

BOOK REVIEW

Arguing about disability: philosophical perspectives, edited by Kristjana Kristiansen, Simo Vehmas and Tom Shakespeare, London, Routledge, 2009, 232 pp., £70.00, ISBN 0-4154-5595-2

This collection of essays has the stated goal of combining philosophical insights with disability topics. The editors, Kristjana Kristiansen, Simo Vehmas, and Tom Shakespeare, propose in their introduction that disability studies, while doing an excellent job of ‘reconceptualizing of disability as a social phenomenon . . . lacks essential dimensions of theoretical scrutiny . . .’ (1). The book attempts to provide this rigorous theoretical scrutiny by closely examining key ideas in disability studies. The collection is divided into three major sections – metaphysics, political philosophy, and ethics. Within the first section, authors try to define terms like subjectivity, values, realism, and social constructionism. The second section looks at philosophical discussions revolving around justice, citizenship, freedom, personhood, and identity. The final section is on ethics and looks at interventions like cochlear implants, genetic screening, and, somewhat anomalously, at how Giorgio Agamben’s work might impact disability studies.

There are many good things to say about this book. Readers will come away with a greater sense of complexity in regard to traditional issues in disability studies. For example Matti Häyry’s essay ‘The moral contestedness of selecting “deaf embryos”’ is certainly the most comprehensive and thoughtful review of this controversy that I have read. The issue at stake is the desire of some Deaf parents to use in vitro fertilization (IVF) along with pre-implantation genetic diagnosis (PGD) to select embryos with a greater likelihood of developing into deaf children. While many segments of the Deaf world find this practice perfectly acceptable, bioethicists have had a field day condemning it. The issue for the former group is that one should have a right to have a child like oneself; for the latter it is that if one is using medical technology for human reproduction the aim should be to give the best possible life to the child once it is born. Häyry painstakingly goes through every permutation of the argument, teasing out all the possible philosophical and bioethical implications while also giving due regard to the rights of the parents. Using the logic derived from both the medical and social models, Häyry comes up with a ‘non-directive compromise’ which duly notes that both sides of the argument have equal justification and so genetic counselling should highlight this duality rather than strive for some unattainable ‘objective’ neutrality. This essay alone justifies the purchase of the entire book.

On a similar theme, Patrick Kermit examines the issue of cochlear implants, and particularly the argument that a child’s best future should be kept in mind when making a decision to implant or not – a similar argument to the one that of the best

possible future used in the Häyry essay. Kermit ends up focusing on the child's right to language, and particularly the right to have an indigenous language – in this case sign language – as a justification for not promoting cochlear implantation. The essay makes parallels between the struggles of indigenous peoples to keep their native languages and the rights of the Deaf to do so.

Berge Solberg's essay on prenatal screening for Down syndrome is also a very thorough examination of the subject. Weighing the issue about autonomy of parents in being able to choose screening against the feelings that parents and people with Down syndrome might have that they are being denigrated. Solberg explores the possibility that Down syndrome 'represents not a disease, but rather a radical difference' (193). Without taking sides, Solberg concludes that the case for Down syndrome screening is an ethically complex one and that early advocates of screening the total pregnant population have overlooked this complexity. One suggestion is to think of screening as a way to help foetuses and newborns in danger rather than to identify the foetus as 'an enemy or friend'. On the whole, this essay does a very good job of teasing out the difficulties in Down syndrome screening.

Jackie Leach Scully's essay looks at Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological theory of embodiment to examine some premises of the mind-body split in disability studies. She raises the issue that the mind of PWD's may in fact be shaped by their corporeal experience, and she argues that the metaphors that non-disabled people use about PWD's can create neural loops and pathways that will inevitably colour the way disabled people are perceived.

There is some wrestling with past philosophers like R. H. Tawney and John Rawls in the political section. Jerome Bickenbach goes back to a 1931 essay by Tawney who asserts that justice relates more to social inequalities than to individual differences. Bickenbach wonders whether these individual differences need to be taken into consideration in addition to social and economic inequality. He uses the term 'non-talents' to account for the various differences that a range of individuals might have. And he concludes that more than just a simple sense of distributive justice is needed – what one wants is an additional sense that the failure to respond to the needs of individuals with differences can amount to a kind of social injustice.

Rawls comes up in Richard Hull's essay on disability and freedom. Hull describes what he calls Rawls' minimalist philosophy which posits a person as free if one's freedom is not violated actively by another person. This essentially negative view of freedom is too restrictive, Hull asserts, because one might not be able to act freely if one is limited by one's own inability to carry out an action. Disability is obviously the case in point in which an inability can limit one's freedom, so one can be unfree despite the fact that no one is actively limiting one's freedom. Thus remedial actions and increased access is a requirement to create freedom for all, a much more positive and activist view than that presented by Rawls.

As one might imagine with a work like this, the social model is taken up for some criticism and defence. In most of the essays, there is a general acceptance of the social model, but the book aims to make things complex and the social model is notoriously easy to think of in simple terms. The most vulnerable part of the social model in the past has been a simple distinction between impairment and disability. Some of the essays seek to challenge that simple distinction by wondering if impairments themselves might be socially constructed. Simo Vehmas and Pekka Mäkelä explore this subject and also seek to determine if the postmodern stance in which everything is socially constructed can be usefully applied to disability. As realists, rather than

postmodernists, they seek to debunk an extreme form of social constructedness while also allowing that ‘impairment includes a physical and social dimension’ (45). They propose, however, that there are what they call ‘brute facts’, and that these are not dependent on representation and social interpretation. Their essay could have been stronger if it had realistically tackled postmodernism by using the texts of seminal postmodern philosophers like Derrida or Foucault in addition to citing disability studies scholars who reference them. Having not done that, the philosophical exercise looks more like an argument against enlightenment era sceptics like Bishop Berkeley.

Having found much to like in this book, there are still some problematic issues. The claim to be bringing some new rigor to a baggy discourse of disability studies is a bit of a large claim. There has been for some years now a body of writing accumulating in which philosophers have already ploughed some of this field – notably Marsha Saxton, Shelley Tremain, Marian Corker, Anita Silvers, Adrienne Asche, and Eva Kittay, to name a few. In addition other philosophers who might not be described as disability-friendly have delved into the subject – most notably John Rawls, Martha Nussbaum, and of course the often reviled Peter Singer. Not many of these show up in this book. I had been hoping, from the title of the book, that there would indeed be some serious arguing going on the book, and the book would be organized to present a set of pros and cons, modules of controversy to be argued back and forth. But the essays in this book don’t argue so much as refine and define; and the authors all seem unaware of what each other has written, so that no major of sense of argument permeates the book.

In that regard, as a fan of the contrarian work of Tom Shakespeare, I was expecting more of boisterous ride than I got. In fact, Shakespeare seems virtually absent from the book, having written no essay in it. If he had some influence on the book, that influence may be well below the radar. The general introduction is quite short and uncontroversial, mainly summarizing each chapter, and makes no argumentation or claims itself. Indeed the introduction ends only with the summary of the last chapter but without any conclusion with which one might argue.

As a US academic, and I try to say this without self-interest, I have to add that the absence of any North or South American authors in this work and the virtual absence of any references or citations to the work of scholars from countries other than the UK, former Commonwealth members, and Scandinavia gives one pause. Especially given the fact that the US is so strongly oriented toward history, philosophy, literature, and the other humanities, it might have made sense to make this work a bit more inclusive. And the reality is that in a multicultural and global world, disability studies, especially work that attempts to provide far-reaching analyses of complex issues, needs to leave the localization of certain viewpoints to find a truly philosophical overview.

A final carp is that the book has no serious engagement with continental philosophy. I would have liked to have seen a less consistently positivist view and a willingness to even mention the major trends in philosophy in the past 50 years. The theoreticians of biopower, biopolitics, and deconstruction are rarely if ever to be found. There is one essay on Giorgio Agamben, written by Donna Reeve, a PhD student, but it is the weakest essay in the book. It tries but cannot make up for the omissions elsewhere. You would have no idea, thumbing through this book, that Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze, Jean-Luc Nancy, Slavoj Žižek, Julia Kristeva, to name just a few, had ever written anything that might be relevant to a current discussion of disability and philosophy.

Despite these reservations, I do recommend the reading of *Arguing about disability*. It will provoke thoughtful responses as well as, one hopes, arguments.

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