Introduction: Philosophies of Disability and the Global Pandemic

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Introduction

Philosophies of Disability and the Global Pandemic

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Shelley Lynn Tremain has a Ph.D. in philosophy and initiated the field of philosophy of disability. She has published widely on a range of topics including (feminist) philosophy of disability, Foucault, biopolitics, genetic technologies, ableism, and underrepresentation in philosophy. Tremain is author of *Foucault and Feminist Philosophy of Disability* (University of Michigan Press, 2017), the manuscript for which won the 2016 Tobin Siebers Prize for Disability Studies in the Humanities, and editor of two editions of *Foucault and the Government of Disability* (University of Michigan Press 2005, 2015), an interdisciplinary collection of work on disability and Foucault that was recently translated into Korean. In 2016, Tremain was the recipient of the Tanis Doe Award for Canadian Disability Study and Culture. Tremain has been at the forefront of efforts to increase the diversity of philosophy, especially with respect to employment of disabled philosophers, mentorship of disabled students, and attention to critical philosophical work on disability. She coordinates BIOPOLITICAL PHILOSOPHY, the philosophy blog that focuses on issues of underrepresentation in philosophy and which is home to Dialogues on Disability, the groundbreaking and critically acclaimed series of interviews that she conducts with disabled philosophers.

In my contribution to the 2018 inaugural issue of *International Journal of Critical Diversity Studies* (*IJCDS*), I offered an argument for why critical philosophical work on disability, conducted in the new subfield of philosophy to which I had given the name "philosophy of disability," should be recognized as a bona fide form of critical diversity studies (CDS). My argument in the article did the following: (1) indicated how this new area of CDS shares features with established areas of CDS, including Black Studies, Feminist and Gender Studies, Indigenous Studies, and Queer Studies; (2) articulated the outlines of the subfield of philosophy of disability; (3) suggested the ways in which philosophy of disability challenges the ableist demographics and assumptions of Eurocentric mainstream philosophy; (4) identified how philosophy of disability critiques dominant philosophical treatments of disability; and (5) pointed out how the fields of philosophy of disability and critical disability theory more generally emerged as areas of inquiry from activist and grassroots organizing of disabled people, spurred on by feminist, Black civil rights, diasporic, lesbian and gay, and other social movements internationally.

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As I argued in the 2018 article, one of the features that philosophy of disability has in common with other areas of CDS is a central reliance on the tools of social construction and a critique of essentialism. Although philosophers of disability disagree about what disability is, as well as how, and the extent to which, disability is socially constructed, assumptions about the social constitution of disability lie more or less at the heart of philosophy of disability; that is, regardless of how much practitioners of this relatively recent subfield of inquiry otherwise disagree, they almost unanimously agree that disability is not a natural state of affairs which is unconditioned by social power and other historically contingent influences. Indeed, the approaches to disability that philosophers of disability advance resist and run counter to the dominant conceptualization of disability that is persistently elaborated within bioethics, cognitive science, and mainstream political philosophy and ethics especially, according to which disability is a natural deficit, personal misfortune, or pathology that necessarily reduces the quality and worth of disabled people's lives and inevitably leads to the social and economic disadvantages that disabled people confront. Insofar as practitioners of the Euro-American philosophical tradition have, with few exceptions, cast disability as a natural, negative, and inert state of affairs in this way, they have historically removed or precluded disability from the realm of philosophical inquiry and kept at bay philosophical debate and questioning about its epistemological, ethical, and political status.

Nevertheless, a growing body of critical philosophical work on disability addresses social issues and concerns pertinent to disability and disabled people that nondisabled philosophers and other academics omit from serious consideration or misrepresent in ways that detrimentally affect disabled people. The marginalization and exclusion from philosophical discourse of urgent social issues and concerns with respect to disability and the COVID-19 pandemic are a case in point. Mainstream philosophical discourse about the pandemic has largely ignored the systemic poverty, isolation, and other social disadvantages and inequities that have increasingly accrued to disabled people due to the pandemic. When, in the context of the pandemic, philosophers have considered disability at all, their focus has been directed almost exclusively at questions that pertain to the distribution of so-called scarce healthcare resources – including questions about the development of triage protocols; about whether disabled people can justifiably retain their ventilators if COVID-19 hospital units require them; and about which disabled people, in which countries, should or should not be prioritized for vaccination.

This special issue of *IJCDS* – which is devoted to the theme "Philosophies of Disability and the Global Pandemic" – goes beyond an exclusive focus on the aforementioned questions in order to address the range of discursive gaps with respect to disability that have coalesced in critical philosophical discussions about the COVID-19 pandemic, doing so in ways that acknowledge how nationality, race, gender, class, colonialism, and other apparatuses of power always already condition and shape disability. Taken as a whole, the peer-reviewed contributions to the issue resist the obfuscation of these lacunae by considering (among other things) how the circumstances of the current COVID-19 pandemic sharpen the focus of various critical conceptions of disability and ableism; how this pandemic has affected disabled people economically, socially, institutionally, and internationally; the implications (especially for disabled people) of novel forms of social organization, mechanisms of (dis)association, and practices of division that characterize the COVID-19 pandemic; and the extent to which or even whether the current pandemic – which has thrown into relief social, economic, national, racial, and other disparities, as well as exacerbated them – will lead to systemic social, economic, political, and institutional change that benefits disabled people and members of other marginalized and disenfranchised social groups.

Let me open "Philosophies of Disability and the Global Pandemic" by providing brief descriptions of the provocative and timely articles that this highly illuminating special issue of *IJCDS* comprises.

In my contribution, I provide additional background on the subfield of philosophy of disability and its relations to work in various areas of mainstream philosophy, including bioethics and social epistemology. Then I adopt an approach derived from critical genealogy to closely examine the nursing home-industrial-complex that lies at the center of the COVID-19 pandemic in many jurisdictions, concentrating on how the COVID-19 tragedy has unfolded in nursing homes, so-called long-term care facilities, and other institutions in which elders and younger disabled people across Canada are confined.

In her article, Gabriela Ramirez Arguedas amplifies notions of disposability introduced in my article to demonstrate that the epistemic authority of the dominant narrative about COVID-19 in Costa Rica is grounded in discriminatory and oppressive ideologies of normalization with respect to which people's lives and bodies are valued. As Arguedas explains, this official discourse about the COVID-19 pandemic expresses the condescending and paternalistic tradition of medical epistemology in Costa Rica. How, Arguedas asks, does this narrative discourse affect the way that older people and disabled people are treated during this pandemic?

Elvis Imafidon continues these examinations of the embodied character of asymmetries of value and power in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. In particular, Imafidon is concerned with the asymmetries of value and power that, he argues, are inherent in African communitarian philosophy's assumptions about personhood and the implications of these assumptions for disabled people's access to healthcare, especially during this pandemic. For Imafidon, elimination of these asymmetries requires that the dominant conception of community embedded in African thought be broadened.

Two articles in this special issue draw upon the work of French philosopher and decolonial psychiatrist Frantz Fanon. Emily Anne Parker elaborates how Fanon's critique of the distinctions between human and earthly agency, human and body, and human and animal provide the framework for his claims about the significance of colonial wartime "cortico-visceral disorders." For Fanon, Parker notes, the colony is a manifestation of disgust for blackness, animality, the agency of soil, and powers of the sun, as well as for disability that the colony itself produces and, simultaneously, is an effort to install a nonracialized and nondisabled, that is, universal, agency. As Parker explains it, a Fanonian response to the global pandemic and climate crisis would, therefore, appreciate the array of crises that arise when humanity is understood as the opposite of the Earth. In their article, furthermore, Suze G. Berkhout, Lindsey MacGillivray, and Kathleen Sheehan explore the insights and tensions between Fanon's psychiatric writings, mad studies, and critical prison studies, linking this work to their own professional and practical experience as inpatient (acute-care) psychiatrists tasked with the implementation of ward policy changes in light of COVID-19 infection control concerns. Indeed, these co-authors underscore the ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic offers a particularly salient moment in which to identify and reflect – in highly concrete ways – on shifts in psychiatric carcerality.

The phenomenon of psychiatric carcerality and the COVID-19 pandemic also provides the motivation for Sara M. Bergstresser's contribution to this special issue. Bergstresser is concerned with the continuation in the United States, even during the COVID-19 pandemic, of involuntary psychiatric hospitalization. Bergstresser situates psychiatric diagnosis and hospitalization within the context of decades of social and historical research, as well as emergent fields of inquiry – including feminist philosophy of disability, CDS, and mad studies – in order to argue that a socially mediated process, legitimated with appeals to "health" and "safety," should not be maintained during a pandemic of a communicable virus that especially endangers people in congregate settings such as psychiatric wards, prisons, and nursing homes.

In some respects, the article that Johnathan Flowers has contributed to "Philosophies of Disability and the Global Pandemic" returns this special issue to questions and concerns introduced at its outset, that is, raises questions about the position of disabled people vis-à-vis the university and underscores concerns with respect to both the virtual exclusion of disabled people from the discipline of philosophy and the oft-demeaning situation of disabled people within academia more generally. The crux of Flowers's argument in the article is that the presumed accessibility gains that have emerged in the COVID-19 pandemic – including the presumed gains within academia – are the products of a world that is prepared for some people and their bodies and not for other people and their bodies. Drawing upon Sara Ahmed's work on the inheritance of a world, Flowers argues that ableism prepares the world for inheritance by nondisabled people and their bodies but not disabled people and their bodies.

As my brief overview of the articles that make up this special issue of *IJCDS* indicates, the contributions to this collection articulate perspectives and concerns left out of mainstream philosophical and popular discourses about the pandemic. Hence, the contributions to the issue challenge (each in its own way) philosophers and other critical thinkers to expand the array of methods, approaches, and techniques with which they identify and understand the events and implications of the phenomena of the COVID-19 global pandemic. Indeed, I am sure that this issue of *IJCDS* and the essays that it comprises mark merely the beginning of that historically signficant process.

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