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Beast or God: Philosophical Exclusion of Disability and Disabled Voices

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BEAST OR GOD: PHILOSOPHICAL EXCLUSION OF DISABILITY AND DISABLED VOICES

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BEAST OR GOD: PHILOSOPHICAL EXCLUSION OF DISABILITY AND DISABLED VOICES

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In philosophy, our goal is to ultimately discover what it is to be human. How do we exist in our world, and how *should* we exist? Throughout history, philosophers have been attempting to answer these questions in any way possible. Well, almost. Unfortunately, marginalized voices -- such as those with disabilities -- have been excluded from the conversation in a way that minimizes and undermines any answers provided. Philosophers such as Descartes make the argument that human existence is purely in the mind, and that we can separate ourselves from our bodies; many disabled philosophers would disagree. Disability studies finds that our body has just as much of an influence on our cognition as our brain (sometimes even more so); to separate ourselves from our bodies would be to fundamentally change our existence. We would not exist in the same capacity. But, because disabled voices have been excluded from philosophical literature and discussions, the canon currently has no choice but to follow the Socratic, Platonic, Aristotelian, and Cartesian ways of thinking: our bodies are mere instruments for our being and morality. In my thesis, I examine the ways in which ableism have influenced our philosophical thinking and how we as philosophers can attempt to include disabled voices in philosophy going forward.

Introduction

Generally speaking, philosophers have avoided discussing the topic of disability. Some believe that issues involving disability are to "be addressed outside the realm of justice, through charity or acts of benevolence" (Riddle and Bickenbach 4). Others believe that disability studies are an ". . . exploration solely for disability advocates or theorists . . ." (Riddle and Bickenbach 2). Regardless of the reasoning, the consequences are the same: disability, disability studies, and disabled philosophers continue to be left out of philosophical discussions as a whole.

However, there have been some philosophical discussions that gently skirt around the idea of disabled people. In Book One of the *Politics,* Aristotle implicitly references disability -- whether he intended to or not -- when he says that "he who is unable to live in society, or who has no need because he is sufficient for himself, must be either a beast or a god . . ." (Aristotle and Jowett 3). In other words, a person that functions in a way that differs from most of the culture around them must be something other than human. It is completely impossible, according to Aristotle, that a human behave, look, or think differently than those around them. Therefore, disabled people must be either "a beast or a god." Both ends of this statement are problematic because no matter what, the disabled subject is no longer a person. As a god, the disabled subject is incapable of being viewed as a part of human society, and will inevitably fail to live up to the extraordinarily high expectations set -- due to the fact that they are not actually a god. As a beast, the disabled subject is still incapable of being a full member of human society, but has no autonomy to create the world in which they want to live.

This treatment of disability in philosophy starts with Plato and Aristotle, continues through Descartes, and is still prevalent in modern philosophy. As Christopher Riddle says in *Disability and Justice: The Capabilities Approach in Practice*, "What struck me as odd and unique about questioning how people with disabilities were being accommodated under our conceptions of justice was just how few people were doing it. It seemed to me to be such an obviously pressing topic that received either passing attention or none at all" (xiii). Barely any philosophical literature talks at all about disability; even less speaks about it in any substantive way; and less still is written by an openly disabled philosopher.

But, does any of this really matter? Why do we care who writes philosophical literature, or what that literature is about? Does it really matter in the scheme of things? The short answer is: yes. All of this matters, and it matters deeply. Philosophy does not exist in a vacuum. Dr. Tressie McMillan Cottom says that "The royal 'we' take our cues about what ideas matter from whom we must recognize before we ourselves can matter" (211). Society takes its cues on how to recognize whose voice matters from literature. When we give a certain voice authority to speak on a subject matter, we are definitively saying that *this* topic and *this* person matter. On the other hand, when we refuse to give authority or recognition to someone, we are saying the exact opposite: you and what you have to say do not matter. Dr. Tressie McMillan Cottom, who is one of my favorite sociologists, says that "In a modern society, who is allowed to speak with authority is a political act" (Cottom 19). Allowing certain groups of people to speak about their experiences and their stories with authority simultaneously allows that group to become

more equal members of society, as well as broadens our definition of what it means to be human.

It is imperative that philosophy begins to give recognition to disability studies, and even more imperative that we give authority to disabled voices. According to the 2011 World Report on Disability, released by the World Health Organization, "more than one billion people in the world (approximately 15 percent of our population) live with a disability and . . . nearly 200 million of these people experience difficulties in functioning" (Riddle and Bickenbach 2). Riddle and Bickenbach make the argument that philosophy was "designed to inform our social policy, and that these social policies or classificatory instruments were designed to adequately characterize disability to begin to redress some of the injustices currently perpetuated against people with disabilities" (16). In *Arguing About Disability: Philosophical perspectives*, Kristjana Kristiansen, Simo Vehmas, and Tom Shakespeare argue that "Philosophical ethics . . . aims to describe the best features of human character and manner in a way that could be the basis for normative rules and even law-making and jurisdiction" (7). When philosophy doesn't include disability, then disabled people are excluded everywhere. And when more than 15% of the world's population is excluded from philosophy, then there really is no plausible way for philosophical thought to do its job in a way that matters.

So, how do we move forward as philosophers in a more inclusive discussion, knowing that our history explicitly excludes the disabled experience? We know now that there is an "unavoidable alliance of disability studies and philosophy" (Kristiansen et al 1). But how do we suddenly begin that "alliance"? Arguably, the transition will be a

difficult one, especially because it seems that "Disability puts to test the language of equality, which attempts to forget and minimize our differences. To include the disabled in our life means to create a community of diversity and difference, which is much harder to sustain: 'We are creatures that fear difference. The fact that the other is not as we are means that there may be something wrong with us. The only solution is to make them as much like us as possible or to make them live apart' (Hauerwas 1986, 214)" (Ripamonti 66). Including disability in our philosophical discussions means addressing our biases not only in our thought, but also in our language. So why go through all that trouble? Why even bother?

To these questions, I say: ". . . it may seem to privileged people that it is easier to fix me than it is to fix the world" (Cottom 60). To someone that hasn't been historically excluded from philosophical discussions and literature, it is easy to say that we should just move on, it doesn't matter. But to a disabled philosopher, it is essential to say that we should immediately begin changing the narrative: my voice matters as much as any non-disabled person's. Not only does my voice matter, but the way in which disabled experiences are discussed matters as well. According to Lidia Ripamonti, "A recent research paper commissioned by the UK National Autistic Society (hereafter NAS) argues that the language used to describe [disability] has a powerful effect in shaping people's perception of it (Kenny et al. 2015)" (57). We must begin reflecting on the language that we use, the stories we give authority, and we must begin to question why.

In the rest of this thesis, I am going to make the argument that philosophical viewpoints "inevitably direct our responses and actions" (Kristiansen et al 2). The way

philosophers discuss disability has a drastic real-world impact; consequently, the discussions need to happen. ". . . very little theoretical work has been done concerning the key concepts and underlying assumptions of disability studies," and that is incredibly disappointing (Kristiansen et al 2). It is vital for philosophers to begin to be "grounded on proper ontology" in order to begin to increase equality and well-being for individuals (Vehmas and Mäkelä 53). We cannot fully discuss philosophical issues such as justice, equity, and morality without intentionally including disabled voices; otherwise, we are only discussing these topics in the context of a very small group of people.

In short, my argument is going to be that there is not enough representation of disability within philosophical discussions, whether that be as a topic or a voice. The issue here is not convincing you, my readers, that there is barely any philosophical inclusion of disability; that much is obvious. The real argumentation is that philosophy needs more disabled representation. Why does that representation matter? Does it make any difference at all?

Opponents of my argument would say that it doesn't make a difference. As Simo Vehmas and Pekka Mäkelä said, "Millions of competing texts, discourses and representations are not much of a comfort for people who are in pain" (53). Philosophical discourse is not going to cause people with disabilities to feel better physically or mentally, nor is it going to give them the opportunity to live a less painful and more fulfilling life. However, it is arguable that philosophical discourse *will* give disabled people a better chance at living a "good life," as Aristotle puts it, because that is the entire point of philosophy. I agree that philosophy cannot cure pain, but it can create

inclusion in policies and culture. To me, and to many disabled philosophers, that is just as important.

Are there any tradeoffs or risks in this argument, though? Does including disability in philosophy come with any down sides? While not necessarily a negative, including disability in philosophical discussions and literature would necessitate a holistic re-thinking of philosophy. To really include disability in a meaningful way, philosophers must deeply examine the biases that they hold, as well as the biases present in historical philosophy. It may require a full re-working of the philosophical canon. Is this tradeoff worth it, or should we stick with the status quo?

I believe wholeheartedly that the tradeoff is worth it. Philosophy is meant to question the existence of everything; resisting change -- especially change in the canon -- defeats the purpose of philosophy. Philosophers have to be open to more inclusion within the literature. Otherwise, we are just a bunch of people sitting around, pointlessly and endlessly questioning things that don't really matter. To me, this tradeoff is essential for the survival of philosophical thought.

Furthermore, we must not only be open to *including* disability in our philosophical conversations, but we must be open to actually *hearing* what it means to be disabled as told by disabled philosophers. D. Christopher Ralston and Justin Ho add personal experiences of disability to the conversation in the book *Philosophical Reflections on Disability*. The book begins by providing a historical analysis of philosophical thought and conceptualizations around disability by bringing to light historical discussions of disease and illness. They then bring those historical

conceptualizations into conversation with modern medicinal philosophy and disability studies. How do personal experiences complicate and/or add to these conversations? When philosophers are discussing disability, are they doing so in a way that is respectful to people that actually have those disabilities, or are philosophers talking over/for them? Ralston and Ho emphasize the fact that it is very important that non-disabled philosophers talk *with* disabled bodies, not *for* disabled bodies.

Jackie Leach Scully says that "The one with the best story is supposedly seen to win the political battle as well" (51). The group of people with the best philosophical discussion, the most intriguing story, and the authority to tell those stories, is given political and social power. Without the authority to tell stories and have philosophical discussions, a group will always remain marginalized. So, it's time that we give authority to disabled voices. It's time to listen.

General Philosophy and Disabled Discussions

It is a tragedy that in modern philosophy, a book can still open with the proclamation that "What makes this book novel is its focus on disability as a philosophical issue" (Kristiansen et al 1). There is far too little philosophical discussion surrounding disability -- whether that be disability and justice, disability and the good life, disability and ethics, etc. The discussion is still in its beginning stages (Thomas 29; Kristiansen et al 1). There are thousands of years of philosophical history; why are we only just now beginning to focus on disability?

In *Disability, Diversity, and Autism: Philosophical Perspectives on Health*, Lidia Ripamonti – the research coordinator at the Von Hügel Institute – writes that "The main question is: why is disability a problem in the first place?" (Ripamonti 65). Why have we caused disability to be a problem in philosophy? As Jackie Leach Scully says in her chapter in *Arguing About Disability: Philosophical perspectives*:

> Taking disability into consideration does not simply introduce a new analytic focus on a form of marginalised identity, however. As well as expanding our knowledge of impairment and its consequences, disability offers new perspectives on issues such as autonomy, competence, embodiment, wholeness, human perfectibility, finitude and limits, the relationship between the individual and the community, all of them notions that 'pervade every aspect' of our lives (Linton 1998: 118), issues with which moral philosophy and bioethics constantly grapple. It recentres the body within philosophical thought. (57)

Discussing disability not only encompasses humanity more fully in philosophical thought, but also allows those who are already encompassed within the current literature to further explore their own philosophical identities. So why have we not taken advantage of this as philosophers?

Philosophers have not taken advantage of this further exploration because it complicates our current philosophical understandings in a way that would require us to rethink all of our past philosophical discussions. Jackie Leach Scully (a senior lecturer at the School of Geography, Politics and Sociology, and a member of the Policy, Ethics and Life Sciences Research Centre, Newcastle University, UK, as well as an active member of the disability movement in Britain and Europe since the early 1980s) says that, "In effect, we could say that the experience of impairment or disability modifies the moral understandings of disabled people. . . . it is apparent that at least in some circumstances, disabled people have rather different takes on ethical questions relevant to disability than do nondisabled people" (Scully 58-59). Introducing disability into philosophy would demand that philosophers reevaluate everything we think we know, particularly about philosophical dualism (the idea that the mind is entirely separable from the body).

Historically speaking, philosophy has made a clear distinction between mind and body. Descartes tells us that the body "is simply an extended, non-thinking thing. And accordingly, it is certain that I am really distinct from my body, and can exist without it" (Sixth Meditation). We are, according to this line of thought, purely our rational mind, and the body just happens to exist with us. However, recent philosophical thought within disability studies -- as well as research into body cognition within the realm of

neuroscience -- shows us that this simply is not true. We have discovered that it is an absolute fact "that having or being a particular kind of body can result in a person acquiring particular moral understandings" (Scully 59). Our bodies directly impact the way that we participate in rational and moral thought.

With embodied cognition in mind, this thesis is going to begin with an examination of historical treatment of disability within philosophy. How did the ancient Greeks discuss this topic? From there, I will move forward to Cartesian philosophy, and examine how the discussion differs. Is Cartesian philosophy really all that different from the ancient Greeks in its discussion of disability? After my analysis of Descartes, I will briefly examine Hegel's philosophy -- specifically, his master-slave dialectic. Finally, I will investigate how modern philosophers -- such as Judy Butler, John Rawls, and Amartya Sen -- have changed that discussion, if at all. All of these philosophers (who happen to be very mainstream and canonical) have a particular view of autonomy and reason: abstract, idealized reasoning that can be applied in a highly individualized manner to reflect individual autonomy.

As a specific example of the ways in which philosophical ethics should be more inclusive of disabled people (but are not), I am going to focus on the Capabilities Approach. The Capabilities Approach "is a theoretical framework that entails two normative claims: first, the claim that the freedom to achieve well-being is of primary moral importance and, second, that well-being should be understood in terms of people's capabilities and functioning" (Robeyns and Byskov). Christopher A. Riddle asserts in *Disability and Justice: The Capabilities Approach in Practice* that the Capabilities

Approach is objectively incapable of comprehensively addressing disability simply because it exists in a world of philosophy that fails to recognize disability as a matter of importance. While the Capabilities Approach is more able to fully address social issues than most philosophical theories of ethics (purely because it originated out of a need for recognition of racial and gendered issues), it still is not any better than other theories in its ability to address disability. In fact, most literature regarding the Capabilities Approach remains entirely silent on the issue of disability. This is not exclusively the fault of Amartya Sen (the creator of the Capabilities Approach) or his theories; it's just an unfortunate symptom of existing in a canon that refuses to explicitly address disability at all. However, this particular theory still could do better. While the aim of the theory is to be more inclusive of voices and experiences that have been excluded, it does so in a too broad manner, without much explanation as to how we should determine a person's capabilities. Therefore, the Capabilities Approach makes an important first step towards inclusion, but fails to make the second step of specificity. As I will further discuss later in this thesis, neutrality is not always beneficial to those in the minority.

As another specific example: philosophy has the duty to discuss justice overall, but particularly in relation to disability. How does the discussion of disability overlap with the philosophical discussion of topics such as human rights? What would talking about disability in the context of human rights more often look like? Would it substantially change anything? As the rest of this thesis will show: yes. The inclusion of disability in every discussion will have a profound impact on the way we conceptualize the questions asked and the answers given.

The final work that I will be including in this thesis is the one that inspired the topic: *Thick: and Other Essays* by Dr. Tressie McMillan Cottom. This book is a series of personal essays written from the perspective of a disabled, black woman. The first essay in the book primarily discusses the concept of living as a disabled woman in our modern, able-bodied world. What is that like? How do our institutions and philosophies impact people living with disabilities? Could we as a society be doing more to positively impact disabled people? Cottom and I agree that yes, we could -- and should -- be doing more to positively impact disabled people in our modern world. The first step to positive impact is, in my view, giving authority to disabled voices and their stories.

Working Definitions

To begin the discussion about disability and philosophy, I must first provide some background on why inclusion matters not only to the philosophical world in general, but also to me personally. To do that, I also need to provide some working definitions. What counts as a disability? Who gets to make that decision, and why?

Before moving forward, it is important to note that any definition of disability always has a "value-based dimension," regardless of who is doing the defining (Edwards 30). Every person discussing disability has some sort of subjective opinion about how disability should be defined, including myself. I chose to use the interactional theory's definition of disability because I feel that it is the most inclusive while also narrowing in on what is a disability versus a difference in ability. Going forward in this thesis, I will be working under the interactional theorists' definition of disability, as well as the definition of "otherness" provided by the Cambridge Dictionary. However, in agreement with the philosopher Tamise Van Pelt, I would like to add that otherness "can be relative, making the interpersonal dichotomy of Self and Other endlessly reversible" (Pelt 8).

What exactly is disability? Is it synonymous with "differently-abled?" The Oxford English Dictionary says that disability is "a physical or mental condition that makes someone unable to act in a way that is considered usual for most people." Further, Lidia Ripamonti asserts in her article "Disability, diversity, and autism: Philosophical perspectives on health" that there is a conclusive difference between disability and personal identity, particularly in the case of autism; therefore, "differently-abled" is very different from being disabled. In each situation, according to Ripamonti, we must weigh

the philosophical, medicinal, and personal pros and cons of different categorizations of neuro- and physical divergences. Does labeling something as a disability benefit the person experiencing that difference? Or does it just cause more harm? While it is difficult to pinpoint an ultimate definition of what qualifies as a disability, it is imperative that we as a society understand the consequences of using any label. However, while an actual disability is difficult to define, the difference between "differently-abled" and "disabled" is fairly easy. The concept of being differently-abled is much more general than disability; for example, Person A may be less musically talented than Person B, but is better at writing essays in a short period of time. Because this does not have any significant impact on daily functioning for Person A or B, this would be a prime example of experiencing differences in ability (being differently-abled), but not disability. For the rest of this thesis, I will be using the term disability, and will not be referencing differences in ability.

In my opinion, the current definition of disability is not specific enough. For example, what causes someone with a disability to be "unable to act in a way that is considered usual" (Dictionary)? Is it caused by the disability itself, or is there something else? Different philosophers have different answers, but for the purpose of this thesis, I am going to follow both the social and the medical disability model. It is my belief that "disability is a social problem that should be dealt with through social interventions," as well as a medical issue in need of individual attention (Kristiansen et al 2). This way of thinking is referred to within disability studies as "interactional theory."

In the context of this thesis, we must not only know how to define disability, but also how to define the philosophical concept of "otherness." Tamise Van Pelt explores the history of the word, why it was created, and the consequences of applying the concept in real life in the article "Otherness." Van Pelt posits that "otherness" has been historically used as a term for people and/or traits that neurotypical and able-bodied people could not understand, and therefore, had no existing philosophical term for. Historical philosophers were concerned with constructing philosophies about the general population; anything that didn't fit in that category became the "other." To support this idea, the Oxford English Dictionary defines otherness as "being or feeling different in appearance or character from what is familiar, expected, or generally accepted." Otherness in philosophy is the experience of being different from the accepted canon and the people for whom it was written.

Rationale

Humans have been writing philosophical thought for over 2,000 years. Obviously, there's a lot of really important thinkers and writings. However, in my thesis I am only going to give a broad history of the subject; therefore, I must limit which historical philosophers I examine.

To begin with, I am going to analyze Plato and his philosophy in *The Republic*. According to Julia Annas, "Plato is the first philosopher to pay attention to psychological phenomena in a systemic way," and *The Republic* is where he does this. He was not only the first written philosopher; he also was the first to focus on the mind and thought. He was incredibly interested in what it is that makes humanity "human," so to speak. It is because of this that I have chosen to focus on Plato's philosophy in my analysis.

The next philosopher that I have chosen to examine is Aristotle. Aristotle was a student of Plato's, and consequently, carries much of the same skills of reasoning and approaches to philosophy. However, Aristotle is much more evidence based in his philosophies. He only wrote what he observed. For this reason, I believe it is imperative to include him in the conversation about disability in philosophy. It's highly unlikely that Aristotle never encountered or met a disabled person; therefore, if he truly wrote what he observed, then he made very intentional choices to leave specific groups of people out of his philosophies.

Third, I am going to critique Descartes. I have chosen Descartes because of his significant impact on society; without Descartes, we would be in a very different place with regards to philosophy and ethics. According to Joanna Hodge, Descartes' *Methods*

of Discourse and Meditations on first philosophy are when we "arrived really for the first time at the philosophy of the new world" (154). Every important philosopher during Descartes' lifetime and since -- such as "Locke and Kant, Spinoza and Berkeley . . . Caterius, Mersenne, Hobbes, Arnauld, Gassendi and Bourdi" -- have responded in some way to his philosophies (Hodge 155). Clearly, his work was important in shaping the way we do philosophy.

Finally, I will be using Hegel's master-slave dialectic to introduce the modern age of philosophy. Hegel published the *Phenomenology of Spirit* for the first time in 1807 -- eighteen years after the end of the Enlightenment in 1789 (thinkPhilosophy). Thus, Hegel's philosophies ushered in the post-Enlightenment period, and subsequently, the modern period of philosophy. However, I chose to analyze Hegel specifically not because of when he wrote, but because of the fact that he wrote very different ideologies than those that were common at the time; and yet, he still had a massive societal impact (and a lasting impact on the Academy of philosophers). Furthermore, his philosophy also sticks to the status quo of the previous philosophers I am analyzing: he believes in an abstract, idealized reason that is applied to a highly individualized autonomy. Hegel is an important philosopher in this discussion because of the way he theorized about equity and equality, as well as interpersonal relationships, using this framework.

Background

Philosophical discussions surrounding philosophy have historically either been non-existent or entirely problematic. Broadly speaking, "Philosophers . . . have traditionally been sloppy in doing their homework regarding the empirical realities and facts about disability, and tended to treat disability in a stereotypical manner (Silvers 1998; Wasserman 2001)" (Kristiansen et al 1). For whatever reason, philosophers seem to have determined that disability is a subject not worthy of consideration.

Platonic Philosophy

Because Plato is the first written philosopher, I am going to start my historical analysis with him. One of his most influential theories (second only to the Allegory of the Cave) is that of the Tripartite Soul in Book 4 of *The Republic*. In this theory, Plato explains that the soul has three parts: the Rational (thought), the Spirit (emotional), and the Appetite (desires, specifically physical). Plato believes that the Rational should rule over the Spirit and the Appetite in any person, and the Spirit should rule over the Appetite (see Figure 1). Given that the Rational part of the soul is the part that thinks through every question or decision with logic and reasoning, it clearly should rule over the others. The Spirit represents all of our emotions, and should rule over the Appetite, which represents simple, physical desires. While this is inarguably a good basis for the following centuries of philosophy, we are now at the point where we must question the neurotypicality of this claim. Are people that cannot experience rationality to the same degree less human? What about people with emotional disabilities, where the Spirit likely rules over the Rational, such as Borderline Personality Disorder? Plato's theory is a solid

foundation for philosophy, but it also is a solid foundation for othering people with any form of disability. It also entirely ignores Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, which states that we simply cannot achieve these "higher" levels of functioning and ability without meeting our very basic *physical* needs first (see Figure 2) (Hopper).

On the surface, this line of reasoning is not explicitly othering people with disabilities. However, in his theorizing, Plato failed to consider the lives of those that aren't neurotypical or able-bodied. For example, someone with a personality disorder may be physically incapable of prioritizing the Rational over the Spirit or the Appetite. Plato would have to make the argument that this incapability means that such a person is living a lesser life. In *The Republic*, Plato also creates The Myth of the Three Metals (see Figure 3). In this, he argues that some people are born with gold mixed in their souls, making them better than everyone else and fit to rule. The middle class of people are born with silver mixed in their souls, and so are fit to be warriors or auxiliaries. The lowest class are born with bronze or iron mixed into their souls; they are fit to be producers and nothing more (Plato and Bloom). It is my belief that Plato would class people with disabilities such as personality disorders as "bronze." He would not regard their lives with much respect, if any at all.

Figure 1: Plato's Tripartite Soul Explained

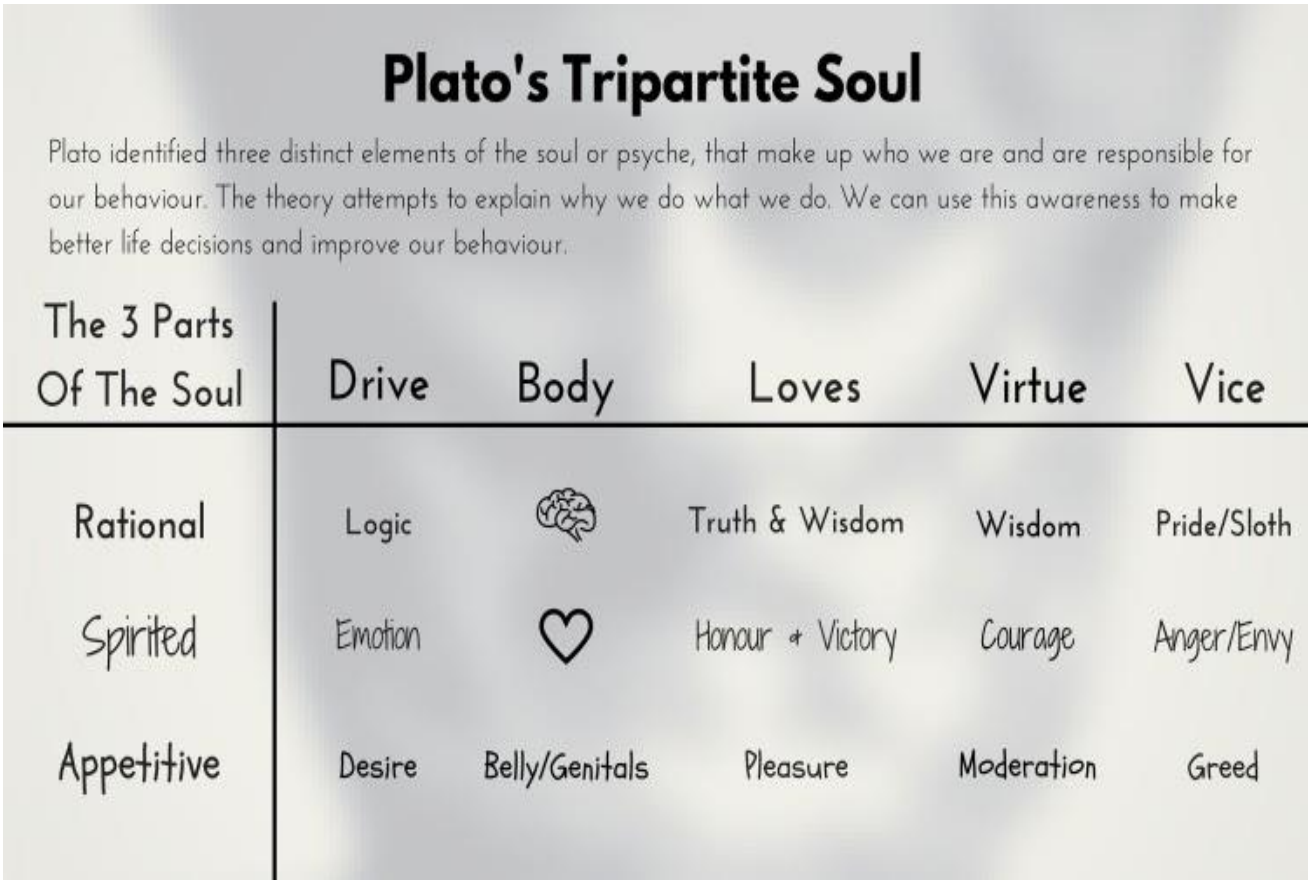

Fig. 1 from Matthew Oxborrow; "Understanding Plato's Tripartite Soul – How to Make Better Life Decisions"; Academy Of Eudaimonia, 20 Apr. 2016, https://practicalphilosophyblog.wordpress.com/2016/04/20/understanding-platos-tripartite-soul-how-to-make-better-life-decisions/.

Figure 2: Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

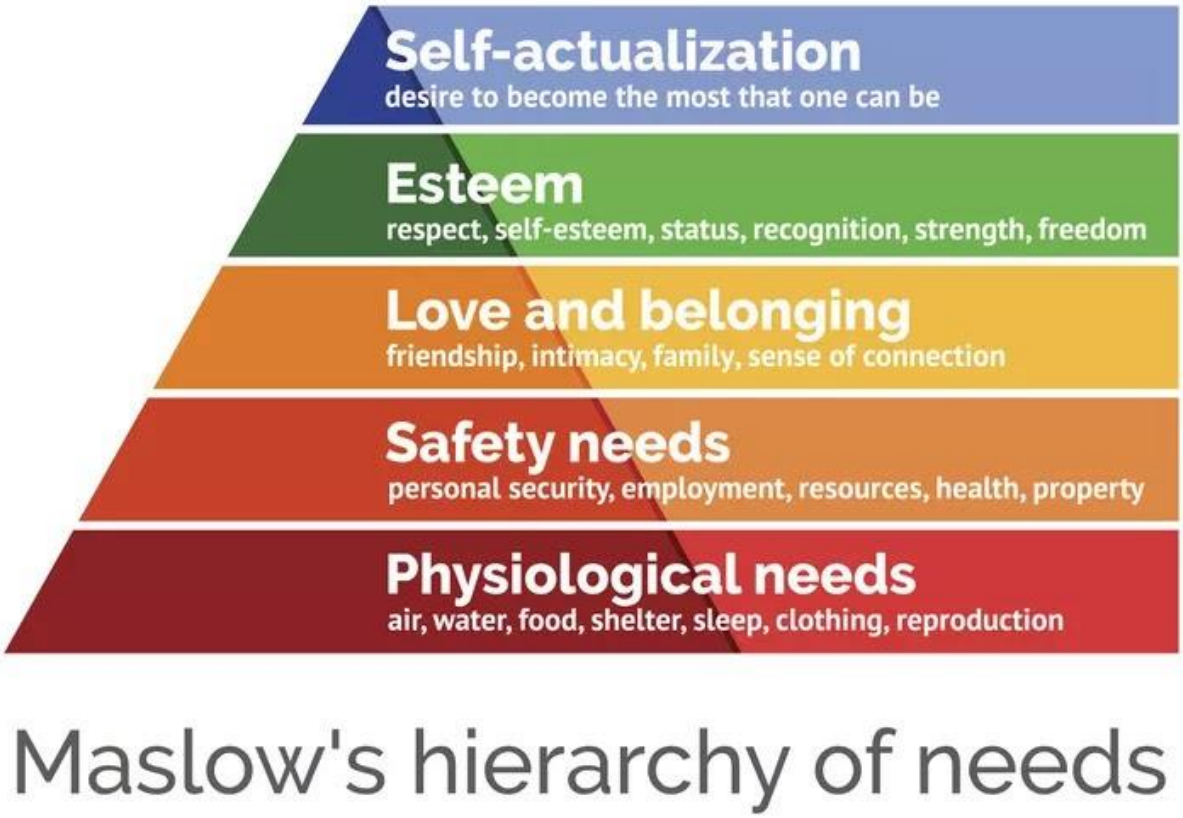

Fig. 2 from Elizabeth Hopper; "Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Explained"; ThoughtCo; ThoughtCo, 24 Feb. 2020, https://www.thoughtco.com/maslows-hierarchy-of-needs-4582571.

Figure 3: Plato's Myth of the Three Metals

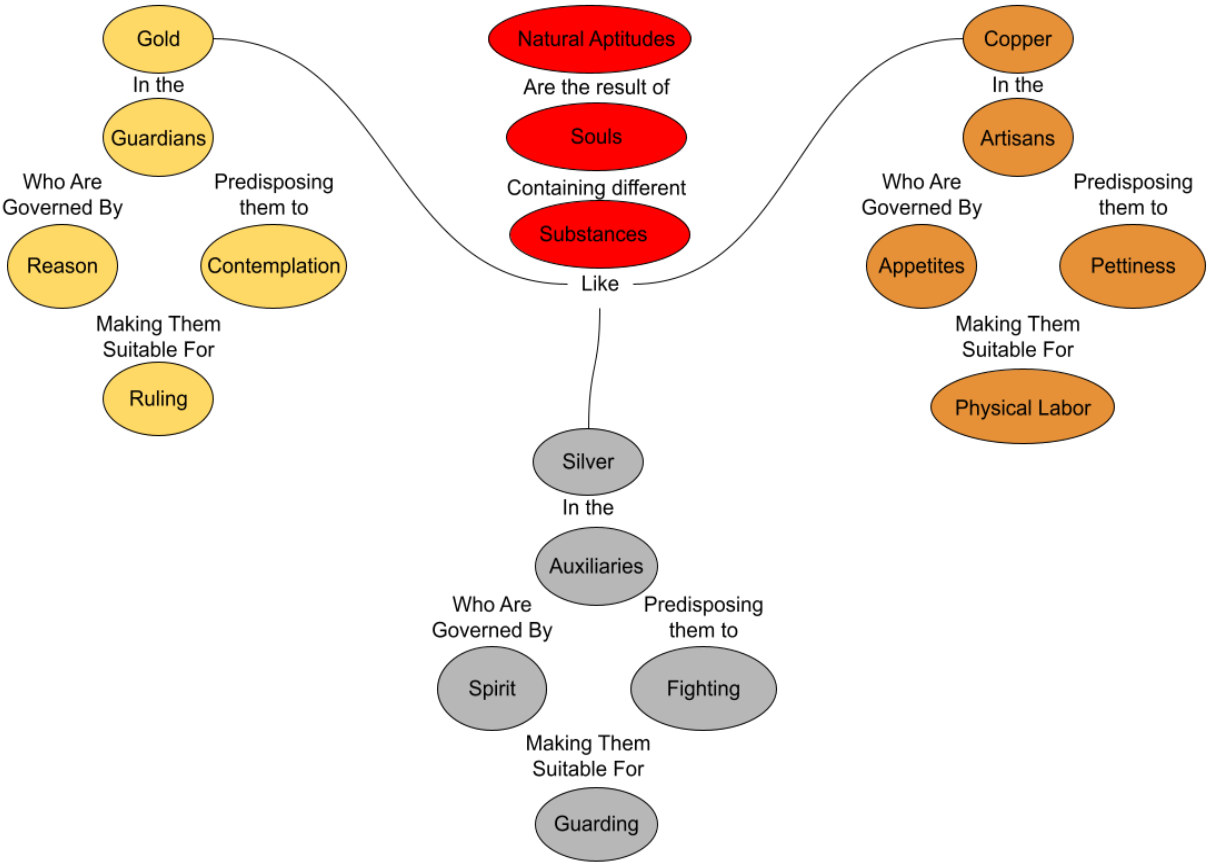

Fig. 3 created by Ellie Alsup

Aristotelian Thought

Chronologically, the next important philosopher in this discussion is Aristotle. It is widely accepted within philosophers that Aristotle is the father of modern metaphysical philosophical thought (Humphreys). While there are many works of Aristotle that contribute extensively to the discussion of otherness and disability, the one that I will specifically focus on is "Politics." There are two quintessential quotes in this writing. Aristotle claims that the "nature of man is political," and that "anyone who either cannot lead the common life or is so self-sufficient as not to need to, and therefore does not partake of society, is either a beast or a god" (Politics). Like Plato, this lends itself to the process of othering people with disabilities. Following Aristotle's logic, a person with neurodivergences such as autism or social anxiety must either be a beast or god, and definitely is not a person because they cannot partake fully in the "common life." Would it be possible to rework these philosophies in a way that is more inclusive, or is it entirely impossible? Are we stuck with the fact that traditional philosophy views disability as something that is othering?

Aristotle began writing his philosophy in direct response to Plato. As a former student of Plato, Aristotle was able to use platonic logic to come to seemingly very different conclusions. As the father of modern metaphysical philosophy, Aristotle had many writings that directly contribute to the way in which we conceptualize disability in philosophy today (Humphreys). However, the most important of these is the *Politics*. Aristotle says that "the nature of man is political," meaning that we all have a need to live

in community (Politics). Humans, according to Aristotle, have an inherent need for a social community; without one, we are not fully human.

So, what does this mean for people that have mental disorders, such as social anxiety, or just have a desire to become reclusive? Are these people not actually human? According to Aristotle, they must not be human at all. For example, even though a person with social anxiety may have a desire to live within a community, their mental illness (depending on the severity) may make it impossible for them to live a "common life." Apparently, this incapability means that they are not human.

Cartesian Reasoning

Perhaps the most famous philosophical quote comes from René Descartes' *Discourse on method and meditations on first philosophy*: "I think, therefore I am" (Descartes 18) On the surface, this quote doesn't seem to be very exclusive of people with disabilities - it simply claims that the only proof of existence is the fact that we can think about our existence. However, it doesn't include the people that are incapable of thinking about their existence, nor does it specify the extent to which a person needs to be able to think about their existence in order to be considered human. He makes the argument that our bodies are mere extensions of our minds, meaning that we can entirely ignore our bodies and focus just on our minds when theorizing about our existence (Hodge). Bodies are just an unfortunate side effect of our existence.

Descartes goes so far as to say that ". . . it is certain that I am really distinct from my body and can exist without it" (Descartes 96). He believes that the body has no real

bearing on our lives or thoughts; we are just minds that are capable of independent thought but need a body for fuel. However, recent neuroscientific studies have found that a theory called "body cognition" actually has some real scientific evidence, meaning that our bodies are in fact necessary for our ability to think (McNerney). But even prior to these studies, philosophers that had already been othered knew that our bodies have a very real impact on the way that we view and theorize about the world (Hodge).

But, Descartes was unaware of these new findings in his time of writing. He wholeheartedly believed that the body just happened to exist and that the mind was the only important thing worthy of existential examination. Of course, even during his lifetime, many people criticized this idea, but never for the right reasons (Hodge). Most of the criticism came from the idea that Descartes was participating too heavily in philosophical skepticism, but failed to be skeptical of the mind's existence. My criticism, however, stems from the fact that Descartes did not have an othered body to contend with; he did not have to think about his body merely because of the privileges it afforded him. Christopher A. Riddle raises a very similar criticism in his book *Disability and Justice: The Capabilities Approach in Practice*: ". . . many of the philosophers working on these problems are not disabled, and perhaps have not encountered a serious disability in their day-to-day lives in any meaningful way. . . . those who are doing the theorizing have not experienced the kinds of injustice people with disabilities have, and consequently, have not been forced to think about it" (1). Descartes had *never* experienced a life of otherness, and it is very likely that he had never even encountered

someone who had. Because of this, once again, disability has been explicitly left out of the conversation.

Post-Enlightenment through Present Day

Tamise Van Pelt writes in her article titled "Otherness" that "As half of a signifying binary, the 'Other' is a term with a rich and lengthy philosophical history dating at least from Plato's Sophist, in which the Stranger participates in a dialogue on the ontological problems of being and non-being, of the One and the Other." The concept of the other has a long history, and it is still in effect today.

In the very beginning of the post-Enlightenment period, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel wrote his master-slave dialectic. He wrote in light of the Haitian revolution about the idea that all of our societal problems stem from the inability to "see [our] own self in the other" (Hegel). Hegel's philosophy captures the idea that our humanity is all about a "pure Notion of recognition," meaning that we have to recognize the other as familiar to ourselves. In his master-slave dialectic, Hegel comes to grips with the idea that the other is equivalent to the self; recognition does not create this fact, but merely allows it to have bearing on our lives and thoughts.

Our modern philosophies surrounding disability and otherness are heavily influenced by Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, and (less so) by thinkers such as Hegel. According to Jackie Leach Scully, "Mainstream moral philosophy [still] tends to treat bodies as barriers to rather than sources of moral insight" (57). Post-Enlightenment thinkers outside of Hegel still "tended to interpret the desire for a universalisable ethics as

meaning that people are most fairly treated as if they were already indistinguishable in their morally relevant features, as if stripped of the traits that make them different, including their bodily traits" (Scully 57). Philosophical treatment of bodies, particularly those that are disabled, has not progressed at all from Plato to modern times.

Who Has A Voice

On top of all this exclusion within mainstream philosophical thought, it's also important to note that not many philosophers (at least those that are recognized as such) have any experience with disability. Philosophers have attempted to narrow in on a definition of morality, ethics, and justice by asking the question "What kinds of values matter?" and have (whether they know it or not) disregarded the question of "Whose values are most important?" (Edwards 30). Mainstream, traditional philosophy has viewed those with disabilities as "beyond the scope" of philosophical thought, and thus, has continued to abuse their concept of otherness (Riddle 1).

Kristjana Kristiansen starts the book *Arguing About Disability: Philosophical Perspectives* by stating that "Irrespective of the value under discussion, the subjective voice of people with impairments should always be given due consideration" (5). She argues that it is time, in modern philosophy, to give authority to voices that we may not have recognized as authoritative in the past. I agree with this statement. In my four years of studying philosophy, the first time I ever read a philosophical statement written by a disabled author (or at least an author that had allowed the public to be aware of her disability) was in my final year as a philosophy major, and it was a book I read outside of my classes. As Dr. Tressie McMillan Cottom wrote in *Thick: and Other Essays*, ". . . not

all of us are presumed by the publics to which we belong to have the right to speak authoritatively" (20). It's time to give authority to those who have been othered by philosophy.

Personal Statement

Disability in philosophy is an incredibly important topic to me for many reasons. First and foremost, I have Generalized Anxiety Disorder and Major Depressive Disorder, as well as a couple (minor) physical disabilities. So, the lack of disabled representation in philosophy is something that hits very close to home.

Tressie McMillan Cottom, PhD. says in her essay "Thick" that "I fix myself, even when it causes great pain to do so, because I know that I cannot fix the way the world sees me" (25). It is easier to fix ourselves, to mask our issues, than it is to ask the world to change. It is easier for me to pretend that mainstream philosophy, for example, already includes bodies and minds like mine than it is to demand that it actually does. Cottom put it best when she said, "And so, I would live broken" (Cottom 13). Until this point, I have allowed myself to live and philosophize as if nothing needed to change, and that simply wasn't the truth. I was living broken.

I know from my own experience as a philosopher and as a human being that my body does, in fact, impact the way that I view and conceptualize the world. My reality has to contend with the fact that my knees bend inwards rather than forward, that my back is curved, and that my mind processes things differently than others. When philosophers such as Descartes claim that the body is "an extended non-thinking thing" that I can separate myself from, I realize just how much I do not fit into the mainstream philosophical thought (Sixth Meditation). I cannot separate my thought from my physical existence because my thought has *entirely* been shaped by my body's interactions with the world.

This thesis is my way of forcing my narrative into mainstream philosophy. My bodily and mental experiences can no longer be ignored without reason. I am here; I exist in the same capacity as every other philosopher. My voice, along with the voices of 15% of the world, deserves to be heard and recognized as a philosophical voice.

Argumentation

Disability deserves a place within the canon of philosophical thought. First and foremost, disabled philosophers deserve the opportunity to read philosophy that is written for them (and perhaps, by them). It is incredibly necessary that every individual be recognized as equally human, of equal importance. Secondly, as Aristotle points out in the *Politics*, ". . . mankind have a natural desire to leave behind them an image of themselves." We have a need to let the future know what our world is currently like; why should this image exclude such a large portion of our population?

Neutrality Is Not Actually Neutral

In *Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy*, Descartes sets up a philosophy full of body neutrality. This includes a lack of specification of gender, ability, size, etc. On the surface, this supposed neutrality -- a body neutrality that is not outwardly stated -- may seem alright; anyone can project onto the narrator. However, I am in agreement with Joanna Hodge when she states that "This neutrality . . . is available only to those who are not marked as deviant with respect to a socially, culturally constituted standard of normality" (165-166). This neutrality only works if you are inhabiting a body that is already perceived by society as neutral. This issue doesn't start or end with Descartes; every major, canonical philosopher is guilty of it. By making philosophical thought seem broad and generalizable, philosophers are actually doing the exact opposite. "Broad and generalizable" philosophy only serves those who are within the norms of society.

Descartes further digs himself into the hole of supposed body neutrality by claiming that "the body can be safely ignored, having been shown to be subject to the discipline of reason, and not subversive of it" (Hodge 163). Obviously, this is just factually untrue given that the current research into "embodied cognition" proves the idea that "the organic reality of the body and its processes are important to abstract thinking, and hence that different embodiments may have subtle effects on higher order cognition" (Scully 60). However, the idea still has an impact, regardless of the validity.

John Rawls, the creator of the theory of the Veil of Ignorance and the Original Position, is guilty of using supposed neutrality as well -- along with many other modern philosophers (Rawls). Oversimplification of the narrator of any theory is supposed body neutrality. In the Veil of Ignorance, John Rawls explicitly uses supposed neutrality (with good intentions, of course). The problem with this is two-fold: 1. disabled readers that have become accustomed to reading philosophy not written for them may have a difficult time projecting themselves onto the narrator, and 2. Non-disabled readers are not expected or forced to explicitly think about bodies or minds that do not align with their own. Again, the supposed neutrality may not seem harmful at first glance, but in actuality, it is explicitly excluding those that have already been othered, or viewed as not neutral, by the society around them.

Why Representation Matters

In *Arguing About Disability: Philosophical Perspectives*, the authors reach the consensus that "someone is a person in practice only if other people recognize her or him as such, and act accordingly (namely, with respect, love and/or contributive valuing)"

(Kristiansen et al 6). Furthermore, they argue that "People need to be recognised as significant, individual subjects with their own characteristics, preferences and so on, in order to be persons both socially and psychologically. If one is overlooked by others as a person, one's psychological development and sense of personhood are compromised as well" (Kristiansen et al 6). But how do we get an entire society to recognize the personhood of a marginalized group?

Including disability and disabled people in philosophical discussions and literature is the first step. Inclusion in philosophy entails a legitimization of ideas, perspectives, and thoughts; therefore, including disability in philosophy is an expression of the value of disabled experiences. Dr. Tressie McMillan Cottom states in her book *Thick: and Other Essays* that marginalized groups (specifically women of color) have historically written "personal essays because as far as authoritative voices go, the self was the only subject men and white people would cede to us" (22-23). Consequently, because these essays have consistently been viewed as less serious or formal than others, no real authority has ever been recognized in a marginalized group (Grosfield). The exclusion of certain experiences or viewpoints (particularly those of disabled people) further exacerbates this delegitimization of ideas and thoughts.

Moreover, representation within literature and academia has many far-reaching impacts. First, and most importantly, when a person reads a work written by someone that has a similar experience in life (i.e., using a wheelchair or hearing aids or experiencing a mental disorder), they are more likely to be able to see themselves in that role (Lawson). This means that the more we introduce disabled philosophers and

philosophy about disability to students, the more likely it is that disabled people will continue to engage in philosophy.

Second, representation within philosophy matters because it forces non-disabled participants to engage with a perspective other than their own, which has the potential to change the way that non-disabled people view disabled communities. Engaging in a person's thoughts allows you to see their internal life. If non-disabled people engage in the internal life of many disabled philosophers, then they are more likely to begin to fully recognize their disabled peers as equal in their humanness.

Furthermore, it seems to me that philosophy as a whole has been stuck in the idea of body-mind dualism. We've been circling that idea for the last 2,000 years; it's time for us to move forward. We know now that the body *does* have a significant impact on our minds, that "mental life is a product of the complex interaction between body and its setting" (Kristiansen et al 5). To claim otherwise is to ignore the empirical evidence that indicates our body has a lot more to do with our thoughts than the Ancient Greeks could have imagined.

How Disability Studies Impacts Philosophy

The inclusion of disability in philosophy is not only important for disabled philosophers, it's also important for philosophy as a whole. If philosophical thinking does not move forward with the empirical facts, then there is no reason to participate in that thinking. I believe that one of the key ways to move philosophy forward is the inclusion of disability. This is important because, as emphasized in *Arguing About Disability,* "different social positions provide distinct epistemic perspectives [. . .], sometimes even

an epistemic advantage in perceiving injustices within a situation" (Scully 59). In other words, different bodies bring different social perspectives due to different worldly experiences; therefore, philosophical thought and literature can only benefit by becoming more inclusive.

Additionally, philosophy has already dealt with topics that disability studies are related to in some way. For example, when discussing morality and ethics, we are really discussing human behaviors and which ones are correct. As Scully says, "moral philosophy and ethics are always concerned with bodies because morality is about behaviour, and behaviour involves bodies" (57). We cannot continue to separate behavior, morality, or ethics from physical actions and experiences. To do so is to limit ourselves in a way that not only detracts from the importance of philosophy, but also detracts from our ability to find any real philosophical answers.

Finally, Aristotle makes the argument that "all men cling to justice of some kind, but their conceptions are imperfect and they do not express the whole idea." He is saying that individual people have no chance of creating a full realization of justice; however, the more people and perspectives present in a conversation, the more likely it is for justice to be realized. Even though Aristotle seems to be fairly ableist in the *Politics* (and in general), this argument does lend itself to the inclusion of disability studies within philosophy. Why would philosophers choose to not broaden our available perspectives and ideas?

Naysayer

Representation Creates Stigmas

In *Disability and Justice: The Capabilities Approach in Practice,* Christopher Riddle begins to question whether representation really helps: “First, when does treating people differently emphasize difference, and result in stigmatization” (Riddle and Bickenbach 61)? How can we guarantee that representation within philosophical literature will not further the stigmatization of people with disabilities?

Some would argue that we can’t. Representing disability within philosophy inherently runs the risk of furthering existent stigmas, as well as potentially creating more. Stereotypes are harmful as it is, and they have the potential to become even more harmful because of representation within philosophical literature. Erin Hawley, a disabled writer, put it best when she said that bad representation can lead to “misconceptions and everyday ableism, which can eventually influence policy and human rights. It actively harms one’s psyche and sense of self-worth” (Hawley).

In addition to this, it could be harmful to create more groups and classifications within philosophical literature. Proponents of this argument would argue that the supposed neutrality approach is the most beneficial. Sure, it may have its issues, but at least it doesn’t “demand [a] unity of voices and the united experience of being oppressed” from people who may otherwise have no similarities, which then, consequently, “undermine[s] individual empowerment” by allowing people to be seen as “caricatures of the group they are expected to represent” (Kristiansen et al 7). Supposed neutrality allows

people to project their *individual* selves onto a philosophy, rather than forcing a *collective* self.

I wholeheartedly disagree with everything that was just said. For starters, I believe that it's also important to ask the question: "when does treating people similarly result in insensitivity to difference, and stigmatize and hinder them on that basis" (Riddle and Bickenbach 61)? In modern times, we know that our individual (*and* collective) differences are important to recognize and acknowledge for many reasons, including -- but not limited to -- differences in perspective (O'Boyle). Ignoring these differences can *only* lead to more harm, whereas recognizing them can lead to *both* positive and negative consequences.

Additionally, I am not making an argument for collectivizing the experiences of disability. It is my belief that to do so would do more harm than good. However, I am arguing that it is important for disabled voices, stories, and perspectives to be heard in philosophical discourse. For thousands of years, we have used non-disabled voices and perspectives in philosophical discussion without the idea that they might be creating "caricatures" of themselves; why do we only raise this issue when discussing marginalized and oppressed groups (Kristiansen et al 7)? Why is it that when an oppressed group decides to add their voices to the conversation, we are suddenly worried about the negative effects of grouping, generalization, and storytelling? Stories have been used in philosophy by and for white men since the beginning of philosophical thought (Socrates' and Plato's use of myths, for example), and continues to be used today (i.e., Rawls' idea of the Veil of Ignorance). When the storytelling is done by a body that is

perceived as neutral, and not a minority, philosophers (and society as a whole) have no problem accepting that story. We must extend this courtesy to minority bodies as well.

Coupled with this is the idea that marginalized groups have the ability to project their individual selves onto a supposedly neutral narrative. This just isn't the case. As stated in my original argumentation, supposed neutrality only works if your existence is already neutral. Because the disabled existence is so out of the norm in philosophical arenas, disabled bodies cannot be neutral. Therefore, the supposed neutrality does not allow disabled people to project themselves into the narrative.

Representation versus Real Pain

Regardless of whether or not representation creates more or less stigma, it still can be argued that it really doesn't matter in the long run. People experiencing disabilities, arguably, have a lot more important things to consider than whether or not philosophers think about the concept of disability enough. In the words of Simo Vehmas and Pekka Mäkelä, "Millions of competing texts, discourses and representations are not much of a comfort for people who are in pain" (53). Representing people with disabilities within philosophy does nothing to actually help them.

People with this belief would argue that shifting the focus of disability studies to philosophical representation is counterintuitive, reckless, and potentially harmful. There are many more pressing issues that desperately need attention. For example, within current public policy, there is a push to extend the length of the Social Security "Trial Work Period" for workers with disabilities, ban the subminimum wage for disabled employees, train police officers on how to interact with people with disabilities, and

much more (Pulrang). Philosophical representation shouldn't even be on the same list as these priorities.

To this obvious false dichotomy, I say: why not? Why shouldn't representation be on the same list? In fact, many disabled people do put representation on the same list of priorities as these other issues (Pulrang). It is my belief that focusing on one issue does not detract from others. In fact, in the case of philosophical representation, it could help in solving the others. For example, the Americans with Disabilities Act actually started as a philosophical movement which gained enough momentum to become policy. Philosophy has real world impacts, particularly in the realm of policymaking; therefore, representation is just as important as other issues within the disability community. Philosophical thought is a known influence on politics and policies. If we were to recognize the authority of disabled voices and stories within philosophy, politics may follow suit. Christopher Riddle points out that philosophical thought is "designed to inform our social policy;" therefore, the inclusion of disability in philosophical discourse will inevitably lead to the inclusion of disability in politics and policy. I would go so far as to say that representation in philosophy can actually eventually lead to solutions for the other issues.

Conclusion

It is my opinion that while philosophy does discuss and explore disability, it is not to the extent that it could or should. Philosophy is supposed to be a thought exploration of the world around us; therefore, it must include disability more extensively. I believe that philosophical discourse would entirely benefit from the added inclusion of disabled voices and perspectives. In addition, I believe it would be beneficial to philosophy scholars and students to hear disabled thoughts because it would expand the current thinking, and would allow more people to be engaged. The authors of *Arguing About Disability: Philosophical Perspectives* argue that "We are free to do something only if we are able to do it" (Kristiansen et al 6). I would like to add that we are free to do something not only if we are able to do it, but also if we are aware of that ability.

Dr. Tressie McMillan Cottom says in her essay titled "Thick" that all of us "are people, with free will, circumscribed to different degrees by histories that shape who we are allowed to become" (26). The history of philosophy has made it clear whose voice matters in discourse. It is well past time to reassess these valuations and add the unheard voices. Disabled voices, perspectives, and thoughts matter just as much as non-disabled. Steven Smith argues that we should entirely rid ourselves of hierarchical judgements of voices, stating that "Once we cease to judge ourselves by society's narrow standards we can cease to judge everything and everyone by those same limitations . . ." (22).

Including disabled people and stories in the canonical philosophy not only allows us to move past our history as philosophers (and to move forward in our thinking), but it also allows philosophy to more wholly conceptualize the meaning of life, justice, morals,

and ethics. These are the things that seem to be most important to philosophy; therefore, we cannot continue to limit ourselves to such a narrow view. We must continue expanding.

Books by Disabled Philosophers

As an addendum to my thesis, I would like to include a non-comprehensive list of philosophical works written or compiled by disabled authors. These writings are not all that exists, but they are important.

- The Faces of Intellectual Disability: Philosophical Reflections by Licia Carlson
    - ISBN: 9780253221575

  "In a challenge to current thinking about cognitive impairment, this book explores what it means to treat people with intellectual disabilities in an ethical manner. Reassessing philosophical views of intellectual disability, Licia Carlson shows how we can affirm the dignity and worth of intellectually disabled people first by ending comparisons to nonhuman animals and then by confronting our fears and discomforts. Carlson presents the complex history of ideas about cognitive disability, the treatment of intellectually disabled people, and social and cultural reactions to them. Sensitive and clearly argued, this book offers new insights on recent trends in disability studies and philosophy."
- The Rejected Body: Feminist Philosophical Reflections on Disability by Susan Wendell
    - ISBN: 9780415910477

  "The Rejected Body argues that feminist theorizing has been skewed toward non-disabled experience, and that the knowledge of people with disabilities must be integrated into feminist ethics, discussions of bodily life, and criticism of the cognitive and social authority of medicine. Among the topics it addresses are who

should be identified as disabled; whether disability is biomedical, social or both; what causes disability and what could 'cure' it; and whether scientific efforts to eliminate disabling physical conditions are morally justified. Wendell provides a remarkable look at how cultural attitudes towards the body contribute to the stigma of disability and to widespread unwillingness to accept and provide for the body's inevitable weakness."

- The Minority Body: A Theory of Disability (Studies in Feminist Philosophy) by Elizabeth Barnes
    - ISBN: 9780198732587

  "Elizabeth Barnes argues compellingly that disability is primarily a social phenomenon--a way of being a minority, a way of facing social oppression, but not a way of being inherently or intrinsically worse off. This is how disability is understood in the Disability Rights and Disability Pride movements; but there is a massive disconnect with the way disability is typically viewed within analytic philosophy. The idea that disability is not inherently bad or sub-optimal is one that many philosophers treat with open skepticism, and sometimes even with scorn. The goal of this book is to articulate and defend a version of the view of disability that is common in the Disability Rights movement. Elizabeth Barnes argues that to be physically disabled is not to have a defective body, but simply to have a minority body."
- Disability Theory (Corporealities: Discourses Of Disability) by Tobin Anthony Siebers

- ISBN: 9780472050390

"Intelligent, provocative, and challenging, Disability Theory revolutionizes the terrain of theory by providing indisputable evidence of the value and utility that a disability studies perspective can bring to key critical and cultural questions. Tobin Siebers persuasively argues that disability studies transfigures basic assumptions about identity, ideology, language, politics, social oppression, and the body. At the same time, he advances the emerging field of disability studies by putting its core issues into contact with signal thinkers in cultural studies, literary theory, queer theory, gender studies, and critical race theory."

- Foucault and Feminist Philosophy of Disability by Shelley L. Tremain
  - ISBN: 9780472073733

"Foucault and Feminist Philosophy of Disability is a distinctive contribution to growing discussions about how power operates within the academic field of philosophy. By combining the work of Michel Foucault, the insights of philosophy of disability and feminist philosophy, and data derived from empirical research, Shelley L. Tremain compellingly argues that the conception of disability that currently predominates in the discipline of philosophy, according to which disability is a natural disadvantage or personal misfortune, is inextricably intertwined with the underrepresentation of disabled philosophers in the profession of philosophy. Against the understanding of disability that prevails in subfields of philosophy such as bioethics, cognitive science, ethics, and political philosophy, Tremain elaborates a new conception of disability as a historically

specific and culturally relative apparatus of power. Although the book zeros in on the demographics of and biases embedded in academic philosophy, it will be invaluable to everyone who is concerned about the social, economic, institutional, and political subordination of disabled people."

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