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The Use of a Disability Lens for Hegel Studies

Disability is a significant issue in contemporary social theory, and its importance is gradually becoming more recognized within philosophy itself. Work in disability theory invites us to understand disability as a relational phenomenon, not solely contained within the body but the result of many historical, epistemological, social, political, and economic factors. Critical work on disability teaches us that what is assumed to be “normal” and “natural” is the result of historical processes and theories, and that our beliefs about disability reveal a broader worldview about contingency and purity.

We ought to examine disability throughout the history of philosophy, and use it to excavate assumptions about what kinds of bodies and minds are worthwhile, and what kinds of perspectives have been excluded. What does the history of philosophy look like if we recognize that disability is central to human experience, and not an occasional counter-example?

There has been little work on Hegel and disability, but his system is helpful for conceptualizing disability.¹ Conversely, a disability lens is also valuable for interpreting Hegel, as it helps demonstrate the interconnections of his system as each part plays a role in creating disability. It opens up new interpretive possibilities for using his work in contemporary social theory, by showing the effects our conceptions of disability have on social values, and how it may be linked to other forms of hierarchy. A disability lens does not mean just picking out those rare instances where he mentions disability or particular disabilities, but noting what forms of difference seem to matter, and asking what might change if the kind of difference associated with disability were taken more seriously, as a meaningful part of humanity and one which gives rise to experience and knowledge that enriches our conception of the whole. This approach accords with Hegel’s core philosophical commitments.

Disability studies is a rich and developing area of theory within which there is much scholarly disagreement, but different disability theories tend to share a

¹ J. Dryden, “Hegel, Feminist Philosophy, and Disability: Rereading our History,” in: *Disability Studies Quarterly* 33:4 (October 2013), and “Digestion, Habit, and Being at Home: Hegel and the Gut as Ambiguous Other,” in: *PhaenEx: Journal of Existential and Phenomenological Theory and Culture* 11:2 (Fall/Winter 2016).