

## Freedom, Transcendence, and Disability: Rethinking the overcoming story

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Disability rights activists and disability theorists frequently criticize “the overcoming story.” This is a story of a disabled person<sup>1</sup> who manages to accomplish something *despite* their disability, in a way that *overcomes* the disability; Eli Clare describes this as “the supercrip,” calling it one of the “dominant images of disabled people” (Clare 1999, 2). Often these stories involve impressive achievements, but they can also involve stories of everyday accomplishments that nondisabled people would not generally have been celebrated for.

Nondisabled people often share these stories as a sign of their apparently loving acceptance of disabled people; the stories are often described as showing that “anyone can accomplish their dreams if they try hard enough.”<sup>2</sup> This gets called inspiration porn.<sup>3</sup> It is precisely because little is expected of disabled people that the overcoming story has its “inspirational” quality – look, even these *horribly disadvantaged* folks can do this, so nondisabled people can do anything! They rhetorically work to keep disabled people in their place. As Clare points out, “They reinforce the superiority of the nondisabled body and mind. They turn individual disabled people, who are simply leading their lives, into symbols of inspiration” (Clare 1999, 2). At its core, the overcoming story is not a celebration of disability, but the opposite: a sign of the fear of disability, and symptom of nondisabled people looking to comfort or assuage that fear, reassurance that “people can do anything they really want to” (Wendell 1996, 106).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> A word about terminology: I will use “disabled person/people” rather than “person/people with disabilities” throughout this paper in recognition of the argument that this acknowledges that disability is part of a person’s identity and experience in the world. For a discussion of person-first language, see Titchkosky 2001.

<sup>2</sup> Think of Scott Hamilton’s “the only disability in life is a bad attitude” on a ‘heartwarming’ Facebook meme.

<sup>3</sup> See the late disability rights activist Stella Young’s 2012 blog post, “We’re not here for your inspiration”: “Let me be clear about the intent of this inspiration porn; it’s there so that non-disabled people can put their worries into perspective. So they can go, ‘Oh well if that kid who doesn’t have any legs can smile while he’s having an awesome time, I should never, EVER feel bad about my life’. It’s there so that non-disabled people can look at us and think ‘well, it could be worse... I could be that person’. In this way, these modified images exceptionalise and objectify those of us they claim to represent. It’s no coincidence that these genuinely adorable disabled kids in these images are never named: it doesn’t matter what their names are, they’re just there as objects of inspiration.”

<sup>4</sup> Referring to reactions to chronic illness, Wendell writes: “Your not getting well depresses everyone—the doctors and nurses to have tried to fix you, your friends and relatives, even people who hardly know you. Your hanging around without recovering reminds them that not everything, not even everything terribly important, can be fixed” (Wendell 1996, 105).

As Stella Young noted, the implication of inspiration porn is that “if we fail to be happy, to smile and to live lives that make those around us feel good, it’s because we’re not trying hard enough. ... We’re not allowed to be angry and upset, because then we’d be ‘bad’ disabled people. We wouldn’t be doing our very best to ‘overcome’ our disabilities” (Young 2012). The story can be turned around and used against disabled people who for whatever reason are not running marathons or climbing mountains or reworking the foundations of physics – they must be malingerers. “Don’t let your disability define you!” “Don’t be held back by your disability!” – these sometimes well-intentioned exhortations fail to observe the way that disability becomes integrated into an identity both through bodily lived experience and through the kind of recognition received in the social world; they also fail to observe the way that oppressive social and economic contexts work against disabled people.<sup>5</sup>

It is not easy to simply ignore the overcoming story, though. As Eli Clare describes, while trying to decide whether or not to give up on a particular mountain climb in bad weather:

And here, supercrip turns complicated. On the other side of supercrip lies pity, tragedy, and the nursing home. Disabled people know this, and in our process of knowing, some of us internalize the crap. We make supercrip our own, particularly the type that pushes into the extraordinary, cracks into our physical limitations. We use supercripdom as a shield, a protection, as if this individual internalization could defend us against disability oppression (Clare 1999, 8).

While deciding whether or not to turn back from a mountain climb, Clare writes “I wanted to prove myself once again. I wanted to overcome my CP. Overcoming has a powerful grip” (Clare 1999, 9). The compulsion to test ourselves, to resist and challenge apparent boundaries – this is something we tend to celebrate. How best to temper this celebration with critique?

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<sup>5</sup> This has real political and material effects; e.g. UK rhetoric of scroungers, who should just toughen up, in context of massive cuts to benefits.

The disability critique of the overcoming story is well-founded. But I want to examine what this might mean in an existentialist context: what is the overlap between aiming at existentialist transcendence, and succumbing to the overcoming story?

I'll present two cases: first, a simplified "pop" existentialism, where the overlap seems total; second, the work of Simone de Beauvoir, where it is less clear. My purpose isn't to make the obvious point that pop versions of existentialism can be problematic, but to show how the disability critique helps us guard against interpretations of overcoming or transcendence that simply reassert ableist ideals.

The caricatured version of existentialism, which celebrates the lone existentialist hero, is tailor-made for being linked with the overcoming story of disability. And sure enough, we see this in a couple of popular texts on existentialism by Gary Cox. One of them, *The Existentialist's Guide to Death, the Universe and Nothingness*, uses disability as an example of bad faith, contrasting "wallowing in disability" vs. transcending it (2012, 65-66) – as though these are the only two options of relationship to one's disability! The other, *How to be an Existentialist: or How to Get Real, Get a Grip, and Stop Making Excuses*, has a lengthy discussion of Sartre on disability, from *Being and Nothingness*.

Sartre had said, "Even this disability from which I suffer I have assumed by the very fact that I live; I surpass it toward my own projects, I make of it the necessary obstacle for my being, and I can not be crippled without choosing myself as crippled" (Sartre 1966, 402).<sup>6</sup>

As Cox explains, "Sartre is saying precisely that a disabled person is not his disability but instead his freely chosen response to his disability and his transcendence of it" (Cox 2009, 51) To explain, Cox tells the story (of course!) of a disabled person (Cox presumes he has spina bifida) climbing Mount Snowdon (a mountain, of course!):

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<sup>6</sup> Full quotation: "The body is the contingent form which is taken up by the necessity of my contingency. We can never apprehend this contingency as such in so far as our body is *for us*; for we are a choice, and for us, to be is to choose ourselves. Even this disability from which I suffer I have assumed by the very fact that I live; I surpass it toward my own projects, I make of it the necessary obstacle for my being, and I can not be crippled without choosing myself as crippled. This means that I choose the ways in which I constitute my disability (as "unbearable," "humiliating," "to be hidden," "to be revealed to all," "an object of pride," "the justification for my failures," *etc.*). But this inapprehensible body is precisely the necessity that *there be a choice*, that I do not exist *all at once*" (Sartre 1966, 402).

He was happy to be mastering the situation in which he had placed himself, happy to be mastering its disability and choosing its meaning. [...] It made me wonder, who in this world is really disabled? The ‘cripple’ who always chooses to push himself and do as much as he can, or the lazy, obese person who always chooses the soft option and does as little as possible except when it comes to eating crap and making excuses? Perhaps the only disabled people in this world are those who have a disabling attitude. (Cox 2009, 50)

Cox notes that this “seems harsh and politically incorrect in our contemporary excuse culture that consistently undervalues individual responsibility and consistently overvalues the blaming of circumstances and facticity. This view should, however be seen as empowering and very much politically correct in terms of the respect it shows disabled people.” (Cox 2009, 50-51) In fact, says Cox, the man “was not disabled but definitely *differently able*” (Cox 2009, 51).

His conclusion reinforces the all-consuming importance of overcoming one’s disability:

I guess he got down OK and I never heard anything to the contrary, but if he died trying then he died transcending the awful facticity of his so-called disability. A good death I guess. Unlike a lot of public buildings, existentialism has always been equipped for disabled access, although, on the other hand, it offers the disabled no special concessions (Cox 2009, 51).

This view of what existentialism would seem to require of disabled people with respect to their disability seems woefully misguided. The message of this story is clear: you’re allowed to be disabled, as long as you continually strive to overcome and transcend it; do not look for any excuses, and looking for concessions (accommodations?) is exhibiting a kind of bad faith. Disability is only ever part of “awful facticity.” Better to die than to merely accept your disability.

Given that existentialist thinkers also note the effect of how others see us on our sense of self, the objectification of disability in Cox’s account is troubling. This is a standard

inspiration porn story: the person is simply treated as an object for Cox's previously-held assumptions, and to allow him to feel better about his superiority to those who are, presumably, not trying.<sup>7</sup>

Cox's account of existentialism is one that emphasizes individual responsibility, to the point of not asking, for instance, *why* "a lot of public buildings" aren't accessible. A different picture emerges, however, if we look at the relational characteristics of Beauvoir's existentialism: here we can start to find another way of thinking about freedom and transcendence that might be better-equipped for disability. Her account is not yet all that a disability theorist might desire, but the pieces are there.

First, a tiny bit of Disability Studies 101:

Part of the argument against the overcoming story is that it misplaces what a disabled person might want most to overcome. The social model of disability is the most common starting point of disability studies and disability rights activism, and so is a good place to start. The social model opposes itself to what it frames as the medical model, in which disability is considered to be an individual problem to be fixed by biomedical expertise in science and technology. The social model argues that there is a difference between impairment and disability. Impairment is the physiological, anatomical, or neurological difference from a species-typical body or mind. Disability is produced by a mismatch between the person and their lived environment. On this account, a person may have an impairment, but they are *disabled* by society, by ableism, by structures and beliefs.

The apparent simplicity of this view has, of course, come under fire much as the sex/gender distinction has. Shelley Tremain has persuasively argued that given the social and historical contexts of biological and psychological research, impairments are not objective and ahistorical but also shaped by shifting assumptions about what productive human bodies and minds should be like. Impairments are thus not brute facts, but "constructs of disciplinary

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<sup>7</sup> Note that while Cox notes that public buildings are often not accessible, he scorns those who "make excuses."

knowledge/power that are incorporated into the self-understandings of some subjects” (Tremain 2001, 632).<sup>8</sup>

This means that, as she writes, “In short, impairment has been disability all along” (Tremain 2001, 632). This does not at all mean that impairment and disability need then both be *bad*; rather that what we even conceive of as impairment or disability is contingent. As she concludes: “The critical question that disability theorists engaged in an historical ontology would ask is this: Of what is given to us as universal, necessary, and obligatory, how much is occupied by the singular, the contingent, the product of arbitrary constraints?” (Tremain 2001, 636).

Either way, though, both the standard social model of disability and Tremain’s social account of impairment as disability point us to the fact that the meaning of disability is neither fixed and static (pure facticity) nor is it something that a single individual can choose entirely alone. We will be returning to this point again.

Bringing this back to an existentialist context. How does Beauvoir treat disability and the overcoming story?

In *Ethics of Ambiguity*, Beauvoir points out that while “in the face of an obstacle which it is impossible to overcome, stubbornness is stupid,” that “there is hardly a sadder virtue than resignation” (Beauvoir 1948, 28). The passivity which does not even try is a “gloomy passivity” (Beauvoir 1948, 29). She goes on to praise something that might sound like an overcoming story:

Popular opinion is quite right in admiring a man who, having been ruined or having suffered an accident, knows how to gain the upper hand, that is, renew his engagement with the world, thereby strongly asserting the independence of

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<sup>8</sup> Full quotation: “If the ‘impairments’ alleged to underlie disability are actually constituted in order to sustain, and even augment, current social arrangements, they must no longer be theorized as essential, biological characteristics (attributes) of a ‘real’ body upon which recognizably disabling conditions are imposed. Instead, those allegedly ‘real’ impairments must now be identified as constructs of disciplinary knowledge/power that are incorporated into the self-understandings of some subjects” (Tremain 2001, 632).

freedom in relation to thing. Thus, when the sick Van Gogh calmly accepted the prospect of a future in which he would be unable to paint any more, there was no sterile resignation. For him painting was a personal way of life and of communication with others which in another form could be continued even in an asylum. The past will be integrated and freedom will be confirmed in a renunciation of this kind (Beauvoir 1948, 29-30).

Renunciation of a goal is only permissible if it does not bar the future, but rather opens up new possibilities (Beauvoir 1948, 30).

Disability and illness are not discussed at length in *Ethics of Ambiguity*. She writes in passing that “one rejects the illness by curing it” (Beauvoir 1948, 31). A little while later she notes that the body has certain “physiological possibilities, but the body itself is not a brute fact. It expresses our relationship to the world, and that is why it is an object of sympathy or revulsion. And on the other hand, it *determines* no behavior” (Beauvoir 1948, 41). Your body is not an excuse for resignation. There is no positive valence suggested to any kind of bodily limitation.

The commitment to the moral imperative of an open future is most evident when she notes that “There are limited situations where this return to the positive is impossible, where the future is radically blocked off. Revolt can then be achieved only in the definitive rejection of the imposed situation, in suicide” (Beauvoir 1984, 32).

In the presence of ableist beliefs about disability, this injunction could do great harm. In her book *Too Late To Die Young*, Harriet McBryde Johnson notes that people on the street have told her “If I had to live like you, I think I’d kill myself” (Johnson 2005, 2). At least one strain of the current discussion in Canada around medical assistance in dying is also evidence of this: freedom, or autonomy, is sought by rejecting a disabled future believed to be without dignity.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> [There is much more to be said about this connection, particularly in conjunction with Beauvoir’s *Old Age*; I have realized too late that it would have made a good focus for this paper, and will have to investigate it further another time! – JD]

Turning to *Old Age* (also translated as *The Coming of Age*), Beauvoir's account of old age has many resonances with disability. It involves detailed descriptions of experiences of the body that are often feared and stigmatized.

Beauvoir describes old age as a real limit. As Penelope Deutscher writes, "Despite the passivity the attitude reflects, she describes her old age as a calamity, in relation to which she is helpless, which besets her, or captures her" (Deutscher 1999, 8). Beauvoir is clear that old age is something that will happen to everyone who lives long enough. The examples she discusses, however, illustrate a wide range of ways of experiencing it. Some people refuse to accept their old age. As Beauvoir tells it, they largely occupy the form of denial, rather than a classic "overcoming" story.<sup>10</sup>

Debra Bergoffen notes that one of the flaws that Beauvoir saw in her earlier work *The Second Sex* was insufficient attention to "material conditions of scarcity" (Bergoffen 1997, 187) – *Old Age* addresses this in much more detail. Her critique is much more directed toward these material conditions as well as social attitudes than to the ways in which people muddle through the aging process. As Penelope Deutscher notes, "In *The Second Sex*, de Beauvoir is torn between directing volleys at those who are indifferent to or responsible for women's economic and social circumstances, and women themselves and how they deal with those circumstances. By contrast, the object of her 'volleys' in *Old Age* is more consistent. She is rarely critical of how a subject deals with their own lived situation and being-for-others as old, however much this might seem open to critique" (Deutscher 1999, 10).

This shift is much in keeping with the thrust of the social model of disability: the problem is not with the individual but with the interaction with the social and economic environment. Much of the difficulty she describes with old age is the way that she is seen by others, and the confrontation between her growing of experience of old age and the societal assumptions that she had held about it. Consequently, the kind of overcoming she endorses in *Old Age* is not a technological or biomedical denying of old age, but the reaffirmation of connections with others, of connections with ends beyond ourselves:

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<sup>10</sup> [If I have time, will choose some good examples – but think paper is already running too long - JD]

There is only one solution if old age is not to be an absurd parody of our former life, and that is to go on pursuing ends that give our existence a meaning – devotion to individuals, to groups or to causes, social, political, intellectual or creative work ... in old age we should wish still to have passions strong enough to prevent us turning in upon ourselves. (Beauvoir 1977, 601).<sup>11</sup>

The affirmation of our freedom is not something undertaken alone. Reading this back into her earlier work *Ethics of Ambiguity* invites us draw out a more suggestive angle throughout for connecting to disability.

In *Ethics of Ambiguity*, she describes freedom as casting oneself into an open future of possibility, rather than falling back into facticity. While this of course involves our own self-chosen possibilities, crucially it also involves our relations with others (Beauvoir 1948 71-2). Freedom must will itself into an open future, but this future is one that will extend beyond our particular life. The presence of others' freedom creates a world of meaning for me. As she writes, "Every man [*sic*] has to do with other men. The world in which he engages himself is a human world in which each object is penetrated with human meanings. It is a speaking world from which solicitations and appeals rise up" (Beauvoir 1948, 74).

This has special significance for thinking through disability. As noted before, the meaning of disability and impairment is not a static one but one shaped by history, by social and economic structures: in other words, by human meanings. This is the case for old age, as Beauvoir notes, but also for something as apparently as much of a brutal fact as pain. As Alyson Patsavas points out, in an article exploring personal experience of pain alongside disability theory, cultural discourses surrounding pain affect pain experiences (Patsavas 2014). Investment in athleticism and overcoming messages "not only prolonged the pain, but also made the pain worse as my body tried to overcompensate for the weakness in my shoulder" (Patsavas 2014, 211-2). Patsavas notes the difference between feeling "alone" with pain vs. connecting with another person with daily pain (213). Crucially, when meeting with

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<sup>11</sup> "One's life has value so long as one attributes value to the life of others, by means of love, friendship, indignation, compassion" (Beauvoir 1977, 601).

their doctor, individual and collective histories for both affect what Patsavas's pain signifies and how it can be imagined. What freedom means in this context is not denying pain (which makes it worse), but exploring how its possibilities and meanings can shift, and to "re-imagine our (shared, pained) futures" (Patsavas 2014, 216).

This involves working with others – as Beauvoir writes, "To will oneself free is also to will others free" (Beauvoir 1948, 72) – but this means that failure of uptake or resistance from others is then a harm. Beauvoir notes that it is precisely because we are so interdependent with others that "oppression is possible and why it is hateful" (82). In oppression, transcendence is cut off from its goals (Beauvoir 1948, 81). Material and physical conditions may present obstacles, but these are not oppression – rather, Beauvoir suggests that "these withdrawals and errors are another way of disclosing the world" (Beauvoir 1948, 81). Oppression is caused by other human beings (82).

As we have seen, my freedom, in order to fulfill itself, requires that it emerge into an open future: it is other men who open the future to me, it is they who, setting up the world of tomorrow, define my future; but if, instead of allowing me to participate in this constructive movement, they oblige me to consume my transcendence in vain, if they keep me below the level they have conquered and on the basis of which new conquests will be achieved, then they are cutting me off from the future, they are changing me into a thing (82). [quick gloss: much as inspiration porn changes disabled people into things for easy symbolism!]

In *Old Age*, she analyses the harms of old age as the harms of oppression. Referring to men who become injured or disabled during work, Beauvoir writes: "By the fate it allots to its members who can no longer work, society gives itself away – it has always looked upon them as so much material ... Old age exposes the failure of our entire civilization" (Beauvoir 1977, 603). She puts it bluntly: "Society cares about the individual only in so far as he is profitable" (Beauvoir 1977, 604).

This is an apt account of disability's place in ableist society. Recognizing disability as a form of oppression on Beauvoir's account further helps us think through what forms transcendence should take.

First, it means that we need not assume that existentialism requires disabled people to overcome their disability (in the form of an overcoming story) – what ought to be overcome is the conditions of ableism surrounding the disability. Impairments and the experience of disability themselves can be understood as ways in which the world is disclosed.

Second, it means that the project of overcoming is not one to be undertaken alone! It is not up to each and every single disabled person to rethink what disability can mean all by themselves, in a heroic act of overcoming social pressures. Rather, it points us to a collective project.

This collective project includes the direct challenge of oppression itself. Consider the achievement of the Section 504 protests in the US involving a group of 150 disability rights activists who took over a federal government office for 25 days in 1977, to pressure the government to sign into law a set of rights for disabled people. To *successfully* pressure the government. As Corbett OToole writes,

A group of disabled people winning against the federal government provided a lifetime of momentum in the fight for civil rights ... We won doing everything the way we had succeeded as disabled people: we created an interdependent support system, we relied on the knowledge and expertise of other disabled people, we worked cooperatively, we came to our decisions by consensus, and we created the opportunity for everyone to participate. We succeeded because we did *not* do it the nondisabled way. Our successes came directly from the skills we'd learned in order to survive as disabled people (OToole 2015, 67).

Telling the 504 story is not inspiration porn but part of collectively reimagining a future. It resists the insistence on the overcoming of *disability* in favour of rethinking what disabled life could look like with the protection of civil rights, and denying the centrality of nondisabled ways of doing things and understanding the world.

There is an important difference between the transcendence of the overcoming narrative (which pop versions of existentialism may seem to endorse) and the existential transcendence Beauvoir directs us toward once we bring disability theory into conversation with her work.<sup>12</sup> The overcoming narrative cuts off possibilities by only assuming one valence for disability: as a wretched condition to be triumphed over. Existentialist transcendence in Beauvoir points us toward opening up possibilities, including the possibility of transforming society itself.

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<sup>12</sup> Another angle, which I lack space for here, is that sickness occurs again in *Ethics of Ambiguity* as one of the fears of the sub-man, who apathetically rejects passion and desire in the face of the risks and tensions of existence: "Weighted down by present events, he is bewildered before the darkness of the future which is haunted by frightful specters, war, sickness, revolution, fascism, bolshevism. The more indistinct these dangers are, the more fearful they become" (45). This can be connected to fear of disability; Beauvoir can help us perceive that the kind of fear of disability we have that is fear of risk, while at the same time propelling us to more creative disability futures.

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