

Like Not Forgetting the Coffee: Accessibility as Habit in Philosophy

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CPA Equity Panel: Ableism and Mental Health Stigma

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Introduction

I'm Jane Dryden, from Mount Allison University in New Brunswick, in Mi'kma'ki, the ancestral and unceded territory of the Mi'kmaq people. I would like to respectfully acknowledge the territory in which we gather, the unceded territory of the Coast Salish Peoples, including the territories of the x^wməθkwəyəm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and Səlilwətaʔ/Selilwitulh (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations.

Beginning this way is becoming a practice in our universities, schools, and public assemblies. It is becoming a habit; like all habits it runs the risk of becoming unreflective, but it also opens up a possibility for putting our responsibilities and relations front of mind – it is by no means the only thing we should do, but it is one thing. (And, in fact, beginning this presentation – where I mostly had disability in mind as I was thinking of accessibility – invites me already to think about intersections of access, and how working for both accessibility and Indigenization require wholesale changes in our default habits of thinking about how we do things in the academy.

My presentation today is focused on a kind of conscientious attention that I think ought to become a norm within professional philosophy: the cultivation of accessibility. Specifically: the habit of considering accessibility (access needs) while in academic spaces. I think that this should become habit in the sense of becoming second nature.

To clarify, consider the example of coffee. Conferences are organized constantly, and they almost always have coffee. Ordering the coffee, as a conference organizer, is a habit and professional expectation. (Apparently some folks have experienced workshops with no coffee; this shocked me to my core. I believe them to be outliers!) I have been at conferences where they ran out of coffee, and it was treated by the conference-goers as a SCANDAL. People began hurriedly and desperately exchanging information about the nearest Starbucks or Tim's; people who had been to those Starbucks or Tim's then recounted harrowing tales of the length of the lines, the shared misery.

My coffee example may seem trivial, but I hope to highlight that there are things we should all be doing; that if we can make a practice of remembering the caffeine needs of most [though not all] academics, we can make a practice of remembering that there will be other needs as well.

So, accessibility.

On the one hand, accessibility can be complicated. There can be conflicting access needs, or miscommunications, or technology failures, or similar, and this will come up later on in this talk.

On the other hand, there are some things that are frequently requested that seem not to be standardly done, despite the slew of conference organization accessibility checklists available on the internet. I have been to many conferences that did not post accessibility information in their CFP or program; I have been to many that did not have signs pointing to accessible washrooms or entrances; I have been to many in which participants did not use available microphones. I have been

to *very few* philosophy conferences in which participants handed out access copies, or in which there are were instructions about not wearing scents, or in which there were quiet rooms (these are standard at disability conferences!). I recently raised an access issue with respect to planning a future generalist conference, and my interlocutor said “But we don’t have anyone who needs that kind of stuff coming, do we?” The general sense I got was something along the lines of “we know this kind of thing matters to *you*, and you know about it because you work on it, but you can’t expect *us* to know about this stuff.”

[Make comment re. what observed so far at CPA/CDSA/Congress in general; note online version of CPA program has link to this panel and to Congress accessibility info, but the Congress accessibility info page doesn’t link directly to Congress’s own “preparing accessible presentations” page]

I think that planning for accessibility should become as standard as remembering to order the coffee. I would like it to become as standard as ordering the coffee *regardless* of whether the conference organizer works in philosophy of disability or whether they are disabled (or whether the conference has a social justice or equity theme). Non-coffee-drinkers order coffee for their conferences, because it is what is done; the situation of “no coffee” is treated as exception. It is a collective habit. I will argue that certain features of accessibility planning should be similar. I would like the effects of *not* thinking of accessibility to be treated as the same kind of (highly avoidable) scandal of not having (enough) coffee – *generally* recognized as a scandal, and not up to disabled philosophers to point out.

I identify as a nondisabled philosopher who works on philosophy of disability, particularly disability in the history of philosophy. Related to this, I have done some work around accessibility in the profession and at my home university, but my work and knowledge is drawn from the important work of disabled philosophers, disabled academics, and activists. This talk isn’t intended to say anything earthshaking about accessibility that isn’t drawn from their work, but to argue that there ought to be a baseline expectation and habit of planning for accessibility regardless of someone’s relation to disability. Fellow non-disabled folks: this means you!

I also want to say something briefly about the conception of disability I am employing. There are a number of models of disability in philosophy of disability, disability studies, and disability activism, and for the sake of this presentation I don’t want my argument to rest on any one of them in particular. What I am presuming is the argument present in most models that contingent social, cultural, historical and environmental factors play a significant (if not dominant) role in determining what counts as disability, how disability is experienced, and how disabled persons are excluded. (I will take as read for now that attendees in an Equity Panel session on Ableism & Mental Health stigma have some familiarity with this line of argument, but happy to clarify further in the discussion, if asked!).

The default understanding of disability is often described as the medical model, in which disability is taken to be an individual biomedical problem to be dealt by medicine and healthcare practitioners with biomedical expertise. Its effects are taken to be products of the biomedical problem itself; such that exclusion is treated as a “natural” effect of the disability rather than a product of social arrangements. This means that taking the medical model as default is itself connected to the material

exclusion of disabled philosophers, as Shelley Tremain has argued.¹ (This point about exclusion is changing in the public eye, to some extent, as a result of decades of activism; but the overall picture of disability is still largely the same; it is considered ‘nice’ and even ‘heroic’ to allow inclusion to those “suffering” from a condition, without deep questions asked about what structural conditions are at play.)²

Since philosophers rarely agree on anything, I will allow that philosophers do not need to all agree on the social model, or any particular model of disability, but that they should at least be aware of it, such that they do not *default* to some variety of the medical model.

The current set up of conferences, events, classrooms, and programs generally assumes a nondisabled participant. I’m going to focus primarily on conferences and other events rather than classrooms, since there can often be some institutional support for reworking our classrooms around accessibility; the structure of our programs (particularly those that have set timelines for completion) raises a whole other set of issues, which I’m not equipped to fully deal with (since I teach at a primarily undergraduate institution) – but the kind of accessibility-as-habit practices I describe have implications and effects for classrooms and programs as well.

Why should philosophers concern themselves with disability and accessibility?

So, why should philosophers—philosophers in general, not just those who work on philosophy of disability or related topics—care about how we think about disability?

Well, if disability is shaped by social, cultural, and environmental factors, then attending to those factors can significantly improve accessibility. And disability is much more prevalent than we tend to assume.

The results of Statistics Canada’s most recent “Canadian Survey on Disability,” released in November 2018, reveal that in 2017, 6.2 million Canadians aged 15 and over (roughly one in five Canadians) “had one or more disabilities that limited them in their daily activities” (this is Statistics Canada’s language).³ And the actual prevalence of disability is likely even higher, since this survey specifically omitted groups where there might be a fairly high prevalence of disability: as Statistics Canada writes, “It excluded those living in institutions and other collective dwellings, on Canadian Armed Force bases, and on First Nations reserves... As the institutionalized population was excluded from the survey, data, particularly for the older age groups, should be interpreted accordingly.”

For youths aged 15-24 years, 13% or 540,000 were disabled. At my (primarily undergraduate) university, our Disability Services office reports that approximately 12% of the student population is

¹ Shelley Tremain, *Foucault and Feminist Philosophy* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press), 3. This point also comes up repeatedly in her *Dialogues on Disability* interview series, now hosted at BIOPOLITICAL PHILOSOPHY <https://biopoliticalphilosophy.com/dialogues-on-disability/>

² Add footnote about limitations of diversity/inclusion language, drawing on Ahmed; cite news stories re. school children raising money for a classmate with a wheelchair without asking why charity model is needed, etc.

³ Statistics Canada, *Canadian Survey on Disability, 2017*, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/181128/dq181128a-eng.htm>. They defined disability as “anyone who reported being “sometimes,” “often” or “always” limited in their daily activities due to a long-term condition or health problem, as well as anyone who reported being “rarely” limited if they were also unable to do certain tasks or could only do them with a lot of difficulty.”

registered with them.⁴ So, this is not too far off (though we can obviously have conversations about improving accessibility for undergraduate students!).

However, there is a steep drop off by the time we get to academic faculty.⁵ For folks of usual working age, 25 to 64 years, 3.7 million or 20% were disabled. And yet when we look at the number of tenure line disabled faculty, as documented in the Equity Committee survey over 2001-2009, the number hovers between 1.5%-2% (though Mathieu Doucet and Guillaume Beaulac note, in their summary, that this number is the hardest to track with the current way the survey is completed. This is not a surprise; a number of scholars point to the worries of disclosing disability.⁶

Whatever the actual number is, it is not 20% -- in other words, the prevalence of disability in philosophy does not track its prevalence in the general working age population. Disabled people are more likely to be unemployed, around the world. However, the degree of this can change substantially from one area to the next. More fun stats: In Canada in 2017, the employment rate of disabled Canadians aged 25 to 64 was 59%, compared with 80% for nondisabled Canadians.⁷ Within the EU, employment rates for disabled people range from 29.8% in Ireland to 69% for Switzerland. The largest differences between disabled and nondisabled people were in Hungary and the Netherlands – 37.4 percentage points; the smallest was in Luxembourg, with only 2.4 percentage points difference.⁸ That is a huge difference! Merely “natural” disabilities would not explain this; there must be differences in the way that disabled people are included within the workforce.⁹ These differences are the result of social and political choices, as well as historical and cultural assumptions.

⁴ Senate Committee on Students with Disabilities, *Report to Senate May 2019*. The report specifies that 90% have “invisible disabilities” including learning disabilities, ADHD, ASD, and mental illness; 8% have physical disabilities including chronic health and traumatic brain injury; less than 2% have hearing impairments, less than 1% have visual impairments, and there were 32 temporary disabilities, including concussions. These numbers may not be reflective of this age group as a whole.

⁵ Nicole Brown and Jennifer Leigh, “Ableism in academia: where are the disabled and ill academics?” *Disability and Society* vol. 33, no. 6 (2018): 985-989. They write, “The proportion of staff in universities declaring health conditions or impairments rose from 2.2% in 2003/04 to 3.9% in 2012/13 (HESA 2017). However, 16% of working-age adults (GOV 2014) and nearly 13% of undergraduates (HESA 2017) have a known disability. Considering these statistics, there is a stark under-representation of disabilities, chronic conditions, invisible illnesses and neurodiversity amongst academic staff.” Their analysis is in the UK, but their description of the pattern of fall off holds here in Canada as well.

⁶ Mathieu Doucet and Guillaume Beaulac, *Report on the CPA Equity Survey: historical trends*, available at <https://www.acpcpa.ca/cpages/reports>. For the American Philosophical Association, in 2018, 4.5% of all members reported being disabled; for regular members, it was 9% (but we don’t know how many of these are tenure track vs. part time, etc.). https://cdn.ymaws.com/www.apaonline.org/resource/resmgr/data_on_profession/fy2018-demographic_statistic.pdf. Note also this point from Statistics Canada from 2012: “Just over one-quarter of Canadians with disabilities who were employed reported that their employer was not aware of it. Among the working-age population with disabilities, 24% required modified hours or days or reduced work hours.” *Canadian Survey on Disability, 2012*, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/150313/dq150313b-eng.htm>. Brown and Leigh 2018 discuss the issue of disclosing.

⁷ Statistics Canada, *Canadian Survey on Disability, 2017*. Compare the previous survey in 2012: “Close to half (47%) of 15- to 64-year-olds with disabilities reported that they were employed, compared with 74% of those who were disability-free. More persons with disabilities (45%) were not in the labour force compared with those without disabilities (21%).

⁸ Eurostat Newsrelease, “Situation of people with disabilities in the EU,” 2 December 2014. <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/2995521/6181592/3-02122014-BP-EN.pdf/aefdf716-f420-448f-8cba-893e90e6b460>

⁹ On a related European note, this article recently circulated on Facebook: Emily Yates, “‘People aren’t disabled, their city is’: inside Europe’s most accessible city” (May 28, 2019) <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2019/may/28/people-arent-disabled-their-city-is-inside-europes-most-accessible-city>

So, back to philosophy: we can attend to the choices that we make as we set up and co-create academic spaces. Shelley Tremain describes ableist exceptionalism as “the phenomenon whereby disability, because it is assumed to be a prediscursive, natural, and politically neutral human characteristic . . . , is uniquely excluded from the production and application of certain values, beliefs, principles, and actions that circulate in political consciousness.”¹⁰ In other words, the treatment and discussion of disability is assumed to be politically neutral, not something that can also have material consequences for disabled academics, and not something that is a justice issue.

But it is a justice issue, if there are barriers to entry to the discipline; and the low numbers suggest there are. Ableism describes not just particular explicit derogatory beliefs about disabled people, but the whole setup of cultural, societal, professional, and design norms whereby disabled people are excluded or disadvantaged. And given these ableist norms, inclusion won’t happen unless it is worked for.¹¹ Sara Ahmed describes diversity work as “pushy” work, “because you have to push against what has already been built,”¹² and that’s what’s called for here.

Trusting case-by-case accommodations to solve the problem has significant limitations. For one, there can be many reasons why a disabled academic might not want to have to disclose their disability in order to ask for accommodations at each event they want to go to. Amongst other things, it presents additional labour for them.¹³ As Zara Bain notes,

I have long since disabused myself of the naive belief that I might be able to be a philosopher first, and a body that “requires accommodation” second. We must all work to be here, no doubt, but some of us make others of us work that much harder to do so, whether they know it or not.¹⁴

[Just as a note: in our current round of collective bargaining, my faculty union is exploring adding a section about recognizing this labour as in fact a form of service to the university; would love to know if anyone has any suggestions about this or useful precedents!]

It also risks the disabled academic being seen as “whiny” or “angry,” particularly when there are delays or problems with accommodation (as is often the case). As Sara Ahmed writes, “When you expose a problem you pose a problem. It might then be assumed that the problem would go away if you would just stop talking about it or if you went away.”¹⁵ The work of improving access should not solely be up to disabled academics. This creates an uneven distribution of academic and emotional labour, and there are real concerns of burnout.

Sara Ahmed notes that “Access can be the formal requirements you might need to meet to enter a world. But accessibility and inaccessibility are also a result of histories that congeal as habits or

¹⁰ Shelley Tremain, *Foucault and Feminist Philosophy of Disability* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press), 33.

¹¹ For the next few paragraphs, I am reworking a passage of an earlier text: Jane Dryden, “Guest Editor’s Introduction: ‘Philosophy and its Borders,’” *Dialogue*, vol. 57 no. 2 (June 2018): 203-216.

¹² Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, 109.

¹³ Aimi Hamraie, “Beyond Accommodation: Disability, Feminist Philosophy, and the Design of Everyday Academic Life,” *philoSOPHIA* vol. 6, no. 2 (2018): 262. Also Zara Bain, “On the Dearth of Disabled Access Information in Philosophical Events.” <https://phdisabled.wordpress.com/2016/02/11/on-the-dearth-of-disabled-access-information-in-philosophical-events/>

¹⁴ Bain, “On the Dearth of Disabled Access Information in Philosophical Events.”

¹⁵ Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 37.

shared routines.”¹⁶ The transformation of those habits and shared routines should become a shared responsibility.

The more accessibility is a shared habit (the more we rework *inaccessible* habits and routines), the less the burden falls on any particular disabled academic. This can happen if we stop thinking of disability as something “someone else” will deal with, and start getting into the habit of thinking of accessibility as something we play a role in creating.

There is often a limit to what we can do with our university buildings, even if administrations are committed to prioritizing accessibility in renovations. But for many conferences and events, we largely create the spaces in and through our decision-making (and through our omissions). As Aimi Hamraie writes “feminist philosophers must understand their labor as the design of everyday academic spaces and interactions, and accordingly become more accountable for material practices of accessibility.”¹⁷ They go on to say:

For all of our training, we do not often understand ourselves as agents with the skills, power, or responsibility to alter existing material arrangements—even arrangements such as the classrooms, conferences, and journals that we frequently create in order to propagate our scholarship. In academic settings, we create barriers and accommodations for one another, whether in the ways that we design our classroom layouts, write assignments, deliver presentations, organize slides and visual aides, or interrupt epistemic violence.¹⁸

I want to extend this to the discipline at large. Disabled philosophers ought to have access to all philosophy contexts.

Why, specifically, should addressing this be conceived of as a habit?

Conference and event organizing is hard. There are countless details that must be attended to; inevitably some things will fall through the cracks, and there is always some last-minute tiny or major crisis. Keeping all of the details front of mind is difficult.

Compare organizing a conference (or learning how to participate in academic spaces) to learning how to drive (something I learned to do around age 30); at first, the number of things that you have to keep in mind at the same time seems impossible – I have to pay attention to the vehicle AND possible pedestrians AND signs AND other cars etc. But once one has been driving for a while, most of this becomes second nature, and so scanning for possible problems is easier, because the rote practices of driving have receded to the background.

Alfredo Ferrarin’s book, *Hegel and Aristotle*, has this strikingly relevant passage:

Through habit, sensation acquires a temporal thickness and a theoretical import. Our immediate life, the life of sensibility, is systematized, ordered, interconnected. Habit

¹⁶ Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, 109.

¹⁷ Aimi Hamraie, “Beyond Accommodation: Disability, Feminist Philosophy, and the Design of Everyday Academic Life,” *philoSOPHIA* vol. 6, no. 2 (2018): 261

¹⁸ Hamraie, “Beyond Accommodation,” 262.

is the active shaping of our receptivity in view of the future... Only because we have habituated ourselves through experience to dealing with situations in determinate ways are we able to face similar situations readily, without being overwhelmed by them, with the speediness of thought and movement that comes from training. Habit produces natural immediacy through spiritual mediation – it produces spontaneity in receptivity.¹⁹

This point about spontaneity in receptivity, without being overwhelmed, is critical. Accessibility checklists can be quite lengthy, and if an access problem emerges despite following the checklist, it might be tempting to an overwhelmed organizer to become defensive: “we went through the checklist! this is not our problem!”

An accessibility checklist is helpful for double-checking that we have not forgotten anything, also good in training ourselves about what to start remembering. Again, the habit that I am specifically arguing for is the practice of *attending to accessibility*. This practice will include the use of checklists but it is not limited to that, any more than driving is limited to checking that my seatbelt is done up and my car has gas.

A *habit* of attending to accessibility means being in the practice of thinking about accessibility as soon as one starts organizing, not as an afterthought. It also means that the practice is present even when one is not the organizer. It leads to actions such as making sure to use the microphone, or noticing if chairs and tables have begun to block access ways and, if able, moving them (or recruiting help to move them). It leads to planning time for verbal description of slides, attending to the pace of speech, making sure we’ve packed fragrance-free shampoo.²⁰ (It also leads to planning time for breaks, which is when, of course, you might have coffee.)

It also means that since one is always considering accessibility (even just as a background concern), access concerns don’t register as “someone else’s problem” but as a shared concern.

Habit marks a commitment – not that we have done it once and can forget about it, but that we continue to do it. And this is what’s needed for inclusion. As Hamraie writes, “Meaningful access, then, is relational accountability. It materializes from a commitment to enact, iterate, and re-iterate our answer to the questions of who belongs, where, and how.”²¹

¹⁹ Alfredo Ferrarin, *Hegel and Aristotle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 280. Both Hegel and Aristotle also emphasize the importance of good upbringing in order to develop good habits and be properly oriented toward virtue.

²⁰ Hamraie has a summary of things that come up that can appear neutral but create barriers: “Disabled philosophers attending or presenting at conferences where disability is a focus of inquiry have found themselves excluded by seemingly neutral and normal physical aspects of the built environment, as well as norms of academic presentation. For instance, the presumption of conference presenters and audiences with normative cognitive, sensory, and physical characteristics governs the norms of oral speech, visual aides such as slides, the presentation of logical arguments, the assertion of expertise, and the analysis of texts—particularly when scholars practice these norms without providing multiple means of accessing their content. The norm that scholars are nondisabled and not chronically ill (and frequently also people with race, economic, and gender privilege) materializes in the ways that we hold conferences within particular types of spaces: conference centers, hotels, and university lecture halls with forward-facing chairs and inaccessible stages, lecterns with microphones, fluorescent lights, scented products, long hallways, narrow doorways, confusing layouts, and ramps that only appear at back doors near freight elevators.” Hamraie, “Beyond Accommodation,” 261.

²¹ Hamraie, “Beyond Accommodation,” 265.

Some objections:

1. Shouldn't something as important as this be up to experts of some kind?

I absolutely endorse learning from disabled people's experience and activism here. That should clearly be a starting point, ethically and practically. After all, that's the slogan: "nothing about us without us." For many things, such as policy work, the involvement of disabled academics is crucial.

For generally educating oneself about how to organize events, how to be a responsible participant, and how to think about the structure of one's classroom, however – there are already many resources out there. Disabled academics and disability scholars have been making suggestions and recommendations for years; the publications, blog posts, and checklists, are all out there. Shelley Tremain's excellent Dialogues on Disability interview series had its *fiftieth* installment on May 15. To expect disabled people to have to create all access for themselves, or to continue to re-explain, continues to put the labour burden on them.

It is really just a matter of deciding to start paying attention. If *paying attention to access* is a habit, then learning more about particular needs, methods, solutions, etc., comes more naturally after it. Paying attention also means being accountable and responsive when told that something is *not* helpful.

2. We can work on accessibility, but won't some disabled academics still need individual accommodations? Doesn't this make it too complicated for rote habit?

Individual accommodations may still be necessary in some instances, even if the conference or event has attempted to make things as accessible as possible. Further, access conflicts do happen, and so there may be the need for individually working out a compromise or solution.

I take seriously Hamraie's concern that

When accessibility becomes a matter of thinking *for* disabled people by presuming access needs and building them into rigid structures, it becomes another standardized, one-size-fits-all practice that excludes those who are unanticipated or illegible. Instead, meaningful access requires building in mechanisms for accountability that hold space for critical questions about material arrangements—the kind of spaces offered by iterative design processes.²²

This is why the habit I argue for is not any particular checklist, but the habit of *keeping accessibility in mind*. If the basics of planning for accessibility are already habit, it is easier to think through what to do in instances of access conflicts or unanticipated needs. Again, this is analogous to the driving situation, where we learn to be able to anticipate complications (e.g., we have a habit or practice of continually scanning the road). Part of planning ahead around accessibility is also recognizing that some people will have particular access needs, and remembering to ask and plan for this in advance.²³

²² Hamraie, "Beyond Accommodation," 265.

²³ I gave a paper at last year's CDSA that talks about responsiveness and ongoing accountability to whoever shows up, putting Derrida's account of hospitality in dialogue with discussions around universal design, which works through some of these issues. "Accessibility and hospitality: Derrida, justice, and universal design" (May 29, 2018), <https://janedryden.weebly.com/research.html>.

3. Habit means that we stop thinking about it. (Analogous to criticism of how Indigenous land acknowledgements can be done by non-Indigenous people in an unthinking way).

Agreed! But there are different kinds of “not thinking about something.” There is “not thinking about something” because it is not a priority, which I think has been the case around accessibility at most conferences to this point. And there is “not *consciously* having to be *reminded* of something”, because it has become second nature. In this case, the basics of a task become routine, freeing up more mental space for creativity and problem solving (also enjoying the event itself!). It means less likelihood of being overwhelmed and deciding to not even try.

For people who haven't done this before: experience helps, but everyone has to start somewhere. It can seem daunting, but thinking of it as starting a habit can help. Teach your students and colleagues. Help make thinking of access a shared professional norm. If they aren't willing, threaten to withhold their coffee at the next event.