 Ibid, 121.
multiply racial handicaps.109

As we can gather from her statements above, however, the mothers that should be included in the category of "motherhood" are not those who are "feebleminded" or "defective" in any sense. Thus we find a dichotomy in motherhood as well as in womanhood, between the good, free woman working to improve the race, and the "feebleminded", "deficient" woman for whom motherhood must be controlled and avoided. Whereas in the male discourse about etiology women as a group were targeted, here we see "able-minded" women separating themselves from "feebleminded" women once again (recall Lowell). When Sanger claims that "We must set motherhood free", it is a call for those other women who continue to burden society to relinquish their motherhood. That the emancipation of "motherhood" and "womanhood" could only occur with the bondage of feeblemindedness and inferiority, is obvious in the concluding words of her book:

This is the dawn. Womanhood shakes off its bondage. It asserts its right to be free. Like begets like. We gather perfect fruit from perfect trees. The race is but an amplification of its mother body, the multiplication of flesh habitations- beautiful and perfected for souls akin to the mother soul....When the last fetter falls the evils that have resulted from the suppression of woman's will to freedom will pass. Child slavery, prostitution, feeblemindedness, physical deterioration, hunger, oppression and war will disappear from the earth.110

This utopian vision is predicated upon the belief that imperfect trees, unperfected ugly souls would not bring forth fruit; thus, "defective" women could only hope to witness the dawn of "womanhood" and the emancipation of "motherhood"- neither of which included them- from behind the bars of the institution.

The power relations with respect to female reformists are complex. The relationship between this group of privileged women and "feebleminded women"

109Ibid, 45. Again, there was a strong connection between the racism inherent in this discourse, and disability. Unfortunately this is a broad topic, beyond the scope of this project.
110Ibid, 233-34.
illuminates the multiple layers at which oppression operated. By calling attention to their "feebleminded" counterparts, female philanthropists had a direct hand in the marginalization of "feebleminded" women. Josephine Shaw Lowell was responsible for the first custodial facility for "feebleminded women" specifically, and the increasing segregation of institutions according to sex. Though feminists like Margaret Sanger may not have directly affected the lives of "feebleminded" women, they exploited this group for the advancement of their political agenda, and for the benefit of "able-minded" women. Finally, insofar as cultural imperialism involves marking out a particular group as "Other", reformists set "feebleminded women" apart from themselves with respect to both womanhood and motherhood.

Conclusion

Raising the question of gender in the classification of mental retardation has presented us with a kaleidoscope of issues much more colorful than the simple relationship between an object of knowledge and its knowers. In examining these five groups of women, some of the features of classification discussed in the previous chapter have become evident. The "feebleminded woman" provides insight into how a prototype is constructed; in this case, growing out of an already prototypical sub-category: the "moral imbecile" or "moron". We have also seen the way in which an unstable category can depend heavily on social norms and stereotypes. This chapter illustrates how sexual norms and feminine stereotypes were incorporated into the very definitions of feeblemindedness, and explanations of its etiology. Finally, it is clear that the history and nature of this classification cannot be abstracted from the complex matrix of power relations out of which it emerged.

The analysis of the various roles women played in terms of Young's faces of oppression has revealed that social group membership can have profound consequences. As (white) women, both "feebleminded" and "able-minded" mothers were viewed as
responsible for causing feeblemindedness; the roles assigned to women in the institutions relied upon dominant stereotypes about femininity; and women were assigned to "field work" because it was perceived as best suited to their feminine "nature". However, the oppression of "feebleminded" women, was quite different by virtue of their membership in both social groups.

The "feebleminded woman" was the quintessential "bad-mother", and there was no corresponding "good mother" myth applicable to her. The marginalization of many "feebleminded" women was total, insofar as they were confined to institutions, wherein they were exploited for their female labor. Finally, "able-minded" women played multiple roles in the oppression of "feebleminded" women. The instrumental role female researchers had in the development of pedigree studies meant that they often picked out "feebleminded" women, justified their incarceration, and provided confirmation for hereditarian explanations of feeblemindedness which added fuel to the "bad mother" myth. Philanthropists like Lowell campaigned for new buildings specifically for "feebleminded women", and along with feminists, exploited these women for the advancement of "womanhood" and "motherhood", neither of which included the "feebleminded" woman. Generally, "feebleminded" women suffered cultural imperialism because these "able-minded" women subscribed to the dominant picture of feeblemindedness. This privileged group of women rendered the perspective of the "feebleminded" woman invisible, and perpetuated stereotypes that confirmed her "Otherness".

The force of Elizabeth Spelman's question in her book *Inessential Woman*, is felt with particular poignancy and urgency when we consider these complex power relations: "Does the existence of those who can be defined as complete persons demand the existence of others who cannot be granted personhood?"\[1\] We might rephrase the question as follows: Does the existence of those who can be defined as complete women

\[1\]Spelman, 7.
and mothers demand the existence of others who cannot be granted womanhood and motherhood?
CHAPTER FIVE
THE PHILOSOPHICAL WORLD OF MENTAL RETARDATION

Thus far I have looked at the historical world of mental retardation. Chapter Two examined its emergence as a distinct category, and analyzed its constitution as an object of institutional and scientific knowledge. In the fourth chapter, the story of its development became increasingly complex, and it became clear that social norms and stereotypes of other groups influenced this classification at the level of definition, etiology and treatment. The power relations involved in the construction of mental retardation as a category also became evident, and we are left with a picture of an unstable, heterogeneous, and politically complex classificatory system by which certain individuals were picked out and experienced a range of consequences by virtue of that classification. I would now like to turn from the past to the present, from the world of mental retardation as defined by doctors, psychologists, educators, philanthropists, and reformists, to the more abstract world of contemporary philosophy. What do other philosophers have to say about mental retardation, both as a classification and as a group of individuals? How do they talk about it? In what sense is it important to philosophical discourse? One might ask how this endeavor follows from the previous chapters: what is the relationship between the history of this classification and current philosophical discussions? It will soon become clear that the historical world of the second and fourth chapters has much in common with the contemporary philosophical world of mental retardation.

The status of mental retardation has changed significantly in North America since the times of Seguin and Goddard. First, tremendous changes are continuing to take place in the way persons labeled mentally retarded are treated. The 1950's and 1960's were a time of organized parental advocacy, and issues regarding discrimination against persons
with mental retardation began to surface against the backdrop of the civil rights movements. The 1970's witnessed a period of de-institutionalization, and numerous federal cases which established the legal rights of the "mentally retarded".¹ In addition to legal advances and increased visibility through the efforts of parent advocates, there has been a changing political climate surrounding disability in general.² The disability rights movement has called attention to the experiences of persons with disabilities, and the growing self-advocacy movement among people who have been labeled mentally retarded has contributed to this.³

The "experts" are changing their perception of mental retardation as well. As I discuss in the first chapter, the American Association on Mental Retardation has offered a new definition of mental retardation which signifies a "paradigm shift" in the way this condition is understood. Rather than viewing it as an individual pathological trait, the new definition is based on the interaction of the individual with the environment (in terms of our conceptual pairs, it would be a non-organic or functional definition, rather than an organic one).⁴ At the same time, advances are being made in the understanding of etiology with respect to particular forms of mental retardation. Geneticists have now identified a number of conditions (Fragile X mental retardation, Down syndrome) that are detectable prenatally, hence reshaping the internal heterogeneity of this category.

In view of the changing perceptions and practices concerning mental retardation, I believe the contemporary philosophical world of mental retardation needs to be brought to light. In order to do this, I asked two questions: "Does mental retardation matter to

¹For example, the United States Supreme Court held in *Jackson v Indiana*, 406 U.S. 715, 738 (1972) that "due process requires that the nature and duration of commitment bear some reasonable relation to the purpose for which the individual is committed." And in 1975 the Federal Education for Handicapped Children Act, now known as the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act, 20 U.S.C. §1400 et. seq., was passed which required that to qualify for federal assistance, a state must provide its disabled children with a "free and appropriate public education."
²See my discussion in Chapter One. Also, Joseph P. Shapiro, *No Pity: People with Disabilities Forging A New Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Times Books, 1994); Oliver; Silvers; Wendell; Davis; Fine and Asch.
³See Dybwad and Bersani; Williams and Shoultz.
⁴Luckasson et. al.
philosophers?" and "Why does it matter?" To help answer the former, I went to the Philosophers Index and found that, though there were no entries under the subject "mental retardation", there were 42 under "mentally retarded", 12 of which were essays from a book called *Ethics and Mental Retardation*. The fact that "mental retardation" was not listed suggests that the philosophical focus is on the group of individuals labeled "mentally retarded", not on the classification itself. Furthermore, the fact that all of the articles dealt with ethical issues surrounding this group (including sterilization, the death penalty, rights, paternalism), reveals that the philosophical world of mental retardation is primarily a moral one: almost all of the literature on the subject falls under the scope of moral, political theory, and bioethics.5

Insofar as mental retardation is a "relevant kind" (to borrow a phrase from Goodman) for philosophers, I intend to address both what is being said about it, and how and why it is said. This chapter will discuss three aspects of philosophical discourse about mental retardation: the use of language; the problem of definition; and the comparison of the "mentally retarded" with non-human animals. What will become clear in the course of this analysis is that some philosophers have remained entrenched in old terminology, concepts and questions about mental retardation and seem unaware of the political and conceptual changes that have taken place in the past forty years. In many ways, the philosophical world of mental retardation will hark back to the historical world we have just left behind.

**The Language of Moral Philosophy: "Idiocy" Revisited**

Though mental retardation, and disability in general, are not obvious areas of philosophical discourse, a number of philosophers interested in rights, justice, respect, animal rights, and personhood have incorporated the "mentally retarded" into their

---

5 I do not address the enormous body of literature in bioethics on mental retardation in this project, though I do discuss it briefly in the Conclusion.
discussions. In my analysis of this literature, examples will be drawn from two kinds of philosophical texts—some that deal directly with the issue of mental retardation, and others that make use of or reference to the "mentally retarded" as part of a larger argument or project. What follows, however, is not an evaluation of the arguments themselves; rather, it is an analysis of the use of language and a consideration of its epistemological and political implications.

(1) Texts Not Explicitly About Mental Retardation

The terms "idiot", "moron", "imbecile" are familiar to many. Those who have just read the preceding chapters will know that they were actual scientific sub-classifications of mental retardation at an earlier point in history, but I would imagine that most people recognize these words and perhaps even hear them in everyday speech. It is unclear whether the presence of this language in philosophical arguments about mental retardation is simply a careless appeal to the colloquial sense of these words, or whether philosophers intend them in the more technical sense, as demarcating levels of mental retardation, and believe them to be in current use. Either way, their pervasiveness in contemporary philosophical literature is surprising, puzzling, and worthy of attention.

In a reprint of the 1974 article "All Animals Are Equal" in an anthology entitled Ethics in Practice (1997), Peter Singer raises the issue of the "permanently retarded" in his discussion of the possibility of distinguishing morally between human beings and non-human animals. He points to one philosopher's attempt to address the issue of the "retarded": Stanley Benn's "clear and honest article...[that] argues for equality of

---

6 Psychologists, doctors and educators abandoned this terminology long before the earliest philosophical works cited here. In fact, some persons labeled "mentally retarded" are calling for the term "mental retardation" to be abandoned. Terms such as "developmentally disabled", "special needs" and "persons with a developmental disability" have already replaced references to "the mentally retarded". In view of this, it is striking to see philosophers using terminology which actually predates the term "mental retardation".
consideration as the only possible basis for egalitarianism. The following passage he quotes from Benn is meant to illustrate speciesism in contemporary philosophy:

Not to possess human shape is a disqualifying condition. However faithful or intelligent a dog may be, it would be a monstrous sentimentality to attribute to him interests that could be weighed in equal balance with those of human beings... This is what distinguishes our attitude to animals from our attitude to imbeciles. It would be odd to say that we respect equally the dignity or personality of the imbecile, and of the rational man... but there is nothing odd about saying that we should respect their interests equally, that is, that we should give to the interest of each the same serious consideration...

Singer follows by saying "Benn's statement of the basis of consideration we should have for imbeciles seems to me correct, but why should there be any fundamental inequality of claims between a dog and a human imbecile?... That the imbecile is not rational is just the way things have worked out, and the same is true of the dog." Here the term "imbecile" is interchangeable with "permanently retarded humans" (as Singer called them initially). This term is used unproblematically in the article, and Singer later confirms this. He engages in a mental exercise where he substitutes terms in the above passage to make it about race and IQ, and then points to how offensive the statement sounds. He states, "If the original did not, at first reading, strike us as being as outrageous as the revised version does, this is largely because although we are not racists ourselves, most of us are speciesists [emphasis mine]." The fact that the language used in the Benn passage is taken as acceptable, and that using the term "imbecile" to refer to the "permanently retarded" is not considered outrageous, is a sign that this terminology is thought to be acceptable.

---

8 Singer defines speciesism as "a prejudice or attitude of bias in favor of the interests of one's own species and against those of members of other species" (Animal Liberation, 6). I will discuss this concept at length in a later section.
9 Ibid, 124.
10 Ibid, 124-5.
11 Ibid, 125.
A more extreme example can be found in Vinit Haksar's book *Equality, Liberty and Perfectionism*. In his study of how the notion of perfectionism "is needed to provide the foundations of egalitarianism", the author gives ample attention to the status of "idiots". Throughout the book, this is the term he uses to refer to individuals labeled mentally retarded (we can only assume this is the group he means, for he never gives an explicit definition of "idiocy"). The text is littered with references to "idiots", their distinction from animals, and various descriptions of their worth. In fact, an entire section is devoted to "Some Perfectionist Presuppositions, and Idiots". A few examples will suffice to take us back to the historical world from the previous chapters:

If differences of intrinsic worth between human beings were well marked, then it would be feasible for political principles and policies to take such differences into account. But in fact the differences are not well-marked—except perhaps in the case of *idiots and their like* [emphasis mine].

If one takes the individualistic line, the *congenital idiot* may appear as a parasite. As an individual he is a very miserable specimen. If all others were like him, the human species as a whole would not be any better than some of the animal species. The *congenital idiot* is a parasite; for people claim for him privileges because he is a member of the human species, yet he does not (unlike normal people) contribute to the true grandeur of the human species, neither now nor (as normal babies will) in the future [emphasis mine].

The one distinction he does make is between congenital idiots and other cases of "mental defectives" who were born with some potential and then lost it:

It is true that the *congenital idiot* falls short of the standard of his species. But it does not follow that any injustice was involved, and so it does not follow that compensatory treatment is due to him. But I admit that in the case of many mental defectives, they have been victims of neglect or of injustice....And in these cases compensatory treatment may be fitting....But the problem with congenital idiots is that they never had the relevant potential, they were such degenerate specimens that one doubts if they ever qualified for membership of the egalitarian club.15

---

13Ibid, 69.
14Ibid, 72.
15Ibid, 74.
Though I will not evaluate the actual arguments that Haksar makes in his book, the above passages give a sense of the moral status accorded to "idiots". For the purposes of this discussion, however, I include them to illustrate that this kind of language is considered acceptable in philosophical discourse. It is not uncommon to find "idiots", "imbeciles" and "morons" in articles written by philosophers at a time when the clinical, legal and political world was trying to change the negative perceptions and treatment of people labeled mentally retarded.16

(2) Texts About the "Mentally Retarded"

The examples given thus far have been in texts not devoted exclusively to the "mentally retarded". Yet this outdated language is present in articles explicitly about mental retardation as well. In Jeffrey Murphy's 1984 article "Rights and Borderline Cases", found in one of the only philosophical books devoted to mental retardation, he quotes a passage from Joel Feinberg's article "The Rights of Animals and Unborn Generations".17 He believes Feinberg to have presented a "well-stated" formulation of the problem:

In between the clear cases of rocks and normal human beings, however, is a spectrum of less obvious cases, including some bewildering borderline ones. Is it meaningful or conceptually possible to ascribe rights to our dead ancestors? to individual animals? to plants? to idiots and madmen?...[emphasis mine].18

Though Murphy goes on in the article to use the term "severely mentally retarded", Feinberg's antiquated terminology is uncritically accepted. Another example is in Susan Rose-Ackerman's article "Mental Retardation and Society: The Ethics and Politics of Normalization". Though she refers to the "mentally retarded" throughout the article, she

16 Though texts such as Singer's and Benn's articles and Haksar's book would not qualify as contemporary, they are using language that had long been abandoned. The most recent AAMD classification manual (1959) was already using the term "mental retardation". See Rick Heber, A Manual on Terminology and Classification in Mental Retardation (American Association on Mental Deficiency, 1959).
17 Feinberg's article appeared in 1974.
18 Jeffrie Murphy, "Rights and Borderline Cases" in Ethics and Mental Retardation, 4.
makes use of a quotation from the late nineteenth century in a footnote about the possibility of their happiness: "Wolfensberger quotes Governor Butler of Massachusetts who in the 1880's said: 'A well-fed, well-cared for idiot is a happy creature. An idiot awakened to his condition is a miserable one.'" It is unclear what the purpose of this quotation is, though the footnote is meant to cite "some empirical support for these concerns". The language in this quoted passage is hardly surprising since it was the accepted terminology at the time, but her use of it is puzzling. One can only assume she is referring to it as possible empirical evidence concerning the happiness of the "mentally retarded".

A more glaring use of outdated language can be found in Jeff McMahan's 1996 article, "Cognitive Disability, Misfortune, and Justice". As the title suggests, McMahan generally uses the term "cognitively disabled" to refer to the individuals whom he discusses. However, he departs from this language a number of times. In his discussion of whether the "severely cognitively disabled" are entitled to compensatory justice (he concludes that they are not), he offers a thought experiment where the reader is asked to compare the relative misfortune of a number of individuals:

Imagine that a person with extraordinarily highly developed cognitive and emotional capacities- for example, Bertrand Russell- suffers a stroke and is reduced to a state of idiocy, with a level of well-being comparable to that of a contented dog. His conditions, clearly, would be terribly unfortunate. Next, consider a congenitally severely cognitively impaired adult (the "Congenital Retardate") whose level of well-being is comparable to that of Russell after the stroke....Finally, consider an extremely dim and stolid man (the "Dullard") who also suffers a stroke that reduces him to the same level as Russell and the Congenital Retardate. While he is more unfortunate than the Congenital Retardate, he is less badly off than Russell. For it is worse for Russell to be a contented idiot than it is for the Dullard [italics mine].

20Ibid.
Leaving aside the merit of this comparison, it is striking that terms like "Dullard" and "Idiot" are used in his examples. He clearly needs to name each individual according to their condition, but one is left wondering whether his use of terms is a deliberate appeal to everyday, unreflective assumptions about "dullards" and "idiots". In another thought experiment later in the article, he adds the term "moron" to his list: "Suppose, for example, that one were to wake up one morning to find that during the night the psychological capacities of every human being other than oneself had been mysteriously increased. Relatively speaking, one would suddenly have become a moron". Again, the fact that this term is used with no qualification, leaves one wondering whether he is unaware of the historical significance of these words, and why they are present in an article which otherwise refers to the "cognitively disabled".

In one of the few articles on mental retardation that begins to examine the way philosophers have marginalized this group, Paul Spicker points to other examples:

The case of 'mental handicap' or 'idiocy' is something of a paradigm in political philosophy. Writers refer to 'idiocy' or 'mental deficiency' as if it were an obvious exception to the moral canons they apply in other cases.[reference to John Rawls here] Feinberg refers to 'human vegetables'. [Isaiah] Berlin, perhaps a little carelessly, credits Bentham with the 'last word' in writing: Is not liberty to do evil, liberty? If not, what is it? Do we not say that it is necessary to take liberty from idiots and bad men, because they abuse it? Spicker is pointing to these passages as evidence of the fact that persons with "mental handicap" have been considered marginal cases. However, even Spicker, in his critique of this marginalization, fails to critically discuss the language used by these philosophers.

Much of the philosophical terminology used to describe the "mentally retarded" is reminiscent of the institutional world of mental retardation at the turn of the century.

Though the language spoken in these two worlds is often the same, the presence of these
terms in recent philosophy reveals a gulf between them. The fact that philosophers are uncritically and perhaps unconsciously speaking this language indicates that they are either unaware of, or unwilling to acknowledge, the historical weight of the words they choose. Part of what the earlier chapters demonstrated was the fact that terminology of "types" of mental retardation was more than incidental. Terms like "idiot", "imbecile", "moron", and "feebleminded" had the status of scientific classifications, and were imbued with social and political significance. I would argue that the uncritical use of these words in contemporary philosophical discourse is akin to finding unexplained references to "niggers" in arguments about the moral justification of affirmative action. The question of language has brought us to the door of this philosophical world; let us now enter and see how the "mentally retarded" are defined, described, and put to work by philosophers.

The Problem of Definition

Mental retardation as a classification has always been internally and externally heterogeneous: it is comprised of various kinds of sub-divisions and multiple approaches to its definition (e.g. organic and non-organic, static and dynamic); and there has never been a consensus as to its definition, though it has been defined by many "experts" from various disciplines. Both forms of heterogeneity still exist today, and one only has to look at psychology and genetics textbooks, the latest AAMR manual, the DSM-IV, and literature by self-advocates25 to see that the very nature and status of "mental retardation" is viewed differently in a variety of contexts. If one were to restrict oneself to the philosophical world of mental retardation, however, a very different picture would emerge: the internal complexities of this classification are rarely discussed and often obscured by the assumption that it is a static, pathological, uniform condition. In this section, I will try to explain the charge by Boddington and Podpadec that, "In the philosophical literature, definitional accounts of mental handicap are either very thin or

25See Dybwad and Bersani.
To do this, I will look at three aspects of the problem of definition: philosophers' deference to other "experts", reification, and prototype effects.

(1) External Heterogeneity: The Excuse for Slim Definitions

The role of philosophers with regard to mental retardation is far from clear. The focus of the current literature gives the impression that philosophers are here to solve the problem of personhood, discuss what rights might follow from the moral status of the "mentally retarded", address the difficulties this group poses to particular moral theories, and discuss the concrete ethical dilemmas that the "mentally retarded" present (e.g. paternalism, sterilization, euthanasia). While the philosopher must grapple with these difficult issues, the assumption seems to be that she is not expected to define the condition itself. This is reflected in the collection of philosophical articles on mental retardation entitled *Ethics and Mental Retardation*, where only three of the twenty articles make reference to the AAMR's definition of mental retardation, or explicitly discuss the issue of definition.27

Because it is thought that their job is not to provide a definition of the condition, some philosophers defer to the "experts" whose job it is to deal with these difficulties. Despite their acknowledgment of this division of labor, however, some philosophers do make general statements about the nature of the condition. While recognizing its external heterogeneity (there are plenty of others who can worry about the definition), they often make assertions which belie a lack of appreciation for the internal heterogeneity and complexity of the classification.

---

Jeffrie Murphy, in "Rights and Borderline Cases", states that the philosopher can only provide a moral framework for discussions about the rights of the "mentally retarded", but not an actual "tidy list of rights":

I will plead my philosophical vocation as an excuse for not providing such a list, since it could be compiled only if we leave the world of abstract thought and begin to gather actual empirical information (which I do not possess) on the exact characteristics of...retarded persons- what they are in fact capable of at various stages....At this point the philosopher must give way to the lawyer, the behavioral scientist, and the physician [emphasis mine].

Though he pleads ignorance as to the actual capabilities of persons with mental retardation, Murphy goes on to make a number of claims which assume some knowledge about their condition. Of individuals who are "more than minimally retarded", he says: "Severely retarded persons normally have little chance of ever becoming autonomous....Here we are dealing with a class of persons who will never be in a position where it could be reasonably claimed that their destinies ought to be determined by their own choices and decisions." The assumption is that the "severely mentally retarded" lack any decision-making capacity at all. However, he does not indicate the cut-off for severe cases, and the only clarification he has made about the "severely retarded" is that they are "more than minimally retarded". What does this mean? Has he talked to parents of persons who have been classified as such, or psychologists and/or physicians for that matter, and determined that they are entirely incapable of autonomy? He admits that this is not within his philosophical domain, however he feels comfortable making general claims about what we can "reasonably" expect from the "severely mentally retarded".

---

28Murphy, 12.
29Ibid, 11.
30Many first-hand testimonies would refute this assumption. In addition to personal experience I had working with children who, though labeled "profoundly retarded" were capable of making their wishes and decisions known, I met a woman whose daughter was labeled severely retarded (she was hydrocephalic, among other diagnoses), and at the time of her death at age 16, she had developed a close relationship with her family, was demanding that she be taught math and science, and would get extremely upset when anyone referred to her as "handicapped".
Later, in arguing that the "mentally retarded" have a right to paternalistic protection, Murphy makes another assertion that assumes an understanding of the capacities and potential of persons with mental retardation. He says, "Here what will be relevant is to guarantee a certain level of security and a certain level, not of education, but of training." He assumes that training, not education, is appropriate, though he does not clarify what he means by "training", nor does he explain the distinction between training and education. This is reminiscent of the turn-of-the-century assumption that training was more appropriate than education for the "feebleminded" in institutions.

I have no objection to philosophers discussing issues surrounding the topic of mental retardation at an abstract level. However, there seems to be a pattern of excusing oneself from possessing knowledge about the particulars of the condition, while simultaneously making generalized statements which presume such knowledge. Another example can be found in Stuart Spicker's reply to Loretta Kopelman's article "Respect and the Retarded: Issues of Values and Labeling". Spicker admits from the outset that the label "mentally retarded" is both normative and "vaguely descriptive". He goes on to say:

The term itself does not offer more than a clue as to the kinds of cognition and conation at work in atypical individuals, who have profound mental disabilities and are often perceived as socially burdensome. A detailed account of the spectrum of human atypical cognition and conation properly belongs to the disciplines of genetic psychology and genetic epistemology, special variants and extensions of the pioneering work of the late Jean Piaget.

Later, in determining whether the "retarded" are proper objects of respect, he defers to other authorities again: "If the retarded individuals can be shown to be capable of such dispositions, knowledge, and rule following (and this is an empirical matter I must leave to the experts- psychologists, physicians and others-) then they can be the objects of an attitude of respect."  

---

31 Ibid, 11.
33 Ibid, 87-8.
34 Ibid, 91.
Despite his admission of ignorance, however, generalized statements about "the retarded" are still advanced. In a footnote, Spicker addresses the comparison between children and the "retarded", and objects to it on the grounds that one is comparing qualitatively different kinds:

The comparison of ....retarded individuals with children (and the description of their behavior as 'childish') is, to be sure, not only invidious but also in total disregard of the empirical, genetic psychological facts. Retarded individuals, are not just 'slower' to develop than (sic) 'normal' children. Rather, they develop in a very specific set of ways qualitatively unlike those of 'normal' children.35

This is by no means an accepted fact. In their comparison of philosophical and psychological approaches to mental retardation, Boddington and Podpadee discuss the two predominant psychological theories concerning mental retardation. The Developmental Delay Theory assumes that "people with mental handicaps are much the same as everyone else except that they develop more slowly and reach a lower level of development"; the Deficit Theory assumes that they are deficient in some cognitive process which results in intelligent behavior.36 Here we see the tension between qualitative and quantitative theories of mental retardation once again. However, Spicker's assertion of qualitative difference is another instance of the oversimplification by philosophers of a very complex and contentious definition.

In both examples, there is a contradiction between the deference to "experts" to define mental retardation, and philosophers' statements which presume "expert" knowledge about the condition. I would like to make one final point regarding these examples. The choice of "experts" in these two cases betrays the view of mental retardation as primarily a medical disorder which is properly defined by physicians, psychologists and geneticists. There is no mention of the fact that in at least 50% of cases, the cause of mental retardation is unknown, or that the majority of cases are mild,

36Boddington and Popadec, 181.
not severe. If we think back to the historical world of mental retardation, and the complex relationship between social and sexual norms, institutional needs, professional interests, and the complex interrelation between definition, etiology and treatment, and then consider current moves to reconceptualize disability as a social problem and the increasingly vocal parent and self-advocacy movement, the failure of philosophers to address the conceptually and socially problematic nature of this classification is alarming. This leads to the next issue concerning philosophical definitions of mental retardation: the problem of reification.

(2) Reification

In his analysis of biological determinism in The Mismeasure of Man, Stephen Jay Gould discusses the fallacy of reification- the tendency to convert abstract concepts into entities- as it has applied to the concept of intelligence. He argues that "the attempt to establish a unilinear classification of mental deficiency, a rising scale from idiots to imbeciles to morons, embodies...the reification of intelligence into a single measurable entity." The main vehicle for the perpetuation of this fallacy was the IQ test. Binet's original intent was for the test to be used as a means to identify "mildly retarded" children in schools so they could be given the appropriate help for improvement. He did not think the numerical score signified the child's innate "intelligence"; the test was merely a practical device. However, as we have seen, in the United States one's numerical score on this test came to represent one's mental level.

---

38 Spicker begins by acknowledging that it is normative, but he leaves this behind, and proceeds to make statements which indicate the view of the "mentally retarded" as a pathological, qualitatively different kind best treated by doctors and psychologists.
40 Ibid, 159.
41 Ibid, 155.
There are remnants of this fallacy in the philosophical literature about mental retardation. While the AAMR is reconceptualizing mental retardation in terms of the individual's relationship to his/her environment, many characterizations of mental retardation in philosophy rely upon the assumption that there is an intrinsic deficit of some sort that causes this condition. Boddington and Podpadec confirm this:

Psychologists are suggesting that the reification of mental handicap is highly problematic, arguing that it should not necessarily be seen as a problem residing within a person, but as the outcome of a complex series of social negotiations. Philosophers' talk of mental handicap seems to reify the category and doesn't take it as problematic, except maybe in the distinctions between levels of handicap. This is arguably emphasized by common reference to specific syndromes like Down's or spina bifida, where, because of assumed identifiable physical, genetic or organic concomitants the reality of the category may be thought justified.42

Not all philosophers discussing mental retardation are guilty of this fallacy. Kopelman recognizes the normative aspect of labeling, and argues that "There is no value-neutral way to describe people as handicapped and no escape from the moral responsibility of justifying these values or purposes of the ascription."43 As Boddington and Podpadec indicate, philosophers also acknowledge the difficulty of drawing distinctions between levels of mental retardation. Anthony Woozley, in considering the difficulties of assigning or denying personhood to the "retarded", writes:

Clearly it is going to be difficult to deny that they are [persons], for the distinction between the mildly retarded and the slow-witted, the dense and the unintelligent can hardly escape being capricious, and the scale from the mildly to the severely handicapped is continuous.44

Though some philosophers acknowledge the problematic nature of this classification, there are many more instances of reification: treating mental retardation as a condition which refers to a discrete and identifiable deficit.

42Boddington and Podpadec, 182-3.
43Kopelman, 68.
44Anthony D. Woozley, "The Rights of the Retarded", in Ethics and Mental Retardation, 49.
Before looking at examples, however, I must distinguish the reification of mental retardation from the reification of intelligence. Though the latter has greatly influenced the former, there are two important differences. First, in the case of intelligence, there is no identifiable corresponding physical feature that one can point to. However, in some cases of mental retardation, there are distinct genetic characteristics (e.g. trisomy 21 or Down's Syndrome, Fragile X mental retardation). Thus, insofar as there is some entity to which the term refers, it is not fallacious to say that mental retardation in one sense refers to a discrete thing; in some cases there are biological causes (usually chromosomal or genetic) which can be identified.

However, this is not the only sense of reification at work in philosophical descriptions of mental retardation. First, philosophers often assume or imply that all levels and forms of mental retardation have some underlying feature. As I mentioned earlier, few philosophers acknowledge that in 50% of cases of mental retardation, the etiology is unknown. Thus, it is fallacious to present all members of the category as possessing some identifiable biological characteristic. In this sense, the fallacy is in extending reification to the entire category, when it is only appropriate for some members. There is another, broader sense in which reification is fallacious, however. It is misleading to equate the condition with the cause: "mental retardation" in all its complex manifestations, cannot be reduced to a genetic anomaly. Thus, it can be argued that it is inappropriate to treat the abstract category "mental retardation" as an entity because to do so is to ignore the complex social factors which play a role in the condition, whether or not there is an underlying biological or genetic cause. This is the fallacy of reification to which Boddington and Podpadec object. While they acknowledge that there may be a biological feature associated with mental retardation, they argue that to go one step further step and assume that mental retardation can be wholly explained by appealing to this feature, and to ignore its socially determined nature, is to be guilty of reification. I offer two examples for clarification.
Jeff McMahan concludes that there is no clear moral distinction between non-human animals and the "severely cognitively disabled" based on the assumption that there are identifiable "intrinsic psychological properties and capacities". He never defines what these are, though his conviction that they exist is strong enough to lead him to the following conclusion:

Where appropriate treatment is determined by intrinsic properties, we may conclude...that the treatment of animals is governed by stronger constraints than we have traditionally supposed, while the treatment of the cognitively impaired is in some respects subject to weaker constraints than we have traditionally supposed.

Though he does not mention any intrinsic genetic, organic or physical properties, he is assuming the existence of discrete psychological capacities which must be identifiable in order for us to be able to compare the "cognitively disabled" with animals, and determine the appropriate treatment. One cannot help but think of the reification of intelligence here.

A more complex example is found in McCullough's thoughtful reply to Loretta Kopelman. Here we see the tension between a static and dynamic conception of mental retardation, and though he wants to maintain both, he ultimately collapses into a static view which reifies mental retardation. McCullough is interested in the normative aspects of labeling. He makes the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic value dimensions of labels for disabling conditions. The former refers to the "diminishment that the handicap per se causes, without reference to how others respond to the label and thereby evaluate its significance". Extrinsic value dimensions of labels include the "attitudes and value judgments and practices that place the handicapped at an additional disadvantage". His definition of the intrinsic value dimension betrays his static view of mental retardation: the idea that there is some "handicap per se", some condition independent of the value

---

45 McMahan, 31.
46 Ibid, 31-32.
47 McCullough, 103.
assigned to it. As I illustrated in the third chapter, mental retardation is different from many physical disabilities in that there is no consensus as to what that intrinsic condition is (i.e. its instability). McCullough refers to "mental deficiencies" as the intrinsic aspect of the label "mental retardation", but does not problematize the extent to which the definition and detection of these "deficiencies" is already value-laden, bound up with the complex relationship between definition, etiology and treatment, and not reducible to some deficit per se.

At the same time, McCullough presents a case for not viewing "handicaps" as "fixed". Rather than assume that "One is or is not handicapped and one's disability is a state of one's existence not open to change or improvement", he calls for a "process-oriented" view of handicapping conditions, which recognizes that conditions differ for each individual, and that the limits imposed by "handicapping conditions" are flexible.\(^{48}\) Here we find a dynamic view of mental retardation, in contrast to those philosophers who have assumed that the severely "mentally retarded" lack any potential for development or change.\(^{49}\) However, underlying this view, is the assumption that there is some identifiable trait linked to the disabling condition.

McCullough presents an interesting critique of the 1983 American Association on Mental Deficiency definition, which defines mental retardation as "significantly sub-average general intellectual functioning, existing concurrently with deficits in adaptive behavior."\(^{50}\) He argues that the "adaptive behavior" criterion is problematic for a number of reasons. First, it is difficult to define it conceptually and to measure it objectively. He also points to the fact that "there is no standard environment by which to measure 'normal' behavior"\(^{51}\), and that deficits in adaptive behavior involve extrinsic aspects of labeling. Finally, he is concerned that the causal connection between intellectual

---

48Ibid, 104-5.
49I will discuss an example of this static representation in the following section on animals.
51McCullough, 111.
functioning and adaptive behavior is "murky"; for adaptive behavior to be a defining feature of mental retardation, McCullough believes that it should be based on "isomorphic mapping of intellectual functioning onto behavioral deficits."\(^\text{52}\)

In his criticisms of the concept of adaptive behavior, however, we see his confidence in the reification of mental abilities. He concludes that, "the label...ought to focus primarily on its intrinsic dimensions and only on those extrinsic aspects causally rooted in those intrinsic dimensions."\(^\text{53}\) For him, these intrinsic dimensions are distinct, identifiable mental deficiencies. This is underscored in his discussion of Jane Mercer's work, in which she distinguishes between the clinical perspective and the social systems perspective. McCullough is critical of only adopting the latter, which views mental retardation as an "achieved status in the social system", because it would not consider someone who was "mentally deficient" to be mentally retarded if their behavior satisfied society's expectations.\(^\text{54}\) Though he is critical of the social systems perspective, he accepts the clinical perspective (the view that mental retardation is a pathological condition) and argues that the two should be wed and used in tandem. He never acknowledges what I have referred to as the instability of this classification: the problematic nature of defining what precise deficit is being referred to. McCullough acknowledges the dangers of viewing "subnormal intellectual functioning" as static- i.e. unimprovable; however, he never challenges the reification of this deficit, and its supposedly "intrinsic" nature. He still believes that we can talk unproblematically about a "handicap per se" in mental retardation. As he concludes, "The label retains its character as a ticket for special treatment and the grounds for this aspect of the label are clarified: they concern mental deficiencies and the behavioral deficiencies they cause [italics mine]."\(^\text{55}\)

---

\(^{52}\)Ibid, 113.
\(^{53}\)Ibid.
\(^{54}\)Ibid, 114.
\(^{55}\)Ibid, 115.
One aspect of the reification of the category "mental retardation", then, is the assumption that it points to some real deficit, and that it is therefore unproblematic as a classification. We find this assumption even in Paul Spicker's article, which is critical of how mental retardation has been discussed by philosophers. Though he challenges the possibility of "mental handicap" as a unified moral category, he sees nothing problematic about the category itself: "The point here is not that mentally handicapped people cannot be defined as a category...It is that mentally handicapped people cannot be treated as a distinct moral category."56 As Boddington and Podpadec observe, "This suggests that the way in which the category is defined is value-neutral".57

The heterogeneity, both internally and externally, and the instability of the classification we call "mental retardation" has been overlooked, and consequently this category has been reified in two ways: i) accepting a pathological model, which assumes that it can be defined solely according to biological, genetic or physical traits which constitute the condition; and ii) uncritically assuming that there is a real, identifiable psychological entity (some version of "mental ability") whose deficit or lack defines mental retardation. I am not denying the possibility of either; I am simply arguing that these two pictures do not tell the whole story of this etiologically, socially and politically complex classification.58

(3) Prototype Effects

There is one aspect of this heterogeneous classification that philosophers do acknowledge; in fact, it is so significant that most of the philosophical literature is structured around it. I am referring to the fact that mental retardation is a hierarchical category, and that there are graded sub-categories from mild to severe. Though this is

56Paul Spicker, 149.
57Boddington and Podpadec, 179.
58It would be an overstatement to say that all philosophers are guilty of this. Kopelman's article on respect and labeling addresses the normative aspects of this category.
clearly a continuum, philosophers often deal with one end of the spectrum or the other. Thus we find two prototypes in philosophical literature: the "mildly retarded" person, and the "severely retarded" marginal person or non-person. The fact that different forms of mental retardation raise distinct philosophical issues is both understandable and expected. What is striking, however, is the polarization of the literature along these lines, resulting in two prototypical kinds who rarely appear together in any one text. McCullough attests to this, and actually warns against conflating the two groups. In his response to Kopelman, he writes:

I believe she has not always emphasized the importance of sharply distinguishing the two lines of argument which an analysis of agency requires when considering, on the one hand, borderline and mildly retarded individuals, and on the other, extremely and profoundly retarded individuals... There are, to be sure, sufficient resemblances between these two extreme groups, but we must be careful that we do not conflate them.

Just as there may be problems that result from conflating these two groups, there are philosophical consequences to the exclusive focus on one of two prototypical cases. Lakoff explains that what makes something a prototypical member of a category is the fact that it is taken as representative of the whole group. The danger is that presenting only one face of mental retardation (e.g. the "severely mentally retarded"), will reinforce existing stereotypes and assumptions about persons with mental retardation in general (in this case, their supposed lack of autonomy, their inability to be rational, the absence of meaningful relationships with others, and the notion that they must be "trained", not "educated"). Often, an author will specify the sub-group that s/he is dealing with, and then proceed to use the general term "mentally retarded" to refer to that particular class. Even when this linguistic move is explicitly acknowledged in the text, I would argue that it contributes to the prototype effect by which we consider this group more representative.

\textsuperscript{59}McMahan's article is an example of dealing only with "severe" cases; see Daniel Wilker's "Paternalism and the Mildly Retarded," \textit{Philosophy and Public Affairs} 8, no. 4 (1979) for the opposite end of the spectrum.

\textsuperscript{60}McCullough, 89.
of the category as a whole. For example, McMahan specifies in a footnote: "For the sake of brevity, I will often refer to congenitally severely cognitively impaired human beings simply as 'the cognitively impaired'....None of my claims apply to the mildly or moderately cognitively impaired."61 I think it might be appropriate to sacrifice brevity for accuracy, however, and clarify the specific group being discussed when making statements such as: "As with domesticated animals, if the cognitively impaired are neglected, their dependency will prevent their achieving levels of well-being of which they are otherwise capable".62

In restricting oneself to prototypes, many interesting and difficult problems are avoided. As Boddington and Podpadec observe:

Although philosophers do recognize that there is a distinction between severe and mild handicap, and that there is a grey area in between, their work tends to gravitate towards considerations of either the very severe or the very mild forms of handicap, where difficulties of definition and questions of ethical justification are possible to present as less problematic.63

I would also argue that the focus on prototypes obscures important epistemological questions that the case of mental retardation raises about the nature of classification itself.

I do not have an alternative to the current category of mental retardation. However, I do think that there are features which are essential to its functioning, and that should at least be acknowledged by philosophers, if not placed under philosophical scrutiny. As the previous chapters illustrated, there is much analytical work to be done in understanding the implications of the heterogeneity and instability of this category, unraveling the etiologic complexities, and considering the complex relationship between the levels of definition, etiology and treatment. We might also ask to what extent this classification is efficacious, given that it encompasses organic and non-organic cases, mild and severe, those with biological causes and those without. What unifies this

61 McMahan, 5.
62 Ibid, 27.
63 Boddington and Podpadec, 178.
classification? To what extent does its cohesiveness rely upon a fallacy of reification? Boddington and Podpadec suggest that, at least for philosophers, it is the common exclusion of people labeled mentally retarded: "What holds the class together is the assumption that they are excluded absolutely or in degree from certain valuable aspects of human life."64

There are many important philosophical issues that go beyond an exclusively moral framework. How is the self-advocacy movement reshaping the boundaries of this definition? What possible reverse-discourses or looping effects are occurring? How is the reconceptualization of disability as a social product by the disability rights movement affecting the status of this classification? Answers to all of these questions are beyond the scope of this project, but I raise them in order to suggest that the philosophical world of mental retardation is impoverished if it restricts itself to the ethical issues that arise from two prototypical cases. To illustrate this point, I will examine the construction of a prototype in philosophical literature: the use of the "severely mentally retarded" in discussions of the status of nonhuman animals. Just as the relationship between oppression and classification became apparent in the examination of the "feebleminded woman" as prototypical, the faces of oppression will reappear in the philosophical association between individuals with cognitive disabilities and nonhuman animals.

Distinctness of Kind: Our Philosophical Pets

One of the conceptual tensions raised in the second chapter was between qualitative and quantitative notions of mental retardation. Recall our historical examination of both views: some portrayed "idiots" and the "feebleminded" as lower on a scale of human development, but human nevertheless (e.g. we saw their infantilization by Rousseau and the superintendents in the term 'man-child'); others considered them to be a qualitatively different kind (e.g. sub-human or animal-like). These two explanations

64Ibid, 183.
function in the philosophical world of mental retardation as well. In an article comparing philosophical and psychological discourse about "mental handicap", Paula Boddington and Tessa Podpadec point to this fact: "Philosophers commonly, although not exclusively, see people with mental handicaps as either non-persons or marginal persons". The former view reflects an interpretation of mental retardation as qualitatively different, while the latter suggests a quantitative understanding.

According to the quantitative view, individuals labeled mentally retarded are seen as occupying a lower place on the continuum of human abilities. In this sense, they are "marginal" cases, which often are "only a left-over problem for personhood. It is seen as one of a range of marginal cases to deal with to prevent your theory from leaking round the edges." Boddington and Podpadec go on to say that "mental handicap" occupies a special place within the group of marginal cases, however:

Indeed, it could be argued that since, unlike some other 'marginals' such as women and animals, which have been widely written on, mental handicap has been largely overlooked by philosophers, it could, perhaps, be labeled the most marginal of all marginal cases.

Rather than examine the depiction of the "mentally retarded" as marginal cases according to the view that they possess certain capacities or potential to a lesser degree (a quantitative portrait), I intend to look at the more extreme depiction of them as qualitatively different from "normal" persons. Often, they are not placed at the low end of the spectrum, but delineate the very limits of personhood insofar as they constitute a separate category of human non-persons. After giving a few examples of this in literature that does not associate them with animals, I will closely examine the ways in which individuals labeled mentally retarded have become designated as a kind more akin to

---

65 Ibid.
66 Ibid, 179.
67 Ibid.
68 There are certainly philosophical issues raised by quantitative portraits of mental retardation (e.g. the way the "mentally retarded" are "marginal" persons; the problem of drawing the line between mild, moderate and severe cases). However, I find the portrayal in of the "mentally retarded" in philosophical discourse as non-persons and radically other a more pressing issue to address.
animals than to other humans. Just as nineteenth century superintendent Issac Kerlin referred to two of his students as his "household pets", I will argue that in many respects, the "mentally retarded" as presented in animal rights literature, have become our philosophical pets.

(1) Qualitative Difference

Not all qualitative depictions of mental retardation in philosophy group the "mentally retarded" with animals. Jeff McMahan, in his article on "Cognitive Disability, Misfortune and Justice", states how his metaphysical position on individuals with cognitive disability differs from that of others: "Some may believe, while I do not, that the souls of the cognitively impaired are like those of other human beings, except that they are inexplicably bound to brains with inadequate resources to allow them to express themselves in ways available to the rest of us." Though he does not elaborate, this statement suggests that, for McMahan, the "souls" of those who are cognitively disabled are qualitatively different- unlike those of "other human beings".

Other philosophers compare the "mentally retarded" with children, and argue that they constitute a distinct, qualitatively different kind of child. Recall Spicker's claim that, "The comparison of...the retarded with children is, to be sure, not only invidious but also in total disregard of the empirical, genetic, psychological facts. Retarded individuals are not just 'slower' to develop then (sic) 'normal' children. Rather, they develop in a very specific set of ways qualitatively quite unlike those of 'normal' children." In a similar statement, De Roose asks "In what sense it is true that all children belong to the same

---

69McMahan, 6. It should be noted that this statement is part of his "apology" to persons who might be offended by the claims he makes in this article: "I should apologize in advance for the fact that much of what I say will be painful to those who are closely related to individuals born with severe cognitive disabilities...In my defense all I can say is that I have tried to explore the issue with as much sensitivity, honesty, and rigor as my abilities permit." (6)

70Stuart Spicker, 97-8.
class?" He concludes that "severely mentally retarded" children "do not really belong to the class of children" in our society:

Severely mentally retarded children will never be fortunate enough to read children's books: they are barred forever from the intellectual stimulation and moral education that are contained in these books. Worse even, the fantasy world that children in conversation and play build up is unknown to them. They are completely excluded from everything that makes childhood at least in hindsight a happy world to those that have passed into adulthood...To be sure, mentally-defective children also contract diseases of childhood, but they are not treated in children's hospitals but in institutions for mentally-defective children. The world of these children is not the one of the family at home or of the children on the playground in the neighborhood. It is more often than not contained between the walls of a room where nurses and doctors are the most regular visitors. From the point of view of project pursuers, they live the life of a prisoner. They are not the kind of children 'to be seen and not heard': they are neither to be seen nor to be heard.

First, note the use of "mentally-defective", a term which has been abandoned in other fields (even the AAMR replaced "mental deficiency" with "mental retardation" in 1988.) Furthermore, while De Roose recognizes that this view of mentally-defective children as a separate category of children altogether is "a fact about our society", his depiction of them further incarcerates them in this "separate category of reality". To imply that the world of "normal" childhood is forever inaccessible to all children labeled severely mentally retarded is to perpetuate a stereotype which is not necessarily true; nor is it true that few of them know any kind of family life. In engaging in these sorts of uninformed generalizations, philosophers perpetuate the marginalization of this group, and reinforce the perception that they are a qualitatively separate kind- in this case, a distinct "type" of child. It is interesting that many philosophers do not compare them to children at a

---

72 Ibid, 91-2.
73 Ibid, 92.
74 Research indicates that 95% of all children labeled mentally retarded live with their natural families, while only the remaining 5% are in residential placements (Stroman, 3). Note that this was also the case in the nineteenth century; most "feebleminded children" lived at home. In his 1926 review of the first fifty years of the Association (now the AAMR), superintendent Arthur T. Wylie confirms this: "Most of [the feebleminded] have lived in the home so the problem for the future, as in the past, is the adjustment of the mentally defective in the home." Quoted in *Century of Concern*, 123.
younger stage of development (infants, for example), which would present a quantitative picture of mental retardation as a lower stage of development; instead they are relegated to a separate world entirely, either with the non-human animals, or alone.

Boddington and Podpadec rightly point to the fact that the philosophical debate about whether these "marginal" cases are really persons, "is at odds with contemporary psychology....[The psychologist's] assumption is that people with mental handicaps, whatever their problem or disability, are first and foremost people."\(^7^5\) This affirmation is not made by philosophers; rather, many of them operate under the assumption that the "mentally retarded" belong in a separate category, or believe that it is the role of the philosopher to determine whether they are persons in any significant moral sense. One might agree that it is the philosopher's job to draw these important moral distinctions; however, as was evident in the preceding section, many of these "experts" in personhood lack an appreciation for the complexities and reality of the human beings they are trying to classify.

(2) Animals and the "Mentally Retarded": Analogous or Identical?

I would now like to turn to the close association in philosophy between non-human animals and persons labeled mentally retarded. Given the critical examinations of the ways in which the "mentally retarded" have been historically likened to animals,\(^7^6\) it is surprising to find them residing along side the "non-human animals" upon which philosophers have focused significant attention in the past two decades. For example, in an anthology called *Ethics in Practice* (1997), all of the references under the heading

\(^7^5\)Boddington and Podpadec, 178.
\(^7^6\)Wolfensberger examines the "sub-human", animal-like status that persons with mental retardation have historically been accorded, and the consequences of this view. For example, the belief that the "retarded" were insensitive to heat and cold justified their being denied heat in their cells in the winter. Of the use of the electric cattle prod on the "severely retarded", he says, "One can still ask the question why such stimuli are not administered in a fashion which strips the symbolism of animal-handling and particularly of 'dumb cattle.'" *Principles of Normalization*, 18-19.
"deficient humans" in the index, are found in the section on "Animals". In addition to clarifying the way philosophers treat mental retardation as a qualitatively distinct kind, an analysis of this relationship between animals and the "mentally retarded" will reveal a number of features of the philosophical treatment of mental retardation generally: the conceptual carelessness with which philosophers refer to "the mentally retarded", the appeal to a superficial and intuitive understanding of mental retardation, and the philosophical exploitation of this group to benefit others.

The link between animals and the "mentally retarded" in philosophical literature manifests itself in a number of ways: (i) it can be comparative, whereby the condition or status of those labeled mentally retarded is compared with animals, or the relationship between "normal" human beings and the "mentally retarded" is thought analogous to our relationship with animals; (ii) it can also be definitional- the "mentally retarded" are actually defined by their "animal-like" qualities or placed in the same moral category as non-humans. Lori Gruen's article on "Animals" in Singer's *Companion to Ethics*, makes numerous references to philosophers who represent the latter position. Michael Fox, for instance, excludes the following groups from the moral community because, like animals, they are incapable of moral agency: "[Like animals]... infants, young children, developmentally impaired people, those in comas, victims of Alzheimer's disease, and other disabled human beings are also incapable of making moral decisions." 

In addition to the appearance of mental retardation in philosophical texts on the status of animals, philosophers discussing the status of the "mentally retarded" often make use of the analogy to animals. In his 1984 article on "The Rights of the Retarded", Anthony Woozley draws a comparison between the "mentally retarded" and a dog to illustrate his point that they both lack a sense of justice: "A dog can look at you

---

77LaFollette, 692. Note the choice of the term *deficient* to refer to these individuals. The other appearance of this group in the index is under "mental defectives" followed by "see deficient humans" (697).  
78Lori Gruen, "Animals" in Peter Singer ed., *A Companion to Ethics* (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1993), 344. It is unclear whom he would include in the group "other disabled human beings".
pleadingly, or even perhaps accusingly; but to say that he is pleading for justice, or accusing you of injustice, is to attribute to him a concept which it would be rash to suppose that he has; the same must be true of many of the retarded."79 Jeff McMahan, in addressing the dependent nature of the "severely cognitively disabled", states: "As with domesticated animals, if the cognitively impaired are neglected, their dependency will prevent their achieving levels of well-being of which they are otherwise capable."80

Animals do not simply serve as a means of comparison in discussions of the "mentally retarded", however. Many philosophers ask whether one can even make a distinction between the two groups. McMahan concludes that in one sense, it cannot be made:

How a being ought to be treated depends, to some significant extent, on its intrinsic properties- in particular, its psychological properties and capacities. With respect to this dimension of morality, there is nothing to distinguish the cognitively impaired from comparably endowed nonhuman animals.81

In his rejoinder to Joseph Margolis, "Do the Mentally Retarded Have a Right Not To Be Eaten?", Jeffrey Murphy echoes this: "I am no longer confident that this distinction is drawable....I am still revolted at the idea of killing and eating a retarded human; but I believe I am just as revolted at the idea of killing and eating a charming, intelligent gorilla- e.g. Koko."82 Haksar, in his discussion of "idiots", phrases the following question so that there is an implicit distinction between "idiots" and "human beings", and goes one step further in suggesting that "idiots" might be even less worthy of moral consideration than animals:

79Woozley, 51. He explains who the "many" are: "A person does not lack a sense of justice by being retarded- unless he is retarded enough; and surely plenty are retarded enough for that....he does not have the comprehension which you must have to have a sense of justice." (50-1)
80McMahan, 27.
81Ibid, 32.
82Jeffrie G. Murphy, "Do the Retarded Have a Right Not to be Eaten? A Rejoinder to Joseph Margolis," in Ethics and Mental Retardation, 46.
It is sometimes thought that human beings, unlike animals, have rationality. But some idiots are less rational than some animals, so why should we give more weight to the interests of idiots than to the interests of animals?83

Few philosophers have noted this alliance between animals and the "mentally retarded" in philosophical literature, let alone been critical of it. Paul Spicker's article "Mental Handicap and Citizenship" is an exception. Spicker argues that the comparison of the "mentally retarded" to animals is unfortunate for two reasons: first, "the moral rights accorded to humans and animals are not equivalent"; and second, "the behaviour of people toward animals is generally different from the behaviour of people toward other people. The identification of mentally handicapped people with animals is liable to change the way in which other people behave towards them."84 To trace the tangible effects which result from this comparison is beyond the scope of this project.85 I am also going to refrain from engaging in a discussion of the rights of the "mentally retarded" and how they differ from rights accorded to animals. Rather, I would like to further explore the nature of and reasons for the comparisons between animals and the "mentally retarded" by looking at one particular argument: the case against speciesism.86

(3) The Case Against Speciesism: Peter Singer's Animal Liberation

In his book Animal Liberation, Peter Singer defines speciesism as "a prejudice or attitude of bias in favor of the interests of members of one's own species and against those of members of other species."87 He goes on to claim that this form of discrimination is on a par with racism and sexism:

---

83 Hakas, 18.
84 Paul Spiker, 142.
85 For an example, see note 75 above. Wolfensberger also describes how the very structure of the institutions was based on the belief that the residents were animal-like, and behaved like animals. See "On the Nature of Our Institutional Models," 40-2.
86 Though I will limit my discussion to Singer's book, the observations I make could be extended to other philosophers as well.
87 Singer, 6.
Racists violate the principle of equality by giving greater weight to the interests of members of their own race when there is a clash between their interests and the interests of those of another race. Sexists violate the principle of equality by favoring the interests of their own sex. Similarly, speciesists allow the interests of their own species to override the greater interests of members of other species. The pattern is identical in each case.88

I will argue that the argument against speciesism relies upon another "ism" which is not brought up in conjunction with animal rights: I call it cognitive ableism. Following the pattern outlined above, I define it as: a prejudice or attitude of bias in favor of the interests of individuals who possess certain cognitive abilities (or the potential for them) against those who are believed not to actually or potentially possess them. I choose to use the term "cognitively disabled"89 to refer to individuals labeled mentally retarded, and also those individuals who are defined by philosophers as lacking certain (usually unspecified) cognitive capacities which would allow for rationality, autonomy, and relations with other human beings. I think the more general term cognitive disability is appropriate in the context of philosophical discussions (like Singer's) which group the "mentally retarded", the "brain-damaged", "human vegetables", and the "intellectually disabled" in the same category.

Singer can proudly say that, since the publication of his book, "It is the complacent, unargued assumptions of the moral insignificance of non-human animals which have become scarce."90 However, in examining both why and how Singer uses the "cognitively disabled" as a group to prove his case against speciesism, it will become clear that his text is another instance of the complacent, unargued assumptions of the moral insignificance of the "cognitively disabled" which abound in philosophical literature.

i) How the "Cognitively Disabled" Help Prove the Case

---

88Ibid, 9. I discuss the validity of this comparison between sexism, racism and specieisism later.
89As with the "feebleminded" and the "mentally retarded", when referring to the "cognitively disabled" as a group, the quotation marks are a sign that I mean individuals who have been labeled as such.
The question of how this group of individuals is used in arguments against speciesism is easier to answer than the question why, so I will begin with the former. The "severely cognitively disabled" are often used to illustrate examples of speciesism.91 Take the example of experimentation. Singer presents a possible non-speciesist argument for experimenting on animals but not humans: humans would suffer more than animals because of their higher cognitive functioning. For example, if they were kidnapped and used for scientific experiments their suffering would be greater because they would know what was going on. He goes on to show, however, that once we take into account the case of the "severely retarded", the argument ultimately collapses into speciesism:

This same argument gives us a reason for preferring to use human infants or severely retarded human beings for experiments, rather than adults, since infants and retarded humans would also have no idea of what was going to happen to them. So far as this argument is concerned non-human animals and infants and retarded humans are in the same category; and if we use this argument to justify experiments on non-human animals we have to ask ourselves whether we are also prepared to allow experiments on human infants and retarded adults; and if we make a distinction between animals, on what basis can we do it, other than a bare-faced- and morally indefensible- preference for members of our own species?92

He goes on to argue that if one considers a speciesist bias morally unjustifiable, then one cannot justify an experiment on non-human animals without also allowing it in the case of a "brain-damaged human". Singer appeals to this case to help answer the question "How do we decide when an experiment is justifiable?":

We have seen that experimenters reveal a bias in favor of their own species whenever they carry out experiments on non-humans for purposes that they would not think justified them in using human beings, even brain-damaged ones. This principle gives us a guide toward an answer to our question. Since a speciesist bias, like a racist bias, is unjustifiable, an experiment cannot be justifiable unless the experiment is so important that the use of a brain-damaged human would also be justifiable [emphasis mine].93

---

91 The fact that the mild cases are never invoked will be discussed later.
92 Ibid, 16.
93 Ibid, 85.
According to Singer, once speciesism is abandoned, the experimentation on non-human animals and on "brain-damaged" humans (one presumes he means severely brain-damaged) is morally indistinguishable. This implies that any experiment on a non-human animal that is justified, must also be justifiable for a "brain-damaged" human. Thus, the "brain-damaged" human is in a sense setting the moral boundaries for the acceptability of our practices towards animals. As I shall argue later, Singer can maintain this position because he sees no fundamental moral distinction between non-human animals and "brain-damaged" or "severely retarded" human beings. Before addressing this point, however, consider another example which invokes the "cognitively disabled".

In addition to experimentation, Singer also addresses the issue of killing non-human animals. He does this by examining the inherent speciesism in the "sanctity of life" argument- the belief that human life, and only human life, is sacrosanct. He presents the example of an infant born with "massive and irreparable brain damage...so severe that the infant can never be any more than a 'human vegetable', unable to talk, recognize other people, act independently of others, or develop a sense of self-awareness." He then asks whether, if asked by the child's parents, the doctor should kill the infant. For Singer, the fact that many people would object to this but not to the killing of non-human animals puts into relief our speciesist bias: the basis for our outrage in the case of the disabled infant is based on an arbitrary value placed on species membership. Singer argues that there are, in fact, more salient and morally relevant features upon which we should base our judgment in the case of killing:

Adult chimpanzees, dogs, pigs, and members of many other species far surpass the brain-damaged infant in their ability to relate to others, act independently, be self-aware, and any other capacity that could reasonably be said to give value to

94 The fact that he uses the terms "brain-damaged" and "mentally retarded" interchangeably reflects his understanding of mental retardation as a reified, pathological condition.
95 Ibid, 17.
96 Ibid.
97 Singer has argued elsewhere that infanticide, when decided by the parents, is acceptable in such cases. See Should the Baby Live? The Problem of Handicapped Infants (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1985).
*life*. With the most intensive care possible, some severely retarded infants can never achieve the intelligence level of a dog....The only thing that distinguishes the infant from the animal, in the eyes of those who claim it has a 'right to life', is that it is, biologically, a member of the species Homo Sapiens, whereas chimpanzees, dogs, and pigs are not. But to use this difference as the basis for granting a right to life to the infant and not to the other animals is, of course, pure speciesism. It is exactly the kind of arbitrary difference that the most crude and overt kind of racist uses in attempting to justify racial discrimination....Those who hold the sanctity of life view do this, because while distinguishing sharply between human beings and other animals they allow no distinctions to be made within our own species, objecting to the killing of the severely retarded and the hopelessly senile as strongly as they object to the killing of normal adults. [emphasis mine]98

The implication here is that there are more important features upon which one might draw moral boundaries, which would make the killing of animals equally, if not more reprehensible than the killing of "brain-damaged" infants. It is because of the "arbitrary" boundary drawn between species that those who hold the "sanctity of life" position (may) condone the killing of non-human animals (it does not follow from this position that one would necessarily condone killing of certain animals under certain conditions) while objecting to the killing of a "brain-damaged" infant.

In the above examples about experimentation and killing, the "severely cognitively disabled" serve to illustrate a bias towards our own species which, according to Singer, is both inappropriate and arbitrary. The question, then, is what appropriate and non-arbitrary distinctions can be made that afford us an alternative to speciesism. This leads us to the question of why those labeled cognitively disabled appear in these various arguments against speciesism. There are three reasons which I will discuss in turn: the "cognitively disabled" are viewed as more akin to animals than humans; their condition is portrayed as static, hence they are an uncomplicated case to examine; and finally, choosing a group that lies at the margins of the definition of humanness helps illustrate the "arbitrariness" of giving preference to one's own species.

ii. Why Choose the "Severely Cognitively Disabled"?

Persons with severe cognitive disabilities, as defined by anti-speciesists like Singer, are a good group to make the case for redrawing our moral boundaries. Rather than privileging species membership, Singer suggests that there are more important characteristics which determine the "worth" of a creature. Though Singer wants to promote the utilitarian view that sentience and the capacity to suffer is fundamental to our treatment of both humans and nonhumans, he suggests additional criteria which might be taken into account in the case of taking a life. He states:

A rejection of speciesism does not imply that all lives are of equal worth. While self-awareness, the capacity to think ahead and have hopes and aspirations for the future, the capacity for meaningful relations with others...are not relevant to the question of inflicting pain...these capacities are relevant to the question of taking life.99

He goes on to explain why, based on these criteria, most of us would probably save the life of a "normal human being" over that of an "intellectually disabled" one.100 (Note that he never defines what he means by normal or intellectually disabled, though one can infer from the passage that a normal human being is one who possesses the "relevant" features, while a person with an intellectual disability does not.)

If we have to choose between the life of a human being and the life of another animal we should choose to save the life of the human; but there may be special cases in which the reverse holds true, because the human being in question does not have the capacities of a normal human being. So this view is not speciesist....The preference, in normal cases, for saving a human life over the life of an animal when a choice has to be made is preference based on the characteristics that normal humans have, and not on the mere fact that they are members of our own species. This is why when we consider members of our own species who lack the characteristics of normal humans we can no longer say that their lives are always to be preferred to those of other animals [emphasis mine].101

---

100Ibid.
The relevant features in deciding the worth of a particular life are those which Singer believes "normal humans" to possess. However, these are not limited to humans. As he suggests, adults of other species possess the ability to relate to others, act independently, be self-aware, while the "brain-damaged infant" and the "intellectually disabled" do not (again he is conflating terminology, using brain-damaged, intellectually disabled, and mentally retarded interchangeably). The implication is that these features draw a more accurate and morally appropriate boundary between individual beings (both human and nonhuman), and that some nonhuman animals are actually more like "normal humans" than abnormal humans are. It is now possible to classify adult nonhumans and "normal" human adults together, and place the brain-damaged, severely retarded, and hopelessly senile in a separate category, the operative criterion being a certain level of cognitive functioning, from which autonomy, relations with others, aspirations for the future, and self-awareness presumably follow. Singer confirms this when he says: "As long as we remember that we should give the same respect to the lives of animals as we give the lives of those humans at a similar mental level, we shall not go far wrong." 

By arguing that the "cognitively disabled" have more in common with animals than they do with "normal humans", and that many non-human animals actually surpass the "cognitively disabled" in mental ability, Singer is able to offer an alternative to speciesism: we can draw our moral boundaries according to a different set of criteria. This alternative, however, is an instance of cognitive ableism; rather than discrimination based on species membership, we give preference to individuals based on their cognitive ability. If speciesism is replaced with a form of ableism, I want to ask whether the privileging of mental ability is any less arbitrary than the decision to give preference to one's own

---

102 See the passage on page 18.
103 Ibid, 21.
104 Singer is far from unique in privileging these features. However, his position differs from many philosophers in the history of moral philosophy in that he wishes to point to the existence of these qualities in nonhuman animals.
species. To answer this, I turn to the second reason Singer utilizes the "cognitively disabled" in his arguments: the supposedly uncomplicated nature of this group.

If the capacities outlined above are more morally relevant than species membership, then the problem of "normal" human infants remains. Insofar as they do not possess self-awareness, autonomy, the ability to have hopes and aspirations or the ability to have meaningful relationships with others, they too could be grouped with the "severely disabled", the "hopelessly senile" and "brain-damaged" persons. Singer recognizes this, and decides to exclude "normal infants" from his discussion because he views them as a more complicated case:

In case anyone still thinks it may be possible to find some relevant characteristic that distinguishes all human beings from all members of other species, let us consider again the fact that there are some human beings who quite clearly are below the level of awareness, self-consciousness, intelligence, and sentience of many non-human beings. I am thinking of human beings with severe and irreparable brain damage, and also of infant human beings; to avoid the complication of the potential of infants, however, I shall concentrate on permanently and profoundly retarded human beings [emphasis mine].

The "complication" of potentiality is not addressed by Singer, and his preference for the "mentally retarded" over (normal) infants betrays a static view of mental retardation. The assumption is that while the "normal" infant has cognitive potential, the "profoundly and permanently" retarded person does not. This is an enormous assumption to make without any reference to the nature of mental retardation, and I would argue that it is akin to the representations of the "feebleminded" as hopelessly incurable which justified their lifelong institutionalization in the early twentieth century. I am not suggesting that there are never cases where improvement or development is unlikely; rather I am pointing to the ease with which philosophers make unsupported assertions about the "profoundly retarded". Singer's choice of this group, rather than "normal infants", is based upon the assumption

---

105 I assume by this latter capacity Singer means some kind of reciprocal relationship, since "normal" humans can have relationships with animals and infants which are meaningful for the former, not the latter.

106 Ibid, 239-40. Here again we see the problem of language. To equate the "permanently and profoundly retarded" with "human beings with severe and irreparable brain damage" gives the impression that there is some physical anomaly or process which has erased the individual's potential.
that individuals who are born with no potential for certain cognitive capacities, are more akin to animals than to infants who lack the capacities but supposedly possess the potential for their development. I would argue that to draw moral distinctions upon some unspecified, undefined potential (or lack there of), is to tread on tenuous ground. Given the historical legacy of static characterizations of mental retardation, and the complexities and difficulties in defining the actual condition, let alone the potential capacities it affects (i.e. the instability of the classification), the elusive notion of potential cannot be easily dismissed, especially if it is going to provide the moral justification for how this group of people are treated.  

Nevertheless, philosophers refer unproblematically to "potential", and continue to define the "severely cognitively disabled" in terms of their lack of it. For example, Jeff McMahan makes this assumption in his discussion of cognitive disability and misfortune. After presenting a number of alternatives, he decides that the "Native Potential Account" of well-being is the most plausible: "Whether a being is well off or badly off depends on how its level of well-being compares to the range of well-being made possible by the highest cognitive and emotional capacities that it has actually achieved or that it natively has the potential to achieve." Based on this account, he concludes that the "cognitively disabled" are not entitled to compensatory justice because they are not unfortunate:

The cognitively impaired need not be unfortunate since, like animals, they may have lives that are good relative to the range of well-being accessible to them given their native psychological capacities and potentials [italics mine].

---

107 Amartya Sen offers a capability-based theory of justice, though his position does not seem to deny the existence of any potential at all in certain human beings. Inequality Reexamined (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992). However, his view is problematic in that it relies upon stereotypes of persons with disabilities as globally incapacitated. See Silvers, "ADA", 219.  
108 McMahan, 18-19.  
109 Ibid, 23.
Not only does this statement rely upon the assumption that these potentials are measurable, but it reinforces the belief that the case of the "cognitively disabled" is analogous to that of nonhuman animals.

Singer dismisses the case of the "normal" infant to avoid confronting the problem of potential, and prefers the "profoundly and permanently retarded" because he assumes that, for them, potential is not an issue. Surely the examples Singer gives would have a very different ring to them if we replaced "profoundly retarded", "intellectually disabled" or "brain-damaged" with "normal human infant". What if the discussion were about killing "normal infants" vs. nonhuman animals, where the nonhuman animals actually possessed the capacities, while the infant only had the potential to develop them? Would we use the "normal infant" as a litmus test for what experiments are permissible, as he suggests we do with the "mentally retarded"?

Even if one accepts the assumption that the "cognitively disabled" are a less problematic case because potentiality is irrelevant, the issue of potential remains a problem for Singer's refutation of speciesism. For instance, if he places greater value on an individual in whom certain traits are actualized, as opposed to mere potentialities, he would have to give preference to some adult non-humans over "normal " human infants.

Furthermore, while he argues that some adult animals like chimpanzees, pigs and dogs "far surpass the brain-damaged infant in their ability to relate to others, act independently, be self-aware", to be consistent he should place them on a par with "normal humans" that possess these same qualities, given that the potential for development of these capacities is arguably greater in human beings than in animals. I do not have room to address this problem in depth, but these questions concerning the ambiguities and importance of potentiality are important to raise. For the purpose of my work here, I

110 Though McMahan does not explicitly discuss how this potential might be measured, I take him to assume that it can be, given his claim that "capacities and potentials" are what should determine our treatment of others.
111 Singer, 18.
simply wish to point out that this notion is no less problematic in the case of the "cognitively disabled" than it is in "normal" human beings or adult nonhumans. In fact, given the complexities of diagnosis, definition and treatment surrounding cognitive disabilities, I maintain that the issue of "potential" is even more complicated than in the case of a "normal" infant. 112

The fact that the "severely retarded" are used in these examples betrays a static view of their condition: it is assumed that they lack the potential for any significant development, and that their condition will never change. Even if there are some cases like those to which Singer appeals, this does not justify the assumption that all cases of "profound mental retardation" are static and lack all potential. Anyone who has worked with or had a close relationship with even the most profoundly disabled child would challenge this gross generalization. 113

Singer never discusses the "mildly retarded", presumably because they already possess the capacities often considered relevant for moral preference. In the exclusive focus on the "severely retarded", we find another instance of a prototype effect: in the attack against speciesism, the prototypical case of mental retardation is the "human vegetable" who "can never achieve the intelligence level of a dog". 114 This prototype has a number of features: severe cases are usually compared with animals; this "type" is often placed in a moral category below "normal humans" (adults and infants), and many "adult nonhumans"; and in addition to being viewed as static, the "severely retarded" individual is designated as a qualitatively different kind of being. By virtue of his or her supposed lack of potential, the prototypical mentally retarded person cannot be considered on the

112 Psychologists point to the heterogeneity of this category, and argue that even in cases with an identifiable genetic or biological cause, we still do not have the ability to accurately predict the severity of the cognitive impairment and the ways it will be manifested. See MacClean, 14.
113 My personal experience with children labeled "severely retarded" was that it is often a matter of finding what will allow them to realize their potential. I worked with one girl who was profoundly moved by music, and I was eventually able to teach her how to play her favorite songs on the xylophone. The depiction of this group as devoid of all potential for learning and development is both empirically misguided and, at a personal level, deeply disturbing.
114 Singer, 18-19.
spectrum of human development (e.g. like the quantitative picture generated by classification according to IQ score). When the "arbitrary" boundary of species membership is discounted, the severely "mentally retarded" individual emerges as a distinct, qualitatively different kind.

The "cognitively disabled" are used in animal rights discourse because they justify replacing speciesism with an alternative set of characteristics, and because they are thought to represent an unproblematic case which does not involve the difficult notion of potentiality. The final reason this group is so appealing in refuting speciesism is because its members lie at the margins of definitions of human nature. As fringe members who, according to some, are only members of our species by virtue of their biology, they can illustrate the "arbitrariness" of this boundary. When confronted with the "cognitively disabled" in this attenuated form, presented as lacking all important human qualities and bereft of even the potential for development, we are reminded of the nineteenth century descriptions of "idiots" as lacking in everything but human form. Today, these empty "shells of humanity" are used to argue that there are far more important features than the simple biological fact of belonging to the species Homo Sapiens. Recall Singer's claim that "To use this difference as the basis for granting a right to life to the [brain-damaged] infant and not to the other animals [adult chimpanzees, dogs, pigs, and members of many other species who surpass his/her abilities] is, of course, pure speciesism."115 By focusing solely on the capacities he does, Singer places individuals with severe cognitive disabilities at the margins of humanity. Because they do not supposedly share with the rest of us in our mental capacities, the only possible thing that could unite us with them is our biology. Once stripped of all relevant human qualities, the argument can be made that there is something unjust about preferring these individuals to an animal that possesses these qualities, simply because they fall on our side of the species boundary. Only a group so far removed from "us", from "our humanity", could convince us that there is

---

115Ibid, 19.
only one feature which we have in common (i.e. we are all Homo Sapiens), and that this feature is morally irrelevant.

Consider the following example. At one point, Singer groups the "hopelessly senile" with the "retarded" and the "brain-damaged". Why did he not choose the example of a hopelessly senile grandmother to make his case against speciesism? Arguably, she "can never achieve the intelligence level of a dog"; a "chimpanzee, dog or a pig will have a higher degree of self-awareness"\textsuperscript{116} than Grandma; and we might decide that "an experiment cannot be justifiable unless the experiment is so important that the use of... [a hopelessly senile Grandmother] would also be justifiable".\textsuperscript{117} Perhaps we would conclude that it is better to save the life of a "normal human being" than Grandma's, or that our choice to experiment on an animal rather than Grandma is an arbitrary and unjustifiable choice, and in making it we join the racist and sexist in our brand of discrimination.

Why do these examples seem odd or troublesome? Because "Grandma", for many of us, has a human face, a human history, and stands in some kind of relationship with other human beings, if not with ourselves, while for many a "human vegetable" or a "brain-damaged infant" does not. The example of the "cognitively disabled" presents us with a case to which many of us have little exposure or emotional resonance, and draws upon our preconceptions and intuitions about mental retardation. This is evident in McMahan's claim that speciesism alone cannot justify giving preference to the interests of the cognitively disabled over "comparably endowed animals". He presents the situation as if, with the exception of close family members, the only thing we share with this group of fellow humans is a biological relation:

\textbf{Bare comembership in the human species, which is what we share with the cognitively impaired, does not involve personal ties, mutual sympathy, shared values, a common commitment to a certain way of life, social cooperation, or any...}

\textsuperscript{116}ibid.
\textsuperscript{117}ibid, 85.
of the other features of relations that are more readily recognizable as legitimate bases for partiality [emphasis mine].

"We" presumably refers to the cognitively able- those of "us" who have no connection to this distant group of people, while "they" would include both the "severely cognitively disabled" and their families or people close to them. The constitution of the "cognitively disabled" as a group so radically different from ourselves relies upon this us/them dichotomy.

The "severely cognitively disabled" as a group are consistently chosen, not only because its members are often believed to have more in common with animals than with humans, but because they are perceived as radically "Other". As the preceding sections in this chapter on language and definition suggest, many philosophers lack familiarity with the history of the classifications, the complexities of this condition (e.g. its internal and external heterogeneity and its instability), and perhaps have never had contact with the individuals themselves. It is unfortunate that when this socially and philosophically marginalized group does become visible in philosophical literature, it is often in a truncated or prototypical form. It is equally disappointing that a book like Singer's, aimed at dispelling myths and refuting "complacent, unargued assumptions" about one marginalized group, draws upon and perpetuates myths and assumptions about another.

One aspect of the philosophical world of mental retardation, then, is the close relationship between animals and the "severely cognitively disabled". While absent from many other areas of philosophy, persons labeled mentally retarded are present in many discussions about animal rights; they are often described through analogies or comparisons with animals; and arguments against speciesism rely conceptually upon the

---

118McMahan, 34.
119Of course, this is not the first group to be accorded this status. Simone de Beauvoir's account of woman as Other in The Second Sex (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1968) has been followed by a growing body of literature in feminism and post-colonial discourse on the processes of dehumanization which accompanies this position of "otherness". See, for example, Linda Alcoff, "Philosophy and Racial Identity," Radical Philosophy 75 (Jan/Feb 1996).
"cognitively disabled" as a group. The analysis of this relationship has revealed a number of important aspects of philosophical discourse about mental retardation. First, the likening of the cognitively disabled to animals perpetuates a qualitative view of mental retardation: they are viewed as qualitatively different than "normal" human beings, and their similarity with animals suggests that they are closer in kind to nonhumans that to humans in certain important ways. The prototypical case of mental retardation in the philosophical literature on animal rights is always the severely mentally retarded individual - in Singer's words, the "profoundly and permanently retarded". Other forms of mental retardation are never addressed, and while this is somewhat understandable given the arguments being made, the carelessness in terminology contributes to the erroneous assumption that this subgroup is representative of the whole. (Recall the interchangeable use of the terms "retarded", "severely retarded", "intellectually disabled", "profoundly and permanently retarded", "brain-damaged", "human vegetable".) One might object that since we are philosophers, not doctors or psychologists, the important thing is to have a general sense of the group we are discussing. However, in light of the gravity of the claims that are being made (e.g. when it is justifiable to kill), there is little room for carelessness.

There is an inherent cognitive ableism in the arguments against speciesism: it is thought more appropriate to base moral judgments on qualities like self-consciousness, ability to have future aspirations, and one's "mental level", than on one's membership in a particular species. It seems that this choice of criteria, when presented with no justification for their importance, is as arbitrary as choosing "member of Homo Sapiens" as a moral yardstick. Is it?

(4) Cognitive Ableism vs. Speciesism: A Necessary Choice?

Some philosophers have argued that the distinction between human and non-human is, in fact, central to moral arguments about the "mentally retarded". Joseph Margolis, in his 1984 article "Applying Moral Theory to the Retarded", argues that,
though there is no "principled defense of the humane treatment of the retarded that all rational agents would recognize as correct or conceptually compelling", the best approach is to recognize their species membership. He states, "I confess I still do not see what could possibly provide a stronger foundation for humanizing disputes about the retarded", and believes that "blurring the distinction between the retarded and non-human animals is a conceptual disaster".\(^{120}\) If Margolis is right, and speciesism is actually central to the "humanization" of our debates about the status of the "mentally retarded", then must we promote speciesism?

Loretta Kopelman echoes this position in her discussion of respect and persons labeled mentally retarded: "I will defend the view that *all humans merit some respect as fellow beings*.\(^{121}\) She goes on to explain that the "profoundly retarded" are owed respect as our *fellow beings* because they possess three features: sentience; their treatment by us affects our institutions; and they are members of families and communities.\(^{122}\) Her criteria for respect are deliberately not based on an individual's capacity, agency or potential for reciprocity, characteristics which Singer argues should replace mere species membership. We are faced, then, with a dilemma: it seems that, in moral considerations about the "profoundly retarded", a choice must be made between cognitive ableism, on the one hand, or a form of speciesism on the other. In order to clarify this dilemma, it is instructive to look at the differences between cognitive ableism and speciesism in terms of Young's faces of oppression. In the previous chapter, I examined concrete instances of oppression in the history of mental retardation. Here I intend to look at forms of oppression at the conceptual level, and show how the "mentally retarded" as a group are victims of cultural imperialism, marginalization, and exploitation as a result of the cognitive ableism implicit in the philosophical defense of speciesism. By clarifying the

\(^{120}\text{Margolis, 33.}\)
\(^{121}\text{Kopelman, 66.}\)
\(^{122}\text{Ibid, 67.}\)
nature of this oppression, important differences between cognitive ableism and speciesism emerge.

Young says that to experience cultural imperialism is to have one's particular perspective obscured by the dominant culture, and to be marked out through stereotypes as "Other". As we have seen in the above examples, this is precisely what philosophers do at the conceptual level when they: i) assign moral worth to certain lives based on cognitive ability; ii) rely upon and perpetuate stereotypical beliefs about individuals with lower cognitive capacities; and iii) present them as "Other" in all respects except their species membership. Some might object that in the case of the severely "mentally retarded", their cognitive impairments preclude them from experiencing (in any conscious sense) this form of oppression, and that they would be unable to contribute their particular perspective even if they had one. There are two responses to this objection: first, it is not the case that all individuals who have been labeled "severely mentally retarded" (again, a precise definition of what this means would be helpful) are incapable of conscious experiences and articulation; furthermore, even if they are not able to understand their "Otherness" at the conceptual level, we have seen its concrete effects in the forms of institutionalization, sterilization, and instances of violence. Finally, even if the failure to incorporate their perspective into philosophical discourse were justified in cases where the individual lacks the ability to articulate or to experience their oppression self-consciously, the exclusion of the experiences of those who have directly observed and/or have relationships with persons labeled "severely retarded" and the presence of unfounded generalizations are signs of this cultural imperialism.

The "cognitively disabled" are also marginalized within contemporary philosophical discourse. The previous chapters uncovered concrete manifestations of this face of oppression in the form of segregation and institutionalization, and one could analyze the ways in which individuals labeled mentally retarded are currently

\[123\text{Young, 58-9.}\]
marginalized in society. My focus here has been on the conceptual marginalization that they suffer in philosophical discourse. In the literal sense, they are referred to as "marginal cases" in many moral and political theories. They are also marginal with respect to other groups in the attention that they receive from philosophers; in the case of animal rights, they appear in literature only to promote the interests of non-humans. At the level of classification, the "severe" cases have been placed in the same marginal category as nonhuman animals. Finally, in their close association with animals, they are presented as only marginally human, reduced to bare fellow-species status.

In addition to marginalization and cultural imperialism, the conceptual oppression of the "mentally retarded" in philosophical discourse takes the form of exploitation. Young defines exploitation as the process by which an unequal distribution of benefits results from the transfer of energies from one group to another. One example of this can be found in the historical use of inmates as an institutional labor force. I would argue that at the conceptual level, the "severely cognitively disabled" are being exploited insofar as they are used in arguments against speciesism, yet reap no benefits from their philosophical labor. This is apparent in the visibility of nonhuman animals and the relative invisibility of the "mentally retarded" in philosophy. Another trip to the Philosopher's Index shows 252 entries on "animals", and only 42 on the "mentally retarded". Peter Singer proudly confirms that in the time since the first edition of Animal Liberation (1975), there has been a growing body of philosophical literature and awareness about non-human animals:

Fifteen years ago I had to search hard to find a handful of references by academic philosophers on the issue of the status of animals; today I could have filled this entire book with an account of what has been written on this topic during the past fifteen years. Articles on how we ought to treat animals are included in virtually all the standard collections of readings used in applied ethics courses.  

---

124 Ibid, 53.  
125 Singer, 241.
Given the prominent role that the "cognitively disabled" play in this literature, it is unfortunate that today there is still only a handful of references by academic philosophers on the status of the "mentally retarded". What is more discouraging, however, is the perpetuation of their oppression in texts which are aimed at combating the oppression of another disadvantaged group, in this case, nonhuman animals.

This brings us to the issue of speciesism. How does the oppression inherent in cognitive ableism differ from the injustices of speciesism? If one were to analyze the treatment of animals, there is no doubt that they are oppressed in certain ways. They suffer tremendous violence (as Singer chillingly documents), exploitation (e.g. they are experimented upon to benefit human beings), and Singer would argue that they have been unduly marginalized within philosophical discourse insofar as they have been excluded or thought to be morally unimportant. However, according to Young's framework, oppression is something that happens to "social groups", and animals do not qualify in her sense of the term. In re-examining the notion of a social group, I hope that important differences between speciesism and cognitive ableism will emerge, and will ultimately lead us out of the dilemma of having to choose between them.

Recall Young's definition of a social group as "a collective of persons differentiated from at least one other group by cultural forms, practices, or way of life." One important feature of a social group is the notion of self-identity; Young explains that group membership is partially responsible for constituting individual identities:

A social group is defined not primarily by a set of shared attributes, but by a sense of identity....Though sometimes objective attributes are a necessary condition for classifying oneself or others as belonging to a certain social group, it is identification with a certain social status, the common history that social status produces, and self-identification that define the group as a group. The "cognitively disabled" have been classified and assigned a particular status within society, though their treatment has clearly not been uniform (e.g. as I have shown.

126Young, 43.
127Ibid, 44.
institutional life was very different for the "mildly retarded" caregivers and the severe
custodial cases). This issue of self-identification applies to persons with cognitive
disabilities, as evidenced by the growing self-advocacy movement; however, this feature
of group membership is arguably more complex for the "severely" disabled, insofar as
their sense of identity is in question. Even if one believes that some members of that
group are incapable of self-identification, it is arguable that they still suffer forms of
oppression by virtue of their membership in that group. Furthermore, the simplistic and
prototypical representations of the "cognitively disabled" can negatively affect the
identities and treatment of those who do identify themselves with that group. I argue,
then, that cognitive ableism, in perpetuating the above forms of oppression, is
significantly different from speciesism because it happens to a social group.

Another important difference between speciesism and cognitive ableism becomes
evident if we consider the treatment of animals and persons with cognitive disabilities.
Animals and the "severely cognitively disabled" are often compared when discussing the
justification and effects of a particular practice. However, examples such as
experimentation and killing (which are usually chosen because they directly affect
animals) do not highlight the important differences between the "cognitively disabled" and
non-human animals; rather they reinforce the perception that, in severe cases, the only
"arbitrary" difference between the two groups is species membership. Consider the title
of Jeffrey Murphy's article: "Do the Mentally Retarded Have a Right Not to be Eaten?".
He says that his title is not meant to offend, but rather:

...to raise the issue of rights for the retarded in its hardest context- namely, do they really differ in any significant way from those animals which we feel free to kill and eat? Too much well-meaning sentimentality is allowed to pass for thought in the discussion of the retarded, and I want to shock my way through this.128

128Murphy, "Do the Mentally Retarded Have a Right Not to be Eaten?", 46. Note the dualism between "sentimentality" and "thought" here.
Other philosophers choose similarly extreme examples: De Roose says "It is certainly no more than reasonable to require from moral theories that they explain to us why, to give a very crude example, it would be morally repugnant to put mentally-retarded children in front of a bulldozer in order to crush them."\textsuperscript{129} The history of mental retardation is replete with instances of horrific and repugnant treatment; however, it is telling that philosophers formulate their own extreme examples. If one relies solely upon these admittedly crude and shocking examples, or practices such as killing and experimentation in the context of the treatment of animals, it is not surprising that philosophers can find little difference between animals and the "cognitively disabled". Murphy, for instance, concludes that he is equally morally repulsed by the thought of killing and eating a severely mentally retarded child and Koko the gorilla.\textsuperscript{130} However, if we choose a different practice, of which our past offers us plenty, it becomes clearer why the case of nonhuman animals and the severely "cognitively disabled" are different in ways beyond their species membership. Consider an alternative example.

Imagine placing a group of beings in a building and keeping them there, unclothed, without a bed, furniture or toys, forcing them to defecate on the concrete floor, depriving them of any human contact, and only occasionally letting them outside. Is the injustice of doing this to an animal (say a pig or a dog, to use Singer's examples) on a par with treating severely "cognitively disabled" children this way? I think most of us would say "no". The point of this example is to illustrate that, when we consider other practices (which in this case are historically accurate\textsuperscript{131}) we see that the difference between a dog and a severely cognitively disabled child is not an arbitrary line drawn between species. We are not

\textsuperscript{129}De Roose, 87.
\textsuperscript{130}Murphy, "Do the Mentally Retarded Have a Right Not to be Eaten?", 46.
\textsuperscript{131}In 1972, Geraldo Rivera exposed Americans to the horrific conditions in two New York institutions. He gave the following description of Letchworth Village (the same one we encountered in Chapter Four): "Virtually every patient in building Tau was undressed and there was shit everywhere; it looked and smelled like a poorly kept kennel....The residents of Tau were young girls...most of them were literally smeared with feces- their roommates', their own. They looked like children who had been out making mudpies. My stomach still turns just thinking about it. But they were, after all, just little girls. And those little girls- just like your sister or daughter- wanted to be held and loved" (Quoted in Trent, 258).
outraged at keeping animals "naked", depriving them of bathrooms, or depriving them of loving human contact. When we acknowledge that persons labeled cognitively disabled, as members of our social, human world, are directly and indirectly affected by our institutional practices, and recognize that the treatment (e.g. institutionalization) of certain individuals is often justified by extension to other members of that same social group, the difficulty of distinguishing between nonhuman animals and the "cognitively disabled" disappears. By discussing only the severe cases, generalizing about their condition (to the point that they are stripped of all actual and potential human capacities), and choosing examples which do not reflect their actual historical treatment (e.g. killing and eating them), it is easy to divorce persons labeled cognitively disabled from our concrete human world. Their ostracism in the abstract world of philosophy is difficult to reconcile with fact that persons with cognitive disabilities are members of families, communities, and a social group with a distinct history.

Young discusses social group membership in terms of the Heideggerian notion of thrownness: "one finds oneself as a member of a group, which one experiences as always already having been. For our identities are defined in relation to how others identify us, and they do so in terms of groups which are always already associated with specific attributes, stereotypes, and norms."132 Insofar as persons labeled cognitively disabled are members of a distinct social group in relation to other social groups, and experience concrete consequences from this group membership, cognitive ableism differs from speciesism. For this reason, I also object to equating speciesism with racism and sexism.133 Though the pattern may seem similar in each case, an analysis of the oppression which results from these forms of discrimination at the level of social groups, reveals important differences. One particularly important difference is the fact that human identities are in part shaped and constituted by one's group membership, whereas it is

132Young, 46.
133There are also problems with equating racism and sexism. See Spelman, particularly her chapter on "Gender & Race: The Ampersand Problem in Feminist Thought" (114-132).
arguable that non-human animals do not have this same relationship with their classification.

Moreover, classifications of human beings are open to what Ian Hacking calls "looping effects": the nature of the classification itself can be altered and shaped by the responses of individuals to their classification. Similarly, Young stresses that, though we are "thrown" into pre-existing social groups, "it does not follow from the thrownness of group affinity that one cannot define the meaning of group identity for oneself; those who identify with a group can redefine the meaning and norms of group identity." I view this as another fundamental difference between human beings as members of social groups, and nonhuman animals.

Cognitive ableism and speciesism must differ in certain respects, insofar as the groups which are the objects of discrimination are qualitatively different. To say this is not simply another instance of speciesism. I am not arguing that we should give preferential treatment to humans as opposed to animals because they are members of social groups. Rather, I am drawing this distinction to clarify an important difference between the nature and consequences of two forms of discrimination and oppression. Given these differences, what conclusion can be drawn about the necessity of choosing between speciesism and cognitive ableism? Recall the dilemma: it appeared that the only way to give moral status or give preference to the interests of the "severely cognitively disabled" was to do so based purely on species membership (a form of speciesism); however, if we reject speciesism and privilege mental ability and the capacities which follow from it (cognitive ableism), it seems impossible to distinguish morally between nonhuman animals and the "severely cognitively disabled". Ultimately, I do not think that we have to make a choice: it is not necessary to collapse into one by rejecting the other.

---

134 Hacking, 370.
135 Young, 46.
First, one can argue against speciesism without falling into cognitive ableism. It is possible to recognize relevant moral characteristics possessed by nonhuman animals without using the "severely cognitively disabled" to make this point. One need not set up the opposition between nonhuman animals and the "profoundly retarded" to argue that we treat animals unjustly. Singer's point seems to be that we value certain characteristics in human beings, and have failed to recognize that some non-human animals possess them too, and for this reason, we should refrain from killing and experimenting upon them. To argue that speciesism is unjustified or arbitrary does not imply that we can no longer differentiate between persons labeled cognitively disabled and nonhuman animals. As I have argued, nonhumans are not members of social groups in the way that all humans are; hence the oppressive consequences of discrimination are different and can be analyzed independently. The comparison with the "cognitively disabled" is not necessary to refute speciesism.

Conversely, one can refute cognitive ableism without being guilty of speciesism. Margolis suggests that the only basis for treating the "mentally retarded" in a certain way is by virtue of their species membership. However, there are three conceptual errors that underlie this claim. First, it is assumed that the "severely mentally retarded" lack all potential for capacities deemed essential to personhood. This static view, which denies any possibility of change or development, can be contrasted by a dynamic view (supported by the both the AAMR's current definition, and the Americans With Disabilities Act136) which recognizes the condition as both mutable and influenced by the individual's interaction with his or her environment. The second error is related to the first: the assumption is often made that the persons with severely cognitive disabilities are a uniform group. However, there are relevant differences, such as etiology, organic or non-organic manifestations, and external environment, that might affect the individual's potential for development. Hence it is misleading to present the "severely cognitively

136See Luckasson et. al.; Silvers, "ADA".
disabled" as an unproblematic group about which we can make generalizations and moral claims. Furthermore, this assumption relies upon the belief that there is a clear boundary that can be drawn between "severe", "moderate" and "mild" cases; presumably we can appeal to more than species membership in discussions of the "mildly" or "moderately retarded".

The final conceptual error is the sharp dichotomy made between "bare species membership" and full personhood. In arguing that the only basis for treating the "mentally retarded" in a particular way is their species membership, individuals are divided into those with potential and/or actual capacities which make us persons, and those who possess neither potential nor actual features. Rather, if we view this as a continuum of potentialities and abilities, and broaden the range of features that are relevant to our moral status (e.g. membership or thrownness in an already existing social group, member of a familial and social community), we might see that we share more in common with the "severely retarded" than just our biological label, and that speciesism is not the only avenue available in discussing them.

This leads to one final point. There is an important difference between discrimination based on species membership (speciesism) and simply making the distinction between human and nonhuman animals based on other important features. In using the "cognitively disabled" in arguments against speciesism as a form of preferential treatment, a false opposition is created by which it seems that the interests of the "cognitively disabled" are in direct conflict with the interests of nonhuman animals. Moreover, if one takes social group membership seriously as a criterion, rather than defining persons only according to certain cognitive capacities, it is no longer problematic to distinguish between nonhuman animals and the "severely cognitively disabled". We can maintain a distinction between these two groups- one a social group, the other not- in ways that are not ableist, while still criticizing the unjust discrimination against those who are not members of our species (i.e. fight against speciesism).
My purpose here was to illustrate the way in which arguments against speciesism often rely upon ableist assumptions and arguments. This is not a new phenomenon: for example, racism has often informed arguments against sexism.\textsuperscript{137} However, just as one can maintain that racism and sexism are equally deplorable, a choice need not be made between speciesism and cognitive ableism. The oppressive nature of the discrimination against both nonhuman animals and the "cognitively disabled" can be recognized without perpetuating it in the process. Part of this optimism comes from Singer's own text. In addressing the objection that he is simply privileging animals over humans, he points to the close relationship between movements against speciesism, racism and sexism:

It is often said, as a kind of corollary of the idea that 'humans come first' that people in the animal welfare movement care more about animals than they do about human beings. No doubt this is true of some people. Historically, though, the leaders of the animal welfare movement have cared far more about human beings than have other humans who cared nothing for animals. Indeed, the overlap between leaders of movements against the oppression of blacks and women, and leaders of movements against cruelty to animals, is extensive.\textsuperscript{138}

It is not surprising that an alliance between the disability rights and animal rights movements is not mentioned here, given the inherent ableism that underlies Singer's position. However, I do not think that this rift is insurmountable. One of the objectives of this project is to outline the ways in which philosophers can rethink their portrayal of mental retardation, and clarifying the tensions and important differences between speciesism and cognitive ableism is a first step. In arguments against speciesism, as well as in philosophical discourse generally, individuals whom we consider "cognitively disabled" must not become our philosophical pets.

\textsuperscript{137}There is an enormous body of literature from women of color identifying the racism inherent in feminist literature.

\textsuperscript{138}Singer, 221.
CONCLUSION

The fact that this dissertation focuses more on the past than on the present is not incidental. In addition to illuminating a number of features of classification, this historical analysis was an important backdrop to understanding current philosophical discourse about mental retardation. It became clear that many of the terms and arguments used in philosophical discussions (e.g. the close association between animals and the "mentally retarded") have a distinct history. If philosophers are going to continue to talk about mental retardation, it is imperative that they become acquainted with the past as well as the present. Given the depictions in philosophy of mental retardation as a static, reified "natural kind", an analysis of its historical emergence as a classification is crucial. I agree with Anita Silvers that:

Acknowledging, rather than ignoring, whether social institutions have historically embraced or excluded certain kinds of selves alerts us to how what we take to be essential conceptions of these excluded persons may in actuality be the product of historical contingency.1

Moreover, insofar as "oppression persists in our society partly through interactive habits, unconscious assumptions and stereotypes, and group-related feelings of nervousness and aversion,"2 philosophers must examine the nature and source of the biases and fears which may inform their discussions about persons labeled mentally retarded. By juxtaposing the historical and philosophical worlds of mental retardation, one feels the force of Goodman's claim that "Worldmaking as we know it always starts from worlds already on hand; the making is a remaking."3

The fifth chapter was devoted to examining how and why philosophers talk about mental retardation. Many of the philosophers I discussed address the nature and status of

1 Anita Silvers, "Reconciling Equality to Difference: Caring (F)or Justice For People With Disabilities," Hypatia 10, no. 1 (Winter 1995): 50. Silvers calls this process "historical counterfactualizing".
2 Young, 148.
3 Goodman, 6.
the "mentally retarded" as a moral category. However, few problematize the nature of the classification itself. As a response to this absence in philosophical discourse, I have presented a framework by which to analyze the complexities of classification. Though I focused exclusively on the development and definition of mental retardation, I think it can be helpful to discuss other classifications (particularly other disabilities) in terms of their:
i) heterogeneity; ii) instability; iii) prototype effects; and iv) power relations. Adopting this approach to mental retardation reveals that there are intricate dynamics involved in constructing a category and defining the individuals whom it picks out, and that mental retardation is far more complex than a "natural kind".

As I discussed in the Introduction, "social construction" can be understood as both a process and an object. I have not used this term in the course of this dissertation; rather than speaking about the "social construction of mental retardation", I have offered an analysis of "classification" as it applied to mental retardation. However, "classification", like "construction", can also be interpreted in two ways: it can be used as both a verb and a noun. I would like to review the four features of classification I identified by examining these two interrelated meanings of classification.

Classification is a process which functions at a number of levels. At the individual level, particular persons can occupy the position of "classifier". The superintendent who diagnosed cases of idiocy, or the "intuitive" woman researcher who classified an individual or family line as "defective", were both personally engaged in the process of classification. This process also occurs at the level of groups of individuals. Professional groups classify certain kinds of persons according to criteria decided upon in their disciplines. For example, psychiatrists present a three-part definition in the DSM-IV; geneticists classify certain chromosomal abnormalities as instances of mental retardation; and some philosophers classify the "severely mentally retarded" as non-persons. Various

---

4The criteria are significantly sub-average general intellectual functioning, significant limitations in adaptive functioning, and age of onset before 18 years of age. *DSM-IV*, 39.
disciplines engage in the process of building systems of classifications that are then carried out at the concrete individual level or, in the case of philosophy, at the abstract conceptual level. This feature of classification contributes to what I call "external heterogeneity": the fact that there can be numerous classifiers (individuals and professional groups) of one particular condition.

The process of classification also depends upon techniques and instruments that allow classifiers to do their job, but which also place certain limits on what can be said about a condition or person. As Goodman states, "We are confined to ways of describing whatever is described." In the case of mental retardation, the various methods of detection (e.g. IQ tests, pedigree studies, medical examinations) resulted in an internally heterogeneous classification. Different techniques of gathering knowledge yielded different typologies.

As a process, classification is intentional, non-subjective, and relational. It is intentional in that there is always a reason for classifying persons (e.g. to generate scientific knowledge, advance political objectives, or as a response to social problems). At the same time, however, the process can be viewed as non-subjective; given the multiple levels at which it operates, there is no one person necessarily responsible for its execution. Finally, classification is relational: it necessarily involves an object of classification (it is always the classification of something or someone). When its object is a human being, the process of classification produces classified subjects. This project was also an examination of the ways in which these classified subjects are affected by both the process of classification and the consequences of the label that is attached to them.

The relational character of classification helps explain the phenomenon of instability. In the case of mental retardation, there was never one determinate, underlying object of classification. Genes, intelligence, physical processes, mental abilities, and

---

5 Goodman, 3.
behavior were all objects of classification in the general act of classifying the "mentally retarded".

The second meaning of "classification" is not as a verb, but as a noun. In addition to examining ways of classifying persons as "mentally retarded", I have presented an analysis of the development of mental retardation as a distinct classification, or taxonomy. A classification can have various internal features (e.g. mental retardation is heterogeneous and often has prototypical members). As the case of mental retardation illustrates, the very nature of a classification can be contingent on a number of factors. A classification is shaped by the complex interrelationship between definition, etiology, and treatment (this contributes to its instability). Its boundaries may be also be permeable insofar as social and political factors play a part in the actual development and nature of the classification.

There is a complex relationship between classification as a process, the individuals that it produces, and the classifications themselves. Insofar as mental retardation is caught up in this dynamic, I do not think that it can be described as a "natural kind". Its instability, heterogeneity and the generation of prototype effects, are all signs that the classification (in both the verb/noun sense) of mental retardation is deeply embedded in a social, political and historical context. This is not to say that mental retardation does not have concrete, biological features associated with it; some of the objects of classification are physical or genetic phenomena. My point is that to reduce "mental retardation" to these discrete traits is to ignore features of this classification that are equally fundamental to its definition.

What, then, is the connection between the notion of cognitive ableism as a form of oppression that I introduced in the last chapter, and the complex dynamics of classification? In the case of philosophical discourse, I argued that relying upon an understanding of mental retardation as a "natural kind" can have oppressive consequences. By ignoring the instability and heterogeneity of this classification, philosophers
conceptually marginalize, exploit, and perpetuate prototypes of persons labeled mentally retarded. Furthermore, I would argue that it is the inability to recognize one's own position as a classifier (an aspect of cultural imperialism) that contributes to the cognitive ableism in philosophy- the privileging of individuals who possess certain "normal" cognitive abilities (defined by philosophers as rationality, autonomy, potentiality, etc.), and according lower status to those who do not.

Young's pluralistic approach to oppression rests on the assumption that "Each group has a specific identity and history that cannot be reduced to any other." Though she refers to "ableism" along with sexism, racism, homophobia and ageism throughout her book, I believe that "cognitive ableism" is a distinct form of ableism that deserves separate consideration. My discussion of speciesism was a first step at defining and exposing the cognitive ableism inherent in philosophical discourse by examining how persons labeled cognitively disabled are marginalized and exploited in unique ways. Silvers rightly points to the fact that:

Modern moral thought has not construed disability as being like other particularities which differentiate moral agents from each other. While modern moral thought commonly dismisses differences between persons as contingent and external, and thus as inessential to a person's moral being, disability unmistakingly has been embraced as a morally essential attribute; one which assigns the disabled to the borderline of moral worth.

I suggest that the essentializing of "disability" in philosophical literature is done in various ways, and that "the disabled" as a group do not all occupy the same place in this marginal moral space. For example, persons with physical impairments alone are not used to refute speciesism, nor have I found arguments that debate to what extent they can be distinguished from nonhuman animals. Insofar as philosophers "conclude that physical or

---

6 Young, 142.
7 The distinction between "physical" and "cognitive" disability is not a clear one. Many individuals have both physical and mental impairments. The very possibility of drawing this distinction needs to be addressed.
8 Silvers, "ADA", 220.
mental impairment, a contingent individual state, entails a moral deficit", it is important to analyze if and how this deficit is defined differently with respect to different impairments.

This project is an attempt to broaden the philosophical boundaries within which cognitive disability is discussed. Much of the philosophical attention devoted to persons labeled mentally retarded focuses on their status as a marginal or morally problematic case. I have presented alternative avenues of discussion- historical, epistemological and political- whereby philosophers might spend less time debating whether we can distinguish persons with mental retardation from non-human animals, and more energy examining the nature of classifications, the effects they have on classified subjects, and the power relations inherent in the practice of classifying. I would like to conclude by briefly considering three changes that are occurring with respect to cognitive disability that demand further philosophical attention: the discursive explosion in bioethics; advances in genetics; and the growing self-advocacy movement.

Bioethics and the Politics of Prevention

I have not discussed the area of philosophy where persons labeled mentally retarded are given the most attention: bioethics. One could say that there has been a discursive explosion around mental retardation in this field. While the Philosophers Index has only 42 entries on the "mentally retarded", BIOETHICSLINE (a data base from the Kennedy Institute) has 1,970 entries on "mental retardation", and 1,941 under "mentally retarded". Bioethics presents a vast area for the kind of analysis I have undertaken here. Given the close association with clinical practice, it would not be surprising to find that bioethicists, even more than other moral philosophers, adhere to a medical (or "natural kind") model of mental retardation, and leave the problematic status of the classification

---

9Ibid. 221.
10What follows is a brief sketch of these issues, not a detailed discussion. There are many gaps to be filled.
untouched. Furthermore, the issue of cognitive ableism is particularly salient in bioethics, where the focus of so much of this discourse is on the prevention of mental retardation.

Many of the topics in bioethics under which mental retardation falls deal with its prevention in some form. The issue of prenatal screening implies the possibility of avoiding (either through refraining from conceiving, therapeutic practices on the fetus or newborn, or abortion) certain disabling conditions, many of which involve mental retardation. For example, one of the most common reasons for a woman to undergo prenatal testing is to detect Down syndrome, and though it is associated with a number of possible physical conditions, the principle characteristic is mental retardation.11

Another topic which bears directly upon individuals labeled mentally retarded is sterilization. There is an extensive history of sterilization and mental retardation,12 and today one still finds debates around the ethicality of voluntary, involuntary and non-voluntary sterilization.13 The specter of prevention lurks behind arguments about the possible harms of pregnancy and birth to a woman with mental retardation, her fitness as a mother (i.e. possible harms to the child), and the moral culpability of women labeled mentally retarded giving birth to children with similar or worse conditions.14 Again we are confronted with a technology which might prevent further cases of mental retardation.

In my discussion of speciesism and the justification for killing nonhuman animals and the "severely mentally retarded", I indirectly touched upon the problem of infanticide of newborns with cognitive disabilities. One of the most widely discussed cases in

---


12See Reilly; Trent, Ch. 6.
14The "good/bad mother" theme is currently playing itself out in bioethical debates over whether it is morally justifiable for "mentally retarded" mothers to bring a disabled child into the world. See Bonnie Steinbock, "Reproductive Rights and Responsibilities," Hastings Center Report 24, no.3 (May-June, 1994).
bioethics is the Baby Doe case, where a child was born with an intestinal blockage which could have easily been repaired with surgery. However, because the child was diagnosed as having Down syndrome, the parents decided to let the child starve to death (over a period of eleven days). This is perhaps the most blatant example of cognitive ableism, insofar as a human life is actually terminated solely because of his membership in the category "mentally retarded".

There are still other bioethical areas that are in some way concerned with the prevention of mental retardation: coerced contraception, euthanasia, and the new reproductive technologies (e.g. in vitro fertilization, artificial insemination, surrogacy) which would allow for parents to avoid giving birth to a child with genetic conditions associated with mental retardation. In addition to discussing the consequences of these practices for persons with mental retardation, the implications of the discourse itself must be acknowledged. The politics of prevention cannot be ignored by philosophers. Persons with mental retardation must not be treated by philosophers and clinicians simply as a two-fold problem to be solved: at the existential level, how can we prevent their existence?; at the moral level, how do we deal with the ethical dilemmas this population poses?

Genetic Visibility and Prenatal Prototypes

Another related area for future research is to examine how the advances in genetic screening are currently changing both the structure of mental retardation as a classification, and the perceptions of persons with mental retardation. As this project has illustrated, the question of why someone is "mentally retarded" has always mattered, and

---

15See James Gustafson, "The Johns Hopkins Case" (pp.413-414), Robert Weir, "Selective Nontreatment of Handicapped Newborns" (pp.414-418), and "Treating Baby Doe: The Ethics of Uncertainty" (pp. 419-428), in eds. Beauchamp and Walters, Contemporary Issues in Bioethics, 4th ed., (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1994).

16There is extensive literature by disability theorists on this topic. See Adrienne Asch, "Can Aborting Imperfect Children Be Immoral?" in John D. Arras and Bonnie Steinbock, Ethical Issues in Modern Medicine, 4th ed. (Mountainview, Calif.: Mayfield Publishing Co., 1995); Asch and Fine; Anne Finger, "Claiming all of our Bodies: Reproductive Rights and Disability" in With the Power of Each Breath.
the problem of etiology has become increasingly complex since the times of Seguin and Goddard. The current AAMR manual advocates a multifactorial approach to etiology that recognizes four categories of causal factors: biomedical, social, behavioral, and educational.\textsuperscript{17} I will focus briefly on one advance in determining biomedical causes of mental retardation: the ability to prenatally identify genetically-caused conditions. Though detailed analysis is required to support my claim, I would argue that this new technology marks a shift as significant as the IQ test and the construction of institutions for "idiots" in determining what can be said about mental retardation.

The AAMR manual lists forty-three chromosomal disorders (divided into three sections- autosomes, X-linked, other X chromosome disorders) that have been associated with mental retardation.\textsuperscript{18} In order to understand how the ability to screen prenatally for conditions like Down syndrome and Fragile X syndrome, can change our perceptions of mental retardation, let us first recall the past. As I discussed in Chapter Two, before the acceptance of intelligence tests, doctors relied upon physical symptoms and other visible manifestations of "idiocy" and "feeblemindedness" to guide their diagnoses. One might say that the notion of "invisible idiocy" was not yet developed. Whether it was strange outward appearance, behavioral abnormalities, speech difficulties, unresponsiveness, the inability to perform particular tasks, or animal-like qualities (the list goes on), idiocy was a visible spectacle. The IQ test inverted that visibility: it both allowed for an invisible human characteristic (some form of intelligence) to be assessed, and created the ability to pick out high-grade cases of "feeblemindedness" which had thus far remained undetected (hence, the "moron" becomes the prototypical, invisible case).

We are currently experiencing another inversion of visibility. Historically, etiology has always been a riddle to be solved. Before the turn-of-the-century, numerous etiologic explanations circulated, though consensus was never reached, in part because there was

\textsuperscript{17} Luckasson et. al., 71.
\textsuperscript{18} They stress that "etiology is not destiny", and that the disorders listed are those that, in some, not all cases, were concurrent with mental retardation. Ibid, 72.
never any concrete thing or feature to which doctors could point as the cause of idiocy. Hereditarian explanations dominated during the period of eugenic fervor, and pedigree charts tracing one's family history were an attempt to make feeblemindedness visible (though it relied upon the recollections of the living about their no-longer-visible dead relatives). However, the cause of idiocy and feeblemindedness (defective germ plasm) remained invisible; etiology was inferred from symptoms, behavior, environment, and family trees.

This is no longer the case. The cause of some forms of mental retardation is now identifiable at the genetic level: scientists can detect particular genetic anomalies (e.g. Trisomy 21 or the "fragile site" on the X chromosome). A "triple screen" for Down syndrome is also available, and means that all pregnant women, regardless of age, can be screened through a blood test (which includes the serum alpha-fetoprotein test usually performed to detect neural-tube defects) to determine the risk of having a fetus with Down syndrome. This test is significant, for "it marks another major step in genetic screening....Rarely, if ever, has such universal screening been offered and marketed for a single fetal anomaly....The triple screen for Down syndrome is the first universal screening effort for a single disorder with nonlethal prognosis." 

19 It is likely that as more conditions associated with mental retardation are detected, screening procedures will proliferate, and our perceptions of persons with mental retardation will change. 20 Already there has been an increase in the internal heterogeneity of this classification: though there are many individuals labeled mentally retarded for whom no genetic etiology is determined, there are sub-classifications based on genetic etiology which have become categories in their own right (e.g. Down syndrome, Fragile X syndrome). Though time


20 I do not know how exactly this will affect our perceptions, though I would imagine that the medical model will become increasingly dominant, and persons with mental retardation may be viewed as genetic "accidents" that might have been avoided.
does not permit here, an important epistemological project will be to trace how the association of these genetic abnormalities with mental retardation continues to transform and rearrange the boundaries of this heterogeneous classification.

Another issue that calls for philosophical analysis is the effect of this technology on prototypes. Historically, various forms mental retardation have been picked out as representative of the category as a whole, and as we saw, there were a number of social, political and scientific factors that fueled the creation of these prototypical "kinds". Prenatal screening opens the door to a new kind of prototypical case: the prenatal prototype. The etiologic paradox of this new screening technology is that the genetic condition is visible prenatally, yet its manifestation remains invisible until the child is born or years later (depending on the condition). I maintain that this indeterminacy encourages the generation of new prototypes. In cases where the severity cannot be determined (e.g. Down syndrome, Fragile X syndrome) but the genetic abnormality can be detected prenatally, there is the possibility of characterizing the future person with that condition in a particular (often stereotypical) way. Genetic visibility, coupled with the as-of-yet invisibility of the actual child, allows for descriptions of "types" that become representative of the category as a whole. The case of Down syndrome illustrates this danger: women are presented with the picture of a severe, untreatable condition despite the fact that "severe" forms are found in a very small percentage of cases.21 An important project will be to examine how the existence of "prenatal prototypes" will affect both our perceptions of mental retardation and its very nature as a classification.

Finally, the availability and practice of this new technology raises questions concerning mental retardation as a gendered classification. There are many parallels between the historical roles women played in the definition and detection of

21For discussions of the biases in how conditions are described to women with positive test results, see Barbara Katz Rothman, The Tentative Pregnancy (New York: Norton, 1986); Abby Lippman, "Worrying - and Worrying About - The Geneticization of Reproduction and Health," in Misconception: Volume One; Rayna Rapp, "Constructing Amniocentesis: Maternal and Medical Discourses", in eds. Faye Ginsburg and Anna Lonenhaupt Tsing, Uncertain Terms: Negotiating Gender in American Culture (Boston: Beacon Press, 1990) . See Elkins and Brown for facts about Down syndrome that are usually misrepresented.
"feeblemindedness", and the multiple positions women occupy today with respect to prenatal testing. Insofar as women must undergo these tests and decide whether or not to keep the "disabled" fetus, the "good/bad mother" myths may still be at play, and women are once again in a position of being "responsible" for the kind of child to whom they give birth. Furthermore, with respect to the detection of conditions which cause mental retardation (e.g. Down syndrome) many women are playing an intermediary role analogous to the field workers, as genetic counselors. Rayna Rapp writes, "Once amniocentesis became commonly available, there was a need for someone to...translate scientific possibilities into personal terms. As it turned out, women seemed drawn to the role of 'gatekeeper' between science and social work, between epidemiology and empathy." In light of the power relations examined in the fourth chapter, the fact that most of this work is performed by women, and the relationship between the counselor and client, demand philosophical reflection. Though time does not permit a discussion here, I suggest that there are many additional issues dealing with the classification and power relations surrounding cognitive disability which have yet to be addressed from a feminist philosophical perspective. The fourth chapter was an attempt to add to this dialogue.


23Reminiscent of the female reformists discussed in Chapter Four, some (feminist) moral philosophers argue that it is a woman's responsibility to avoid the birth of a "disabled" child if she can, and rely upon negative images of mental retardation and disability generally to build their arguments. See Laura Purdy, "Loving Future People", in ed. Joan C. Callahan, *Reproduction, Ethics, and the Law: Feminist Perspectives* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995); Bonnie Steinbock and Ron McClamrock, "When Is Birth Unfair to the Child?", *Hastings Center Report* 24, no. 6 (November-December, 1994). Barbara Hillyer has a detailed critical discussion of "mother-blaming" in *Feminism and Disability* (Norman, Okl.: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993). She makes the controversial claim that disability rights activists also play a role in mother-blaming, particularly mothers whose children are labeled severely mentally retarded (Ch. 6).


25Ibid, 27.

26Current work from this perspective tends to focus on physical disabilities, or "disability" generally. See Susan Wendell, "Toward a Feminist Theory of Disability" *Hypatia* vol. 4, no. 2 (Summer 1989); *The Rejected Body: Feminist Philosophical Reflections on Disability* (New York: Routledge, 1996); Silvers, "Reconciling Equality to Difference".
Self-Advocacy as Reverse-Discourse

The final change that calls for philosophical attention is the growing self-advocacy movement among persons who have been labeled mentally retarded. At the beginning of the second chapter I made the qualification that this project does not trace "subjugated knowledges"; rather, it examines the development of a classification as defined by scientific and philosophical "experts", and explores the power relations between the classifier and the classified. However, as long as philosophers take an interest in the issue of cognitive disability and persons thus labeled, we cannot ignore the voices that are emerging from this growing political movement.27 I would like to conclude with one observation concerning the relationship between mental retardation as a classification, and the consequences of self-advocacy.

Historically, discussions of mental retardation have been both relational and negative; definitions have often taken the form "not x". The proliferation of statements as to what mental retardation is not, (which oftentimes outweigh the number of positive claims that can be made) is a recurring feature of the classification. This negative formulation of mental retardation has functioned at a number of levels. As a social group, the "mentally retarded" (or "idiots", "feebleminded") have been differentiated from other marginalized groups. As we saw, it was the differentiation between idiocy and insanity that was a first step in isolating "idiots" as a specific "kind" worthy of attention. In contemporary philosophical discourse, we find the "severely mentally retarded" defined as both non-persons and in relation to other non-persons, namely animals.

Persons labeled mentally retarded have also been defined in terms of attributes that they lack. Most obviously, it is their intellectual "deficiency" that has constituted them as a social group. However, the language of deficit has described other features as well. Historically, "idiots"

27There are many philosophical and political issues that the self-advocacy movement raises concerning political representation. There may still be many persons labeled "mentally retarded" whose perspectives will not be acknowledged (either due to the severity of their condition, or other constraints). The extent to which this movement will shape the nature and perception of the classification also depends upon the effect it will have on the members of this group who cannot represent themselves.
were ineducable, "moral imbeciles" marked with an indelible moral deficit, "feebleminded women" lacked both intelligence and "feminine" virtues. According to some recent philosophical literature, the "severely cognitively disabled" lack attributes which would make them "persons", and are often characterized as lacking any form of potential. Finally, the nature of many philosophical conversations perpetuates the division between us/them. In creating a dichotomy between the "intellectually disabled" and "normal humans", Singer defines the former as not normal. The subtitle of Veatch's book, The Foundations of Justice: Why the Retarded and the Rest of Us Have Claims to Equality, attests to the position of persons labeled mentally retarded as the "Other".

Mental retardation as a condition is still defined negatively. Current classifications indicate that "experts" can say more about what mental retardation is not, than what it actually is. It is striking to see that even the most medicalized definitions have few positive traits by which to define mental retardation. For example, apart from the tripartite definition offered by the DSM-IV, there is little more that can be positively said: "No specific personality and behavioral features are uniquely associated with Mental Retardation....There are no laboratory findings that are uniquely associated with Mental Retardation....There are no specific physical features associated with Mental Retardation....Because of its heterogeneous etiology, no familial pattern is applicable to Mental Retardation as a general category....In approximately 30-40% of individuals seen in clinical settings, no clear etiology for the Mental Retardation can be determined".28

Stating what mental retardation is not is also a feature of definitions which adopt a "functional" rather than a medical model. In the latest AAMR classification we find a series of statements explaining what mental retardation is not:

Mental retardation is not something you have, like blue eyes or a bad heart. Nor is it something you are, like being short or thin. It is not a medical disorder, although it may be coded in a medical classification of diseases. Nor is it a mental disorder, although it may be coded in a classification of psychiatric disorders (e.g.. DSM)....The level of functioning may have a specific etiology, but mental retardation is not synonymous with etiology.29

---

28 DSM-IV, 42-4.
29 Luckasson et. al., 9.
In this case, mental retardation is understood in terms of the individual and his or her relationship to the social environment. The fact the AAMR claims that mental retardation is not something "you have", and does not equate it with a medical or psychiatric disease, is evidence of the changing perceptions of disabilities away from the individual trait/pathological model. Though I would argue that there are positive political consequences in moving from a medical to a functional model, the AAMR and DSM-IV definitions are similar insofar as they continue to describe mental retardation in terms of what it is not.

Some of the features of classification discussed earlier can help explain why mental retardation is so often described as not x. The fact that in the case of mental retardation there is no distinct biological feature or impairment constitutive of its definition points to the instability of this classification. Furthermore, the descriptions by the AAMR and DSM-IV are evidence of both the internal and external heterogeneity of mental retardation. Finally, all of the negative characterizations of mental retardation (past and present) discussed above point to the fact that mental retardation and the "mentally retarded" have historically been defined "from above", by groups of "experts" and "professionals". Though the AAMR and DSM-IV definitions are signs that this is still the case, the self-advocacy movement is challenging the expert/object dichotomy.

In *The History of Sexuality, Vol. I*, Foucault writes that "the appearance in nineteenth century psychiatry, jurisprudence, and literature of a whole series of discourses on the species and subspecies of homosexuality...made possible the formation of a 'reverse' discourse: homosexuality began to speak in its own behalf." I would argue that in the development of the self-advocacy movement, mental retardation is speaking on its own behalf, creating a reverse-discourse. Self-advocacy allows for inversion of the negative definitions of mental retardation into positive assertions of what "mental retardation" is and what it is like to live with that label. Some self-advocates believe that an important step is to do away with the label "mental retardation" altogether. In response to this, the largest parent/professional advocacy group, the

31See Dybwad and Bersani.
"Association of Retarded Citizens", did away with their title (and the word "retarded"), and officially became "ARC" in 1991. The AAMR, however, has been slower to respond. In the beginning of its latest edition, it states:

The manual retains the term mental retardation. Many individuals with this disability urge elimination of the term because it is stigmatizing and is frequently mistakenly used as a global summary about complex human beings. After considerable deliberation, we concluded that we are unable at this time to eliminate the term, despite its acknowledged shortcomings. The purpose of this manual was to define and create a contemporary system of classification for the disability currently known as mental retardation and, in order to accomplish that, we had to use the commonly understood term for the disability.

I wonder whether philosophers will be as reluctant to respond to the claim by self-advocates that "We are People First".

This dissertation has examined the nature of classification as both a process and a product. Though I discuss the history of mental retardation in terms of power relations and oppression, I have spoken very little about the actual experiences of the classified subjects themselves, of the ways these classifications have shaped their lives, and of the many points of resistance which have gone unnoticed by analyzing the discourses on this topic produced "from above". I see the self-advocacy movement as an important step toward allowing the many forms of "subjugated knowledges" to surface, creating a reverse-discourse that will positively re-define and re-name mental retardation.

When a mentally handicapped person comes and asks 'Am I mentally handicapped?' - the fact that a person asks a question like that is because he has been going around thinking "What am I and what am I not?" Now it is very important that one doesn't just answer 'Yes, you are mentally handicapped,' but one must try to get to the bottom of his question. It is now that the best time has come to speak about the words mental handicap. I will go so far as to say that a person cannot answer this question if he or she does not have a positive handicap consciousness. If a person is negative, they will do anything not to be mentally handicapped. One cannot feel any solidarity with others who are mentally handicapped either, because one wants to be better than one is all the
time. Moving away from a negative handicap consciousness towards a positive consciousness is very difficult. One needs a lot of help because it is very difficult.  

33 Dybwad and Bersani, 54. This is from a speech given by Ake Johansson at the international conference of the Nordic Association on Intellectual Disability in 1987 at the University of Uppsala, Sweden. Johansson lived 32 years of his life in institutions. (51)
REFERENCES


Goddard, Henry Herbert. 1910. "Four Hundred Children Classified by the Binet Method". In The History of Mental Retardation: Collected Papers, Volume I,


