

DISABLING PHILOSOPHY

Data compiled by the U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy indicates that the disparity between the labor-participation rates of employable disabled people and employable nondisabled people across all sectors of American society is abysmal: 21% for disabled people compared to 69% for nondisabled people. More specific figures for the disparity between disabled and nondisabled people employed as full-time faculty in academia are even worse, with philosophy boasting the greatest disparity in this regard of all disciplines in the humanities and social sciences, comparable only to the STEM fields. For although disabled people comprise an estimated 20-25% of the North American population, surveys conducted in 2012 and 2013 by the Pacific Division of the American Philosophical Association (APA) suggest that they comprise less than 4% of full-time faculty in philosophy departments in the U.S. and, according to a 2013 survey conducted by the Equity Committee of the Canadian Philosophical Association (CPA), they comprise less than 1% of full-time faculty in philosophy departments in Canada. In other words, nondisabled people comprise an estimated 96-99% of full-time faculty in North American philosophy departments. These figures are shocking, constituting almost complete exclusion of disabled people from professional philosophy.

Why is there such a striking disparity between the percentage of disabled people in the general population and the percentage of disabled people in professional philosophy? Why is there virtually no disabled people employed full-time in North American philosophy departments? Are there no disabled philosophers? Is there some characteristic, trait, or sensibility that all disabled people intrinsically possess that makes them especially averse to philosophical inquiry? Are disabled people, as a social group, somehow better-suited to other areas of the humanities or not suited for academia at all?

Rather than attribute the grievous demographics of professional philosophy to some feature or characteristic inherent to disabled people, that is, to some individual or collective deficiency, defect, or flaw intrinsic to disabled people themselves (a standard response when ableism in any sphere or facet of culture and society is pointed out), we should turn the critical gaze back onto professional philosophy itself in order to discern both the best explanation for why there are so few disabled people in its ranks and the best answer to the question of what should be done to rectify this unacceptable state of affairs. For surely we philosophers agree that there should be a concerted profession-wide response to the current situation, that is, we can surely agree that something pro-active must be done about the egregious under-representation of disabled people in philosophy. Or can "we"?

I asked myself that self-same question again recently when I read esteemed feminist philosopher Ann Cudd's featured post on the Pea Soup blog in which Cudd (1) articulated prevalent misconceptions about disabled people by (among other things) equating "permanently disabled" with permanently unemployable, wholly incapacitated, and necessarily dependent; and objectified and essentialized disabled people by referring to us as "*the disabled*." Given that these and other uninformed views and implicit biases about disabled people underlie the philosophical perspectives that many philosophers hold (after all, Cudd's remarks are responses to and participate in a prominent discourse of political philosophy and ethics), it is no wonder that "permanently disabled" people are not regarded as viable colleagues in the profession, nor

considered worthy of the role of “professional philosopher.” Similar, and even more harmful, misconceptions about disabled people can be identified in cognitive science, bioethics, and other sub-disciplines. In fact, much of the very subject matter of philosophy runs counter to efforts to increase the representation of disabled people in the profession.

In October 2013, I published an article entitled “Introducing Feminist Philosophy of Disability” in a special issue of *Disability Studies Quarterly (DSQ)* whose theme is *Improving Feminist Philosophy and Theory by Taking Account of Disability*. Given its role as an introduction to the special issue, the article is designed to provide a context within which readers of the journal unfamiliar with the demographics of philosophy can situate the contributions to the issue; hence, the introduction identifies noteworthy institutional, structural, discursive, and material factors that contribute to the hostile environment that disabled philosophers confront and delegitimize research and teaching in philosophy of disability. I was concerned to show how some of the central institutions and venues of the discipline and profession of philosophy – including the APA and the New APPS and Leiter Reports blogs – were (each in its own ways) biased against disabled people and treat them unequally, as well as show how other influential elements of the field – such as PhilJobs and PhilPapers – diminish the importance of philosophy of disability, disqualifying it from the realm of what counts as philosophy. The article spells out how the APA (its website, conferences, committee structure, and so on) has systematically failed to represent disabled philosophers equally; how the architecture of PhilJobs and PhilPapers implicitly and structurally precludes critical work on disability; how feminist philosophers reproduce ableism in their work; and how the ableist language and other discursive practices of numerous philosophy blogs variously demean disabled people and contribute to the exclusion of disabled philosophers.

In the six months since I published the *DSQ* article, little in philosophy has changed: The APA has taken no noticeable measures to include vital information missing from its website, nor has it redesigned the inaccessible website itself, nor has it acted in any significant way upon any of the other criticisms or recommendations that I make in the article; the conceptual and organizational frameworks of PhilPapers and PhilJobs have not been modified, but rather continue to respectively marginalize and obscure research and teaching in the area of philosophy of disability, for the most part classifying work on disability in medical terms and ignoring its political character; some philosophy blogs continue to generate discursive practices that degrade disabled people and discount disabled philosophers and philosophy of disability; and most mainstream feminist philosophers continue to conceptualize and write about feminism and diversity in terms that limit their scope to gender alone, or to gender, race, and sexuality, or to gender, race, and class, producing “intersectional” analyses that essentially boil down to considerations of (binary) gender to which race and sexuality or race and class are rather haphazardly added and in whose terms disability is nowhere to be found. Notably, the New APPS blog altered the practices for which I criticized it in the article, with John Protevi at New APPS blogging about my *DSQ* article and the entire issue and emphasizing their importance for the field, as well as posting links to the article and table of contents for the issue.

The intransigence of the aforementioned formally and informally institutionalized dimensions of the discipline and profession notwithstanding, there does, nevertheless, seem (or so I would like to think) to be an upsurge of recognition amongst some philosophers that

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disabled people are under-represented in, and have been systematically excluded from, the profession of philosophy; that philosophical claims, arguments, and positions are thoroughly embedded in a complicated matrix of ableist, racist, sexist, heterosexist, and classist force relations; and that the uncritical reproduction of these relations of power within philosophy constitutes a host of injustices that must be eliminated.

Useful links:

<http://dsq-sds.org/article/view/3877/3402>

<http://dsq-sds.org/issue/view/108>

<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/disability/>