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Philosophy of Disability

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Philosophy of Disability

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Disability has been a topic of heightened philosophical interest in the last 30 years. Disability theory has enriched a broad range of sub-specializations in philosophy. The call for papers for this issue welcomed papers addressing questions on normalcy, medical ethics, public health, philosophy of education, aesthetics, philosophy of sport, philosophy of religion, and theories of knowledge. This issue of *Essays in Philosophy* includes nine essays that approach the philosophy of disability in three distinct ways:

- The first set of three essays provide a careful analysis of John Rawls, and the application of his work in ethics and justice to societies in which persons with disabilities, especially cognitive disabilities, can take active part in the processes of civil society.
- The second set of three essays branch out into continental philosophy, and are especially engaged with issues of community membership, communication, translation, and hermeneutics.
- The third set of three essays address disability specifically through the arts and aesthetics; asking questions on the portrayal of disabled persons in the arts and its implications for normalcy, sexuality, beauty, and the sublime.

The first essay, “Cognitive Disability, Capabilities and Justice” by Serene Khader, brings together the work of John Rawls, Martha Nussbaum, Amartya Sen, and Eva Feder Kittay. Khader provides a clear analysis of how the issue of disability asks us to challenge the common notions of the public and private spheres, and how practical reason is asked to transcend and bring together the public and private into a holistic, pragmatic policy perspective. The combination of Becker’s idea of agency with Kittay’s idea of relationship is especially inspired, and can provide a new means for addressing the relationships of persons with varied abilities and disabilities in society.

In the second essay, “A Rawlsian Perspective on Justice for the Disabled” by Adam Cureton, a careful analysis of Rawls’ veil of ignorance and original position is given, to illustrate how Rawls’ theory of justice is especially relevant to the issue of disability. Cureton discusses whether or not there is a place for “paternalism” in cases of extreme disability, especially cognitive disability. There are a variety of critiques of paternalism in such cases, for example, regarding the apparent loss of liberty and integrity of some persons who are borderline cognitively impaired, or who might be forced to live under certain assumptions about what a “rational” person would choose. Some philosophers who focus on the disability theorists’ critique of “normalcy” might be concerned that the “rational” decisional capacity benchmark might actually be a holdover of “normalcy” under another name.

The theoretical background on Rawls in the first two essays sets the stage for application to public policy found in the third essay, “Justice and Cognitive Disabilities: Specifying the Problem,” by Sophia Wong.

Citing specific examples of public policy decision making related to persons with cognitive disabilities, Wong addresses the question of self-advocacy and “speaking for” persons with disabilities directly and with great sensitivity. Wong cites Licia Carlson to problematize categorizations of disability and provides specific case study examples, including Down Syndrome and Nick Pentzell, arguing for the conclusion that persons with disabilities can and should be included in the scope of justice, even if it means that others must “speak for them” at times.

In the fourth essay, “Ability, Disability, and the Question of Philosophy,” by Scott DeShong asks philosophers to engage in a meta-level analysis of their own communication style regarding disability. DeShong provides a close reading of current literature on philosophy and disability, giving an opening discussion of figures in the philosophy of disability community (Canguilhem, Foucault, and Tremain). Major figures in the philosophy of disability often focus on terminology, and the power of words, the difficulty of communication, is a concern that often remains under the surface of the Rawlsian perspectives on justice and disability. For example, DeShong discusses the use of terms like “normalcy” and “ableism,” terms of primary importance for philosophers who write on disability. The philosophical focus on such terminology invites a Levinas-inspired critique of philosophy itself as “able” or “disabled” in its use of language to analyze ability and disability.

The fifth essay, “Native American Worldview and the Discourse on Disability” by Lavonna Lovern, addresses disability from a Native/Indigenous paradigm. Whereas the linguistic turn in the canon of western philosophy might leave us trapped in particular concepts and terms, the indigenous paradigm allows for a broader understanding through the use of narratives. Lovern notes that on the Eurocentric world view, disability has at times been read as implying a weakness of character. Instead, from the standpoint of community and connected social relations, disabled persons in indigenous communities are not held as weak, but as a differently abled yet still important members of the community. Taking inspiration from the work of Cajete, Lovern describes this as not only a challenge to western justice paradigms, but as a shift in ontological categories. Using metaphor and narrative, indigenous communities provide a different model of inclusion, a different model of community-making-choices-for someone who has cognitive disabilities or reduced decisional capacity, and a different model of community membership encompassing duties and roles for all members. The ability or disability of a person does not lessen one’s moral obligations to them, or their obligations to all their relations – it merely adjusts the specifics of those obligations and duties. The way that this essay combines ontological/metaphysical implications with linguistic and ethical implications is especially important.

Our sixth essay, “Listening to Phonocentrism with Deaf Eyes: Derrida’s Mute Philosophy of (Sign) Language” by H-Dirksen Bauman, provides a discussion of communication and community relationships within the deaf community, as well as a discussion of the rising academic field of Deaf Studies. Baumann’s work is especially intriguing, as it clarifies a conceptual connection between the work of Jacques Derrida and Deaf Studies. Although continental philosophy, and perhaps especially Derrida’s work, is often labeled as a primarily descriptive philosophy, Baumann clarifies and argues for a distinctive and valuable normative/prescriptive stance. The linguistic emphasis critiqued in the two previous essays in the issue, the limitations brought about by the linguistic western emphasis, may be transcended by the sign language poetics described by Baumann. For example, in discussing the emergence of body poetry in American Sign Language and other signed languages, Baumann notes “they are poetic expressions from a culture outside the voice. To what extent these poetics destabilize a logocentric metaphysics is a topic worth deep inquiry...there are certain moments of radical inspiration in

poetics that may be taken as a sign, gesturing to alternative ways of being in the world.”

In the seventh essay, “Doubly Monstrous: Female and Disabled,” Julie Clarke brings together a variety of different examples in the arts that depict disability and its wide ranging reception in the aesthetics/art community. Rich examples from film as well as other visual media are balanced with an analysis of beauty. Clarke addresses visual arts that explicitly ask us to challenge our own assumptions about persons with disabilities, about our reactions and assumptions about sexuality, about our own notions of inclusion and exclusion and attractiveness. The issue of beauty is embodied through Aimee Mullins, a runner who uses two artificial limbs, and whose appearances in film and magazines bring up the question of her beauty resulting from or transcending her physical state of being.

The eighth essay, “Benny and Joon’s ‘Alternative Philosophies’ of Emotional (Dis)ability, Class, Gender, and Sexuality” by Diane Wiener, argues for a new interpretation of a film that others have argued reinforces patriarchal assumptions about madness and hysteria. The paper combines and develops two different philosophical approaches at the same time: the themes of deconstructive reading and queer reading (in both senses of queer, coming from continental philosophy), and theories on decisional capacity of persons with disabilities (coming out of medical ethics/public health analysis; asking questions of whether or not paternalism is justified in the context of patients with severe cognitive disabilities or limited decisional capacity.) The medical ethics literature on quality of life often asks questions about how quality of life can be measured, whether it must be viewed holistically, quantitatively or qualitatively; and it is possible that a film like “Benny and Joon” provides a metaphorical/filmic depiction of a “quality of life” standard achieved by a patient, through her relationships with those around her. Of special note is the way Wiener draws out the notion that Joon herself is an active patient, taking part in her own recovery; arguing that at times in the film Joon is “healing” men in her life much more than men or her doctors are healing her.

Our concluding essay provides a reading of “Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer” that transcends the usual distinctions between the descriptive and the normative. In “A Textual Deconstruction of Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer: Utilitarianism, Mechanism, and Static Constructions of Disability in Society and in Schools” by Susan Gately and Christy Hammer, we are invited to look back on the static conceptualizations of disability that are exemplified in the media and in pop culture. The story of Rudolph is problematic; while it seemingly asks that Rudolph be allowed to play, his inclusion rests on assumptions about his special abilities and his “use to society.” Without his special jumping ability, or his useful glowing red nose, would his disability be as welcomed at the end of the story? Gately is right to point out that even in our own call for papers for this issue of *Essays in Philosophy*, the language did slip between people/persons with disabilities and disabled people/persons. The treatment Rudolph receives is related clearly and cogently to existentialism as well as utilitarianism. The arguments Gately and Hammer make showing that society has an obligation to provide learning-rich environments, and that the role of teachers is paramount in helping to empower young Sartre/Kierkegaard existentialists in making decisions and choices about their lives, are especially timely given the current context of education in the United States with its emphasis on standardized testing and No Child Left Behind.

These nine essays each illustrate how philosophy, whether via Rawlsian theories of justice, or via theories of communication and hermeneutics, or via theories of the arts, aesthetics and pop-culture, can offer us a new and reinvigorated understanding of disability. In closing, I would like to thank Michael Goodman, General Editor of *Essays in Philosophy*, for his patience, his advice and his openness to a still novel and unusual topic, throughout the process of editing this issue.

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