

## **Loving Ignorance and Philosophy of Disability**

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Jane Dryden, Mount Allison University

[jdryden@mta.ca](mailto:jdryden@mta.ca)

In a recent issue of *Disability Studies Quarterly*, Corbett O'Toole argues that it is important for disability studies researchers to disclose their “relationship to disability” (O'Toole 2013). The idea for this paper came while reading this article at the same time as teaching a brand new course on philosophy of disability to 4th year undergrads in the Fall of 2013. There were a range of relationships to disability in the room – being disabled, having disabled family members or friends, volunteering with disabled people, being nondisabled. It was important for us, during our conversations, to disclose these relationships in order to understand some of the reasons behind our differing reactions to the material. This lead to conversations that I don't usually end up having in my philosophy classrooms, where normally we focus our attention on the details of the arguments, and away from any personal self-reflection. The fact that this is an anomaly seems odd in itself, given that, since Socrates and philosophy's founding mythology, we have been told that “the unexamined life is not worth living.”

What does it mean, then, to bring disability studies into conversation with philosophy in a classroom? The discipline of philosophy is largely concerned with abstraction, universality, and objectivity. Even with the work on reshaping and reframing objectivity by standpoint theorists, phenomenologists, philosophers of science, and so forth, we are still faced with the problem: can we make *philosophical* arguments about disability *without* systematically distorting the concerns and ideas of disabled people to make them fit into the confines of philosophical discourse?

I hope that it's possible, but also want to be critical of my own position, and interrogate my own optimism (Dawn Rae Davis writes, “Optimism may signal one of the effects of privilege” (Davis 2002, 152) — my new favourite saying). To do this, I draw on work on epistemology of ignorance, as it has developed within feminist philosophy. I want to make a brief note: Some of the work I will use today draws from women of colour writing about their relationship to white feminists – I obviously don't want to make the claim that race itself works the same way as disability, or that the political or social issues are the same, but I think that the structure of the ignorance at play is similar

enough that I can draw on their insights and criticisms in my reflection about my own role within disability studies.

Work on epistemology of ignorance investigates ways in which ignorance is not innocent or accidental, but reflects and reinforces existing structures of privilege. Nancy Tuana provides a taxonomy of forms of ignorance, which I will list and comment on briefly. I don't have time to comment further within the paper, but am happy to answer questions about them afterward; there's also a useful discussion by Licia Carlson, in her 2010 *Faces of Intellectual Disability*, about how these connect to philosophical claims about intellectual disability, which provoked some of my own thinking about the matter (Carlson 2010, 201-204).

The first form of ignorance is “knowing that we do not know, but not caring to know” – in other words, that figuring a thing out is not perceived as important to those in authority (Tuana 2006, 4-6). As Carlson writes, “there is a clear lack of interest among some philosophers in regard to the specific conditions and the lived realities of the individuals they discuss” (Carlson 2010, 202). The second is *not* knowing what we don't know, “because our current interests, beliefs, and theories obscure them” (Tuana 2006, 6-8).

Our class, it seems, was a good forum for dealing with these. In readings, discussions and assignments, we tried to challenge broad claims about disability, to realize that the different experiences of different disabled people do matter, and to take stock of the questions that are not generally asked within philosophy (such as the social, political, and economic realities affecting the formation of and assumptions about disability).

A third form of ignorance is withholding information from affected groups or cultivating their ignorance (Tuana 2006, 9-10). A related fourth is the positioning of some people as not worthwhile knowers, not worth taking seriously (Tuana 2006, 13-15). My students and I talked about who gets to attend university, and who gets to be part of the discussions that affect them; my disabled students talked about their own experiences with being taken seriously (or not) around the university.

A fifth form of ignorance is willful ignorance, when privileged groups “do not know and do not

want to know” (Tuana 2006, 10-13). It occurs when genuinely coming to *know* and *understand* something would require a change in practices, a change which a privileged, dominant group is unlikely to want to undertake. (For instance, genuinely thinking through accessibility at a university.) My students understood the logic of this form of ignorance, but were frustrated by its seeming insolubility – nonetheless, it led to good discussions.

The sixth form of ignorance Tuana discusses is somewhat different: it is what she calls “loving ignorance,” and, positioned against the previous pernicious forms of ignorance, involves an attitude of humility toward what we cannot know of others’ experiences. Carlson prescribes “loving ignorance” as something for philosophers to consider with respect to the experiences of some people with intellectual disabilities (Carlson 2010, 204-207). On a related note, writing about the relationship between white feminism and women of color, Dawn Rae Davis points to an “ability of not knowing” which involves putting aside “the will to succeed in the knowledge game”: as Davis writes, “we cannot give up on knowledge altogether, but we must give considerable attention to what knowledge cannot make available” (Davis 2002, 155, 152, 147): in other words, not everything is there for *me* and *my* theorizing.

Though lauding ignorance seems a strange directive given philosophy’s love of knowledge, it seems to be the right mode to foster in a classroom, where my students’ experiences (which I may not fully understand) may challenge the theories that I am teaching, my disciplinary convictions shaped by my philosophical training, and my experience as a nondisabled person.

Lest I now fall into the trap of self-congratulatorily patting myself on the back for being lovingly ignorant, however, I want to consider another discussion of “loving ignorance.” Mariana Ortega discusses the attitudes of white feminists who use the work of women of color in academic and political discussions, and who see themselves as caring about the situation of women of colour and wanting to “give” them a voice – Ortega calls this a “loving, knowing ignorance” (Ortega 2006, 62). As she writes,

Those guilty of this kind of loving, knowing ignorance have learned the main sayings of such well-known feminists of color as hooks, Lorde, and Lugones, and are aware of Spelman’s claims about the problems of

exclusions in feminist thought. They theorize and make claims about women of color. However, they do not check whether in fact their claims about the experience of women of color are being described with attention to detail and with understanding of its subtleties. In other words, this ignorance goes hand in hand with the production of knowledge about the experience of women of color. The result of this ignorance is that women of color continue to be misunderstood, underrepresented, homogenized, disrespected, or subsumed under the experience of ‘universal sisterhood’ while ‘knowledge’ about them is being encouraged and disseminated...  
(Ortega 2006, 62).

As a nondisabled professor in a classroom teaching philosophy of disability, this kind of ignorance, translated to the field of disability, is something I worry about. My urge, as a philosopher, is to draw out the universals and shared aspects in the discussions that come out of the classroom: but is this disrespecting my students, especially my disabled students, who are learning how to articulate the *difference* between their experiences and the ableist assumptions of philosophy, the university, and the other students? Even if it’s disability theory that I’m teaching and not straight philosophy, if I fit their experiences neatly into the theory which I, at the front of the room, am presenting them, are they then discouraged from deviating from or challenging that theory? I have struggled with the competing urges to tie the discussion up in a neat, organized way – tie it up with a bow, so to speak – and the urge to let the threads lie where they may, in order to challenge the whole project of neat bow-tying, and more accurately reflect the messiness of actual lived experience. I felt vulnerable in the classroom – there were discussions that ran beyond my control – but that vulnerability served as a regular reminder of the temptation to lapse into philosophical arrogance and to the well-meaning ignorance Ortega describes.

(Alongside teaching the class, I began a project with a group of disabled students to examine students’ experiences of accessibility at our university. During the course of this project, a number of students opened up to me about instances of ableism they had encountered that I found shocking even in the midst of all my readings in disability studies. Optimism as sign of privilege, indeed.)

Drawing from both Tuana’s and Ortega’s discussions of loving ignorance, the common lesson is

one of humility. In the classroom, this means that it is important both to listen and to concede authority, while at the same time attempting to guide students toward clearer and more confident articulations of their own arguments (not of mine). I can point out when they are contradicting themselves unintentionally and help them tease out what they are trying to get at. I can help them overcome the ignorance of simply not knowing something, and provoke and challenge them in instances of willful ignorance. I can help point them toward resources they might not have considered yet on their own. It is not up to me to tie their experience to the theory though; I can point and say “Check this out, see if it is useful to you or if it provokes anything helpful,” but I should not say “Oh, this is *just like* this theory....” I have to recognize that my students may have some experiences they’re not (yet) ready to theorize or share (if ever), that my own desire to see my theoretical commitments be validated by their self-reports needs to be recognized and checked. All of this requires care and respect: a kind of love within the classroom, and the ability to put aside the drive to mastery over knowledge in favour of an acceptance of the ambiguous, the unsettled, the unresolved.

These reflections go beyond the best way to teach philosophy of disability to an upper year seminar of undergraduates, and on to what philosophy itself might be capable of doing. It seems as though philosophy is good training for spotting patterns, teasing out implications, for clarifying things that are murky, for complicating things that seem obvious: these skills can be useful to disability studies. The problem is when philosophers believe that idealized philosophical argument is a replacement for actually listening to others. Licia Carlson’s book (2010) diagnoses in detail the problems with most philosophical engagement with intellectual disability, and the assumptions that are made about intellectual disability in order to fit it into theories about fitness, excellence, moral worth, utilitarian calculations of harm, and the quality of life. In most of these cases, philosophers aren’t even lovingly ignorant in Ortega’s sense, but just ignorant.

There’s an important discussion going on right now within philosophy as a field about how to increase its diversity (in terms of who is included within professional philosophy) and pluralism (in terms of different approaches, topics and methodologies). Teaching outside my comfort zone, teaching a course in which I encouraged my own students to hold me to account, in which we held our own discipline to account, taught me a lot about how difficult this work is. Shelley Tremain writes about the absence of disability as a concern within professional philosophy in her

introduction to a recent DSQ special issue on “improving feminist philosophy by taking account of disability,” noting that even apparently “intersectional” feminist analyses often leave disability out (Tremain 2013). The solution to these difficulties is not to simply pay lip service to ‘disability’ as a topic to which philosophers contribute their expertise. The danger is that philosophers believe, based on their training, that they can extend themselves to any area in order to do “philosophy of X.” When we do this, we often don’t ask how that X is then going to have to change us and to change the way we do philosophy. Philosophy should not remain unscathed by these encounters. Doing “philosophy of disability” without adequate attention to the concerns Ortega and Tuana raise risks that “philosophy of disability” create a kind of theorizing that reinforces ableist, biomedical and neoliberal claims about disability under the guise of ‘simply’ clarifying and organizing existing concepts and beliefs.

Doing philosophy of disability – putting the tools of philosophy at work in understanding ableism, phenomenologies of disabled embodiment, creation of disabled identities, creating theories of justice that *do* justice for disabled people, all of this – involves the ever-present risk of arrogance. To *not* do philosophy of disability, though, to avoid it as philosophy largely has been doing too far, is a retreat from the responsibility of a discipline that seeks to make claims about ‘humanity,’ ‘justice’ and ‘ethics.’ Further, it is a retreat from our responsibility to our disabled students, whose experiences are systematically excluded from what gets to count as relevant. This means, however, sometimes getting it wrong. As Linda Martín Alcoff writes in her famous essay, “The Problem of Speaking for Others:”

If I speak only for myself it may appear that I am immune from criticism because I am not making any claims that describe others or prescribe actions for them. If I am only speaking for myself I have no responsibility for being true to your experience or needs. But surely it is both morally and politically objectionable to structure one’s actions around the desire to avoid criticism, especially if this outweighs other questions of effectivity. In some cases, the motivation is perhaps not so much to avoid criticism as to avoid errors, and the person believes that the only way to avoid errors is to avoid all speaking for others. However, errors are unavoidable in theoretical inquiry as well as political struggle, and they usually make contributions. The

pursuit of an absolute means to avoid making errors comes perhaps not from a desire to advance collective goals but a desire for personal mastery, to establish a privileged discursive position wherein one cannot be undermined or challenged and thus is master of the situation. From such a position one's own location and positionality would not require constant interrogation and critical reflection; one would not have to constantly engage in this emotionally troublesome endeavor and would be immune from the interrogation of others. Such a desire for mastery and immunity must be resisted. (Alcoff 1991)

Teaching philosophy of disability, as a nondisabled person, involves the humility of recognizing that one will be wrong. To not teach it, out of fear of getting it wrong, is to be complicit in the continued willful ignorance of disability present within professional philosophy. To teach while admitting to one's loving ignorance and failures of knowledge hopefully models to students a relationship to both theory and practice that helps them to think critically about their own intellectual development and to engage in their own self-examination: an appropriate lesson for philosophers. Sometimes we need to have the scary conversations, even – especially – in philosophy.

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