

JOEL MICHAEL REYNOLDS

## MERLEAU-PONTY, WORLD-CREATING BLINDNESS, AND THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF NON-NORMATE BODIES

Limiting a field to those who live similar lives diminishes its truth and usefulness, yielding at best partial truths, at worst distortions of central concepts.

Eva Kittay<sup>1</sup>

There is no hierarchy of orders or layers or planes...there is dimensionality of every fact (*dimensionnalité de tout fait*) and facticity of every dimension (*facticité de toute dimension*) — This in virtue of the “ontological difference”.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty<sup>2</sup>

At the mythic origins of the Western philosophical canon, awaiting the peristalsis of hemlock that would consummate his juried execution, Socrates asks, “Is life worth living with a body that is corrupted and in a bad condition (*mochtherou kai diephtharmenou somatos*)?”<sup>3</sup> “In no way (*oudamōs*),” replies Crito.<sup>4</sup> This corrupted, bad body has historically been correlated to what we, for only the last two centuries, term ‘disability’ in English.<sup>5</sup> With just a single word, Crito affirms Socrates’s uncritical treatment of a vast and nebulous range of corporeal differences as if they constituted a monolith, as if a uniform corporeal set fashioning lives in lockstep. And that form is further rendered negative. It is assumed that bodies are capable of lack and ruination and that certain lacks and ruins lessen a body’s worth and the forms of life it might afford.<sup>6</sup> Socrates’s error lies in preemptively grouping, judging, and foreclosing a multiplicity of embodied experiences.

Merleau-Ponty, in his early critiques of objectivism and intellectualism and across his oeuvre, consistently pushes against reductions of the body that fail to attend to the multiplicity of its always meaningful relations. Every bodily configuration is more than a compilation of anatomical and physical structures. The body is always a unit of meaning, an active producer of sense in contexts. As he put it in 1942, “the notion of a living body (*corps vivant*) could not be grasped without the unity of signification, which distinguishes a gesture from a sum of movements.”<sup>7</sup> However, that unity of signification, that non-reducible holism of sense (*sens*), depends upon how one’s singular body is lived. For the body, as Beauvoir lithely puts it, is “our situation...our grasp on the world

and the outline for our projects.”<sup>8</sup> Yet, our situations, grasps, and projects are all shaped by the facility or resistance our social context affords. And there is an argument to be made that the vast majority of contexts across history have been actively resistant, if not hostile, to most disabled bodies.

Historically, inside philosophy, inside thinking that takes itself to be philosophical, certain bodies have been (and still are) considered to render life less worth living or not worth living at all. The refrain “I’d rather be dead than disabled,” a refrain heard by people with disabilities and their families and allies all too often, has deep philosophic roots. These roots attest to the long-standing privileging of the able-body in philosophy—a privilege that has resulted in a historic marginalization of disability despite its fundamental role in human existence. But I would argue, as do an increasing number of scholars at the intersection of feminist philosophy, philosophy of disability, and critical disability studies, that such roots are giving way.

These scholars often turn to Merleau-Ponty, as I do here, to develop phenomenologies of disability or of the “non-normate” body.<sup>9</sup> Such studies buck the historical tendency of philosophers to merely employ disability as an example of deficiency or harm, a litmus test for normative theories, or an umbrella term for non-standard, non-normate bodily variation. By “normate,” I mean the exemplar or ideal figure of ableism: that form of life constituted by and assured through its participation in normality. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, who coined the term, defines it as “the veiled subject position of the cultural self, the figure outlined by the array of deviant others whose marked bodies shore up the normate’s boundaries. The term *normate* usefully designates the social figure through which people can represent themselves as definitive human beings.”<sup>10</sup> The pair “normate/non-normate” thus better picks out the range and lived contexts of meanings captured by that of “ability/disability.” By fusing norms, values, and desires, the concept of the normate brings into relief the way in which categorization by ability is irreducibly social. Powers and histories are always at play in the constitution of any given ability or disability.

But what precisely does it mean to undertake phenomenological investigations of non-normate experiences? And what relationship does such inquiry have to phenomenology as well as to philosophy as a whole? In “Philosophy and Non-Philosophy since Hegel,” Merleau-Ponty defines “non-philosophy” as a philosophy that does not split consciousness from nature, being from beings, body from mind, or subject from object—a philosophy so distinct from its canonical history that a “non-” or “a-” must prefix it.<sup>11</sup> The guiding concern of this paper is the relation of disability to philosophy and non-philosophy: the relation of the *sens*, the meaning and direction, of philosophy as judged and informed by the lived experiences of non-normate bodies.<sup>12</sup>

I first argue that the problematic treatment or omission of disability within the history of philosophy and the phenomenological tradition in particular is due to the inheritance of what I call “the ableist conflation” of disability

with pain, suffering, and disadvantage. While a Merleau-Pontian-inspired phenomenology marks a promising starting point for thinking about embodied experience both normate and non-normate, I here draw a cautionary tale about how ableist assumptions, implicit or explicit, can easily undermine accounts of non-normate experience. I show that Merleau-Ponty's famous reading of the blind man's cane is problematic insofar as it omits the social dimensions of disabled experiences, misconstrues the radicality of blindness as a worldcreating disability, and operates via an able-bodied simulation that conflates object annexation or extension with incorporation. I then argue that if phenomenology is to become non-philosophy, as Merleau-Ponty once hoped, it must heed the insights of "crip" or non-normate phenomenology, which takes experiences of disability as its points of departure.

### *The Ableist Conflation*

Across the history of philosophy, disability has been understood before all else as a lack or privation. For example, Aristotle writes,

Blindness (*tuphlotēs*) is a privation (*steresis*), but one is not blind at any and every age, but only if one has not sight at the age at which one would naturally have it. Similarly a thing suffers privation when it has not an attribute in those circumstances, or in that respect and in that relation and in that sense, in which it would naturally have it.—The violent taking away (*biaia aphaeresis*) of anything is called privation.<sup>13</sup>

Agreeing with Aristotle, Kant claims, "infirmity (*Schwäche*) of the mind is just such a crippled state of mind, as infirmity of the body is a crippled state for the body. Infirmities are not hindrances of the powers of mind, but a lack."<sup>14</sup> Take as a final example Mill's famous, if not infamous, judgment about happiness and satisfaction: "better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied."<sup>15</sup> One meaning of 'fool,' in late nineteenth-century English, is what would today be considered a type of intellectual disability. In that light, Mill's claim could be read as a variation of Socrates's rhetorical question.<sup>16</sup> On a utilitarian calculus, a deficit or malformation of intelligence—even if it results in happiness—is qualitatively *worse* than not having that lack.

Be it in the works of Aristotle, Kant, or Mill, conceptualizations of disability across the history of philosophy are underwritten by what I call *the ableist conflation*.<sup>17</sup> The ableist conflation consists, at minimum, of the following claims:

- {1} Disability is a lack or deprivation.
- {2} Deprivation of potential goods is a harm.<sup>18</sup>
- {3} Harm causes or is a form of pain and suffering.
- {4} Given 1-3, disability is coextensive with (weak version) or causes (strong version), pain and suffering.

To be clear, I am not defending any of these claims or the many assumptions behind their operative terms; I am contending that claims of this sort are often linked together to support the ableist conflation of disability with pain, suffering, and disadvantage. But there is an enormous body of research across disability studies that demonstrates the ableist conflation to be misguided, if not flatly false, in a plethora of cases of disabled experience.<sup>19</sup> Despite its empirical and reflective dubiousness, the ableist conflation, taken in this wide sense of picking out the contours of a habit of thought, has served as a bedrock for philosophical inquiry about disability. For philosophy to combat ableism, this bedrock must be destroyed.

### *Merleau-Ponty's Cane*

Merleau-Ponty refers to multiple types of disability in *Phenomenology of Perception*. I will first highlight one of the more sweeping claims he makes about disability in general, demonstrating how his treatment of disability vacillates between committing and undermining the ableist conflation. This claim comes at a crucial juncture, opening the concluding section, entitled “Freedom,” wherein the opposition between absolute freedom and absolute determinism is addressed:

[N]o causal relation can be conceived between the subject and his body, his world, or his society. [...] [A]t the very moment that I turn toward myself to describe myself, I catch sight of an anonymous flow, an overall project in which “states of consciousness” do not yet exist, nor, *a fortiori*, do characteristics of any kind. I am for myself neither “jealous,” nor “curious,” nor “hunchbacked,” nor “a civil servant.” We are often amazed that the disabled person or the person suffering from a disease (*l’infirmes ou le malade*) can bear their situation. But in their own eyes they are not disabled or dying (*infirmes ou mourant*). [...] Consciousness can never objectify itself as sick-consciousness or as disabled-consciousness (*conscience-de-malade ou conscience-d’infirmes*); and, even if the elderly man complains of his old age or the disabled person of his disability (*l’infirmes de son infirmité*), they can only do so when they compare themselves to others or when they see themselves through the eyes of others, that is, when they adopt a statistical or an objective view of themselves.<sup>20</sup>

The amazement with which we, according to Merleau-Ponty, regard the situation of those deemed “disabled” is made possible by the ableist conflation. The non-disabled and non-diseased, he contends, are amazed when one who is disabled or diseased or both—the distinction is in this passage unclear—bears their situation. Why? Because the latter is thought to be so harmed through lack or deprivation that even *bearing* such a situation is cause for astonishment. Merleau-Ponty assumes the ableist conflation and then uses it against itself, as it were, to undermine its reduction of a life to a particular, negative characteristic of lack.<sup>21</sup>

Arguing from the perspective of pure consciousness, Merleau-Ponty points out that consciousness is not itself aware of itself as determined in any way; on the contrary, that is a “second-order knowledge” (460/499). This is why consciousness can never objectify itself as sick-consciousness or any determinate *X*-consciousness. “Mineness” or what it is to be “myself” exceeds any discrete determinations. Nevertheless, objectification is indeed “the price we pay, without even thinking about it, for being in the world.” I am, in point of fact, “not free to ignore others,” because I am not a pure consciousness (459/497-98). Thus, the opposition between absolute freedom and determinism proves false. There is an imbrication, a gearing-in, a suffusion between the world and myself that renders me neither fully free, nor unfree.

But by the time Merleau-Ponty finishes elaborating a response to this opposition by claiming that “freedom makes the obstacles to freedom appear,” disability has disappeared as an example (464/502). If “freedom does not destroy our situation, but gears into it,” then is one not forced—at least in part—to see oneself comparatively and objectively (467/506)? What of disabled-consciousness (*conscience-d’infirmes*) now? And is not such a form of gearing-in a constitutive, not accidental, part of one’s being? Does Merleau-Ponty not ultimately reopen a space for the ableist conflation, for the view of disability as an ontological lack and as sharing the plane of pain and suffering?

To answer these questions, I turn to the oft-quoted example of the “blind man’s cane” (*le bâton de l’aveugle*).<sup>22</sup>

Without any explicit calculation, a woman maintains a safe distance between the feather in her hat and objects that might damage it; she senses where the feather is, just as we sense where our hand is. If I possess the habit of driving a car, then I enter into a lane and see that “I can pass” without comparing the width of the lane to that of the fender[.] [...] The hat and the automobile have ceased to be objects whose size and volume would be determined through a comparison with other objects. [...] The blind man’s cane has ceased to be an object for him, it is no longer perceived for itself (*Le bâton de l’aveugle a cessé d’être un objet pour lui, il n’est plus perçu pour lui-même*); rather, the cane’s furthest point is transformed into a sensitive zone, it increases the scope and the radius of the act of touching and has become analogous to a gaze (144/178).

The cane is no longer an object *for* the “blind man,” but is part *of* his being. Setting aside the ambiguity here with respect to congenital blindness (since it is not obvious at what developmental point the cane would be or cease to be an object), what does it mean that it is not just any cane—not a walking cane or fighting cane, etc.—but a “blind man’s cane”? And what is actually meant by “blindness”? If one were congenitally blind, one might have learned how to use echolocation via mouth-clicks and footsteps to “see.”<sup>23</sup> In such cases, one is obviously not blind in the sense of not being able to “see” the world around one, as the term “blindness” is often assumed to mean.<sup>24</sup> Of the many questions one might (and should) raise about the deployment of blindness in this passage, I will focus on the following: what must Merleau-Ponty assume

about *le bâton de l'aveugle* to employ it analogously to the woman's feathered hat and a person driving a car? And how do the examples of disability he deploys inform his claims about freedom, consciousness, and history?

Of central concern here is the extent to which Merleau-Ponty's claims about the cane are based in an able-bodied simulation of blindness that does not recognize the difference introduced by disability in the example and, insofar as they are so based, misleadingly support the role of blindness in the analogy with the feather and car. For brevity's sake, I will refer to this henceforth as the *bodily habit analogy*. I will argue that this analogy runs awry by 1) omitting the social dimensions of blindness, 2) misconstruing the radicality of blindness as a complete sensory-perceptual experience—what I will call a “worldcreating disability,” and 3) operating via what seems to be a simulation grounded not in experiences of blindness, but of ocular sightedness.

Firstly, note that the “blind man's cane” can only function as Merleau-Ponty claims it does when others do not treat him *as disabled*. As the metonymy of “white-cane” for “blind person” demonstrates, the white-cane is often taken as an obvious, extrinsic sign of blindness as a “disability” in the logic of the ableist conflation. The cane makes one *conspicuous*, easily leading to the interruption of any number of one's bodily and social habits. When the “blind man” encounters another who speaks loudly (conflating deafness with certain visible disabilities, as is woefully common) or who refuses service to him, the smooth incorporation of his cane is disrupted.<sup>25</sup> When he cannot safely cross a street because of a lack of curb cuts or audible walk signals, that incorporation is also disrupted.

Secondly, the experience of blindness is a much more radical reconfiguration of existence than Merleau-Ponty imagines. He mistakenly suggests that when an able-bodied person *pretends* to be blind for long enough, the cane can still become incorporated “after some time.”

In the exploration of objects, the length of the cane does not explicitly intervene nor act as a middle term: the blind man knows its length by the position of the objects, rather than the position of the objects through the cane's length. [...] *If I want to become habituated to a cane, I try it out, I touch some objects and, after some time, I have it “in hand” (en main) [...] Habit expresses the power (le pouvoir) we have of dilating our being in the world, or of altering our existence through incorporating (annexant) new instruments. (144-45/178-79).*

Does the able-bodied person then have it “in hand” in the same way a blind person does? How much time is needed? I would counter that in the case of a sighted person simulating blindness the cane is not part of a process of incorporation; it is instead an annexation, to translate the French more literally. With some practice the sighted person can surely annex or appropriate a cane as a bodily extension, but I am not convinced that they can incorporate or integrate it. Following the arguments of Preester and Tsakiris, I would contend that Merleau-Ponty problematically vacillates between claims that support object-extension or object-annexation vs. total, worldly, embodied

incorporation.<sup>26</sup> But it is precisely the latter that seems to be germane to blind experience vis-à-vis a cane and, *a fortiori*, the experiential conditions pertaining to a worldcreating form of disability. The bodily habit analogy seems to have misconstrued blindness in crucial ways.

For example, take the account of John Hull, who experienced late-onset blindness:

First I believed that blindness was when you couldn't see because something had gone wrong with your eyes. Then I understood that blindness was a deprivation of knowledge for which alternative sources and kinds of knowledge would compensate. Gradually I came to see that blindness is a whole-body condition. It is not simply that your eyes have ceased to function; your whole body undergoes a profound transformation in its relationship to the world. *Finally, I came to believe that blindness is a world-creating condition.*<sup>27</sup>

Hull's description moves from an understanding of blindness cast in the logic of the ableist conflation—blindness as lack and suffering, as something “gone wrong”—all the way to a positive, generative, and rich form of life, however different from the norm. Corporeal alteration does not entail corporeal degradation, his account suggests, even when the former occurs by definition, as it were, through loss. Hull had to not only *become* blind, but also shed his ableist assumptions about being blind; he had to both become blind and also abnegate ableism to experience blindness as worldcreating. Hull's account suggests that becoming blind is a form of what L.A. Paul calls a “transformative experience,” an experience the epistemic position of which one simply cannot be in prior to having it.<sup>28</sup>

Thirdly, as many disability activists and critical disability studies scholars have argued, simulation exercises not only fail to “simulate” the experience in question, they are actively harmful by reinforcing misguided ableist prejudices.<sup>29</sup> As some who are blind have claimed and as neuroscientific evidence supports, blindness *cannot* be simulated by a sighted person because blindness is not a lack of sight, but a fundamental set of sensory-physical conditions for the creation of a world.<sup>30</sup> How could one—through a discrete activity, much less a thought experiment—simulate the total, habituated, embodied conditions of an experience of the world?<sup>31</sup> To be fair, Merleau-Ponty does not explicitly claim that the able-bodied person having the cane “in hand” is identical to a blind person's use of the cane. It is not clear precisely how far Merleau-Ponty wishes to take the example of sighted cane use.

That being said, a sighted person will fail to experience blindness by simply wearing a blind-fold while walking around with a cane or imagining how such an object would be incorporated if one “could not see.” Blindness, when taken by the sighted as an object of contemplation and experimentation, is often conceived as a characteristic or quality, analytically separable, of a subject. One might retort that merely wearing a blindfold, upon critical reflection, is indeed an easy target. What about donning non-transparent sunglasses, acquiring a white-cane, and then trying to arrange transportation from one's

home to, say, a grocery store or perhaps an art gallery, all along the way discovering how others respond or fail to respond? What about then heading to a local disability services office to be processed as disabled in a legal sense by one of the many bureaucracies of our late capital economies? Though better than unwitting blindfold exercises, I would counter that none of these will suffice to experience the type of world blindness creates *as* a world. In short, the disanalogy between the white-cane, the feather, and the car should cause phenomenologists serious pause about uncritical deployments of non-normate embodiment.

When discussing disability, Merleau-Ponty clearly works to avoid the Scylla of factual reduction and the Charybdis of aperspectival generalization. Yet insofar as Merleau-Ponty's use of blindness (and other experiences of disability) is grounded in an able-bodied perspective and, *a fortiori*, the ableist conflation, his account goes astray. Granted, Merleau-Ponty's aim in assuming what "the blind man knows" is primarily to glean insight about embodiment by looking to the proprioceptive incorporation of various objects. With a more sustained focus on the experience of blindness and with incorporation of writings by people who have experienced blindness firsthand, both congenital and non-congenital, much more would have been revealed about such embodiment, including the conditions and import of one's socio-historical context and the constitutive role ableism plays therein. This is a question of how one applies a Merleau-Pontian phenomenological analysis and, more generally, how one combats ableism when engaging in phenomenological inquiry.

### *Non-Normate Non-Philosophy*

White-canes are *not* easily incorporated in a world made inaccessible for so many bodies in so many ways due to the structural and ideological stigmatization and exclusion of what is marked as 'disability,' which is to say, in a world made and maintained for the normate. Insofar as the historical, cultural, and social cannot be split from the natural, biological, and individual, the historical traces of ableism and the ableist conflation cannot be erased from the form and materiality of the body. A successful crip phenomenology will always seek to bring such traces into relief. "Crippling" is here understood as a method of, first, exposing the able-bodied assumptions of a given conceptual terrain or methodology and, second, articulating a conceptual reconstruction of that terrain grounded in non-normate experience.<sup>32</sup>

Across Merleau-Ponty's corpus, the body in its lived immediacy takes on a role unprecedented in the history of philosophy, but, as feminist critics, among others, have argued, his thinking of bodily difference, of corporeal variation, did not go as far as his own philosophic commitments might have suggested. As I hope to have demonstrated above, philosophical inquiry performed outside of the parameters of the normate body provides a needed and generative



corrective to the philosophical binaries and reifications against which Merleau-Ponty's oeuvre is positioned—even if Merleau-Ponty himself did not fully plumb the depths of such inquiry. Despite Merleau-Ponty's missteps regarding blindness, his work as a whole, specifically its radical rethinking of binaries such as history/nature or materiality/ideality and its relentless insistence on bringing all forms of knowledge to bear on the understanding of experience, provides a fecund method for non-normate phenomenology.<sup>33</sup>

Put differently, non-normate phenomenology constitutes a form of non-philosophy insofar as it both assumes and generates a radical critique of the ontological attitude, which is to say, that attitude which posits a philosophically fundamental difference between being and beings and which, for the early Heidegger, draws an uncritical line between ontological and ontic determinations—bracketing questions of gender, sexuality, race, disability, or class under the domain of the latter. Non-normate phenomenology constitutes a form of non-philosophy through its insistence on the *irreducible multiplicity of worlds created through the constitutive phylogenetic polymorphism and ontogenetic variability of human corporeality*. There is, for such a method, no fundamental split between subject and object, body and mind, consciousness and nature, being and beings, or ability and disability.

As Merleau-Ponty avers, “the problem of a philosophy which *might be* non-philosophy remains *in toto* as long as one thinks *consciousness* or ‘object’ [*Gegenstand*].”<sup>34</sup> Of course, Merleau-Ponty is not interested in renouncing philosophy *as such*, but philosophy as it has historically understood itself. “Non-philosophy,” then, is a catachresis. It is to be heard as a return to or a new beginning of philosophy—less a return to philosophy *proper*, as if a question of propriety and struggle over the power of the name, and more a return to *philosophy as experience* or philosophy as authentically about and of the world—philosophy as founded, constituted, and de(con)structed by experience. Because of the historical entrenchment of the ableist conflation, experiences of disability, of the multiplicity of non-normate experiences, are uniquely situated to unsettle philosophical inquiry that would take itself to be separate from its object. Inquiry performed vis-à-vis the non-normate body is non-philosophy, then, in multiple senses. It is so in the sense of being a theme historically judged unworthy of philosophical inquiry (if not of living), and it is so in the sense of resisting philosophy's historical pretensions toward reification and its predilection for founding thought in binarity.<sup>35</sup>

The phenomenon of “blindness” tells us much more about the body than about how objects become part of somatic habituation or about the multi-modality of perception as a function of the intertwining of sense and sensibility, of the invisible and visible. It fundamentally upends and problematizes how we think of “ability,” which I take to be an ultimate and still undertheorized term for *the power when subject and object meet*. Non-normate phenomenology, then, performs non-philosophy through ex-posing the ineliminable imbrication of subject and object, body and mind, consciousness and nature, etc. Despite

operating in the order of reasons, non-normate phenomenology, where successful, inscribes the fusion of nature and history in experience.

Despite canonically frequent deployments as a trope, example, or exception, philosophical occlusion and unfamiliarity with experiences of disability bespeaks entrenched failures of reflexivity at the level of both theory and praxis—a result of the normalizing effects of visibilization, of sedimentation of the intertwining, ambiguous interplay of the visible and invisible, sense and sensibility. Ableism, whether cast in the veneer of attitudes natural or critical, renders such results when it functions to underwrite the ableist conflation and devolves inquiry with collective aspirations into inquiry of privileged production. For the values and worlds it will provision and proffer, we need the non-philosophy of non-normate phenomenology.

Joel Michael Reynolds  
reynoldsj@thehastingscenter.org

## BIBLIOGRAPHY:

- Abrams, Thomas. "Is Everyone Upright? Erwin Straus' 'the Upright Posture' and Disabled Phenomenology." *Postdisciplinary Humanities & Social Sciences Quarterly* 24, no. 4 (2014): 564-73.
- Aristotle. *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*. Bollingen Series. Edited by Jonathan Barnes. 2 vols. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984.
- Baynton, Douglas. "Disability and the Justification of Inequality in American History." In *The New Disability History: American Perspectives*, edited by P. K. Longmore and Lauri Umansky, 33-57. New York: New York University Press, 2001.
- Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. Translated by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier. New York: Vintage Books, 2011.
- Braddock, David L., and Susan L. Parish. "An Institutional History of Disability." In *Handbook of Disability Studies*, edited by Gary L. Albrecht, Katherine Seelman and Michael Bury, 11-68. Thousand Oaks; London; New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2003.
- Davis, Lennard J. *The Disability Studies Reader*. 4th ed. New York: Routledge, 2013.
- Garland-Thomson, Rosemarie. *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1997.
- Gowman, Alan G. *The War Blind in American Social Structure*. New York: American Foundation for the Blind, 1957.
- Guilmette, Lauren. "Curiosity-as-Care: Feminist Philosophies of Disability, Foucault, and the Ethics of Curiosity." *APA Newsletter on Philosophy and Medicine* 18, no. 1 (2016): 46-50.
- Hall, Kim Q. *Feminist Disability Studies*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011.
- Haraway, Donna. *A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century*. New York, NY: New York, NY: Longman, 1998.
- Hull, John. *On Sight and Insight: A Journey into the World of Blindness*. London: Oneworld, 1997.

- Kafer, Alison. *Feminist, Queer, Crip*. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2013.
- Kant, Immanuel. *Lectures on Anthropology*. The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant in Translation. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.
- Kittay, Eva Feder, and Licia Carlson. *Cognitive Disability and Its Challenge to Moral Philosophy*. Metaphilosophy Series in Philosophy. West Sussex; MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010.
- Kleege, Georgina. *Sight Unseen*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999.
- Kuusisto, Stephen. *Planet of the Blind*. New York: Dial Press, 1998.
- McRuer, Robert. *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability*. Cultural Front. New York: New York University Press, 2006.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *La Structure Du Comportement*. Bibliotheque De Philosophie Contemporaine. Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1942.
- *Le Visible Et L'invisible: Suivi De Notes De Travail*. Collection Tel 36. Paris: Gallimard, 1979.
  - *Phénoménologie De La Perception*. Paris: Gallimard, 1945.
  - *Phenomenology of Perception*. Translated by Donald A. Landes. Oxon; New York: Routledge, 2011.
  - “Philosophy and Non-Philosophy since Hegel.” Translated by Hugh J. Silverman. In *Philosophy and Non-Philosophy since Merleau-Ponty*, edited by Hugh J. Silverman. Continental Philosophy. New York; London: Routledge, 1988.
  - *The Structure of Behavior*. Translated by Alden L. Fisher. Boston: Beacon Press, 1963.
  - *The Visible and the Invisible; Followed by Working Notes*. Translated by Claude Lefort. Northwestern University Studies in Phenomenology & Existential Philosophy. Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1968.
- Mill, John Stuart. *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*. Vol. X Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 2006.
- Mladenov, Teodor. *Critical Theory and Disability: A Phenomenological Approach*. Critical Theory and Contemporary Society. Edited by Darrow Schecter New York; London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015.
- Nagel, Thomas. “Death.” In *The Metaphysics of Death*, edited by John M. Fischer. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993.
- Nario-Redmond, Michelle R., Dobromir Gospodinov, and Angela Cobb. “Crip for a Day: The Unintended Negative Consequences of Disability Simulations.” *Rehabilitation Psychology* (2017).
- Nielsen, Kim E. *A Disability History of the United States*. Revisioning American History. Boston: Beacon Press, 2012.
- Oxford English Dictionary*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2002.
- Paterson, Kevin, and Bill Hughes. “Disability Studies and Phenomenology: The Carnal Politics of Everyday Life.” *Disability & Society* 14, no. 5 (1999): 597-610.
- Patsavas, Alyson. “Recovering a Cripistemology of Pain: Leaky Bodies, Connective Tissue, and Feeling Discourse.” *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies* 8, no. 2 (2014): 203-18.
- Paul, L. A. *Transformative Experience*. 1st ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.
- Pierre, Joshua St. “Distending Straight-Masculine Time: A Phenomenology of the Disabled Speaking Body.” *Hypatia* 30, no. 1 (2015): 49-65.
- Plato. *Complete Works*. Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett Pub., 1997.

- Preester, Helena, and Manos Tsakiris. "Body-Extension Versus Body-Incorporation: Is There a Need for a Body-Model?" *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 8, no. 3 (2009): 307–19.
- Price, Margaret. "The Bodymind Problem and the Possibilities of Pain." *Hypatia* 30, no. 1 (2015): 268–284.
- Reynolds, Joel Michael. "'I'd Rather Be Dead Than Disabled'—the Ableist Conflation and the Meanings of Disability." *The Review of Communication* 17, no. 3 (2017): 149–163.
- Salamon, Gayle. "The Phenomenology of Rheumatology: Disability, Merleau-Ponty, and the Fallacy of Maximal Grip." *Hypatia* 27, no. 2 (2012): 243–60.
- Sandahl, Carrie. "Queering the Crip or Crippling the Queer?." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian & Gay Studies* 9, no. 1/2 (2003): 25–56.
- Stiker, Henri-Jacques. *A History of Disability*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999.
- Thaler, Lore, Stephen R. Arnott, Melvyn A. Goodale, and David C. Burr. "Neural Correlates of Natural Human Echolocation in Early and Late Blind Echolocation Experts." *PLOS ONE* 6, no. 5 (2011). <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0020162>.
- Thaler, Lore, and Melvyn A. Goodale. "Echolocation in Humans: An Overview." *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Cognitive Science* 7, no. 6 (2016): 382–93.
- Toombs, S. Kay. "The Lived Experience of Disability." *Human Studies* 18 (1995): 9–23.
- *The Meaning of Illness: A Phenomenological Account of the Different Perspectives of Physician and Patient*. Philosophy and Medicine. Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1992.
- Toombs, S. Kay, David Barnard, and Ronald A. Carson. *Chronic Illness: From Experience to Policy*. Medical Ethics Series. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995.

## NOTES:

- 1 Eva Feder Kittay, "The Personal is Philosophical is Political" in Eva Feder Kittay and Licia Carlson, *Cognitive Disability and Its Challenge to Moral Philosophy*, Metaphilosophy Series in Philosophy (West Sussex; MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 397.
- 2 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible; Followed by Working Notes*, trans. Claude Lefort, Northwestern University Studies in Phenomenology & Existential Philosophy (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 270; *Le Visible Et L'invisible: Suivi De Notes De Travail*, Collection Tel 36 (Paris: Gallimard, 1979), 318.
- 3 This piece benefitted greatly from responses at the 2016 meeting of the *International Merleau-Ponty Circle*. For thoughtful and constructive feedback provided at various stages of its development, I would also like to thank Susan Bredlau, Catharine Fullarton, David M. Peña-Guzmán, Rebecca Hansen, Helen Ngo, Jennifer Scuro, and Florentien Verhage.
- 4 Plato, *Complete Works* (Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett Pub., 1997), 47e.
- 5 Kim E. Nielsen, *A Disability History of the United States*, Revisioning American History (Boston: Beacon Press, 2012); Henri-Jacques Stiker, *A History of Disability* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999).
- 6 The role such assumptions play in thinking about disability across the history of philosophy relate in crucial ways to deeply problematic treatments of gender and race. See, e.g., Douglas Baynton, "Disability and the Justification of Inequality in

- American History,” in *The New Disability History: American Perspectives*, ed. P. K. Longmore and Lauri Umansky (New York: New York University Press, 2001). More specifically, numerous arguments and concepts deployed across history to explain, justify, and perpetuate social hierarchies have been couched in terms and tropes of disability. Among the many implications evinced by this historical claim, it strongly supports arguments from feminist, queer, and critical philosophy of race scholars who have argued that projects of social justice, both inside and outside the academy, must forge futures that mutually undermine and oppose ableism, racism, sexism, cissexism, heterosexism, colonialism, and all other such forms of oppression.
- 7 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Structure of Behavior*, trans. Alden L. Fisher (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963), 161-62; *La Structure Du Comportement*, Bibliotheque De Philosophie Contemporaine (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1942), 175.
  - 8 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (New York: Vintage Books, 2011), 46.
  - 9 As a sample of engagement between CDS and phenomenology, see Teodor Mladenov, *Critical Theory and Disability: A Phenomenological Approach*, ed. Darrow Schecter, Critical Theory and Contemporary Society (New York; London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015); Kevin Paterson and Bill Hughes, “Disability Studies and Phenomenology: The Carnal Politics of Everyday Life,” *Disability & Society* 14, no. 5 (1999); Gayle Salamon, “The Phenomenology of Rheumatology: Disability, Merleau-Ponty, and the Fallacy of Maximal Grip,” *Hypatia* 27, no. 2 (2012); Thomas Abrams, “Is Everyone Upright? Erwin Straus’ ‘the Upright Posture’ and Disabled Phenomenology,” *Postdisciplinary Humanities & Social Sciences Quarterly* 24, no. 4 (2014); Joshua St Pierre, “Distending Straight-Masculine Time: A Phenomenology of the Disabled Speaking Body,” *Hypatia* 30, no. 1 (2015). When critical disability studies scholars engage with phenomenology, it is often employed as a reference or supplement to some other form of inquiry (rhetorical analysis, critical theory, or autoethnography, etc). A notable exception is the work of S. Kay Toombs, who has done extended phenomenological research from out of her own experience of living with degenerative multiple sclerosis. See S. Kay Toombs, “The Lived Experience of Disability,” *Human Studies* 18 (1995); S. Kay Toombs, David Barnard, and Ronald A. Carson, *Chronic Illness: From Experience to Policy*, Medical Ethics Series (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995); S. Kay Toombs, *The Meaning of Illness: A Phenomenological Account of the Different Perspectives of Physician and Patient*, Philosophy and Medicine (Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1992). Toombs does not, however, mount a critique of ableism with respect to phenomenological method or to central figures and texts within the tradition.
  - 10 Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 8. See also Joel Michael Reynolds, “Normate” in *50 Concepts for an Intersectional Phenomenology*, eds. Ann Murphy, Gayle Salamon, and Gail Weiss (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, Forthcoming).
  - 11 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Philosophy and Non-Philosophy since Hegel,” in *Philosophy and Non-Philosophy since Merleau-Ponty*, ed. Hugh J. Silverman, Continental Philosophy (New York; London: Routledge, 1988). Silverman’s translation is based upon course notes established by Claude Lefort from Merleau-Ponty’s 1961 lectures at the Collège de France. When I use the term “history of philosophy,” I am referring to the canon as accepted by many scholars working in European and Anglo-American philosophy. One could call this “Western philosophy,” but that too would be a misnomer.
  - 12 Put differently, this is a way of asking: what would it mean to *crip* philosophy proper? Of course, I am not the first to ask this. For example, see Kim Q. Hall, *Feminist Disability Studies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011). In many respects, this is a very live question for multiple areas of inquiry in philosophy that are coming into contact with (and discovering the many insights of) critical disability studies and philosophy of disability. It is important to note that there are some who find the re-

- appropriate term “crip” to be offensive, if not triggering. While I am sensitive to these concerns, it has been adopted in increasingly widespread forms of both academic and political discourse. I will follow the latter scholars and activists in using the term here, albeit sparingly. On the whole, I find “non-normate phenomenology” a more apropos rendering of what I take those using the term “crip phenomenology” to be picking out.
- 13 Aristotle, *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*, ed. Jonathan Barnes, 2 vols., Bollingen Series (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 2:1615/022b27-22. In the spurious *Sense and Sensibilia*, it is also commented that “of persons destitute from either sense, the blind are more intelligent than the deaf and dumb” (437a15-17).
  - 14 Immanuel Kant, *Lectures on Anthropology*, The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant in Translation (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 113/25:554.
  - 15 John Stuart Mill, *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, vol. X (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 2006), 212.
  - 16 See the entry on “fool, n.1 and adj.” in OED, “Oxford English Dictionary,” in *Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2002). I am here consciously avoiding contentious debates surrounding treatments of disability by contemporary utilitarians such as Peter Singer. On that topic, see Lauren Guilmette, “Curiosity-as-Care: Feminist Philosophies of Disability, Foucault, and the Ethics of Curiosity,” *APA Newsletter on Philosophy and Medicine* 18, no. 1 (2016), 46-50.
  - 17 Noting and decrying the conceptual connection between disability and disadvantage, harm, suffering, pain, or any number of negative experiences and states is a commonplace among disability studies scholars and philosophers of disability. What I present here is ultimately a recasting, synthesizing, and condensing of such arguments. The ableist conflation is one mode—I think the primary one—in which ableism manifests itself. On ableism more generally, see Fiona Kumari Campbell, *Contours Of Ableism: The Production Of Disability And Aabledness* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009). I offer a longer version of this argument, in Joel Michael Reynolds, “‘I’d Rather Be Dead Than Disabled’—the Ableist Conflation and the Meanings of Disability,” *The Review of Communication* 17, no. 3 (2017), 149-63.
  - 18 There are numerous thorny issues surrounding why, how, and whether deprivation of potential goods is a harm. See, e.g., Thomas Nagel, “Death,” in *The Metaphysics of Death*, ed. John M. Fischer (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993).
  - 19 Lennard J. Davis, *The Disability Studies Reader*, 4th ed. (New York: Routledge, 2013).
  - 20 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald A. Landes (Oxon; New York: Routledge, 2011), 458; *Phénoménologie De La Perception* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945), 497. Citations to this text will appear in the body of the essay hereafter, with the English pagination followed by the French.
  - 21 In in end, Merleau-Ponty is ambiguous about the extent to which he configures disability and/or illness (that he conflates these is a problem of its own) as defined by lack. At one point, he does define illness as a “complete form of existence,” but at other points, as I argue, he treats disabilities and/or non-normate ability states as deficient. Ibid, 110/138. I am grateful to Florentien Verhage for this point.
  - 22 In the context of the USA, there are some in the blind community who prefer the terms “visually impaired” or “a person with a visual impairment.” Because, however, many in the blind community accept the phrase and also for continuity of reference to Merleau-Ponty’s text, I here maintain the typical English rendering.
  - 23 See “How To Become Batman,” *NPR Invisibilia*, <http://www.npr.org/programs/invisibilia/378577902/how-to-become-batman>. Recent neuroscientific research on human echolocation helps clarify the neurological processes that would afford this possibility. See, e.g., Lore Thaler et al., “Neural Correlates of Natural Human Echolocation in Early and Late Blind Echolocation Experts,” *PLOS ONE* 6, no. 5 (2011); Lore Thaler and Melvyn A. Goodale, “Echolocation in Humans: An Overview,” *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Cognitive Science* 7, no. 6 (2016). I am grateful to



- John Jenkinson for pointing me to this work.
- 24 The object, Merleau-Ponty implies, must become inconspicuous to the point of being a part of one's being in, and orientation to, the world. Note that psycho-somal incorporation (*incorporation*) is at once intentional interiorization (*intériorisation*) in the description he provides: these objects become not just constitutive of one's sensing, but sense (*sens*) itself.
- 25 Gail Sullivan, "Uber Sued For Allegedly Refusing Rides To The Blind And Putting A Dog In The Trunk," *The Washington Post*, accessed September 10, 2014, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2014/09/10/uber-sued-for-allegedly-refusing-rides-to-the-blind-and-putting-a-dog-in-the-trunk/>.
- 26 Helena Preester and Manos Tsakiris, "Body-Extension Versus Body-Incorporation: Is There a Need for a Body-Model?," *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 8, no. 3 (2009): esp. 309. I am grateful to Florentien Verhage for bringing this piece and such arguments to my attention.
- 27 John Hull, *On Sight and Insight: A Journey into the World of Blindness* (London: OneWorld, 1997), xii, my italics.
- 28 If this is right, then one cannot know "what it's like" to be blind (assuming that to be a monolithic category for the sake of argument) if one is sighted. L. A. Paul, *Transformative Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).
- 29 Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2013), 4, 9; Michelle R. Nario-Redmond, Dobromir Gospodinov, and Angela Cobb, "Crip for a Day: The Unintended Negative Consequences of Disability Simulations," *Rehabilitation Psychology* 62, no. 3 (2017), 324-33. DOI: 10.1037/rep0000127.
- 30 See Georgina Kleege, *Sight Unseen* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999), esp. 122-63; Stephen Kuusisto, *Planet of the Blind* (New York: Dial Press, 1998). With respect to how this world is one of "lack" or "harm" due more so to societal than bodily issues, Braddock and Parish note, "while some people with disabilities at midcentury wrote about their experiences as a tragedy to be overcome (e.g., Walker 1950), writings of blind Americans in the mid-twentieth century describe not blindness but the social and physical environment as the essential problem of disability." David L. Braddock and Susan L. Parish, "An Institutional History of Disability," in *Handbook of Disability Studies*, ed. Gary L. Albrecht, Katherine Seelman, and Michael Bury (Thousand Oaks; London; New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2003), 44. They then refer to multiple first-person accounts as cited in Alan G. Gowman, *The War Blind in American Social Structure* (New York: American Foundation for the Blind, 1957). I cannot do justice here to the multiple literatures engaging experiences of blindness, whether based in first- or third-person accounts and whether engaged through modes of humanistic, social scientific, or natural scientific inquiry. My claims and citations are attenuated to the aim at hand: raising the question of the phenomenology of non-normate experiences and how it might bear upon phenomenological inquiry and philosophy more generally. Furthermore, by showing how a famous example deploying disability misses crucial aspects of the experience in question, my hope is that this will lead to further reflection upon both the meaning and use of such examples—and with respect to the latter, this includes the responsibilities and politics of citation.
- 31 There are over seventy references to "blindness" (*aveuglement*) and just six to "disability" or being "disabled" (variations of *infirmes*) in *Phenomenology of Perception*: one at 84/111, four at 458/497, and one at 461/500. Nearly all uses are pejorative: blindness as not comprehending, etc. The quote above represents one of the few places where blindness is employed positively. In this positive case, the "disability" of blindness is described and reconstructed via a phenomenological reduction seeking to explain the relation of embodiment to existence. The incorporation of various prostheses becomes proof of the nature of our being, our finitude, and our corporeal ambiguity. Themes extant in posthumanist writings retroactively ring loudly here, themes which have come under intense scrutiny in critical disability studies. See Donna Haraway, *A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth*

- Century* (New York, NY: New York, NY: Longman, 1998). For an extensive list of disability critiques and uptakes of Haraway, other post-humanist writers, and post-humanist figures such as the cyborg, see the notes to chapter 5, “The Cyborg and the Crip: Critical Encounters,” in Kafer, 205-13.
- 32 I am amending a definition from Carrie Sandahl, “Queering the Crip or Crippling the Queer?,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian & Gay Studies* 9, no. 1/2 (2003), 25-26. I became aware of this article from Alyson Patsavas, “Recovering a Cripistemology of Pain: Leaky Bodies, Connective Tissue, and Feeling Discourse,” *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies* 8, no. 2 (2014), 203-18. As McRuer puts it, “crip theory questions—or takes a sledgehammer to—that which has been concretized; it might, consequently, be comprehended as a curb cut into disability studies, and into critical theory more generally.” Robert McRuer, *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability*, Cultural Front (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 35. As noted above, there have been criticisms of the use of this term from multiple corners. A brief and helpful overview of this is provided in Margaret Price, “The Bodymind Problem and the Possibilities of Pain,” *Hypatia* 30, no. 1 (2015), 268-84.
- 33 To be clear, his later work proves most fruitful in such an endeavor. Given his own criticisms that the *Phenomenology of Perception* does not escape the subject-object distinction, I take this to be unsurprising. Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 200.
- 34 “Philosophy and Non-Philosophy since Hegel,” 44. The German reference is Merleau-Ponty’s own.
- 35 “Philosophy and non-philosophy: a detached philosophy always reappears in disguise,” Merleau-Ponty writes. “What is needed is a negation of the negation which we do not fix either in negativism or positivism...the renunciation of philosophy must be a consciousness of these difficulties in the nature/history opposition.” *Ibid.*, 83.