



# Effective Advocacy

## Can we talk to each other about hard topics?

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# What's the problem?

## Academic Version (as described by Heath)

- ▶ If a member of an oppressed group stakes out a position, reasonable people "in the middle" do not voice their disagreement because *they do not want to appear unsympathetic*.
- ▶ So the only criticism you hear comes from
  - ▶ *People who say you're "insufficiently radical"*
  - ▶ *Unreasonable and unsympathetic people*

# What's the problem?

## Consequences

- ▶ Positions and rhetoric become more radical over time
- ▶ *All* critics are perceived as being unreasonable or ill-motivated
  - ▶ Shaming, silencing, demonizing of critics
  - ▶ Example: 85% of Canadians, including 85% of severely disabled Canadians, support assisted suicide, given safeguards.
    - ▶ Response of activists is often a version of: supporters of assisted suicide "don't value disabled lives"
    - ▶ Are 85% of Canadians (including disabled Canadians) really this evil in their heart-of-hearts?

# Why is that a problem *for advocacy*?

- ▶ People are often not going to *tell you* when they are skeptical about what you're selling
  - ▶ This includes people who *control resources*
- ▶ Often our rhetoric is persuasive *only to the people who are already convinced*

# Step 1: Recognize the job to be done

- ▶ Remember that you *have to convince your **actual** audience*, not an ideal audience and not people already on side
- ▶ **Shaming** isn't the same as persuading
  - ▶ It might shut someone up, but it doesn't get her helping the cause
- ▶ Not everyone who doesn't agree yet is a bad person, so don't use rhetoric that is going to offend



## Step 2: what are your *reasons*?

- ▶ We're often bad at this (but so are most people).
- ▶ Requires asking *hard, potentially offensive* questions:
- ▶ *Examples:*
  - ▶ *Lots* of people who think hard about these things believe that "full membership in the moral community" requires certain cognitive abilities that it's not obvious that everyone has
  - ▶ *Many* ordinary citizens don't understand why someone who doesn't show any sign of understanding the issues of the day should vote in elections.

We in this room think they're obviously wrong. But *they* don't think it's obvious at all. How many of us can provide strong answers to the question "why?" that don't amount to "because it's obvious"?

## Step 2: what are your reasons?

- ▶ We're only going to get the answers we need by taking these questions seriously and formulating plausible responses
- ▶ This requires disagreement, explicit discussion of other views
- ▶ We don't have much practice at this
- ▶ There will be disagreement about answers. (Not every remark can "build on" the last thing somebody said).
  - ▶ Disagreement ≠ Disrespect
- ▶ People who do raise hard questions often are treated with suspicion ... 'Are you really on our side?'

# Additional concerns when discussing issues to do with vulnerable people

- ▶ It's all very well to deal with harsh-seeming claims in the abstract, but it's hard to keep your cool when it hits close to home.
- ▶ Eva Feder Kittay---professional philosopher: "imagine being the mother ... and reading statements such as ... [examples above]"
- ▶ "Nothing about me without me" --- but
  - ▶ Do limits to understanding mean this is *nothing but* telling people that others believe things that might hurt their feelings?
  - ▶ If professional philosophers can't separate feelings from these topics, is it fair to expect it from people who have experience of being marginalized, picked on, not taken seriously?



# We need to have discussions anyway

- ▶ Kittay again: vulnerable people, those who know them best, are in a position to know things the rest of us don't
  - ▶ This isn't *magic*, mostly just *location* and *familiarity*
- ▶ If we advocate for autonomy, we need to ensure that the people we advocate for help drive the bus---it's part of meaning what we say

# The Challenge

- ▶ How to have the discussions productively?
  - ▶ *Take it slow*
  - ▶ *Plain language---a lesson many academics could stand to follow*
  - ▶ *Teach the lesson: "I wouldn't bother to argue with you if I didn't respect you"*
- ▶ *My fellow citizens: people I respect enough that when I disagree with them I think it's worth trying to change their minds*

# References:

- ▶ Joseph Heath, "The problem of 'me' studies," blog post from May 30, 2015, <http://induecourse.ca/the-problem-of-me-studies/>
- ▶ "Most (84%) Canadians Believe a Doctor Should be Able to Assist Someone Who is Terminally Ill and Suffering Unbearably to End Their Life," <http://www.ipsos-na.com/news-polls/pressrelease.aspx?id=6626>
- ▶ Eva Feder Kittay, "The Personal is Philosophical is Political: A Philosopher and Mother of a Cognitively Disabled Person Sends Notes from the Battleground," in *Cognitive Disability and its Challenge to Moral Philosophy*, Wiley-Blackwell, 2010, pp. 393-413