

Counter-Narratives of Disability in the History of Philosophy

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Professional philosophy's interest in disability has been increasing lately, and with it a rise of philosophy of disability. Whereas previous work had primarily been focused on disability and bioethics, it is worth noting a number of recent anthologies have drawn disability beyond the sphere of bioethics and into questions about justice, identity, agency, and so forth. This is useful as it underscores one of the main messages of the disability rights movement and disability studies: that disability cannot and should not be understood primarily as a biomedical problem, but as a complex of social and political relations that – to be sure – are connected to individual impairments, but not reducible to them, much as gender in its social complexity is not reducible to biology. (And this is the case regardless of the particular line one takes on the sex/gender distinction or the impairment/disability distinction.)

A risk with this work is that disability can be taken up as yet another topic for philosophers to study with their pre-established methods, norms, and tools. It is assumed that to do “Philosophy of X,” one might have to learn a bit about X, but that the philosophical methods one brings to bear on it are much of a standard set – philosophy can add conceptual clarification to discussions of X, but X is not really going to change philosophy itself. (This shows up to some extent in citation patterns – philosophers tend to cite other philosophers, not disability theorists outside of philosophy. And so the traditional norms and habits of the discipline continue to dominate.)

The example of feminist philosophy is instructive. Taking heed of the experiences and concerns of women – as reflected upon, developed, and refined within feminist theory – did not simply mean “adding women” to existing theories, but developing new theoretical lenses and tools to a range of philosophical topics, from ethics to epistemology and metaphysics.

Similarly with disability, it is important to do justice to the complexity of understandings of disability and impairment that have emerged from within disability studies, and to understand the way that disability is not merely a topic but can also be a lens of inquiry. (An example of this is the special issue on “Cripistemologies” in the *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies* 8:2 (2014) – the editors, in their introduction as they talk about coining the term, talk about how they “were questioning ... what we think we know about disability, and *how we know around and through it*” (130, my emphasis).)

Susan Wendell noted, back in 1989, that “If disabled people were truly heard, an explosion of knowledge of the human body and psyche would take place” (Wendell 1989, 120), but for the most part, philosophy continues to operate on a general assumption of a homogeneous notion of disability as (biological) defect. As a number of disabled philosophers have pointed out, philosophy tends to think of disability as a limiting concept, “to delineate conceptual boundaries” (Silvers 86¹), and on this model it tends to remain a bad thing, somehow ‘other’ or ‘marginal’ to what’s essentially human.

Within the social model of disability theory, however, the distinction is commonly made between impairment and disability, in which impairment is the biological, neurological or anatomical difference from a species norm leading to some loss of typical species function, and disability is produced by the relationship between that impairment and the social and lived environment. Disability is created by physical and social barriers, such as inaccessible buildings, stigmatizing assumptions, and expectations of a narrow model of “productivity.” This distinction has helped in generating social policies aimed at mitigating disability without necessarily assuming that all impairment, or physical and neurological difference, must be “bad”. It’s worth noting that the social model has been criticized from within disability studies, on the one side for downplaying the significance of impairments (in particular chronic pain), and on the other side, for maintaining a binary between the biological and the social that overlooks the degree to which judgements about what counts as impairments are also the result of social, political, economic, and historical contingencies. These critiques have led to innovative work in their own right, but in general a

¹ See Silvers 142 re. work by Amundson, Kavka and Wendell that points out that “contemporary philosophy alludes to disability primarily in discussions of whether to kill, or let die, fetuses, neonates, or elderly individuals with disabling conditions.”

common theme throughout both the social model and its critiques is to rethink the premise of “compulsory ablebodiedness” (Johnson and McRuer, 136) and the self-evident value of ‘the norm’ (or, per Rosemarie Garland Thomson’s term, “the normate”). Ableism and fear of disability can be linked to fear of a loss of autonomy, fear of being dependent on others, fear of being vulnerable (see Wendell 1996). The existence of disability, for many, points to the fact that we cannot control everything that happens to us, which is terrifying. The common trope of the supercrip who “overcomes” disability, similarly draws on the idea that if we simply will something sufficiently that we can make it happen, and ties into claims about personal responsibility and being appropriately “deserving” of assistance, official or otherwise. Challenging this also leads to the rethinking of norms around independence and autonomy, and how our fears of vulnerability lead to ableist assumptions about difference.

The rethinking of bodies, function, relation, autonomy, independence, and so forth, at play within this area ought to be rich terrain for philosophers. What would it be like for philosophy to respond by taking this work seriously?

We can help to develop a response, and to render ourselves more open to welcoming this work, if we examine how we tell the story of our own tradition. The history of philosophy is often told through the lens of an autonomous agent whose knowledge aims at being purified from earthly and material concerns. Aristotle himself acknowledges that this is a privileged position when he points out that philosophy begins with leisure (*Metaphysics* 1.1).

But there are counter-narratives within the history of philosophy, in which we are not disembodied autonomous knowers, but vulnerable and interdependent agents whose knowledge is only ever partial and situated. These counter-narratives can be friendly to much of disability theory; and by acknowledging the wisdom of these narratives within our own tradition, we can be more open to the work of disability theorists, and better allies when we work on philosophy of disability.

This echoes feminist work on the history of philosophy, which challenges certain narratives about the philosophical tradition in favour of highlighting other norms, as they have been developed and reflected upon within feminist theory. Therefore, exploring disability in the history of philosophy doesn’t just mean counting up the instances of the tradition’s hostility to disability, but asking what

happens if we put disability at the centre, and investigating what kind of counter-narratives are possible. This means noticing the role of norms, of whether there is scope for acknowledging interdependence, of knowledge gained from difference.

I'm going to briefly discuss three philosophers from the point of view of these counter-narratives. Right now I'm mostly just trying to highlight strands we could explore. I'm also not trying to suggest that these three are the only ones we could do this for. The Western philosophical tradition as we have inherited it is obviously ableist; that doesn't need to be the end of a conversation, though, but rather a beginning: how can we change our self-understanding. What other stories could we tell?

Aristotle

One of the reasons the history of philosophy can seem so miserable from the point of view of disability is that when we read what philosophers actually write about disability, we get things like this, from the *Politics*: “As to the exposure and rearing of children, let there be a law that no deformed child shall live” (*Politics* 7, 1335b15). Meanwhile, some might point to Aristotle's discussion of a “slave in respect of nature” and wonder about *what* sorts of human beings might be in such a “natural” position.”

Explicit comments about disability aside, the key question for the kind of rereading of Aristotle I'm suggesting is what to do with the centrality of his discussion of norms. “What is a good life for me” is rooted in the idea of “what is a good life for a human being”; Aristotle refers to goods based on the kind of being I am, and this is tied into species norms and expectations – or, to put it more Aristotelian terms, our potential to actualize a form. From this perspective, any difference from a biological norm that interferes with “normal” functioning seems like a bad thing. Species essentialism is not an ally to disability theorists.

In one of the very few published articles dealing with Aristotle and disability, Garret Merriam, however, points out that we are in a different situation post-Darwin, in which we recognize that species are dynamic and do not have a core essence (Merriam 2010, 134). Other models of flourishing, which dispense with “the lingering ghost of Aristotelian essentialism” make more sense, given the arbitrariness even of attempts to work out a species-average (134-135). We ought to

change the question, he argues, from “how does this individual compare to a species-norm in terms of the capacities necessary for flourishing?” to “*given the individual circumstances of this person’s life, are they living well, or living poorly?*” (135). Once this is done, Aristotelian notions of practical wisdom and judgment can be brought back, examining ways in which individuals manage to flourish in a range of different ways.

Ditching the idea of a species-norm works for Merriam in terms of claiming the usefulness of virtue ethics for disability, but if we really want to work to reweave a history of philosophy and rethink the possibilities inherent in the tradition, I worry that it’s a little too neat. I think it’s important not just to acknowledge that species essentialism still haunts us, but to investigate that ghost a little further. Doing so by taking up Aristotle’s idea of habit as second nature and the social model’s arguments about the social construction of disability might be a promising and fruitful avenue. How we learn to live and inhabit the world depends on the others around us. There are reasons to think that we can become habituated to others who are different from us, and that regularly being surrounded by different sorts of people is good for us. If this is the case, what norms could we develop as a society that would help to shape our conceptions of the good? What sorts of ideas of humanity might we then develop? What new sorts of virtues could we explore? What might Aristotle contribute then? What happens if we think of the form of humanity not in terms of an outdated biological essentialism, but in terms of what makes a good life within a highly diverse society?

In any case, an Aristotelian ethics might be congenial to thinking of disability. Susan Stocker gives one example by pointing to an Aristotelian notion of empathy to emphasize our connection to others and the practiced habit of engaging “with the other that what is good for her is taken up as our own good” (Stocker 2002, 139, 143-4). This is useful in avoiding responses based out of paternalistic pity.

For Aristotle, we depend on others for the maintenance of a good society in which we have the opportunity to develop, and we cultivate our virtues in company with others. Even contemplation and philosophy, often conceived as quite solitary pursuits, have a social embeddedness within a society that makes them possible and friends with whom we engage in dialogue. The Aristotelian self, even the philosopher, is a highly relational human being. His attention to the material

conditions needed to enable our flourishing fits well with the social model's attention to disabling institutions and arrangements.

Spinoza

Spinoza is an altogether different figure. He is experiencing a resurgence of interest as a number of feminist and posthumanist philosophers, drawing on work by Deleuze and others, are pointing to possibilities in Spinoza for thinking through naturalism, relationality, and power.² This suggests two things to me: *One*, I think these new readings of Spinoza mark a good example of the reweaving and retelling that's possible in the history of philosophy, and that makes doing this kind of work exciting. *Two*, given Spinoza's discussions of the body, I think it's appropriate to read him within disability theory and philosophy of disability.

Here's a start. For Spinoza, it is not clear that there is any such thing as human nature (Rice 1991). He makes occasional use of the phrase, but it does not refer to any strong version of essence. He notes that our ideas of perfection and ideals in nature come from us and how we came to form general ideas of what we observe: "So when they see something occurring in Nature at variance with their preconceived ideal of the thing in question, they believe that Nature has then failed or blundered and has left that thing imperfect. So we see that men are in the habit of calling natural phenomena perfect or imperfect from their own preconceptions rather than true knowledge" (Spinoza Ethics 4 Preface, 152-3). Spinoza denies Aristotle's claim that nature does nothing without a reason, and thereby considers the idea that nature could fail in an attempt as a "fiction" ([Spinoza 153 – see Appendix 1]).

For Spinoza, there are no final causes – there is no teleology. This is because God, or Nature, is already perfect and so does not need further perfecting. Also, all bodies are part of God's essence, which is infinite. "From the necessity of the divine nature there must follow infinite things in infinite ways" (E I, Pr 16). So the diversity that we see around us is all part of God – we can take things as they come. In the Preface to Part III of the *Ethics*, on the emotions, Spinoza points out

² (A blurb on the back of Sharp's book claims "Spinoza has finally become indispensable for feminist, postcolonial, and antiracist struggles!")

that rather than castigate emotions as being opposed to reason as others do, instead: “my argument is this: in Nature nothing happens which can be attributed to its defectiveness, for Nature is always the same, and its force and power of acting is everywhere one and the same.” Even negative emotions can be considered in themselves, as part of “the same necessity and force of Nature as all other particular things.” They are all equally part of Nature.

As Anita Silvers asks, “why do we think disability must be bad?” (Silvers 86). Spinoza gives us a good way of rethinking this common assumption. The *conatus* with which “each thing, in so far as it is in itself, endeavors to persist in its own being” (E, III, Pr 6), is the “actual essence of the thing itself” (E, III, Pr 7). We endeavor after those things which “increase or assist the body’s power of activity” (III, Pr 12).

But note! Since there is no set human nature, and no teleologically-related defect, there is no set human norm for how that body’s power of activity may be increased or assisted, and no set norm for what exactly that body is in the first place.

Further, since the body is made of parts already, within a larger whole, there are no reasons for arbitrarily excluding prostheses, technologies, or alternate ways of being from the good for us. There is no separate good – “we do not endeavor, will, seek after or desire because we judge a thing to be good. On the contrary, we judge a thing to be good because we endeavor, will, seek after and desire it” (E, III, Pr 9, Sch).

Spinoza’s philosophy of immanence, rather than being politically quietist, means that we don’t need to “fix” disabled bodies to make them like the norm – rather, consider each for their own particular needs that would increase the power of *that particular* body or mind. And, as he says (and notably, this is one of the first things that Deleuze draws attention to): “nobody as yet has determined the limits of the body’s capabilities: that is, nobody has yet learned from experience what the body can and cannot do...” (III, Pr. 2, Sch.). Spinoza mentions this in connection with discussing the mind and body relationship, but it points to the openness of his conception of humanity, and the power of the body within his philosophy, and so its potential for resisting compulsory ablebodiedness.

I've focused largely on embodiment thus far. Spinoza's thought is also highly relational, which is no surprise given that we are all modes of the same substance; our freedom and power are connected to increased knowledge of the causes and connections we are involved in. As Aurelia Armstrong summarizes, in an article arguing for understanding Spinoza's thought in the context of theories of relational autonomy, "to the extent that we understand something, it ceases to be 'outside' us" (Armstrong, 57). For Spinoza, ethics are largely based on our perception of similarity with others, but greater time spent with disabilities can affect what we read as 'similar'.

Hegel

So far I've discussed a philosopher whose ideas are deeply rooted in essences, in teleology, in form, and one who rejects that picture more or less entirely. Hegel, fittingly, offers a third way. We do have concepts to which things conform, but our knowledge of those concepts changes as we go through history, and we cannot predict now what will be part of a concept later – we need to live it. Consequently, difference from an assumed norm can be seen as a source of knowledge – while it isn't always (and Hegel can be scathing of things he deems 'pure idiosyncrasy'), we are invited to ask how it changes and recenters our concepts.

Similarly to Spinoza, Hegel notes that our conception of ourselves begins fairly narrowly and ultimately expands to comprehend the way we are part of an interconnected whole. Our very awareness of ourselves comes from this interaction, and our thinking is shaped by the community of which we are a part. Our bodies also play a large role in our thinking; in the *Philosophy of Spirit* (the third part of the *Encyclopedia*), he notes the embodied character even of thinking as it draws from factors such as temperament, mood, and habit. Our relational, embodied state is part of our freedom – the more we come to understand it, the freer we are – but also is entwined with our vulnerability. His idealist account of how culture and society make over our bodies fits well with the social model, and similarly bringing that social model back to Hegel can help point out unexpected tensions within his work, where he doesn't seem to adequately follow up on the implications of his own work.

Hegel regularly reminds us that as finite creatures, death and disease are not accidental but essential to us; the particular diseases we develop may be contingent, but the fact that our bodies will be sick

is not. Appreciating this is to appreciate the kind of beings that we are. Drawing this out opens up the possibility of rethinking our abhorrence of disease as a threat to our autonomy, and instead to a courageous acceptance of our vulnerability. While disability is not to be equated with disease (one can be disabled and healthy), the idea that it is a natural and regular part of our existence as finite creatures to not conform to a particular ideal of human functioning is a useful one, particularly when conjoined with Hegel's arguments about our interdependence through the family, civil society, and the state.

It's important to be careful about this claim. Anita Silvers warns against uncritically promoting interdependence when it reinforces perception of neediness: "Although interdependence is often thought to enhance connectedness, promoting it can prove as isolating in reality for people with disabilities as communitarians suppose their theoretical autonomy condemns them to be. The reason is that relating to others mediated by their perception of one's neediness is a distancing, not a bonding or integrating, experience" (Silvers 1998, 39).

Hegel is useful here, though, since he retains an account of our autonomy in amongst our interdependence. The intertwining of self-discovery with other-directed relations is a key part of his system, in which freedom is 'being at home with oneself in the other'. Consequently, promoting the self-development of those around me becomes part of my own self-development, and vice versa, and his well-known account of recognition can give a way of diagnosing instances of failure to adequately attend to others as they would be perceived in their own self-identity.

What considering his thought through a disability lens does is to invite us to consider a broader range of ways in which we can be interconnected, the opportunity to deepen our critical understanding of what that interconnection means, and a broader range of ways to consider the human.

Much more could be said on all these philosophers. In particular, a fuller account of their approaches to intellectual disability would be good. In passing, I'll note that of the three philosophers I'm mentioning, Hegel may have the most congenial view (as I've argued elsewhere)—(a), he regards a lot of mental impairment not as *other* to reason, but a reordering of the mind's typical focus, which should then be explored empirically and sympathetically; and (b), he regularly

warns against one-sided views of reason that only valorize one mode of rationality. This paper has mostly focused on physical disability, but there's a lot more that can be said about intellectual disability.

Conclusion and note on methodology

The philosophers I've been talking about might not recognize or endorse the story I'm trying to tell about them; there's no reason to expect that any of them would avoid the charge of ableism in their work (Spinoza maybe less so; but with respect to intellectual and psychological disability he is certainly quite dismissive). That's fine – the tradition as a whole, along with Western society, has indeed been ableist in its guiding assumptions, norms, and values, and it would be strange for philosophers writing in that context not to share at least some of that. But now, with the work done by disability theorists and disability studies scholars, we have a chance to go back through our tradition with *new questions*, and examine the story in a new way.

I want to conclude with some methodological suggestions, drawing partly from feminist work on history of philosophy. In their introduction to an anthology of feminist work on Hegel, Kimberly Hutchings and Tuija Pulkinnen have outlined three approaches that contemporary scholarship on Hegel tends to take.

- 1) “Closed mode”, in which scholars seek “to locate definitive answers to philosophical questions about, for instance, the foundations of valid knowledge claims or of the nature of the good state in Hegel’s texts.”
- 2) “Open mode”, which “accepts the plurivocity of Hegel’s philosophy and draws on Hegel’s arguments as a resource for articulating and potentially transforming the terms of contemporary philosophical dilemmas.”
- 3) “Deconstructive mode,” which “finds the interpretive key to his work in those passages that unsettle the claims foregrounded by Hegel’s authorial voice.” (Hutchings and Pulkinnen 2010, 4).

The first is of interest primarily to specialists in the history of philosophy, and given the conservative nature of the texts being studied, is unlikely to generate emancipatory results for philosophy of

disability. It is important to do, in order to make sure that we are not operating on misunderstandings of the text, but it cannot be the final word in having Hegel, or other philosophers, speak to us today.

The second and third modes seem more fruitful for the future of developing a disability lens within the history of philosophy. One of the main flaws possessed by philosophers is a kind of assumption that because we've thought very hard about something, that we've understood it adequately and included what there is to include. Philosophy as a discipline engages in relentless border-policing about what *counts*, about what is *rigorous* enough to be "real philosophy" or to have attention paid to it by "real philosophers." While some of this is part of any discipline, and helps ensure that we are careful in our work, it can also perniciously exclude new or different ways of thinking. We are so caught up in insisting that something is *not* philosophy, that we sometimes don't stop to ask whether it could be.

One of the advantages of working within the history of philosophy is that it becomes palpably obvious that philosophy has been a lot of things over the years, and that there is no single philosophical method and ultimately no unquestioned philosophical dogmas: somewhere in the history of philosophy there will be some exception to almost everything. It is time for scholars working in the history of philosophy to really plumb this advantage.

The third – deconstructive – mode invites us to go back and unsettle the main text, in order to discover what then comes out of it, and what possibilities are opened up by working through the margins. This then serves to reshape the text itself, provoking disorientation. This is good, though I sometimes worry that we lose some of the positive contributions of the text upon which we might want to build. Consequently I understand it as complementary to the open mode.

The second – open – mode identified by Hutchings and Pulkinnen invites us to take those areas of Hegel's text (or by extension any philosopher's text) that seem surprising from our contemporary perspective, and use them reflexively against our perspective. We may not come out of this agreeing with Hegel, or whoever else, but we have at least disoriented ourselves somewhat. This disorientation can help us rethink established lines of inquiry. Note, Hutchings and Pulkinnen refer specifically to the "plurivocity of Hegel's philosophy" – some Hegel scholars use this to argue that,

based on argument X, made in, say, his *Logic*, Hegel should have argued Y instead of Z in, say, his political philosophy. Hegel's philosophy lends itself particularly well to this approach, given the vastness of his system. Other canonical figures also contain these resources of productive dissonance, however, and exploring this is the bread and butter of history of philosophy scholarship.

What is useful in this plurivocity is that it confers a certain legitimacy to cultivating those arguments that seem particularly fruitful; for isolating lines of argument that go farthest to unsettle contemporary assumptions or claims – after all, if we lay different strands of his texts together, we can note that even Hegel doesn't always agree with Hegel.

The open mode is not concerned primarily with the definitive answer to what these figures would conclude about the role of disability in the good life, but rather what using them can do for reshaping our assumptions about this question.

The key thing is to avoid the classic philosopher pitfall: intellectual arrogance or smugness. Again, thinking about these arguments very hard and reading the texts carefully is not going to adequately unsettle long-established, ableist habits of thought but will risk reproducing them (even if it's possibly innovative and creative ways – still ableist!). We can risk being limited in our critical work by our own theoretical and political horizons.

Here I suggest deliberate intellectual anachronism: we need to go out of our way to read canonical philosophers from the history of philosophy alongside scholarship in disability theory. Not neatly compartmentalized – “now I am reading these disability studies readings” vs. “now I am reading my philosophy readings.” It is easy to get drawn into the maze of a text – I think many people in philosophy enjoy working their way through a nice chunk of argument, possibly forgetting what lies outside of it – but it's important to allow the intellectual disorientation that comes from moving back and forth, with neither the conversation amongst disability theorists nor the plurivocity within the canonical philosophers' texts having ‘master’ status. [Note: I'm not saying that our work on disability should be drawn primarily from scholarly texts rather than lived experience; but I do think we should take advantage of the theoretical work that's been done to make sense of experiences of disability].

Kant makes a lovely distinction between learning a system of philosophy and actually philosophizing (1998, A836-7/B864-5). The first is something that can be taught, the second is something that must be *done*. To do this, then, reflection, dialogue, teaching, listening, and fretting – all will help contribute to the project of working through the history of philosophy, of giving it life, and of rethinking its use and its meaning in the face of disability.

By working through the history of philosophy in this way, we can try to dislodge our common assumptions about what's 'obviously' the case. That's a benefit of studying the history of philosophy in general – that change of perspective. As Genevieve Lloyd notes in her introduction to the *Routledge Companion to Spinoza and the Ethics*, "Reading the *Ethics* can make us aware of the contingency of much of the content and practice of contemporary philosophy which we often take for granted" (Lloyd 1996, 23). I think that this can be true of more than just Spinoza. Bringing the questions of disability theory back into that history encourages us to rethink common narratives of what these philosophers mean, and helps us to be more ready for the challenge of philosophical thinking about disability that doesn't simply reinforce ableist assumptions.