

Existential Philosophy and Disability

Call for Contributions

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Disability is a significant part of the experience of being human. As the World Health Organisation acknowledges: “Almost everyone will temporarily or permanently experience disability at some point in their life [and an] estimated 1.3 billion people—about 16% of the global population—currently experience disability.”¹ As a concept, the understanding of disability has been shifting over the past decades from medical models based on impairment, defect or deficit in the individual, to the social models upheld by the 2006 Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, recognising that “disability results from the interaction between persons with impairments and attitudinal and environmental barriers that hinders their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others.”²

Despite these facts, disability remains largely ignored and stigmatised both in general discourse and in academic research outside of the recent field of Disability Studies. While accessibility policies and plans have been developed in many countries, persons with disabilities continue to face discrimination, stigmatisation, and the effects of ableism in all aspects of life, including access to health care and support, education and the protection of their fundamental human rights, leading to negative life outcomes and life expectancies.³ Outside of recent disability rights movements, disability is generally viewed as something negative, a disorder to be repaired. Yet as Elizabeth Barnes has noted: “being disabled is not something that by itself or intrinsically makes you worse off. Being disabled is...a way of being a minority with respect to one’s body, just as being gay is a way of being a minority with respect to sexuality. It is something that makes you different from the majority, but that difference isn’t by itself a bad thing.”⁴

One of the most serious challenges faced by persons with disabilities today is the lack of understanding, appreciation and acceptance of these different ways of being human, experiencing life and interacting, with regard to physical, mental, cognitive, sensory, and other health differences. This volume aims to make a positive contribution by engaging issues surrounding disability with perspectives from existential philosophy. Existential philosophy, broadly understood, places the focus on the individual and on the precedence of existence over essence, on the lived, subjective experience of the individual, rejecting metaphysical and universalist views on human nature and the human condition. As such, it may provide a path to better understand the plurality of human experience and existence conditions. At the same time, many of the traditional themes of existential philosophy, such as choice, freedom, and

¹ World Health Organisation, ‘Disability’, https://www.who.int/health-topics/disability#tab=tab_1 (Consulted 2 June 2023).

² <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-persons-disabilities>

³ <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/disability-and-health>

⁴ Elizabeth Barnes, *The Minority Body. A Theory of Disability*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2016, p. 6.

authentic selfhood, may need to be re-examined in light of the specific difficulties and challenges presented to persons with minority bodies, minds, modes of communication, or experiences in a world where social norms and institutions entail direct and indirect discrimination.

Existential philosophy suggests that we are what we are in the eyes or gaze of others (Sartre) or through our acts of disclosure in the world (Beauvoir), or perhaps through the shared language games through which meaning is created (Wittgenstein). But what does this entail for individuals with minority bodies, experiences or realities, and whose experiences may be stigmatised, misunderstood or invalidated by the general community? Do cognitive, intellectual, physical and sensory disabilities or differences represent challenges to authentic self-disclosure in a world that pathologizes difference and in which the language for self-understanding and communication with others, as well as an understanding and appreciation of these differences, may be lacking?

Do the concepts of existential philosophy have something to contribute to discussions about disability rights, identity and pride? Are some founding existential concepts, such as freedom and authenticity, potentially misguided regarding certain persons' experiences? How do specific conditions or disabilities impact individuals' life choices and potential, their identity and autonomy? Can existential philosophy provide new perspectives to promote the recognition, respect and appreciation of difference and diversity? And in what ways does rethinking human existence through the lens of disability call into question some of the potentially still essentialist (as well as ableist) views of human nature inherent in existential philosophy?

This volume seeks to broaden our philosophical understanding of disability, moving beyond traditional questions in bioethics, to perspectives on the specific lived experience of persons with disabilities. Contributions engaging with any specific form of disability, as well as more general contributions on disability and ableism that engage with perspectives from existential philosophy and phenomenology (such as Albert Camus, Theodor Adorno, Emil Cioran, Simone de Beauvoir, Jean-Paul Sartre, Karl Jaspers, Hannah Arendt, Martin Heidegger and Ludwig Wittgenstein, and their nineteenth-century predecessors [Kierkegaard, Nietzsche...]) are welcome. *Contributions from scholars with disabilities are particularly welcome.*

To contribute:

Scholars interested in contributing a chapter are invited to submit an abstract of 500 words and short bio-bibliography by **10 September 2023** to melissa.fox-muraton@esc-clermont.fr. Early submission is welcome.

Full manuscripts for accepted proposals will be expected by **31 December 2023**. Manuscripts should be 20-35 pages, Times New Roman 12, double-spaced, with minimal formatting.

We hope that this collected volume will appear in the series *New Research in the History of Western Philosophy*, which is published by Brill.
<https://brill.com/display/serial/NRHW?language=en>