

Dialogues on disability

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In mid-January of 2015, I accepted an invitation from Thomas Nadelhoffer (College of Charleston) and Kevin Timpe (Northwest Nazarene University) to become a contributor to “Discrimination and Disadvantage”, a blog that they intended to launch several weeks later whose focus would be the various forms that discrimination and disadvantage take, especially within professional philosophy. Because word about the impending blog spread rapidly throughout the philosophy blogosphere and other social media, Discrimination and Disadvantage became fully operational in advance of the proposed date when, at the end of January, Joseph Stramondo (Drexel University) wrote an inaugural blog post about the medicalisation of the legal concept of “reasonable accommodation”.

Since the inception of the blog, I have regularly contributed short essays, announcements, and links to articles that concern philosophical, political, ethical, and other theoretical issues related to disability, that is, contributions that are likely to interest philosophers who work in the emerging sub-field of philosophy of disability, including items about (for example) accessibility to philosophy conferences, disabled identity, ableism, the underrepresentation of disabled philosophers, and universal design. Occasionally, I have posted

items on other subjects, such as the employment conditions and status of untenured faculty, the whiteness and Eurocentrism of philosophy, and animal ethics. I recently joined Nadelhoffer and Timpe as a co-ordinator of the blog.

In March 2015, I asked the philosophers on my Facebook page for their opinions on my idea to conduct interviews with disabled philosophers that I would in turn post to the blog. The idea garnered enthusiastic responses, as did my proposal to name the prospective series of interviews “Dialogues on Disability”. The next day, I circulated a call for participants and began to extend invitations for interviews to disabled philosophers whom I know through Facebook, conferences, and my editing work, know through other colleagues, or whom I do not know at all, but whose work I admire.

The first instalment of the Dialogues on Disability series, in which I interviewed Bryce Huebner, an associate professor in the philosophy department at Georgetown University, was posted on Wednesday, April 15, 2015. Subsequent instalments in the series have been posted on the third Wednesday of every month since then, making the Dialogues on Disability series a centrepiece of the Discrimination and Disadvantage blog. My interviewees thus far comprise a diverse group of philosophers in

terms of disability, race, gender, class, age, and sexuality and come from various corners and sub-fields of the discipline – including cognitive science, feminist philosophy, indigenous philosophy, philosophy of love, Africana aesthetics, and political philosophy – as well as from a range of professional positions and ranks – including adjunct professors, graduate students, associate professors, and an associate dean. I have not used any sort of criteria (i.e., administrative, juridical, or medical terms of reference) to establish the qualifications of any given philosopher to be interviewed, apart from the expectation that the interviewee in question self-identify as disabled (although, in fact, Huebner, in the very first interview of the series, indicated his ambivalence about such self-identification).

The Dialogues on Disability series of interviews is designed to be an organisational tool that aims to forge a community of disabled philosophers by providing a public avenue for discussion with disabled philosophers about a range of topics, including their philosophical work on disability; the place of philosophy of disability vis-à-vis the discipline and profession; the distinct ways in which disabled philosophers experience institutional discrimination and personal prejudice in philosophy in particular and academia more generally; accessibility; ableism; and anti-oppressive pedagogy.

Disabled philosophers are among the most underrepresented and marginalised members of the profession. The data available, to date, indicates that disabled philosophers comprise between 1–4% of philosophy faculty, despite the fact that working-age disabled people make up an estimated 17–22% of the general population. These grievous demographics signal the urgent need for

disabled philosophers to publicise the discrimination and disadvantages that they confront throughout the profession and across academia.

The Discrimination and Disadvantage blog has proven to be a vital site for this sort of consciousness-raising within the profession. The Dialogues on Disability interview series in particular has enabled disabled philosophers to draw attention to issues pertinent to them that are not adequately or appropriately addressed in venues such as standard journal articles, department meetings, or conferences. Furthermore, the series has enabled disabled philosophers to demonstrate – in very concrete and specific ways – to their nondisabled colleagues that the disadvantages that they confront are not medical in nature, are not natural, nor are they isolated occurrences to be rectified through individualised means; on the contrary, as my interviewees continue to show, these disadvantages are political, socially constituted, and systemic states of affairs whose elimination requires that the philosophical community develop broad structural and institutional strategies and solutions for that distinct purpose. The Dialogues on Disability interview series is a guide to that end.

Further reading: The Discrimination and Disadvantage blog: tinyurl.com/za3fpqk

Shelley Tremain has a PhD in philosophy and specialises in philosophy of disability, feminist philosophy, social theory, Foucault, and bioethics. Tremain publishes widely on a range of topics, including ableism in (feminist) philosophy, the constitution of impairment, and Foucault and disability. She is the editor of *Foucault and the Government of Disability* and her monograph *Foucault and (A) Feminist Philosophy of Disability* is forthcoming from the University of Michigan Press in 2017.