

## Essays in Philosophy

---

Volume 9

Issue 1 *Philosophy of Disability*

Article 8

---

1-2008

# Ability, Disability, and the Question of Philosophy

Scott DeShong

*Quinebaug Valley Community College*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://commons.pacificu.edu/eip>



Part of the [Philosophy Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

DeShong, Scott (2008) "Ability, Disability, and the Question of Philosophy," *Essays in Philosophy*: Vol. 9: Iss. 1, Article 8.

Essays in Philosophy is a biannual journal published by Pacific University Library | ISSN 1526-0569 | <http://commons.pacificu.edu/eip/>

# Essays in Philosophy

A Biannual Journal

Vol. 9, No. 1, January 2008

---

## *Ability, Disability, and the Question of Philosophy*

---

*Abstract.* This essay treats the field of philosophy and the study of disability such that each may be conceived of in terms of the other, perhaps to the extent that they may be thought of as one. First, it examines the bases and methods of various documents in the study of disability, finding that such study may be conceived of as essentially philosophical, even as the philosophical nature of disability studies threatens such studies' practice. Then philosophy is depicted as that discourse which necessarily interrogates its bases and methods -that is, as discourse that engages its own ability. The two fields are presented as exemplary of the interrogation of ability, particularly of discursive ability. The essay's primary influence is Emmanuel Levinas, mainly for the emphasis he places on the nature of language in his approach to philosophical critique. Developing the notion of im/possibility -the simultaneous emergence of a discourse's conditions of possibility with those of its impossibility -the essay focuses on "dis/ability" as the central notion in the convergence of philosophy and disability studies.

### I

I wish to engage the philosophy of disability as a matter of response to a question. Perhaps not least of the difficulties involved is that I do not know the question, and indeed I cannot know. Yet this much seems comforting -unfortunately, for any practical context of questioning (although the comfort fortunately will turn out to be temporary) -insofar as it emphasizes the philosophical nature of the enterprise. That is, knowing the question would reveal the enterprise to be pragmatic, probably, or at least a matter of the sciences, human or otherwise, and thus arguably the inquiry would fall outside the field of philosophy. Much, if not most, of what today is considered disability studies belongs to the sciences (to include much of what takes place nominally in various fields of the arts and humanities), insofar as such studies involve knowing the questions, and sometimes answers, if not more or less comprehensible ends of thought, whether or not the means are clear. Indeed, much that is said under the title of disability studies arrives (as well as departs) in the realm of practical politics, a realm in which there will always emerge some version of normality.

I do not intend to suggest that philosophy per se cannot be concerned with politics, or be pragmatic, or that any philosophical undertaking cannot or indeed will not inevitably and appropriately be taken as belonging to a political context. But I wish to emphasize that philosophical discourse is that discourse which engages the terms and emphases that define and underpin it, engaging matters that pose as questioning per se, questioning that turns upon its own roots and remains unsatisfied with any delimitation of itself. In short, I define philosophy as that discourse which inherently

wrestles with its own definition. Perhaps I am focusing on a moment that might better be referred to as theory than philosophy; perhaps “theory” is a more appropriate term for discourse that engages not only its own methods and purposes, but its very possibility. Here, I reveal -if it has not been obvious yet -my linguistic bias, albeit a bias that is only proper to the so-called linguistic turn that did not so much change the focus of philosophy but reveal the nature that had been proper to philosophy throughout its history. In any case, given this definition of the philosophical, I wish to consider that however pragmatic many or most articles of contemporary disability studies might appear, the study of disability can be taken by and large as inherently a philosophical enterprise.

During the 1990s, as a distinct field of disability studies was taking shape, George Canguilhem’s observations about medical and biological normality were regularly drawn on to inform disability critiques that focused on the cultural and social normalization of human physical features. More recently, the work of Michel Foucault (who himself draws on Canguilhem) has become highly influential for scholars of disability, mainly due to his detailed analyses of discursive normalization and of social power formations that emerge in -as the title of Shelley Tremain’s anthology puts it - “the government of disability.” Thus across roughly the past two decades, work in disability studies has critiqued the normalization of ability and concomitantly brought into focus the various ways ableism emerges. A basic moment in this work has been an exposure of the development of centralization, exposure of the emergence of a center of normal ability against which all that is marginal becomes cast as abnormal and/or disabled. A subsequent moment is one in which the centrality is exposed as having emerged not naturally, but rather by means of manipulation that can make no claim to the natural. Indeed, work in disability studies has performed a broad denaturalization of the natural as such, and thereby dislodged any possible normalization of ability.

Such work involves a thoroughgoing critique of the very notion of nature, and indeed eventually the category of the human, with social and legal ramifications. The technology and infrastructure of modern societies come under critique, toward the end of opening access, for the full range of abilities, to the broadest possible range of social and cultural benefits. Braille keypads, elevators, and curb cuts represent only the start of such opening. Yet logically, coming before the question of resource allocation is that of what is to be accomplished -what is to be considered (human) ability at all. Certainly, technological and infrastructural access is developed with at least minimal ends in mind, ends of ability that, if perhaps not quite normalized, will be naturalized, called into being as proper to those who will gain access. The pragmatic and political question of access addresses the needs of specific persons and helps alleviate their pain and difficulty, a project whose intentions and specific successes cannot be disparaged. Yet the philosophical implication of improving access per se is the establishment of ability or abilities to be accessed, and thus the establishment of what, in the terms of Emmanuel Levinas (which I will discuss in more detail below), becomes the “said” of ability: the articulation of ability becomes the development of another ableism. Thus the practical politics of disability critique tends to help establish a center, contributing to an essentially teleological project that can hardly avoid developing a claim of nature, human nature.

But perhaps a struggle over a center need not lead to the establishment of new margins, and in my view, the most insightful recent work in disability studies -involving an awareness of the pitfalls of pragmatism -manages to avoid the problem. For example, in *Crip Theory*, Robert McRuer notes the “ineluctable impossibility . . . of an able-bodied identity” (10), as he represents a developing awareness in disability studies of the anarchy inherent in the larger project of denaturalization.

Particularly with the use of the term “impossibility,” McRuer’s observation indicates a philosophical movement of the field away from the theoretical trap it would set for itself by an excessively pragmatic emphasis on remedying problems of access.

Other critics working in disability studies have helped the field continue to move beyond the discursive naturalization of ability. In her afterword to the anthology *Bodies in Commotion*, Peggy Phelan notes that any expression of disability, such as the categorical phrase “people with disabilities,” will tend to standardize human ability (322). Lennard J. Davis, in his emphasis on the field’s moving into what he calls “dismodernism,” writes in *Bending over Backwards* that disability studies is finding its way beyond the Enlightenment-modernist project of inclusiveness -a metaphysical project that would include all that can be specifically articulated -and into a project where articulation is not the limit of thought, expression, or action (which is to say politics). And in her work on “claiming disability” -the title of one of her books, naming a movement that has been taken up broadly by disability activists -Simi Linton lays claim to the margin as such in a way that does not entail moving to any new center. She stakes a claim on a negative, in a negation that stated as such remains one, and thus she maintains it. As I read it, this negation based on its opposite does not establish a new center or maintain a statically negative relation to the center, but rather emphasizes a vexation of the able center and disabled margin by each other, emphasizing that the key term must be written with a virgule -dis/ability.

The movement into a philosophy of disability that I find represented in the work of these scholars brings with it the hazard that philosophy may overwhelm any practical politics of disability. The strength of the demand for access -in which the articulation of disability is made, the disabled person is identified, and thus the ableist center is inscribed and maintained -is the demand’s pragmatic effectiveness. But perhaps the philosophy of disability presents no necessary danger to such effectiveness, particularly insofar as, indeed, the field of disability studies is not unified. And as Linton’s work in particular indicates, there are moments in the field where a philosophically informed politics begins to take shape. Moreover, a philosophical criticism, one emphasizing the discursive problematic of ability and disability -that is, pointing out the dis/ability itself of the critique and of the field itself -need not be seen as an abstract enterprise that detracts from the practical politics of the field. Indeed, the language of the project may be read as its most concrete aspect -as the material not only of the field but of the practical ideological, social, and indeed infrastructural and technological context in which people’s lives are affected, or indeed effected.

Reflecting a certain disarray that may be observed in the field of disability studies, we might express the state of the field by calling disability studies itself traumatic, a field that engages trauma mainly in engaging the trauma of itself. By this view, the main trauma emerges in and as the virgule, in what we might term the “im/possibility” of disengaging the possible from the impossible -the articulated from the inarticulable -and hence in the im/possibility of the effort. To find that an ability is not only also a disability, but an undecidable dis/ability, means realizing that what is intended, or sought, or perhaps dreamed in and for the discourse entails a muddling and maddening, a becoming lost, the encounter of a nightmare. The dream of health, of wholeness, of arrival, is one of completion, of competence, that the very vitality of its performativity must thwart, hence producing what we might refer to as the nightmare of health -the nightmare that emerges in place of any attempted dream of wholeness. Thus it appears that disability critiques endemically cannot do what they do, albeit perhaps also they may do what they cannot do. Engaging the question of ability

and therein engaging its own ability, disability studies might be thought of as exemplary theoretical or philosophical discourse, developing and engaging the impossible tension of ability and disability in a way that works broadly to address the problematic of all language, all signification.

## II

Having discussed the emergence of the philosophical specifically in the study of disability, I will consider how philosophy may be understood to be disabled, or rather dis/abled. As I have indicated at the beginning of this essay, I wish to focus on the philosophy of philosophy, or alternatively the theory of theory (or a crossing of the terms either way) -on a regressive or recursive structure that both emphasizes and puts in question, continually, what thought and discourse (to include questioning) are able to do. In concentrating on the philosophical (or theoretical) per se, I am concentrating on the discourse's ability, emphasizing that the philosophical or theoretical moment in any discourse is the moment that involves engaging its own ability (the discourse's and the moment's). Indeed, the term "ability," and the very notion of ability, can be applied in a largely unquestioning and functional way such that the term applies to all sorts of activities, or capacities, or the like -in short, to performances -yet what it means to have ability in any of the applied cases, and what ability in general entails, remains opaque in such usage. Perhaps in discourses other than philosophy, such as the scientific discourses I have referred to above, the question of ability can be critically engaged. Yet I argue that insofar as any discourse genuinely engages the question of ability, it therein encounters the question of its own ability, and in that moment the discourse is expressly philosophical or theoretical.

Beyond engaging philosophy per se in terms of questioning, and beyond finding the questioning to be an engagement of its own ability, I have stated that there can be no arrival at the question to which philosophical discourse responds -no clarification of any fundamental question or questions from which the field of questioning emerges. In this, I echo the critique Levinas develops of what he refers to as the ontological bias that emerges in philosophy as represented in Martin Heidegger's work, a critique Levinas develops most directly in "Is Ontology Fundamental?" In this essay and elsewhere, Levinas explains that what calls for discursive engagement is enigmatic, that the source, or origin, or center of philosophical discourse (or indeed any language, ultimately) cannot be located or even named -that, contrary to Heidegger, the focus of philosophy cannot even be thought of as being, or Being. The critical point is that the discourse itself emerges as response to what is "beyond essence," in Levinas's terminology, to what is beyond knowing and indeed beyond any articulated ability, thus beyond any pragmatic pursuit and beyond any possible normalization. Indeed for Levinas, the ability of all discourse emerges as response to enigmatic ability, and philosophy is that discourse which emphasizes recognition of this.

To put it more accurately, philosophy *can* recognize this. The ability of philosophy is implicated in its ability, such that philosophy is discourse that in addressing the ability of its ability can thereby address ability more broadly, engaging the question of ability as the questioning that ability as such entails. Insofar as it develops such dual and inevitably contradictory questioning, philosophical discourse engages what Levinas refers to as the difference between the "saying" and the "said," the latter being what "is" (or apparently can be) meant by and done in language. The saying, for Levinas -as he discusses in various texts (most notably *Otherwise than Being*) -is responding in which what may be meant or accomplished remains response, remaining engaged in the open, incomplete questioning endemic to thought and language. Whereas all discourse inevitably emerges

as said, and thus becomes read in terms of determinative and expressed practical ability, the saying involves the conditions of language's possibility, however impossible it is for the saying to emerge in language that is actually spoken, written, or exchanged. The relationship between the saying and the said corresponds to the relationship between the ability of ability and the articulation of ability, so that the conditions of possibility of the articulation of ability (or of any articulation) correspond with the impossibility of articulating ability, or of articulating anything other than a dead, unthinking and indeed unthought said. The saying of ability exceeds the possibility of articulation: ability is dead insofar as it is articulated as ability. The result of articulation is ableism, as articulation plays its role in the establishment of normality. (In "On Potentiality," Giorgio Agamben discusses in somewhat different terms the relationships I examine here, as he addresses Aristotle's treatment of potentiality and impotentiality.)

Language, philosophical and otherwise, might seem here never to emerge except as disabled, yet that would be only partially correct. Rather, language, insofar as it emerges as a matter of response, reflects not only the dead and deadening power of its having been said -that is, its simple possibility -but also the impossibility that persists in the conditions of its expression, the ability to undermine, by exceeding, any possible articulation. Language emerges in im/possibility, we may say, or alternatively it emerges in dis/ability. Philosophy, in the ability -which is thus dis/ability -of recognizing this problematic, is thus a discourse of dis/ability. What is philosophical (or theoretical) emerges with ability that is per se undermined, that always cannot do what it does, perhaps, or conversely and paradoxically can (only) do what it cannot. Itself dis/abled, indeed self-dis/abling, philosophy gains ability and disability coextensively as it engages the dis/ability of discourse generally.

### III

As I have approached the philosophy of disability in this essay from each end of the genitive "of," so to speak, I have tried to show how each of the two terms becomes revelatory of the other. I have discussed the characteristically philosophical discourse that emerges when disability is addressed in language, and I have discussed what we may recognize as the dis/ability that philosophy is. In each approach, the elusive and enigmatic notion of ability becomes the focus of the inquiry, as it is this notion to which the problematic of each discourse responds. Yet as I have noted above, ability itself emerges as response: no origin for ability can be found, but rather ability emerges in response to some question of its own ability, of the ability of ability, questioning that itself appears the questioning proper to all signification. What I refer to as the ability of ability is what Levinas calls "the very signifyingness of signification, which signifies in saying before showing itself in the said." He writes that this signifyingness "is the *for* of the relationship" expressed in "the contradictory trope of the-one-for-the-other"; it is a matter of relationality that is proper to language before language emerges, before language indeed is (*Otherwise than Being*, 100). I reiterate that such relationality, for Levinas, precedes and exceeds being or Being; put in terms of ability, it is the ability of ability before there is ability, or alternatively the im/possible condition of ability (thus my use of forms of "to be" in this essay emerge under erasure, never to be read without irony, as will have been clear to those familiar with Levinas or with the work of Heidegger or Jacques Derrida).

Ability as responsive thus cannot be so, exactly, nor can it be responsible, which is to say determinative. It cannot be true in its responding without impertinence, and moreover without being

untrue, and thus it is properly irresponsible. This is not quite a contradiction: it leads again to a use of the virgule, such that ability responds always ir/responsibly. As a matter of the problematics internal to language -specifically, the vexed relationship between the signifier and the signified -the relation between ability and its origin is im/possible in a way that Levinas refers to as “unrightness itself” (“The Trace” 355), as a matter of the originary disruption at the heart of the ability of language. This is to say that in engaging philosophy and disability in a discourse focused on the notion of ability, I find for both fields (which thus arguably are one) a non/foundation in the im/possible field of the ir/responsible ability of the ability of language.

I am performing here what in the field of literary criticism would be considered a strong reading, itself ir/responsible and involving an unrightness that, no doubt, some would attribute specifically to my thinking, rather than to the discourses involved. Indeed, my approach is informed by emphasizing the rhetoric of these discourses, in an emphasis that owes to the work of Paul de Man, whose own emphasis on the term “theory” in conjunction with (not to say over) the term “philosophy” has also influenced my thinking here. It is in a literary-theoretical vein that questions such as that of the ir/responsibility of ability can best be posed, I think, which is perhaps why the writing of Levinas -particularly the later work that I have relied on most -has such an evocative, as opposed to logical, quality. In such writing, many terms are less deployed than played, receiving definition from context as well as -indeed more than -imposing meaning on material. Thus perhaps the strong reading is less so than it may appear; perhaps strength and weakness are reversed, as a certain passivity obtains where it may seem that a force of argument has been applied.

It appears indeed that ability must become dis/ability in such an approach as I develop here, as perhaps it must do in all approaches that engage their own terms and emphases critically enough. It may be inevitable, if not necessary, that such dis/ability emerge in any careful consideration of the disability of philosophy or the philosophy of disability -in either case, whichever way the genitives are read -or in the event that the differences between the terms and fields seem obliterated, and the question of ability stands out, as if alone. Gathering the questioning about itself, indeed, the notion of ability would seem to have taken the field.

Scott DeShong  
Quinebaug Valley Community College

### References

Agamben, Giorgio. “On Potentiality.” *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*. Ed. and trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1999. 177-84.

Canguilhem, Georges. *The Normal and the Pathological*. Trans. Carolyn R. Fawcett and Robert S. Cohen. New York: Zone, 1989.

Davis, Lennard J. *Bending over Backwards: Disability, Dismodernism, and Other Difficult Positions*. New York: New York UP, 2002.

de Man, Paul. *The Resistance to Theory*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1986.

Levinas, Emmanuel. “Is Ontology Fundamental?” *Basic Philosophical Writings*. Ed. Adriaan T.

Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi. Bloomington: University of Indiana P, 1996. 1-10.

---. *Otherwise than Being: Or Beyond Essence*. Trans. Alphonso Lingis. Pittsburgh: Duquesne UP, 1998.

---. "The Trace of the Other." *Deconstruction in Context: Literature and Philosophy*. Ed. Mark C. Taylor. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1986. 345-59.

Linton, Simi. *Claiming Disability: Knowledge and Identity*. New York: New York UP, 1998.

McRuer, Robert. *Crip Theory: Critical Signs of Queerness and Disability*. New York: New York UP, 2006.

Phelan, Peggy. "Reconsidering Identity Politics, Essentialism, and Dismodernism: An Afterword." *Bodies in Commotion: Disability and Performance*. Ed. Carrie Sandahl and Philip Auslander. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2005. 319-26.

Tremain, Shelley, ed. *Foucault and the Government of Disability*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2005.