

Looking Back to Look Forward: Disability, Philosophers, and Activism

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Philosophers have already been [publicly engaged around COVID-19](#) in many ways through podcasts and writings aimed at broad audiences. This is not surprising, given that the discipline is topic-equipped to probe into many dimensions to understanding and redirecting life under COVID. Science, justice, governmental power and authority, public trust, and care are just one large handful of such topics, each housing [more specific discussions](#) led by philosophers with relevant expertise. How have and how might philosophers contribute to linking disability and *activism* in these peri-COVID-19 times, especially in forms of public engagement that go beyond podcasted talks and articles aimed at a public audience? How do we harness philosophical thinking to contribute positively to those living with disability whose vulnerabilities are heightened by this pandemic and the ableism highlighted by collective responses to it?

Recently there have been some important community-based webinars like [Grounding Movements in Disability Justice](#) held in late April and its more recent follow-up [Disability Justice and COVID-19](#) in early May. They have been organized and run by Black, disabled-identifying people operating independent of institutional support. As public events, they are a model of diversity, inclusion, and accessible engagement that philosophers working on disability justice will learn much from and could likely contribute to. And the recently Netflix aired documentary [Crip Camp](#) provides a keen sense of how a powerful disability activist community can start from small steps. But where are the philosophers in such interplay between disability and activism?

Comments on or responses to this post, which are most welcome, will be one helpful place to constructively answer this question. (To start on one answer: philosophers are working together with non-philosophers in bioethics, as exemplified by thought-provoking contributions by Wendy Rogers, Jackie Scully, and Tom Shakespeare to last year's special issue of the journal *Bioethics* on [Bioethics and Activism](#).) But I want to step back to reflect on the recent history of philosophy and disability in encouraging further thinking about not just the “where” but the “how” questions I have asked.

The [Society for Philosophy and Disability](#), established by Anita Silvers, Adam Cureton, and others, is less than 10 years old and there is at least the perception that philosophy has been a hostile environment for both people with disabilities and the study of disability. When Eva Feder Kittay and Licia Carlson organized their landmark conference, *Cognitive Disability: A Challenge to Moral Philosophy*, held in September 2008 in New York, they did so both in recognition of that perception and with an aim of constructively engaging with prominent views in ethics and bioethics of the quality of life of people with cognitive disability. It was a challenge to one deep strand of ableism in philosophy. (Papers from the conference were published in several forms, including in [this book](#).)

My own forays into disability activism from philosophy led to a long-term, community-university project focused on the creation of video narratives of Alberta's eugenics survivors, a project running from 2010 to 2016 [whose impact is of interest beyond philosophy](#). From the outset I found a receptivity from students, who eventually made up about half of [our team of 80](#), to engage philosophically at the interface of disability and activism. Most of those students were drawn into that project from other parts of the universities we worked in—biology, history, sociology, physical education, law, disability studies; they were not already philosophy students. What appealed to

many of them was seeing how philosophical thinking could challenge taken-for-granted views to make a difference on issues that mattered in their personal lives and local community.

Amongst the small, early steps that we took in forming what became the [Eugenics Archives](#) team was to start a blog in 2007, initially called the *What Sorts of People Should There Be?* blog. While we mostly just posted individually with some administrative oversight, as do most collective blogs, late in 2008 we experimented with something more coordinated and sustained, drawing on the efforts of about 10 of us, including graduate students in philosophy. We made a series of posts based around short clips from talks and exchanges captured in the video recordings of the Cognitive Disability conference that Kittay and Carlson had organized. The recordings provided one level of accessibility and preservation in a public space, but we wanted to take this to a further level and make the important exchanges at the conference accessible to a wider audience beyond philosophy, using the short clips to enhance accessibility. Our surrounding commentary and the ensuing discussion on the blog would extend the philosophical reach of the original discussions.

Over the next two months, we produced [a series of 13 blog posts](#), nearly all centred on video. At times provocative framing posts facilitated rich discussion, both from those in our group and amongst those to whom the blog series spoke. After a few weeks, we had a sizeable daily audience and much uptake beyond philosophy. The topics we covered included parental choice and disability, the case of Ashley X and growth attenuation therapy, animal rights and disability, the binary of cognitive ability and disability, personhood and dependence, and loss and ableism.

The series ignited some accessible, high quality philosophical discussion and created resources that found their way into university classroom discussions. It strengthened our disability activism and the place of philosophy in it. And it shifted the views of at least some disability scholars and activists who had primarily thought of the discipline of philosophy only as ableism-enhancing.

This minor example of how philosophy, disability, and activism can be integrated contains a few lessons for those working at these interfaces now in the peri-COVID-19 times. Philosophers with a more nascent relationship with disability activism, even those with lived experience of disability or who specialize in the philosophy of disability, need allies more deeply experienced in the world of disability activism who may well have a negative view of philosophy and philosophers based on their own lived experience. Building trust within the emerging teams through action is critical. Establishing individual and collective credibility proceeds not by the power of abstract thought but by creating something tangible, what we might understand as [evocative objects](#), that draws from and speaks to the lived experience of disability.

By relying on bite-sized videos, we opened our discussions to many from outside of philosophy, and [video narratives of oral histories of eugenics survivors](#) became a hub of the Eugenics Archives website and the basis for a documentary film, [Surviving Eugenics](#), that is freely available online for classroom use. In being prepared to write the posts and to comment constructively on those of others, we exemplified a kind of community of inquiry at a distance. By building in these kinds of features to the series we offset some of the ephemerality that all blogging comes with. Our evocative objects were individual, video-centred posts and the series they formed. But philosophers can think imaginatively about other evocative objects for brokering public engagement around disability and activism suitable in our current times. For my part, I would start by pairing Jackie Scully's short [Disability rights and disablism in a time of pandemic](#) with [the powerful, short video that Stacy Park made](#) shortly before her too-early, recent death.

Additional Links:

- *Ethics Talk*: Disability Community Perspectives on COVID-19 with Alice Wong and Joe Strasmondo in conversation. <https://journalofethics.ama-assn.org/podcast/ethics-talk->

[disability-community-perspectives-covid-19.](#) A 30-minute podcast (with transcript) between a disability activist and scholar at the American Medical Association Journal of Ethics.

- *Biopolitical Philosophy*: A blog by Shelley Tremain and Melinda C. Hall that incorporates Tremain's "Dialogues on Disability", featuring her recently-posted redux interview with Quayshawn Spencer. <https://biopoliticalphilosophy.com/>

Biography:

[Rob Wilson](#) is professor of philosophy at the University of Western Australia and works in the philosophy of mind, biology, and social science. His most recent book is [The Eugenic Mind Project](#) (MIT Press, 2018). The Aeon essay, [Eugenics never went away](#), talks more about the ongoing relevance of eugenics for thinking about disability and [his review](#) of Eva Kittay's *Learning from My Daughter: The Value and Care of Disabled Minds* (Oxford, 2019), has just appeared in Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews.