

Disability and Euthanasia: The Case of Helen Keller and the Bollinger Baby

John Gerdtz

ABSTRACT

In 1915 Helen Keller published a letter supporting the euthanasia of an infant with apparent cognitive and other disabilities. Keller had already established a national reputation as an advocate for people with disabilities, and her letter created considerable controversy. The purpose of this paper is to examine the contradictions between Keller's strong support of services for individuals with some disabilities, while at the same time recommending euthanasia for those with different disabilities.¹

IN NOVEMBER AND DECEMBER 1915 the front pages of *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and other prominent newspapers were crowded with stories about the Bollinger baby case. In November 1915 a prominent Chicago physician, Dr. Harry Haiselden, refused to perform surgery on the newborn son of the Bollinger family. He recommended that the baby should be left to die, basing this recommendation on his observation that the baby had a number of obvious physical disabilities. Haiselden argued that it is "our duty to defend ourselves and future generations against the mentally defective."² The Bollinger baby died five days later, and Haiselden began an intensive publicity campaign in support of his opinions. There was considerable public discussion of Haiselden and his actions and opinions, and in December 1915, in a letter to *The New Republic*, Helen Keller wrote a letter strongly supporting

¹ Research for this paper was supported by a Faculty Development Grant from Saint Mary's College of California.

² Haiselden quotes from *The New York Times*, November 19, 1915, p. 22.

Haiselden.³ Keller was already well known as an advocate for persons who were blind and deaf, and her opinions surprised a number of her sympathizers. The purpose of this paper is to review the possible foundations for Keller's opinions in the Bollinger case, and to consider the tendency of some advocates of persons with a certain type of disability to advocate euthanasia for those with other disabilities.

THE CASE OF THE BOLLINGER BABY

The complete story of Dr. Haiselden and the Bollinger baby case has been described at length by Martin Pernick in his book *The Black Stork*⁴ and will only be reviewed briefly in this paper. When baby John Bollinger was born on November 12, 1915 at the German American Hospital in Chicago, the attending physician contacted Dr. Haiselden, who was the surgeon on call that night at the hospital. Dr. Haiselden identified a number of physical abnormalities and recommended that the Bollinger parents not consent to surgery that may have saved the infant's life. The parents agreed, and the baby died five days later.⁵ This incident may have been forgotten by all except those immediately involved if Harry Haiselden did not have such a thirst for publicity.

Haiselden immediately publicized the incident in the *Chicago American* newspaper, and the story was soon appearing in *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*. Haiselden justified his actions in the Bollinger case with two basic arguments: first, that infants with serious disabilities were destined for a life of suffering and that a merciful death was the most humane option. Second, persons with certain disabilities were a danger and a burden to society. For his first argument, Haiselden stated regarding infants with disabilities: "It [sic] is pitched into an institution forthwith" and "Institutions are an abomination." He also argued that "it is our duty to defend ourselves and the future generations

³ See Keller's letter, "Physicians' juries for defective babies" in *The New Republic*, December 18, 1915, pp. 173-74.

⁴ Martin S. Pernick, *The Black Stork. Eugenics and the Death of "Defective" Babies in American Medicine and Motion Pictures since 1915* (New York NY: Oxford Univ. Press, 1996).

⁵ Pernick, *The Black Stork*, pp. 3-5.

against the mentally defective.”⁶ Haiselden’s two arguments, that persons with certain disabilities were objects of pity and that simultaneously they were a threat to society, were common arguments by supporters of the eugenics movement in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.⁷ Haiselden intensified the controversy by stating that he had been using selective euthanasia in his medical practice for the previous ten years, and that he would continue the activity. He was a man of his word. Haiselden participated in at least five more infant euthanasia incidents over the next three years.⁸

Many of the prominent newspapers in Chicago, New York and Washington were filled with discussions of the Bollinger baby and Haiselden’s actions. Newspaper editorial pages were covered with articles in support of Haiselden or in opposition to him. *The New York Times* changed from initial opposition to qualified support (with a condemnation of Haiselden’s publicity seeking).⁹ Some prominent physicians publicly supported and applauded Haiselden’s actions, while other physicians condemned him.¹⁰ A prominent professional organization of lawyers and physicians, the Medico-Legal Society of America, publicly supported Haiselden’s actions at their annual meeting in November, 1915.¹¹

The Bollinger case also created a split among social reformers in the various Progressive, Socialist, and Radical political movements. According to Nielsen, “This [the Bollinger case] was one of the most widely discussed cases in radical and progressive circles.”¹² Jane Addams, a prominent social activist and founder of the Settlement House movement

⁶ Haiselden quotes from *The New York Times*, November 19, 1915, p. 22.

⁷ See Pernick, *The Black Stork*, esp. pp. 54-60.

⁸ Pernick, *The Black Stork*, p. 4.

⁹ Pernick, *The Black Stork*, p. 5.

¹⁰ Pernick, *The Black Stork*, pp. 6-7.

¹¹ See “Says surgeon was right. Medico-Legal Society indorses his refusal to operate,” *The New York Times*, November 18, 1915, p. 4.

¹² Kim E. Nielsen, *The Radical Lives of Helen Keller* (New York NY: New York Univ. Press, 2004), p. 147.

in Chicago, argued in the *Washington Post* (November 18, 1915) that many “defectives” made important contributions to society in the past, and she criticized Haiselden. One of these famous contributors who was cited by Addams in her article was Helen Keller.¹³ Addams, however, seems to have been in the minority in Progressive circles in her criticism of Haiselden. Nielsen summarizes the situation well: “One wonders why Jane Addams criticized Haiselden while so many other progressive women in her circle did not: Lillian Wald [who supported him], Margaret Sanger [who kept quiet], Emma Goldman [who kept quiet].”¹⁴

HELEN KELLER’S RESPONSE

By late November, 1915 it seemed that the only prominent member of the Progressive movement who had not publicly commented on Haiselden was Helen Keller. Keller was well-known as an outspoken supporter of services for persons with disabilities (especially those who were deaf and blind), as Addams suggested in her *Washington Post* article. Since the publication and success of her book *The Story of My Life* in 1903, Keller was a well-known writer and public speaker.¹⁵ She was prominent not only for discussion of issues related to disability, but also for her socialism, her union activities, her support for the Soviet Union, and her opposition to war. Keller summarized her political philosophy in her book *Midstream* (published in 1929): “I do not pretend that I know the whole solution of the world’s problems, but I am burdened with a Puritanical sense of obligation to set the world to rights.”¹⁶ In an article in the New York Socialist newspaper *Call* on November 26, 1915, and in a letter to the editor of *The New Republic* on December 18, 1915, Keller set out her

¹³ Nielsen, *The Radical Lives of Helen Keller*, p. 36. Pernick, *The Black Stork*, also discusses the article by Addams on pp. 191-92.

¹⁴ Nielsen, *The Radical Lives of Helen Keller*, p. 147.

¹⁵ Kim Nielsen, Ed. *Helen Keller. Selected Writings* (New York NY: New York University Press, 2005), see especially pp. 3-4.

¹⁶ Helen Keller, *Midstream. My Later Life* (Westport CT: Greenwood Press, 1968, originally published in 1929), p. 175.

opinion of Haiselden and the Bollinger baby.¹⁷ The *Call* also published articles by Haiselden and by Anna Bollinger, John Bollinger's mother. According to Pernick,¹⁸ *Call* and other socialist newspapers, especially in New York, paid more attention to the Bollinger case than to the execution of labor organizer Joe Hill which occurred around the same time.

The letter titled "Physicians' juries for defective babies" was published in *The New Republic* on December, 18, 1915. This paper will focus on *The New Republic* letter, for it provides more details about Keller's opinions about the Bollinger case than the article in *Call*. Keller begins her letter with her reflections on the meaning of "the sacredness of life." She concluded that "It is the possibility of happiness, intelligence and power that give life its sanctity, and they are absent in the case of a poor, misshapen, paralyzed, unthinking creature."¹⁹ Keller went on to describe the actions of Haiselden as a "weeding of the human garden that shows a sincere love of true life."²⁰ Keller then proposed a solution to the dilemma of deciding who was to live and who was to die. She felt that an analogy to the criminal justice system was appropriate, because, as opposed to an ordinary criminal defendant who may go on to be a "useful and productive member of society," the "mental defective, on the other hand, is almost sure to be a potential criminal."²¹ Keller proposed a jury of physicians to decide whether an infant would live or die because "[t]heir findings would be free from the prejudice and inaccuracy of untrained observation." Keller added: "They [the physicians' jury] would act only in cases of true idiocy, where there could be no hope of mental development."²² Keller noted that physicians' juries may be subject to abuse in that "[t]he powerful of the earth might use it to decide cases to suit themselves," but that "if the evidence were presented openly and the

¹⁷ Pernick, *The Black Stork*, p. 191.

¹⁸ Pernick, *The Black Stork*, p. 33.

¹⁹ Keller, "Physicians' juries," p. 173.

²⁰ Keller, "Physicians' juries," p. 173.

²¹ Keller, "Physicians' juries," p. 173.

²² Keller, "Physicians' juries," pp. 173-74.

decisions made public, there would be little danger of mistakes or abuses.” According to Keller, “Anyone interested in the case who did not believe the child ought to die might be permitted to provide for its care and maintenance.” In conclusion, Keller wrote that “we must decide between a fine humanity like Dr Haiselden’s and a cowardly sentimentalism.”²³

What is so striking about Keller’s letter is how closely her opinions reflected the general philosophy of the Progressive Eugenics movement. Keller makes three basic arguments in her letter in support of Haiselden. First, if infants with severe disabilities really understood their situation, they would be happy to be put to death. Second, the cost of caring for persons with these disabilities is an intolerable burden for families and society. Third, individuals with severe disabilities are almost certain to become criminals and therefore they are a danger to society. In addition, the letter demonstrates the Progressive faith in objective scientific opinion as a means for settling ethical dilemmas. Martin Pernick summarized this opinion well: “His [Haiselden’s] backers could even simultaneously love and loathe those they labeled unfit without acknowledging much emotional conflict, because they believed their attitudes were products of an objective method that had resolved such ethical and emotional contradictions.”²⁴ Many of the published commentaries from 1915 about the Bollinger case that were collected by Martin Pernick²⁵ indicated there was a strong approval for leaving the decision about treating infants with severe disabilities to physicians, with no role for the parents in the decision.

How do we account for the apparent contradiction between Keller’s opinion in the Bollinger case and her own disability and advocacy for services for people with disabilities? Keller had many times, in letters, articles, and public testimony to various legislatures, argued for additional financial support for services for persons who were blind and deaf.²⁶ I am

²³ Keller, “Physicians’ juries,” p. 174.

²⁴ Pernick, *The Black Stork*, p. 15.

²⁵ Pernick, *The Black Stork*, see esp. pp. 32-38.

²⁶ See, for example, “Our duties to the blind” (1904), and “A fair chance to be independent and self-respecting and useful” (1905) and many others in Nielsen,

aware of no occasion when the dedicated socialist Keller argued that those interested in services to the blind should finance those programs themselves, as she argued in *The New Republic* letter for those who opposed physicians' juries. The inherent contradictions in Keller's letter were noted by Kim Nielsen: "In her adoption of eugenic sentiments Keller certainly failed to consider her own life and its implications. *She* had once been considered to live a 'hopeless death-in-life.'"²⁷ Keller also appeared to propose in her letter a range of disabilities from acceptable to unacceptable (and so, unworthy of life). Clearly, blindness and deafness were at the acceptable end of the continuum, while cognitive disabilities like mental retardation (or potential cognitive disabilities) were unacceptable. Much later, in 1938, Keller intervened in the case of another infant, Helaine Colan, but in this case Keller argued that the life-saving surgery should be carried out. Helaine Colan suffered from a rare disease of the eyes that could have also infected her brain. Doctors recommended that Helaine's eyes be removed to save her life, and this obviously created a terrible dilemma for the parents. Although Helen Keller was not directly consulted by the Colan family, she sent a telegraph and a public letter to urge the family to consent to the surgery because "[b]lindness is not the greatest evil."²⁸ The difference, for Keller, seemed to have been that in the Bollinger case there was a real possibility that the baby might have a cognitive disability, while in the Colan case cognitive disabilities like mental retardation did not appear to be an issue.

This strange contradiction in Keller's letter, that some persons with disabilities deserve increased public support and funding while those with other disabilities should be candidates for euthanasia, was not confined to Helen Keller and the case of the Bollinger baby. For example, the Aktion T-4 euthanasia program in Nazi Germany, guided by many of the same principles that guided Haiselden, received the enthusiastic support of many reformers and progressive psychiatrists. These reformers hoped that the resources freed by the killing of "hopeless cases" could be redirected

Helen Keller. Selected Writings.

²⁷ Nielsen, *The Radical Lives of Helen Keller*, p. 37.

²⁸ Nielsen, *The Radical Lives of Helen Keller*, pp. 68-69.

toward improved services for persons with other disabilities.²⁹ More recently, the philosopher Peter Singer argued that killing infants with severe disabilities “cannot be equated with killing normal human beings”³⁰ and indicated that this argument only applied to infants with severe cognitive disabilities (such as mental retardation), not to all disabilities; other prominent ethicists have published opinions similar to Singer’s.

AFTERMATH

Helen Keller seemed to lose interest in Haiselden after the publication of her letter to *The New Republic*. One reason may be that during November, 1915 she was also in regular contact with Henry Ford regarding his proposal to sail a “peace ship” to Europe to try and end World War I. Antiwar activities consumed much of Keller’s time through 1918 and later.³¹ Keller’s book *Midstream* (published in 1929) contains her description of her activities and opinions around 1915 to 1916, but there is no mention of Haiselden or of the Bollinger baby in that book. A recent collection of Keller’s writings, *Helen Keller Selected Writings* (published in 2005), contains no documents from 1915 and no mention of the Bollinger case. However, the editor of the *Selected Writings* (Kim Nielsen) did discuss the Bollinger case in her book *The Radical Lives of Helen Keller* (published in 2004). Helen Keller died in 1968.

Harry Haiselden continued his euthanasia activities and his publicity-seeking behavior for another four years. He traveled frequently, giving lectures in support of his activities and opinions. For example, the November 29, 1915 issue of *The New York Times* contained an advertisement for the Princess Theatre under the title of “the unborn”: the

²⁹ See Michael Burleigh, *Death and Deliverance. 'Euthanasia' in Germany 1900-1945* (Cambridge UK: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1994), esp. pp. 88-90.

³⁰ Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics* (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 1979) page 131. For a detailed discussion of the attitudes of Peter Singer and other animal rights activists toward the right to life of persons with cognitive disabilities see Gerald V. O’Brien, “People with cognitive disabilities: the Argument from Marginal Cases and Social Work ethics.” *Social Work* 48:3 (July 2003): 331-38.

³¹ Nielsen, *The Radical Lives of Helen Keller*, pp. 37-38.

advertisement included the statement that “Dr. Haiselden of Chicago will speak on Eugenics.”³² Another announcement of a speaking engagement in New York City is found in *The New York Times* of December 30, 1915.³³ Haiselden was expelled from the Chicago Medical Society (mainly for his publicity-seeking behaviors), but he did manage to keep his medical license. The Illinois State Board of Health decided in February 1916 that in the Bollinger case Haiselden “had been the consulting and not the attending physician in the case, he should be released from responsibility for the death.”³⁴ In addition, the Board of Health took no action against the attending physician.³⁵

Haiselden was the co-author and a member of the cast of a popular movie *The Black Stork* (completed in 1917), which promoted the eugenic philosophy. Martin Pernick found that the movie was shown in rural theaters as late as 1942.³⁶ Haiselden also wrote many popular newspaper articles and articles for professional medical journals supporting his philosophy and activities.

In April 1919, Haiselden and two nurses from the German American Hospital traveled to Cuba. The reasons for the trip were unclear, but one newspaper article suggested that Haiselden would be doing research “that could not be done without interference in the United States.” Haiselden died of a stroke in Cuba around June 1919.³⁷ Martin Pernick’s book *The Black Stork* is an excellent source for those seeking more information about Haiselden’s personal life and his movie *The Black Stork*.

Anna Bollinger, John Bollinger’s mother, died in 1917. According to a newspaper report at the time, she was still grieving the death of her

³² Princess Theatre advertisement, *The New York Times*, November 29, 1915, p. 18.

³³ “Invite Dr Haiselden to speak here,” *The New York Times*, December 30, 1915, p. 8.

³⁴ “Clears Dr Haiselden. Health Board drops charges in baby Bollinger case,” *The New York Times*, February 7, 1916, p. 18.

³⁵ Pernick, *The Black Stork*, p. 8.

³⁶ Pernick, *The Black Stork*, p. 6.

³⁷ Pernick, *The Black Stork*, p. 12.

son.³⁸

This paper is not an attempt to diminish the very real accomplishments and courage of Helen Keller. At the same time, although few today would support Keller's rather naïve confidence in using objective scientific approaches to solve moral dilemmas, her opinion that the lives of some individuals with disabilities are valuable while the lives of persons with other types of disabilities are worthless, is still proposed by some influential people today.

³⁸ Pernick, *The Black Stork*, p. 11.

“The case of William Sanger, whose wife formed the Birth Control League, should open the eyes of all intelligent persons to the forces at work against the spread of this new idea. A short time ago Sanger was giving away a pamphlet, Family Limitation, that his wife had written.” Keller’s support of Haiselden and her stunning advocacy of a eugenics-based birth control program reinforced the unsolicited link between the Bollinger baby case and the birth control question. “No other event in recent months,” ran the editorial in the Salt Lake Telegram, has been so widely discussed in the newspapers, in the pulpits, in meetings of scientific societies and in the homes of the people. . . The movement for birth control has gained new recruits through the discussion of the Bollinger baby case.” PDF | On Feb 2, 2019, Mirza Muhammad Zubair Baig and others published Crossing over the Communicative Barrier: Case of Helen Keller's Developmental Disability and Language Learnability | Find, read and cite all the research you need on ResearchGate. Disability and Language Learnability. Mirza Muhammad Zubair Baig & Mudassar Mahmood Ahmad. In the Bollinger case, a handicapped baby was refused a lifesaving operation in Chicago in 1915, touching off a national debate over mercy killing the mentally disabled. Advertisement. One surprising supporter was Helen Keller. She wrote in The New Republic that the fate of the “idiot baby” whose “existence is not worthwhile” should be left to a jury of physicians. She was no friend to the idea that all human lives are inherently valuable and worthy of protection, even those of the mentally handicapped. The government and euthanasia supporters in the Netherlands are justifying the recent killing of a 29-year-old mentally ill woman in the same way that Helen Keller judged the life of the Bollinger baby: They believed future happiness was impossible.

“You realize that Helen Keller was a proponent of eugenics, don’t you?” he casually tossed over the front cover of my book one afternoon. I would not believe it. How could a woman made deaf and blind from an illness in early childhood possibly advocate for killing those born with the same disabilities? A quick internet search, however, succeeded in eliminating my doubts regarding Keller’s eugenic opinions. Keller Rejected the Sacredness of Life “For Others.” “Much of the discussion aroused by Dr. Haiselden when he permitted the Bollinger baby to die centers around a belief in the sacredness of life. It is the possibilities of happiness, intelligence and power that give life its sanctity, and they are absent in the case of a poor, misshapen, paralyzed, unthinking creature.”