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Rituals of knowing: rejection and relation in disability theology and Meister Eckhart

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ABSTRACT

One of the most powerful claims of disability theology is that the rejection of persons with disabilities somehow correlates with a rejection of God. This ‘correlative rejection’ is, however, frequently just stated rather than explored in detail, something this article therefore seeks to remedy by examining one example of the correlative rejection that draws together the ethical concerns of theologians writing on intellectual disability with Meister Eckhart’s teaching on the human relationship with God. Here, the correlative rejection is exposed as an inevitable result of the narrow emphasis on autonomy and rationality in human self-perception which shape the habituated, even ritualised ways that we try to know persons with intellectual disabilities and God. By contrast, truly knowing and relating to persons with intellectual disabilities, God, and finally also ourselves, relies on a reconciliation with the dependence, vulnerability, and non-rational forms of exchange that a narrow attachment to autonomy and rationality seems directly to occlude. The correlative rejection thus signals both a practical and epistemological problem which results from how we view ourselves and how we subsequently relate to and try to know others, the harmful effects of which are both ethical and spiritual.

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Introduction

At the heart of much disability theology lies a powerful claim ‘To reject the disabled because they are disabled is to reject God’.¹ Taking this claim seriously means recognising that the social and ethical concerns raised by disability theology also represent a profoundly theological problem. However, despite the clear importance of this claim to the genre, the nature of this ‘correlative rejection’ of persons with disabilities and God has not been examined with the detail it deserves. This article therefore develops the discussion, focusing on how the rejection of persons with intellectual disabilities by the ‘able’ in contemporary society parallels the rejection of God as considered by Meister Eckhart in his teaching on ‘detachment’ (*abegescheidenheit*). In both cases, we will see, rejection results, on the one hand, from a self-perception narrowly centred on presumed norms of rationality and autonomy and on the other, from ratio-centric attempts to know and relate to persons with intellectual disabilities and God. For theologians writing from their relationships

with persons with intellectual disabilities, just as also for Eckhart in his account of the human relationship with God, these norms are revealed as a false account of our being human and a limited form of knowing and relating to others which is particularly detrimental to our receptivity towards persons with intellectual disabilities and God. By contrast, receiving and knowing persons with intellectual disabilities requires a re-habituating to the dependence, vulnerability, and non-rational dimensions of our knowing and relating which can occur through reciprocal, caring and committed relationships with persons with intellectual disabilities themselves. For Eckhart too, although our relationship with God is radically different from relationships with other humans, knowing and relating to God through detachment requires a comparable reconciliation with the same dependent and vulnerable reality of our being and a similar release of ratio-centric knowing. In the particular case of persons with intellectual disabilities and God, the correlative rejection thus describes the ethical and spiritual consequences of assumptions about human existence which are not just false, but epistemologically limiting, obstructing our capacity to know and relate to persons with intellectual disabilities and God by shaping our interactions with them in ways that always already reject.

In the following three sections, we will explore a definition of intellectual disability before considering how people with these life experiences are often viewed in western society. Peter Singer's work will provide an example of both common assumptions about people with intellectual disabilities and the patterns of self-perception and ways of knowing and relating to others which shape these assumptions. The view which Singer exemplifies will then be scrutinised through Thomas Reynolds' work on the 'cult of normalcy' where we will consider in more detail the ritualised pattern of response to persons with intellectual disabilities, exposing the views of the previous section as, in fact, a defensive rejection of those who undermine what we believe to be true about ourselves, played out in the ritualised attempt to assimilate or stigmatise them. We will then turn to the insights of authors who write from the experience of committed relationships with persons with intellectual disabilities, in particular Henri Nouwen and Jean Vanier. In total contrast to Singer, people with these life experiences are identified as of equal worth to anyone else and with a clear capacity to engage reciprocally in relationships if we are willing to know and receive them in ways that do not immediately obstruct relation by rejecting and devaluing how and what they have to give. Building relationships with them, we will see, demands a reconciliation with the realities of dependence and vulnerability, both theirs and our own, which are seemingly anathematised by a self-perception and approach to relation rooted in autonomy and rationality. Most important of all, this experience is itself expressed by Vanier and Nouwen as a reconciliation with dimensions of our being human together that are, in fact, essential to human relating and which are encountered daily in the repetitious activities of care. It is with this in mind that we will then turn to Eckhart's account of the human relationship with God. Eckhart closely parallels both the critique of autonomy and reason, the association of these with limiting and, again, seemingly ritualised 'ways' of knowing that obstruct our relationship with God, and finally, the identification of dependence and in some sense also vulnerability, as the basis for a knowledge of and relationship with God that transcends these limitations.

Wholeness, worth, and intellectual disability

‘Intellectual disability’ is a broad label affixed to numerous kinds of life experience. Nevertheless, as Jill Harshaw notes, citing the International Classification of Diseases (ICD 10),² it always includes several criteria: ‘[1] a significant impairment of intelligence... [2] a significant impairment of social functioning which comprises a range of conceptual skills...social skills...and practical skills’ and, finally, ‘[3] an onset before the age of 18’.³ Within these criteria, the World Health Organisation also distinguishes the severity of an intellectual disability as either mild, moderate, severe, or profound.⁴ While some people with mild or moderate intellectual disabilities can live independently or with minimal support, can learn practical and social skills, and may also work full- or part-time jobs, persons with profound intellectual disabilities may have little or no voluntary movement or capacity for verbal communication and a negligible capacity to develop or employ the cognitive abilities and social functioning skills noted above.

For most persons with intellectual disabilities, their cognitive and physical impairments mean they depend on support for at least some daily activities and for those with profound intellectual disabilities this can reach a seemingly total dependency and lack of capacity for communicative exchange. Partly because of this dependency and their potentially limited capacity to understand or clearly communicate experiences, they are at higher risk of various kinds of harm and abuse and for this reason are counted as ‘vulnerable adults’ in the UK care sector.⁵

Dependent, vulnerable, and cognitively impaired, the lives of persons with intellectual disabilities cannot but contradict a view of human wholeness, worth, and relating which prioritises autonomy and rationality. To consider the nature and prevalence of this view and its subsequent effect on how persons with intellectual disabilities are perceived, we will draw on Peter Singer’s work focusing, not on his utilitarian ethics, but on the assumptions about the wholeness and worth of some forms of life over others, thinly veiled in the account of ‘personhood’ upon which his ethics depends.⁶

In *Practical Ethics*, Singer takes personhood as a category for determining whose preferences should have priority in ethical decision making. Personhood, Singer insists, is distinguished by ‘characteristics like rationality, autonomy, and self-awareness’ and a person, because of these characteristics is ‘aware of itself’ and thus ‘capable of having desires about its own future’.⁷ Singer does not, however, simply apply these traits to a concept of the human individual as an isolated entity. They have another role which Singer does not explicitly draw out but which is essential to his argument, that of communication. Without the capacity for language use or other forms of complex and concept-sharing communication, Singer’s ethics cannot function for it depends on an individual’s capacity to communicate to others that they *are* rational, autonomous, and self-conscious beings, and this capacity is premised on the traits which already identify them as persons. There is therefore an implicit preference towards certain kinds of exchange, or relating, through which someone might reveal their wholeness and worth – their personhood – to someone else.

Rationality is, as such, much more than just an ontological trait or a tool for enabling autonomy in Singer’s account of personhood. It makes possible certain ways of knowing or relating, certain complex concept-sharing forms of communication which we often assume to be essential for understanding each other and, in this case, for

identifying each other's wholeness and worth, or personhood. Recognising this is fundamental if we are to properly understand why Singer's view of personhood inevitably rejects persons with intellectual disabilities, for the traits by which he defines personhood are simultaneously the principal means of identifying a 'person' as such. According to Singer's criteria, the dependence, vulnerability, and cognitive impairments of persons with intellectual disabilities thus immediately reveal their non-personhood to us, not through our open attempt to understand their life experiences, but because they cannot communicate with us and about themselves in ways that would identify them as persons. They cannot even object to this demotion, for by prioritising rationality and rational forms of exchange Singer's account already rejects or hierarchically devalues non-rational forms of exchange, treating them either as ethically irrelevant or as always less significant than the preferences and communications of 'real' persons.⁸ Only a person can therefore meaningfully object to being excluded from the category of personhood and this statement indicates more than just grammatical syllogism, for the circularity of Singer's argument is rooted in the relational practices it prioritises just as much as in the categories it applies to people. It is, as such, a *practically* grounded syllogism shaped by the particular ways in which we attempt to know and relate to others. If we accept the premises of Singer's argument, or rather, if we choose to prioritise the same traits as he does in our ways of interacting with and valuing other people, then agreeing with his judgement of persons with intellectual disabilities is inevitable, for when it comes to evaluating their wholeness and worth (their personhood) absence of evidence can be taken directly as evidence of absence.

Some might question this reading of Singer, particularly in its clear assumption that his account of personhood is, in truth, a scale that measures the worth of certain lives over others. Yet as Singer clearly indicates, his use of the category of personhood, similar to that operative within much contemporary ethics,⁹ is an attempt to apply 'common-sense' assumptions about what makes a life valuable to practical ethical situations in a consistent and systematic way.¹⁰ Singer's work is therefore one example of the narrow prioritisation of rationality and autonomy as the criteria by which we define human wholeness and worth in western society, criteria which we prioritise, not just theoretically but also practically, in specific forms of rationally grounded communication and exchange.¹¹

Many would not follow Singer to his often controversial conclusions regarding abortion and euthanasia. Yet if his work (and other similar studies¹²) meaningfully exemplifies presumed 'common-sense beliefs', these conclusions simply expose the potential impact of these beliefs on our judgement of persons with intellectual disabilities. For even outside of controversial ethical debate, we frequently assume in our society that those who depend on others for their day-to-day activities have limited or no capacity to lead worthwhile lives, contribute to society, or engage reciprocally in meaningful forms of communication and relation.¹³ We define the lives of persons with intellectual disabilities entirely by their apparent deviation from our norms and frequently act towards them (if we even engage with them) as if they therefore have no gifts or strengths at all.

Rejection and the cult of normalcy

Challenging this view clearly requires us to question Singer's basic premises from the outset and Thomas Reynolds does precisely this in his work *Vulnerable Communion*.

Reynolds offers a theoretical model, the ‘cult of normalcy’, with which we can re-evaluate both why we seem often to commit to the norms of rationality and autonomy and how this commitment shapes our reaction to persons with intellectual disabilities whose lives seem so incompatible with the dominant norms of western societies.

Reynolds starts with a concept of human being that emphasises our dependence, vulnerability, and relationality. We are creatures with a deep need to be welcomed in a safe space that we might call home, a place which fulfils our instinct for survival, but which also provides the social environment where we might learn the skills that allow us to ‘navigate the relationships by which we not only survive but also find value and purpose in that survival’.¹⁴ The ‘basic question of human existence’ is therefore ‘whether there is welcome at the heart of things’, a welcome because of which we can survive, grow, and flourish.¹⁵

Society provides this ‘space’ of welcome and it does so according to certain patterns. Reynolds articulates this with reference to Charles Taylor’s notion of ‘frameworks’ in which are embedded a particular group’s notion of the ‘good’ which comes to structure our sense of identity and worth.¹⁶ Reynolds adds to the notion of frameworks, insisting that our sense of identity and worth also come through forms of reciprocal and embodied exchange which communicate the ‘good’. We thus share in a worldview that is both conceptually communicated and ‘bodily instantiated, only possible insofar as we are able to participate in practices that characterize a corporate way of dwelling together and reflect its vision of the good’.¹⁷ This, of course, requires us to have the cognitive (and physical) abilities which make participation possible, allowing us to give, receive, sustain, and reinforce the sense of identity and worth which we receive through what Reynolds calls the ‘economy of exchange’ within a particular group.¹⁸

For Reynolds, whether or not a group is a ‘cult of normalcy’ depends on its response to ‘difference’, to those who do not fit into the norms by which group members define their identity and worth and who do not or cannot conform to the group’s economy of exchange. Members of the cult of normalcy respond to such difference with a ‘set of rituals trained upon demarcating and policing the borders of a “normal” way of being’.¹⁹ We react defensively, in other words, to an apparent contradiction of our values and Reynolds gives two examples of how this occurs relevant for our discussion. First assimilation, when we accept others to the extent that we can perceive or remake them according to our own image.²⁰ Second, stigmatisation – when assimilation is impossible, we define people entirely by their real or perceived differences, affixing labels to them which frame a concept of who they are through a vocabulary that distinguishes them from ‘normal’ people, allowing us to justify and treat as normal, our barrier-creating practices and attitudes.²¹ Specifically for our discussion then, the practices through which we treat persons with intellectual disabilities, and the negative judgement of their worth and wholeness which occurs when we judge them solely by the norms through which we define ourselves, follows a ritualised pattern which helps sustain our sense of what is normal.

These two ritualised responses expose something fundamental to Reynolds analysis: for those within the cult ‘difference’, or in our case intellectual disability, is experienced as disruptive. This simple observation takes us to the heart of the cult of normalcy, since the experience of difference as disruptive reveals what it means for the norms of the cult to be meaningful and dependable measures of our identity and worth. The ritualised

patterns of stigmatisation or assimilation in response to difference expose an underlying belief that to sustain our sense of who we are, our norms must be the measure against which we can judge all others. In short, we presume that they must be universally true and the concepts and practices which shape our encounters with others therefore pre-contain and project our commitment to this universality. This means that the problem of the cult is not simply *that* we reject those whose presence is experienced as disruptive, but also that belief in the universality of our norms makes this rejection inevitable, since our norms *must* epistemologically structure what and how we can receive from others if we are to sustain this belief and the secure sense of identity and worth which it offers.

For our discussion then, the norms of autonomy and rationality become the form and filter of our knowledge of persons with intellectual disabilities in a way that leads inevitably to rejection. Conceptually, we stigmatise them, defining them entirely by what they are not (their lack of autonomy and rationality) or we assimilate them to the extent that they are 'like' us.²² Practically, we only treat as meaningful those forms of reciprocal exchange and self-expression rooted in the rational and physical capacities which they lack to varying degrees, meaning that their ways of relating and of sharing who they are with us appear intrinsically limited or even non-existent. The combination of these concepts and practices and the unwavering commitment to the premises of normalcy gives the cult a self-justifying logic, both conceptually and practically grounded, which structurally mirrors the syllogism of Singer's approach to personhood. The final and most insidious dimension of the cult, however, is its capacity to relabel actions that indisputably reject and cause harm. Through the circular logic of the cult, we can be absolved of the role that our actions and attitudes have in limiting the flourishing and social participation of persons with intellectual disabilities, treating their impairments as the cause of their tragic but unavoidable exclusion from a world into which they simply do not fit and in which they have nothing to offer. Wedded to the authenticity and universal validity of our norms of rationality and autonomy, we enter fully into an epistemologically enclosed 'ritual of knowing' which does more than simply reject persons with intellectual disabilities, it allows us to justify this rejection in such a way that we cannot even perceive it.

A fundamental question, of course, is why do we presume that our norms must be universal and inflexible if they are to meaningfully measure identity and worth? The answer Reynolds gives takes us back to the basic need in our sociality – the need for security from 'the intractable uncertainties and perils of our existence in a finite and contingent world'.²³ At the heart of the cult is a basic fear of the vulnerability and dependence upon which our relational existence is unavoidably constructed. We fear these realities because they indicate our exposure to harm, as creatures out of control of the world we are born in and out of control of other people on whom we depend in order to survive and to grow. The western cult of normalcy which Reynolds specifically critiques is thus doubly defensive and self-deceptive, for the norms of rationality and autonomy offer not just the security of a sense of self and of worth, they do so explicitly by stigmatising the dependence and vulnerability on which human sociality and identity is built. Accordingly, the presence of persons with intellectual disabilities is doubly disruptive, for they reveal the falsity of our norms in a general sense, destabilising their function as universal measures of our identity and worth which give us a sense

of security, and they do so in a specific way by living lives that reveal the dependence and vulnerability we fear in ourselves and that our norms of autonomy and rationality seem intended to overcome.

It is important to recognise, finally, that this doubled defensiveness of the western cult of normalcy actually exposes a limitation in Reynolds' argument, but one which helps us better understand the next step in our argument. Reynolds does not clearly distinguish between the North American cult of normalcy he critiques and the cult of normalcy as a general category. This might make rigorous application of his theory more difficult than the above analysis has implied, but it shows us something important about Reynolds' starting assumption. For him, the values of North American society, particularly its emphasis on rationality and autonomy, are socially constructed and not, therefore, valid as universal measures of human identity and worth.²⁴ Reynolds speaks, in other words, from outside the 'ritual of knowing' his work critiques and he does so for an important reason. Like many other authors writing theologically on intellectual disability, Reynolds writes from the context of a committed and caring relationship with someone who has an intellectual disability, in this case, his son Chris.²⁵ In particular, as Reynolds himself states, he writes from his experiences of having his own assumptions and expectations challenged by learning to love and accept Chris, as well as learning to receive Chris's love and acceptance of him.²⁶ This relationship is therefore crucial for understanding what Reynolds' work on the 'cult of normalcy' actually represents. It is not an attempt to theorise from neutral ground. Rather, it gives a theoretical voice to how the view exemplified by Singer appears from the perspective of someone who has experienced a shift in their concept of identity, wholeness, and worth, someone, in other words, whose 'rituals of knowing' have been transformed and it is this transformation we must now consider.

Listening anew

In what follows, we will explore how significant the context of relationships with persons with intellectual disabilities are for this transformation, allowing us to outline an alternative account of human wholeness, worth, and relation, as well as of what it therefore means to 'know' persons with intellectual disabilities. This helps solidify the claim that a view like Singer's in fact falsely judges the experience of being human. More importantly, it also shows that a narrow commitment to the norms of autonomy and rationality, which creates the self-justifying logic we saw in Singer and in the cult epistemologically, limits our perception and leads us to ignore or hierarchically devalue the elements of human existence and forms of reciprocal exchange and communication discussed below. To do this, we will look in particular at Henri Nouwen's relationship with Adam, which he describes in *Adam, God's Beloved*. We will draw out elements of Nouwen's experience that clearly expose what a narrow commitment to the norms of rationality and autonomy occludes, as well as identifying the role of dependence and vulnerability in shaping a context where our ritualised and epistemologically limiting commitment to these norms can be transformed and where a new form of knowing becomes possible.

Nouwen shows us, first of all, that 'knowing' each other and, thus, coming to perceive the worth and equality of another human being to oneself, depends on

practices and interactions that are not simply grounded in reason, but in the body and in our dependence upon and vulnerability before others. Adam, whom Nouwen got to know at the L'Arche Daybreak community, had a profound intellectual disability. He could not use language and his physical disabilities meant he was very dependent upon support for day-to-day activities. Nouwen initially gave in to the temptation 'to look only at Adam's disabilities',²⁷ focusing on the differences between them and treating the challenges of relating to and receiving Adam simply as a problem of Adam's impairments.²⁸ The absence of linguistic communication is especially significant in Nouwen's account of his own transformation, both because of the emphasis on words in his own life as an academic theologian and because it was in the absence of words that he learned to listen to the body, both Adam's and his own.²⁹

This shift from an intellective to affective perception seems to represent a general shift in Nouwen's way of receiving or knowing Adam, in his sense of Adam's receiving and knowing him back and in his own way of communicating himself. It is a point emphasised repeatedly in L'Arche and by Jean Vanier, its founder, who, speaking from 50 years of experience living in community with persons with and without intellectual disabilities, maintains that 'understanding, as well as truth, comes not only from the intellect but also from the body',³⁰ a claim which he applies to all human beings. Critically, this opens up the possibility for recognising persons with intellectual disabilities, even those with profound intellectual disabilities, as not simply passive recipients of support, but also as people capable of giving and of communicating understanding and truth. As Nouwen recounts, it was Adam who helped him rediscover the importance of his own body and to recognise how his own ratio-centric route of self-understanding and self-affirmation led him to ignore this fundamental dimension of his being himself, a dimension which he had to become reconciled with in order to 'hear' and accept Adam.³¹ Nouwen makes absolutely clear that at the heart of this and of his difficult journey of self-discovery, was the recognition of his own neediness and vulnerability, realities which made him recognise a sameness between himself and Adam that he found difficult to accept.³² Yet it was his reconciliation with these realities in himself which enabled a personal growth and a deepening of his appreciation for Adam and his gifts and, Nouwen insists, this was made possible because of what was shared in his caring for Adam and receiving Adam's care for him.³³

The idea of persons with intellectual disabilities as gifted care-givers, rather than needy care-recipients, challenges our assumptions about their lives, but it is a vision deeply rooted in Jean Vanier's perception of them as persons with a tremendous capacity to be themselves gifts to our world.³⁴ Central to receiving them and receiving from them, as Nouwen shows us, is learning to listen in new ways, focusing on more than just words by recognising bodies, gesture, touch, sound,³⁵ and even silence, stillness and presence,³⁶ as essential to human relating and communicating. At the same time, the context of this renewed listening is also fundamental. As many with experience of L'Arche communities attest, it is in the context of committed and caring relationships that a new form of knowing grows, one which, through acceptance of dependence and vulnerability in others and eventually also in ourselves, we can trust in the wholeness and value of different kinds of exchange and different sorts of gifts, even those of persons with profound intellectual disabilities whose inner lives and intentions must always, in some sense, remain a mystery.³⁷ In other words, we can become

habituated, or re-habituated, to a new form of relating and knowing, through relationships with persons with intellectual disabilities, where acceptance of dependence and vulnerability is essential if we are to know them with a perspective that does not simply denigrate and reject them. Crucially though, it is persons with intellectual disabilities themselves who invite this, who ask us to receive them as equal to ourselves, and who invite the change which allows a real relationship to occur, one grounded not just in a truer recognition of who they are but, as Nouwen attests, in a truer perception of ourselves.³⁸

There are two conclusions to draw from this, albeit necessarily tentative due to the brevity of the discussion above. The first is that theologians like Nouwen, Reynolds, and Vanier indicate the value of a much broader account of what is going on in human relating and communicating than that offered by Singer, revealing more plainly in his work the hierarchical assessment of what sorts of traits and forms of exchange constitute and reveal a person's wholeness and worth. As Nouwen's writings attest, Adam was a deeply gifted man who transformed the lives of many who met him, but whose gifts could never be perceived as such in the view exemplified by Singer. Such a perspective would likely reductively interpret Adam's 'gifts' as reflecting the needs and even projections of others rather than indicating something intrinsic to Adam. Indeed, this perspective *must* interpret Adam's gifts as such, for truly accepting his giftedness would mean recognising in it the sign of a different measure of human wholeness and worth and would thus require a breakdown of the whole self-justifying cycle of the cult's 'rituals of knowing', the loss of belief in the universality of its norms.

The second point is the importance of context for transforming the narrow emphasis on rationality and autonomy in our perception of what forms of life and exchange have worth. Clearly for Nouwen, the context which makes transformation possible includes the whole community life at L'Arche, where weakness is embraced rather than deplored and where accepting weakness as an important part of community life is seen as part of a path to greater flourishing. But at the centre of Nouwen's experiences and of the L'Arche communities are persons with intellectual disabilities themselves. People who communicate, share, give, and receive, whose dependence and vulnerability is in many ways obvious, but living with whom can invite a reconciliation with the same realities in our lives. Such sharing makes possible a kind of relating and knowing totally inaccessible to us when we focus narrowly on autonomy and rationality, inevitably rejecting persons with intellectual disabilities and also ourselves.

These two points indicate the truth-revealing and relationship-enriching effects of a form of self-perception and a way of knowing to which theologians of intellectual disability are habituated through their own relationships with persons with intellectual disabilities. At the same time, it is a self-perception and a way of knowing entirely occluded, or its worth hierarchically subordinated, in the perspective exemplified by Singer. Such treatment, as we saw earlier, is inevitable, for the self-justifying logic of that perspective, now identified as rooted also in self-deception, must reject all contradiction, all difference, if it is to remain stable. In the end, this reveals the tragic irony of the cult, for in the search for welcome and acceptance, for safety in a world we cannot control, we act out on others the exclusion, rejection, suffering and chaos which we fear for ourselves while grasping after a dream of security which can never be delivered, for

it is premised on the denial of realities we cannot escape and which are themselves, finally, a critical part of what it means to be human and to flourish.

There is, however, a third response to ‘difference’ which overcomes this cycle of injustice and self-deception and which contrasts with the rituals of assimilation and stigmatisation: the transformation of our norms. Of course, letting go of our narrow emphasis on the concepts and practices which define our identity and worth is not just an unpalatable option but a frightening one which undermines our sense of security and in fact exposes another reason why we reject those whose presence we find disruptive: we fear what accepting them requires of us. Transformation is thus challenging but it is not impossible and the world is full of teachers, for as Nouwen, Reynolds, and Vanier show, such transformation can occur by living alongside, listening to, and being received by those whom we reject.

Losing our ‘ways’

As stated in the introduction, the goal of this article was to interrogate the claim that the rejection of persons with disabilities because they are disabled correlates with a rejection of God. The following analysis of Meister Eckhart’s teaching on detachment will allow us to examine this correlation directly. Eckhart, we will see, identifies the same narrow emphasis on autonomy in our self-perception and of ratiocination in the ‘ways’ of knowing which we apply to God. These directly obstruct our receiving and knowing God, for both involve in some sense a denial of our own being and of God as source of all being and truth. At the same time, truly knowing and relating to God occurs once again in the context of our dependence and with a knowing that transcends natural reason. In this case, however, we know not through close and mutual interrelationships, but through the passive reception of God’s action alone, receiving God’s presence in the ground of our being in a spiritual union that reflects precisely, because it completes, the ontological dependence on God as Creator through which we exist in the first place. The spiritual focus of Eckhart’s works reveals the rejection of God as, again, an epistemological and practical problem, just like the rejection of persons with intellectual disabilities, though in this case it is not God but we who suffer by turning away from the source of all being and beatitude.

The recurring theme of detachment in Eckhart’s sermons charts the reorientation of the soul’s way of being and perceiving in what Kieckhefer rightly identifies as a habitual, rather than ecstatic, union with God.³⁹ However, Eckhart does not present it as a step-by-step process and this is likely an intentional move, since he is deeply concerned with the human tendency to become habitually attached to certain ‘ways’ to God. As he puts it: ‘Whoever is seeking God by ways is finding ways and losing God’.⁴⁰ In sermon 1, Eckhart’s critique of these ‘ways’ focuses on the attitude of ‘possessive attachment’ (*eigenschaft*) with which people often approach practices of ‘fasting, keeping vigil praying and the like’. These, he says, are all good works, but doing them for something in return reflects a mercantile desire ‘to engage in a process of bartering with our Lord’.⁴¹ The problem here, as Eckhart makes clear, is not simply the attachment to certain ritual practices, nor to something we desire from God. The real problem of *eigenschaft* is the habituated form of self-perception

which it reveals, the belief that we belong to ourselves enough in the first place to engage in such bartering.

[These merchants] deceive themselves in their trade ... For they are what they are on account of God, and what they have comes to them from God and not from themselves ... they do not give from what is theirs, nor do they act for themselves.⁴²

For Eckhart then, *eigenschaft* most importantly describes our mistaken attribution of an autonomy or ownership over our lives which, in fact, belong to God.

This is itself a statement of the difference between human and divine being. As Eckhart asserts in sermon 28, only God can properly be called 'Ego' for God alone is One and, as he emphasises in his *Commentary on Exodus*, this oneness also indicates God's self-sufficiency, God's needing nothing other than Godself for God's existence, which is identical with God's essence.⁴³ God's being is thus utterly different from creaturely being, independent and infinite, where we are ontologically limited and dependent on God as source of our being. We exist, as such, in a relation of asymmetrical dependence upon God and the various practices where we display this attitude of *eigenschaft*, including sometimes religious rituals, reflect our failure to recognise this truth. Detachment is, in one sense, Eckhart's response to this, a process by which the soul is reoriented towards and reconnected with the truth of its own being, turning back towards its absolute dependence upon God without whom it is literally 'nothing'.⁴⁴ It involves the reformation or, as Kieckhefer indicates, the habituation to a God-centred self-perception which recognises God alone as the 'somethingness' undergirding our being and giving us to ourselves.

For Eckhart, these issues with our false self-perception overflow into how we try to *know* God. In detachment, we must overcome all the ways in which we treat God effectively like an object in the world, since this places us (as knowers) and creation (as the source and site of our normal ways of understanding) in a position of priority over a God who, properly speaking is the prior cause of creation and of our capacity to know. This leaves us grasping another kind of 'way' just as obstructive as the self-perception rooted in *eigenschaft* mentioned above. Yet in this case it is not the 'way' of particular rituals or of habituated self-perception, it is a 'way' of knowing appropriate for things in the world but profoundly inappropriate when applied to God. This, Eckhart makes clear, is because we know all creatures through some 'means', through an image of them which our natural reason creates in response to sensory impressions of things in the world.⁴⁵ No such image of God is possible, however, for only God can perfectly imagine Godself and the image God has of Godself is the Word, the eternal Son of God.⁴⁶ Knowing God, as such, means participating in God's self-knowledge and for this the soul's normal (ratiocinative) 'ways' of knowing and of trying to understand and be itself, must be transcended. Our reason, Eckhart states, must fall into nothingness and unknowing if we are, finally, to pass into our 'ground' and know God truly.⁴⁷

The idea of the ground is central to Eckhart's spiritual anthropology and epistemology.⁴⁸ It is the site and source of our most personal, transformative, and continual encounter with God, where the soul is at its 'purest, noblest and subtlest'.⁴⁹ This purity also identifies the ground as the soul's point of closest connection to God, indeed, the point of its unity and coming forth from God, revealing an apparent synonymy between the ground and the *Imago Dei* in Eckhart's theology.⁵⁰ It is the

point of the soul's deepest unity with God through which it is created and towards which it must turn in order to know God and become itself most fully.⁵¹ The ground is, therefore, simultaneously the focus of Eckhart's spirituality and theological anthropology,⁵² such that knowing or relating to God ties up with truly being and becoming ourselves, living lives oriented completely towards the source from which that life at the same time springs. To enter or turn towards this ground, the soul must become a silent nothing, still, pure, empty, and naked – all of its 'knowing' turned to 'unknowing' its will and self-grasping negated along with all the ways in which it seeks after a control other than God's. Indeed, the whole orientation of the soul's being is transmuted from outward activity in the world, to an inward passivity defined, in sermon 103, as 'potential receptivity',⁵³ a receptivity explored in the same sermon cycle in terms of the soul's 'passivity', or 'suffering' of God's presence.⁵⁴

The term 'potential receptivity' is used only once in Eckhart's German works but it evokes a clear sense of the role of the ground in detachment, as a kind of space where God might be received and present as Godself.⁵⁵ Critically, it is not our action which enables us to know or receive God, but our detachment from all of our own actions and our becoming utterly receptive to God in that 'place' at the core of our being which, at the same time, belongs completely to God since it is made in his Image. Detachment is, as such, less a particular action or process than a negation of our normal actions and processes, an un-habituating or de-ritualising of our 'ways' of knowing and of understanding ourselves, which only clog up our receptivity to God in the ground. In a sense, detachment therefore mirrors the kind of transformation experienced by Nouwen. For him, the ways of knowing and relating to persons with intellectual disabilities which always already rejected them were revealed and transformed in the vulnerable space of relation where Nouwen learned to receive Adam beyond the limited concepts and practices of knowing and relating shaped by a narrow commitment to autonomy and rationality that also defined Nouwen's self-perception. Yet, unlike in human relationships, where treating others as purely passive recipients of our gifts or strengths leads us to deny *their* giftedness, detachment leads to a totally asymmetrical relationship, since knowing God in the ground through detachment relies entirely on God's own action, God's sharing with us God's presence and self-knowledge. Such radical dependence, we might think, involves a similarly radical exposedness or vulnerability and Eckhart's frequent use of 'blôz' (which means emptiness but also bareness and nakedness) to describe the soul in its ground perhaps indicates this. However, in detachment such exposure is radically transformed. For although in our exposedness before each other there is always the possibility of limited and thus also harmful relating, God, as infinite and self-sufficient, completely transcends such limitations and their effects. God therefore receives us and gives to us unrestrainedly when we turn to receive God, as Eckhart states, God cannot not be present to the soul when it goes out of itself through detachment.⁵⁶ As we turn towards God there is therefore no risk of harm and we are left with an entirely positive sense of vulnerability and dependence. They seem to shape the ground of our God-centred existence, the ground which is also the site of a relating to and knowing God where this relies not on our own, but on God's actions, will, knowledge, and self-sufficient autonomy, as the infinite Creator whose unrestrained giving is the source of healing and life.

Conclusion: theology, ethics, and the correlative rejection

The correlative rejection of persons with intellectual disabilities and God, as presented in this article, seemingly results when we narrowly emphasise autonomy and rationality in our self-perception and prioritise ratiocination in our attempts to know others, human or divine. As we have seen, the impact of our attachment to these ‘norms’ leads to a much larger rejection which finally includes ourselves and perhaps all others. The presence and effects of these attitudes in many of our relationships are not, however, always easy to perceive and this takes us back to the concerns of disability theology. For in the case of persons with intellectual disabilities, the effects *are* visible in the rejection of the wholeness, worth, and presence of these people in our societies, our churches, and our lives. If the correlative rejection identifies something true, then our treatment of persons with intellectual disabilities may be the signpost of a much larger social, ethical, and theological problem. As Hauerwas bluntly suggests, how we treat them is an early warning sign of ‘the culture of death’.⁵⁷ If he is correct, this article may indicate some of the habits of self-perception and rituals of knowing which shape such a culture, one where, to sustain our self-deception we cannot but reject those who remind us of our dependence and vulnerability – who falsify our norms – and, if Eckhart is to be believed, where we also cannot but reject God.

Notes

1. See Swinton’s discussion of the various works which articulate this through various re-imaginings of God as disabled. Swinton, “Disability, Ableism, and Disableism,” 446.
2. ICD 10 is a World Health Organisation publication and will be succeeded by ICD 11 in 2018. It is widely used in clinical practice in conjunction with the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), which is now in its 5th edition.
3. Harshaw, *God Beyond Words*, 14–15.
4. *Ibid.*, 15.
5. “No Secrets: Guidance on Developing and Implementing Multi-Agency Policies and Procedures to Protect Vulnerable Adults from Abuse,” 8–9. Adults are over 18. Anyone under 18 is already treated as ‘vulnerable’. For examples of the kind of abuse they experience and of their having difficulty understanding or communicating these experiences see Gravell, *Loneliness and Cruelty*.
6. The term ‘persons’ with intellectual disabilities is widely used in contemporary literature to prioritise the personhood of the people we are talking about and thus disrupt a definition of who they are that focuses primarily on their disabilities. This may create some confusion in our discussion of Peter Singer’s use of ‘personhood’, which explicitly excludes persons with intellectual disabilities. It is, I firmly believe, better to be confronted with syntactical inelegance than to find easy ways of speaking about people with these life experiences as if they somehow constitute a group distinct from the rest of humanity, when our ways of thinking about and interacting with them – as this article argues – are already so harmfully attuned to treating them as such.
7. Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 160; 76. Note, I take self-consciousness to require rationality and thus continue to refer only to rationality and autonomy.
8. For an interesting discussion of how such judgements in fact construct the conditions by which we then qualitatively judge the capacities and lives of persons with intellectual disabilities see Rapley, *The Social Construction of Intellectual Disability*, chap. 3.
9. Rudman, *Concepts of Person and Christian Ethics*, 42.

10. For instance, in chapter 6 of Singer and Kuhse, *Should the Baby Live?*, Singer and Kuhse offer the same argument about personhood as above. Here, however, they clearly identify it as a model which allows for the more consistent application of the beliefs of parents, medical practitioners, and medical policy about the relative worth of certain forms of life which the authors explore in detail in the earlier chapters of the work (See Singer and Kuhse, 28).
11. For detailed reflections on the continued presence of these beliefs in North America, see Fineman, "The Vulnerable Subject: Anchoring Equality in the Human Condition."
12. See, for instance, Giubilini and Minerva, "After-Birth Abortion"
13. See Hauerwas, "Suffering the Retarded."
14. Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion*, 50.
15. *Ibid.*, 51.
16. *Ibid.*, 53–54.
17. *Ibid.*, 56.
18. *Ibid.*, 56–59.
19. *Ibid.*, 60.
20. *Ibid.*, 46–7.
21. *Ibid.*, 63–65. Reynolds also examines a third mechanism, Taboo. However, the rituals of assimilation and stigmatisation are sufficient for our argument.
22. Leading to hierarchical judgements of their lives, hinted at in the possible use of Singer's category of personhood as a scale and also evinced clearly in the hierarchy of disability which persists even in the disability movement. See Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship*, 27.
23. See note 14 above.
24. *Ibid.*, chap. 3.
25. *Ibid.*, 11.
26. Reynolds, "Love Without Boundaries."
27. Nouwen, *Adam, God's Beloved*, 26.
28. *Ibid.*, 31.
29. *Ibid.*, 34–5.
30. Vanier, *Becoming Human*, 25.
31. Nouwen, *Adam, God's Beloved*, 36–7.
32. *Ibid.*, 67.
33. *Ibid.*, 47, 64–9.
34. See Spink, *The Miracle, The Message, The Story, Jean Vanier and l'Arche*, chap. 1.
35. Staley, "Intellectual Disability and Mystical Unknowing," 398–9).
36. de Vinck, *The Power of Powerlessness*.
37. See Young, *Encounter with Mystery*.
38. Nouwen, *Adam, God's Beloved*, 67.
39. Kieckhefer, "Meister Eckhart's Conception of the Soul's Union with God."
40. Sermon 5b, Colledge and McGinn, *Meister Eckhart*, 183. References to 'sermon(s)' followed by a number indicates the numberings of German sermons in the critical editions of Eckhart's works in, Quint and Steer, *Meister Eckhart, Deutsche Werke*.
41. Sermon 1, Davies, *Meister Eckhart, Selected Writings*, 153.
42. Davies.
43. Sermon 28, (Walshe, *The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart.*, 132), and *Commentary on Exodus*, n.14–21 (McGinn, *Meister Eckhart, Teacher and Preacher*, 45–48).
44. Sermon 39, Walshe, *The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart*, 297.
45. For passing beyond 'means' in our knowledge of God, see sermon 45.
46. For an interesting treatment of God's self-image see sermon 70, Walshe, *The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart*, 231.
47. Sermon 103, Walshe, *The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart*, 56.
48. McGinn, *The Mystical Thought of Meister Eckhart*, chap. 3.

49. Sermon 101, my trans., Quint and Steer, *Meister Eckhart, Deutsche Werke*, vol. IV., 339, 30–2.
50. Sermon 16b, Walshe, *The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart*, 114–8.
51. For the theme of our ground and God's ground being the same ground see sermon 39, Walshe, *The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart*, 223.
52. Turner, *The Darkness of God*, 139.
53. Sermon 103, Walshe, *The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart*, 56.
54. See sermon 102, Walshe, *The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart*, 44., n.7.
55. Again a claim justified by the ground's synonymy with the Imago Dei.
56. Sermon 104, Walshe, *The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart*, 49.
57. Hauerwas, Vanier, and Swinton, *Living Gently in a Violent World*, 56.

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