

# DISABILITY AT THE LIMITS OF PHENOMENOLOGY

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Disability is a problem for phenomenology. I write this not to declare that disability is inherently problematic. It is not. Rather, disability is problematic for phenomenology because it challenges some of the core beliefs that many phenomenologists hold dear. I suggest that phenomenological traditions have a lot to learn from the discipline of disability studies—a discipline rooted in human experience, too often ignored by a theoretical enterprise that purports to explore human experience rigorously. My claim here is that by reflecting on the case of disability, phenomenologists can take stock of their tools. We might ask: if our tools cannot deal with the problem of disability, *what good are they?*

In what follows, I define *disability* in two ways. Neither can be taken in isolation; I ask that they be read holistically. Nor are they unprecedented; I write them alongside much of mainstream disability studies scholarship.

## I. INDIVIDUAL AND FUNCTIONAL

I argue that disability is a form of functional limitation. This reading is in contrast to those who would establish a strong ontological divide between disability and impairment. Functional limitation *emerges* in the entanglements of bodily function and the surrounding world. For example, I have muscular dystrophy. My function is restricted both by my body (I cannot run, and soon will be unable to walk), but also by my surroundings (the walk to my university office, and the atrocious snow clearing in the city in which I live). I write “function” to suggest both functions in a public sense, my ability to enter a wedding venue, and individual restrictions at the bodily level. Disability is thus proximate to “sickness,” but not reduced to it. “Proximate” can mean the relation of a form of limitation caused by sickness, or it can mean having to account for one’s sickness and one’s disability through the same insurance policy. Both forms of proximity are central to disability.

## II. SOCIAL AND COLLECTIVE

Disability categories shift in time and space. What counts as a disability today, and previously has counted as one, are distinct. Who does—and who does not—claim disability identity is culturally and historically variable as well. There is a historical and individual component to disability categories, and they suggest lives that are deemed valuable and lives that are not. Changing categories shift the material lives of those so classified. Disability—not just disability categories, but *disability*—is collectively defined, historically contingent, institutionally distributed, and, in a descriptive sense, *moral*. In line with most of its adherents, I see disability studies as having two primary tasks:

1. Exploring the cultural distribution of ability and disability, and affirming the lives of disabled persons.
2. Challenging notions of disability that reduce it to bio-economic loss.

In what follows, I examine the Husserlian, Merleau-Pontian, and Heideggerian phenomenological traditions. Disability challenges the epistemological framework flowing through Husserlian phenomenology. Do we all share the same mental framework that makes up the transcendental ego? Need we, to count as human? Disability challenges, too, ideas of bodily capability that flow through Merleau-Pontian phenomenology. Do we all, as humans, share the same embodied experience of the world? Can disability be anything other than the breakdown of the corporeal schema? Finally—to complete my threefold list of white, male phenomenological traditions—disability challenges the Heideggerian tradition. Here, I mean its outright contempt for public life, its disregard for the material world outside of the meaningful structures of *Dasein*, and its atomistic neglect of how meaning is made and disclosed in concert with others.

While each of these challenges asks us to question the benefits of these three traditions, I do not think they are insurmountable. Husserlian phenomenology permits us to consider how cognition is enacted *between* multiple agents. It needn't be reduced to an atomistic rationalism that would exclude those who do not match a single form of consciousness and bodily development (Martiny 2015). Merleau-Pontian phenomenology can also be used to show the shared, bodily in-dwelling that bridges the divide between bodies deemed “abled” and “disabled,” and those shifting in-between (Reynolds 2017). Finally, as I have argued in a short book, Heideggerian phenomenology can be used to explore the space of collective meaning upstream from the spaces of subjectivity (Abrams 2016). This means attending to the institutional world before the meaning I establish within it. Heidegger's ontological project allows us to look at the meaning we establish together, before individual subjects are established as abled, disabled, or anything else, in the clinical routine or routine life. Heidegger gives us a model that lets us think about disability in non-atomistic ways. In each of these cases, phenomenology is improved when we examine it through the lens of disability politics. This demands we address economic issues, on which phenomenology has largely been silent. It means thinking about how we live and die *together*, not only alone

like Heidegger's carpenter. It means thinking about the ways institutions accord and deny human worth, rather than simply addressing how we experience such subjection.

This is not an "ableist apologia" for phenomenology (Dolmage 2017, 35). Like others before me (Titchkosky 2000), I cringe every time I read Iris Marion Young claiming that "women in sexist society are physically handicapped" in her otherwise excellent paper (1980, 152). I cringe, again, when I see disability reduced to bodily breakdown, as it often happens in the medical humanities literature. Disability is more than the occurrent hammer that breaks, as described in Heidegger's *Being and Time* (1996). And, as a disabled person reading Heidegger, I will always have the horrors of the Holocaust in my mind as I think and rethink phenomenology through the hard case of disability. We need not an apology, then, but rather a demand for affirmation. This means affirming the lives of disabled people through phenomenological frameworks. It means orienting phenomenology towards the oppression of marginalized people the world over. And it means admitting to the horrible politics phenomenologists have been party to.

The biggest limit that phenomenology must address, if it is to sufficiently explore disability, is to account for the structures of capitalism. Here I am not suggesting disability can be *reduced* to economic structures, as Michael Oliver (1990) did in his most-cited book. I am arguing that if we are going to address the relational mode through which disability emerges, involving both bodies and things, we need to explore the commodity form, through which almost everything in the world around us relates. Disability is not just related *to* commodities, as in the prohibitive cost of power wheelchairs, but through it. Put bluntly: exchange value in this world determines who lives and who dies. Health care decision-making, administration of disability in the workplace, gendered and racialized care work, classroom accommodations, benefits provided, and insurance denied to persons fighting for a diagnosis—the list goes on, and on—each of these have capital and disability in common. Each of these issues are of prime concern to disability studies. Are they of prime concern to phenomenology?

The point, then, is this. If we are going to explore disability meaningfully, we need to be able to account for the economic mediators that make disability experience what it is. We can read dusty tomes, written by long-dead phenomenologists, and debate the nature of embodiment, the epistemological structures that make up the life-world, or the practical notion of care through which we engage the world. Fine. But we also must be able to account for human experience situated in the world of capital, and the inequalities emerging therein. In doing disability studies, in affirming the lives of disabled people, we are pursuing the project that Sara Ahmed put to work in *Queer Phenomenology* (2006): using our lives as situated agents *in this world* to re-orient the phenomenological tradition. My modest addition: this is only possible if phenomenological tools can be re-oriented at all. And if they can't be, *what good are they?*

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