

Rhetorics of difference: Julia Kristeva and disability

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In recent years, the philosopher Julia Kristeva has entered the field of disability, both in her academic capacity and as an adviser to the French government on policy and legislative issues. This is not only an indication of Kristeva's evolving research interests, but also a symptom of disability's increasingly prominent status as a topic of interdisciplinary inquiry. This article undertakes an examination of Kristeva's approach to disability, and of its implications. Kristeva's approach draws strongly on her philosophical and psychoanalytic background, and aims to bring the disabled and non-disabled closer together, ending the marginalization and isolation of people with disabilities. Rhetorical analysis of one of Kristeva's programmatic articles, 'Liberty, Equality, Fraternity and... Vulnerability' however, shows that Kristeva's approach to disability reifies the very conceptual divides and experiential dichotomies she attempts to transcend. Disability is represented as essentially catastrophic and essentially tied to pain and isolation. This approach ultimately worsens rather than improves the grounds for social change.

Keywords: disability; Julia Kristeva; rhetorical situation; audience; implied reader; dichotomies; topoi

1. Introduction

The work of Julia Kristeva can be divided very approximately into three phases. From 1974, when she first rose to prominence with *La Révolution du langage poétique* (Published in English as *Revolution in Poetic Language* [Kristeva 1984]) until the mid-eighties, she could to some extent be described as a linguist, certainly in that she drew extensively on Roman Jakobson and Mikhail Bakhtin, two seminal figures in the study of language. Later, Kristeva's work took a psychoanalytic turn (Kristeva 1989, 2002) – she took her degree in psychoanalysis in 1979 – and a feminist one, as she published studies of Hannah Arendt (Kristeva 2001a), Melanie Klein (Kristeva 2001b) and Colette (Kristeva and Todd 2004).

More recently, Kristeva has begun to explore *disability*. Her writing on the topic is clearly influenced by her interest in language, psychoanalysis, and the speaking subject; nevertheless, much of her recent work, including the *Letter to the President of the Republic on people in a situation of disability* (Kristeva 2003), indicate a primary interest in policy implications, and, ultimately, wide-ranging social change. Kristeva's interest in the politics of disability has been expressed by her leadership of the *Conseil national d'handicap* (National Disability Council), which she co-founded

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in 2003, and she has used her status as a public intellectual in order to raise disability issues in France and internationally.

Kristeva's work on disability is grounded in ethical concerns over the current and historical mistreatment and oppression of disabled people, concerns that also inform much of the work being done both in academic Disability Studies and in the political sphere. Since 1981 was declared the International Year of Disabled Persons by the United Nations, the topic has become increasingly prominent across the globe, particularly as it relates to individual rights and state obligations. The UN Convention on People with Disabilities (United Nations 2007) has, as of April 2010, been signed by 153 countries and has 110 parties.

In many ways, however, the global discourse on disability is in its infancy. There are vast differences between national states of research, interpretive frameworks, and political awareness. It is interesting, therefore, when a figure of Kristeva's intellectual stature joins the dialogue on disability. Her concerns are chiefly with France and French society; her argument is that France lags far behind both the Anglo-American world and the Nordic countries in its approach to disability. Nevertheless, Kristeva produces work that should be addressed in an international context – not only because she publishes English-language texts and discusses American examples, but because her stated aims in entering the field of disability are as utopian as they are revolutionary.

Kristeva's goals are clearly articulated in an article entitled *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity and... Vulnerability* (hereafter, *LEFV*). I heard it delivered as a lecture at Oslo University College in September 2009; it has since been published in the journal *WSQ* (Kristeva 2010). Here, Kristeva develops and sharpens topics and themes that were introduced in her *Letter to the President of the Republic*, and in her discussion with and of the artist Joseph Grigely (Kristeva 2006). Her approach to disability is grounded in French cultural history and psychoanalytic theory. It is my contention that her work can be productively engaged from the perspective of rhetorical theory and disability theory. The purpose of this article is to engage with Kristeva's approach to disability, as it emerges from *LEFV*, in such a way.

Kristeva's work on disability is particularly apt for rhetorical analysis because it exemplifies how the construction of a *rhetorical situation* (Bitzer 1968), including a particular *exigence*, an *audience* and external *constraints*, influences the topic under discussion. This issue also holds considerable interest from the perspective of both disability theory and disability policy, because of a question that is both unresolved and central to those fields: What constitutes the relationship between disability as a singular or totalizing identity marker and disability as a fluid, context-sensitive property – and how can a theory of disability and disability policies be articulated in such a way as to preserve the common characteristics of disabled people without ignoring their differences? Kristeva does not solve this problem in *LEFV*, but her approach to it is nevertheless of great interest.

2. Kristeva's text

For Kristeva, the exigence that motivates *LEFV* consists of the current conditions for and policy towards disabled people in France:

Did you know, for example, that in the country of the rights of man, thirteen thousand disabled children who could have gone to school in 2002 did not? [...] that twelve thousand people with multiple disabilities receive no care [...] (Kristeva 2010, 268)

The exigence is rhetorical in that it, in Lloyd Bitzer's terms, can be completely or partially removed by means of discourse. Kristeva's goal is partly to provide that discourse, but she constructs her rhetorical situation as one that holds greater opportunities. She argues that '[humanism] can find a chance to renew itself in this struggle for the dignity of the disabled (Kristeva 2010, 252).' This is because disability expresses something essential but unacknowledged about the human condition – its *vulnerability*. Only by facing the vulnerability we experience when faced with disabled people can we—the audience—begin to create a new and more complex world.

What, then, are the constraints? Chiefly, the nature of disability. The initial paragraphs of *LEFV* describe the primary problem of disability as one of threats posed to the psyche of non-disabled people:

[T]he disabled person opens a *narcissistic identity wound* in the non-disabled; he or she threatens the non-disabled with *psychic or physical death*, the fear of falling apart and, beyond this, the angst of seeing the *boundaries of the human species itself* fall away. Inevitably, the disabled suffer from an *isolating discrimination that cannot be shared*. (emphases in the original)

The word 'inevitably' in the last sentence is used ironically; Kristeva's argument is about overcoming the isolating discrimination. The unalterable constraints consist not in the psychological response of the audience towards disabled people, but the consequences of that response, which are elaborated in three stories of disability and isolation.

One story is drawn from Kristeva's experience as a psychotherapist, the other two are from television programs she has watched. The first of these programs, *People say I'm crazy*, is a documentary about the schizophrenic artist 'John'.¹ In Kristeva's interpretation of the documentary, the emphasis that the filmmakers place on his paintings contributes to the 'exclusion' (Kristeva 2010, 253) around him. There is little discussion of his psychic life, and therefore, no true sharing (253). The second program isn't referred to by title, but includes 'a mother who [...] had failed her child' (255). The mother is inflicted with paralyzing guilt and victimized by 'the archaic weight of a culture from which we have trouble detaching ourselves: a culture that posits human beings as creatures capable of excellence, pleasure, and achievement, in the image of an almighty Creator' (256). The third example is a patient of Kristeva's named Claire, who is the mother of an autistic girl, Marie. Because Marie's father 'withdrew into his work' (254) Claire is left alone to 'live in another world, an antiworld, the world of disability cut off from the world' (254). All three stories exemplify the pain of disability as a major constraint both on responses of discourse and on social change – there is no way forward without the acknowledgement of pain and vulnerability, and the attempt to avoid this acknowledgement will only lead to catastrophe.

The three brief individual cases are followed by a longer *narratio* in which the *historical* constraints on the perception of disability are discussed. Kristeva, drawing strongly on Henri-Jacques Stiker's foundational *A history of disability* (1999) [1982]), discusses biblical, French medieval and Enlightenment attitudes toward disability, ending in the present moment. Kristeva's argument is that disability, as a social

category, was in earlier times subsumed under poverty and illness. It is only with what she terms the first phase of social awareness, commenced during the Enlightenment, the possibility of *rehabilitation* was introduced and awareness of ‘the infirm’ (Kristeva 2010, 257) began to grow. The second phase is marked by the *state*, rather than charitable institutions, assuming the responsibility for this rehabilitation, thus broadening awareness. And today, ‘France is trying to put into place the *third phase* in the history of disability, notably with the “law for the equality of disabled people.”’

This summary of psychological and historical constraints covers about half of the article. The remainder of *LEFV* is an *argumentatio* in which Kristeva returns to the topic of vulnerability, a category that she argues should be added ‘as a fourth term to the humanistic triad inherited from the Enlightenment – liberty, equality and fraternity’ (Kristeva 2010, 267). Kristeva suggests that the best strategy for bridging the gap between the worlds of the disabled and the non-disabled is ‘*psychoanalytical listening to vulnerability*’ (266), because recognizing vulnerability ‘in me will help me to discover the incomparable subject in the limited body, to construct a common life project’ (266). Thus the exigence may literally be modified by means of discourse; it is by speaking and listening that we will begin to change.

3. ‘We will try to rehabilitate the subject in the deficient body.’ Kristeva’s audience

Before addressing the implications of Kristeva’s argument, it is necessary to first discuss the nature of her audience. An important clue to the identity of her addressees is provided by her use of the first person plural; the article is about *us* and the challenges that *we* face. This is the ‘we’ and the ‘us’ of the polity. Kristeva is urging both philosophical reflection and political action. The rhetorical situation that she is identifying is indeed exigent, in that France compares so poorly to ‘countries like Sweden, Norway, Belgium, Canada and the United States as well as many others’ (Kristeva 2010, 251).

The polity that Kristeva addresses, i.e. her primary implied reader (Iser 1974), is emphatically non-disabled. Although she refers to both the disabled and the non-disabled from an external point of view, the ‘we’ in which the reader is included is always that of the non-disabled. Moreover, this reader is one who experiences the psychological responses of fear, angst and vulnerability. In the same way that an appeal about gender equality directed to an implicitly male audience is problematic, so is Kristeva’s choice of employing a non-disabled *we*. It exacerbates the problem she tasks herself with solving – bridging the gap between ‘two worlds.’ This phrase, and Kristeva’s frequent use of it, serves to underscore and emphasize the extent to which disability is both a conceptually and a socially distinct category from non-disability. The degree to which this is true is a matter of (sometimes heated) debate both in disability studies, policy circles and the NGO community. It is unclear whether Kristeva construes the ‘world of disability’ metaphorically or literally – as a socially and physically separate world, e.g. like a monastery or a prison, or merely as a different modality of experience and interaction. In either case, however, Kristeva’s dichotomous separation of disability and non-disability, with scant reference to contextual factors, forces her readers to choose: Are they disabled or not?

This textual process has a real-world counterpart. Deborah Stone (1984) has described the early phases of the welfare state in Germany, the UK and the US as a process in which a needs-based economy is established alongside the primary,

effort-based one. Disability pensions may be scaled, but access to the needs-based economy is chiefly a question of either/or, with the answer dependent on a medico-bureaucratic assessment in which (with reference to a metaphor that has been explored by Kristeva in *Black Sun*, her book on depression) digital categories are imposed on analogue bodies.

Modernity frequently implies the construction of disability as both privilege and stigma, with the state simultaneously acting as arbiter on the question of entrance and reifying the category (cf., for example, Petryna 2002 on the significance of disability certification in post-Chernobyl Ukraine). Much of the current work in disability studies, undertaken from a great variety of perspectives (Barnes, Mercer, and Shakespeare 1999; Barton 1996; Corker and French 1999; Davis 2006; Gleeson 1999; Imrie 1996; Oliver 1996; Snyder and Mitchell 2006; Tremain 2005), has aimed at the deconstruction of disability as an overarching, life-defining confluence of categories, and at the understanding of disability as a fundamentally *situational* phenomenon.

It is certainly possible to theorize a different reader – a *model* reader (cf. the introduction of the term by Eco [1981] and elaborations by Tønnesson [2004]) – who does not feel naturally included in Kristeva’s ‘we,’ e.g. because he or she is himself or herself disabled. Such a reader is nevertheless forced to choose between ‘us’ and ‘them’; belonging to the first category is commensurate with participation in the rhetorical audience, while membership in the second category implies, at least on the terms of *LEVF*, pain and isolation. Kristeva’s implied audience, then, belongs to *one* world, and has scant knowledge of the other – and the divide between worlds runs deep.

4. ‘The abyss.’ Kristeva’s dichotomies

Kristeva’s main thesis is presented in what is also her most striking figurative paragraph:

Because my inquiry convinced me that, whatever the reasons for the French delay and the shortcomings of measures taken or neglected, the core of the difficulties lies in the abyss that separates the world of disability from the world of the able. And it is urgent to create messengers between these ‘two merciless worlds’: one of disability, with its sufferings and its protective but also aggravating isolation; the other, a society of performance, success, competition, pleasure, and spectacle that ‘doesn’t want to know’.
(2010, 261)

This is, perhaps, the most daunting constraint on rhetorical action. Kristeva’s task, set both for herself and for her audience, is to reach out across the abyss, the width and depth of which she underscores repeatedly:

Oh the pain, anger and bitterness of the walled up world of disability! Oh these demands reiterated again and again to no avail and this lonely suffering of not being able to share the intolerable pain of it all! Since Marie’s birth, Claire had lived in another world, an anti-world, the world of the disabled cut off from the rest of the world. (255)

The essential and fundamental *difference* of the experience of disability is a constraint on rhetorical action in many ways, since the qualities that compose the situation of disability are, according to Kristeva, correlated with a response or action on the part of non-disabled society:

- The *pain* of disability causes a *denial of pain* in the non-disabled. (Of Claire: ‘Marie’s father withdrew into his work.’) (254)
- The *silence* of disability is maintained as *speaking* remains the privilege of the non-disabled. (Of John: ‘No one seems to contemplate letting the disabled artist speak of his anxieties and desires’) (253)
- The absence of any *sharing* of the qualities of disability constitutes *isolation* by the non-disabled. (Of John: ‘Thanks to the film, his works are soon made public; he has an exhibition; he is showered with grants’ (252)
- The absence of *interaction* by the non-disabled precludes the possibility of *inclusion*. (Of Claire: ‘Oh, the malaise of the isolated world of disability its outbursts and bitterness!’) (254)

Pain, vulnerability, silence and isolation are frequently recurring themes in the history of disability – and illness. *LEFV* approaches them within the framework of certain Aristotelian common topics (*koinoi topoi*), namely the dichotomies of cause/effect and antecedent/consequence. Disability is described by Kristeva as belonging necessarily to the first of these conceptual pairs; as the *cause* of ‘narcissistic identity wounds’ (2010, 251) in others or as the *antecedent* of personal crisis, e.g. ‘pain, anger and bitterness.’

Kristeva employs the *topoi* of cause/effect and antecedent/consequence to represent the situation of disability as a phenomenon with certain fundamental or essential qualities, thus preserving the notion of two discrete experiential realms, separated by a chasm or abyss. This belies both the significance of differing *impairments* and their relationship to different social spheres. The ‘disabled person’ exists on the same level of abstraction as the ‘unemployed person’; in order to make sense of the situation of either, both the structures of society and the capacities of the individual must be considered. When seen as an *effect* or as a *consequence*, on the other hand, disability is more easily perceived as a *construction*.

Why is it important to critique the notion of an inevitable causal link between disability and pain/isolation? Isn’t Kristeva’s goal of true interaction between disability and non-disability an admirable one, the moral exigency of which is inversely correlated with the quality of life of disabled people? My answer is that the more disability is represented as a uniquely horrifying predicament, the more improbable social change appears. In terms of argument, the dichotomy between disability and non-disability serves well as the moral grounds for a social revolution on behalf of others, but much more poorly as a realistic representation of the material basis for that revolution – and less still as an appeal to the reader’s sense of revolutionary community, because of the rhetorical difficulty of recognizing oneself as an inhabitant, even a potential one, of Kristeva’s world of disability.

I am somewhat at a loss in trying to comprehend Kristeva’s rhetorical strategy of emphasizing the *otherness* of disability, other than as a means of achieving a wholly different goal. Here is the vertiginous finale to *LEFV*:

New worlds then open to our listening, difficult or enchained, neither normal nor disabled, a flowering of surprise, worlds becoming polyphonies, resonances, different yet compatible, worlds finally returned to their plurality. Don’t tell me I’m dreaming or that this is poetry. What if this were the private face of the politics of disability? (2010, 267)

This *is* poetry, the poetry of the origin myth. The hatching of surprises and of worlds from a mundane egg is a well-known mythological trope, and a fitting counterpart to Kristeva's call for a new revolution, an expansion of the three virtues of the *tricolor* to include a fourth, i.e. vulnerability. But this goal is not linked to disability and disabled people by necessity. Kristeva admits as much; to her, vulnerability is inherently human and essential to our understanding of the human condition. Her vision of the embrace of human vulnerability depends, however, on a clear distinction between non-disability and disability, one that also implies that the latter category is fully co-extensive with the categories of isolation and exclusion, in order that disability may be turned into the exemplar of vulnerability: *Ecce homo*.

The strong identification of disability with vulnerability is not spurious, but it is problematic because it discourages both the recognition that many disabled people can be and are wholly included in mainstream society and, more seriously, a nuanced understanding of the phenomenon itself. There isn't *a* situation of disability, one that is also a situation of isolation and exclusion, but situations through which disabled people move, and in which disablement, isolation and exclusion ebb and flow according to the physical and social circumstances. Disability can imply community and sharing, depending on the individuals in question, and being disabled in the workplace is not identical with being disabled at the dinner table – and the one does not follow from the other.

5. The use of disability: Kristeva on Diderot and Saunderson

Kristeva's strong identification of disability with isolation and misfortune is present both in her general arguments and in her particular stories about disabled people, whether contemporary or historical. A case in point is her retelling of an episode from Denis Diderot's *Letter on the blind*, of his 'meeting with a geometry professor at Cambridge, who, though blind at birth, and never having seen the slightest object, was capable of doing very sophisticated calculations with volume' (Kristeva 2010, 258).

The genius in question is Nicholas Saunderson, who held the Lucasian professorship in mathematics from 1711 until his death in 1739 (Diderot and Jourdain 1916). Diderot, according to Kristeva, concluded that 'if such a genius had been brought down by infirmity, there was something wrong with "divine order."' She refers to him as being 'struck by his meeting' (Kristeva 2010, 258) with Saunderson. However, the *Letter* was written ten years after Saunderson's death, and there is no evidence that he and Diderot ever actually met one another. Rather:

[a]s a translator of English, [Diderot had] read *The Elements of Algebra*, published with an autobiographical preface by Nicholas Saunderson (1682–1739), the blind Professor of Mathematics at Cambridge. Diderot was clearly impressed by the ingenious use that Saunderson made of marked tablets and rulers in his calculations and Saunderson became one of the inspirations for enlightenment efforts to raise the aspirations of the blind. (Oliphant 2008, 70)

Kristeva's interpretation is problematic because she stresses the emotional impact of the interaction between the blind Saunderson and the visually unimpaired Diderot, when the encounter was one between the writer of a mathematical treatise and his translator. In the *Letter* itself, Diderot does not discourse with the historical

Saunderson, but rather applies the latter's name to a fictional character in order to express certain views on epistemology and sensory experience. In fact, Diderot goes to some trouble in order to substantiate this fictional character:

By one of those mystifications which make the French polemical literature of the eighteenth century the despair of bibliographers, Diderot cites as his authority a *Life of Saunderson*, by Dr. Inclif. He sets forth the title with great circumstantiality, but no such book exists or ever did exist. (Morley and Diderot 1921, 75)

The encounter between the two appears to have been of an intellectual rather than emotional nature, and Diderot's interest was in the implications of Saunderson's achievements, and its sensory basis, rather than in his personal misfortune.

This did not preclude Diderot from engaging in close observation of blind people:

The *Letter on the Blind* and its *Addition*, published thirty-three to thirty-four years later, are works so rich in observations on the psychology of blind people and their ability to compensate that they are today considered foundational texts by specialists. (Weygand 2009, 64)

But Diderot is not responding to or writing about calamity or isolation; he is discussing the specifics of sensation and cognition based on various sensory inputs. On Saunderson, he is full of admiration, and far from shaken:

Wonderful stories, indeed, are told of him, and yet there is not one to which, from his attainments in literature and skill in mathematics, we may not safely give credit. (Diderot and Jourdain 1916, 90)

In some of her examples, Kristeva uses the disabled person as an illustrative example in order to discuss vulnerability. She does not enter into the particularities of impairments, but prefers the overarching divide between the disabled and the non-disabled, between manifest misfortune and the identity wounds caused by the fear or horror of such misfortune.

The case against the validity of such a divide is aptly put by the writer and researcher Susan Wendell, who presents herself as a disabled person in the following way:

A person with a disability (or illness) that is not readily apparent, who has a social position with some prestige and power, who earns a good income, who is creative and productive, happily partnered, and obviously enjoying life, violates just about every stereotype about people with disabilities (or illnesses). It is hard for others to accept that anything is really wrong, and, in a sense, nothing is, because a disability is like any other difficulty with which, or around which, a person can live a good life. (Wendell 1996, 3)

Wendell discusses the discomfort and aversion produced in others whenever the particulars of her physical limitations (consequence of her ME, also known as Chronic Fatigue Syndrome) have to be addressed. But she does not belong to a separate *world*; she lives in the chaos and confusion of multiple worlds, always colliding.

Any singular definition of disability is problematic because of the difficulty of establishing boundaries. Is relapsing-remitting multiple sclerosis disabling, even though the condition may present with months or even years of minimal symptoms?

What about severely isolated and excluded people, whose situation is far more strongly correlated with their social class and economic circumstance than with their impairment? To which of the two worlds do *they* belong?

Kristeva's metaphor of messengers sent between worlds – carrying messages that may prove revelatory to the inhabitants of both – is flawed in that presupposes a distinction which is not only conceptually unsound, but historically false. Although she bases much of her historical account on the work of Henri-Jacques Stiker (1999) [1982]), who shows definitively that 'disability' is a modern construct, and that for other times, other modes of explanation and other categories must be employed, Kristeva's concept of disability is all but trans-historical. We see that her rhetorical strategy reifies, more than anything, the dichotomy which she explicitly states that she wishes to transcend.

The problem for further analysis, then, is what to do with the familiar topology of dichotomous opposition between disability and non-disability. It should be noted that this topology is espoused and employed by a great variety of agents in the disability field. Some American cultural theorists defend it, as a means of building communities of experience and identity across a range of different impairments and geographical locations (Siebers 2008). Some British Marxists embrace it as, a means of developing class consciousness and raising awareness of exclusion from the work force (Oliver 1990). Some Scandinavian NGOs use it, as a means of forging political alliances between groups that might otherwise perceive themselves as disparate clusters of medical patients or social outcasts (Grue 2009).

There is, however, a corollary to the dichotomous opposition: Particular, essential characteristics tend to accrue on either side of it. When arguing that human vulnerability is visible in its most prominent and disturbing aspect in the bodies of disabled people, Kristeva is simultaneously implying that vulnerability is a totalizing characteristic of the disabled experience. This is nothing new in the history of psychoanalytically informed approaches to disability – as is pointed out by Tobin Siebers, who also identifies the Freudian presumed association between vulnerability and narcissism:

We of the tender organs apparently have a guaranteed protection against the sorrows of social existence, but we pay for it with the tendency to narcissism, which is the more serious disorder because it has no cure. Narcissists are beyond the reach of therapy because they refuse to invest energy in other people. So long as they suffer – and they suffer always – they cease to love. (Siebers 2008, 40)

Compare Kristeva:

In this encounter, could the disabled subject become not my analyst, but my analyzer? [...] If every speaking being is constructed around a central deficiency, disability inflicts a very different trial: the disabled subject is confronted with the irremediable, lacks or insufficiencies that evolve within certain limits, when they don't stagnate or worsen. (Kristeva 2010, 266)

There is a disturbing presumption here, both of an essential difference between the disabled and the non-disabled, and the function of disabled 'subjects' relative to non-disabled ones. In the Freudian case, disabled people – those of the 'tender organs' – are simply beyond the reach of therapy. In Kristeva's view, their main purpose is to induce therapeutic change in others. In both cases, disabled subjects represent such

extremes of the human psyche that they are functionally beyond true subjecthood. They are there for instructional purposes only. They are ‘they,’ not ‘we.’

6. ‘My utopia.’ Kristeva’s macro-level argument

The overarching argument in *LEFV* is not about disability, but about humanism and vulnerability. Kristeva warrants claims about vulnerability with the topology of dichotomous opposition, backed by stories of isolation:

My ambition, my Utopia, consists of believing that this vulnerability reflected in the disabled person forms us deeply, or, if you prefer, unconsciously, and that as a result, it can be shared. [...] The outside nature of this ambition is actually built on ordinary, painful, everyday experiences. Here are three, among many others. (Kristeva 2010, 252)

The stories of John, Claire, and the Woman on Television (Kristeva 2010, 252) all provide, as backing, cases where disability, as perceived by Kristeva, is an isolating and alienating situation.

In terms of Toulmin’s (1958) argumentation theory, Kristeva’s claim can be articulated as follows:

Claim: Humanism ‘can find a chance to revitalize itself in the battle for the dignity of the disabled by constructing what is still sorely lacking: respect for a vulnerability that cannot be shared’ (Kristeva 2010, 252).

Evidence/Claim: Vulnerability is what makes us human, and should be acknowledged as such.

Evidence: Vulnerability is already present within ourselves, although we try to banish it to *another world*, that of disability.

Warrant: Disabled people, because they bring us face to face with the most painful and problematic aspects of the human condition, suffer from an isolating discrimination (see Figure 1).

A prominent aspect of the warrant is the psychoanalytic claim that unwanted or threatening parts of the psyche are projected unto others. Another and less immediately apparent part of the warrant is the assumption that such undesirable or threatening qualities are immediately and essentially connected with disability. The primary evidence for this is Kristeva’s stories about individual disabled people, and her interpretation of these stories.

Kristeva’s argument is not chiefly about disability. Her goal is to employ psychoanalysis as a catalyst of social change; disability is a useful, but by no means indispensable part of that project. It is only because disability and vulnerability are already closely identified that disability enters into Kristeva’s argument, and this connection is used to warrant the general point about how we organize society, not in order to explore the topic of disability itself.

7. Conclusion

I am skeptical of the *revolutionary* potential of Kristeva’s views on disability. The association between vulnerability and disability is not new, but in fact highly conventional. To reinforce that association, and in fact to develop a dichotomy in

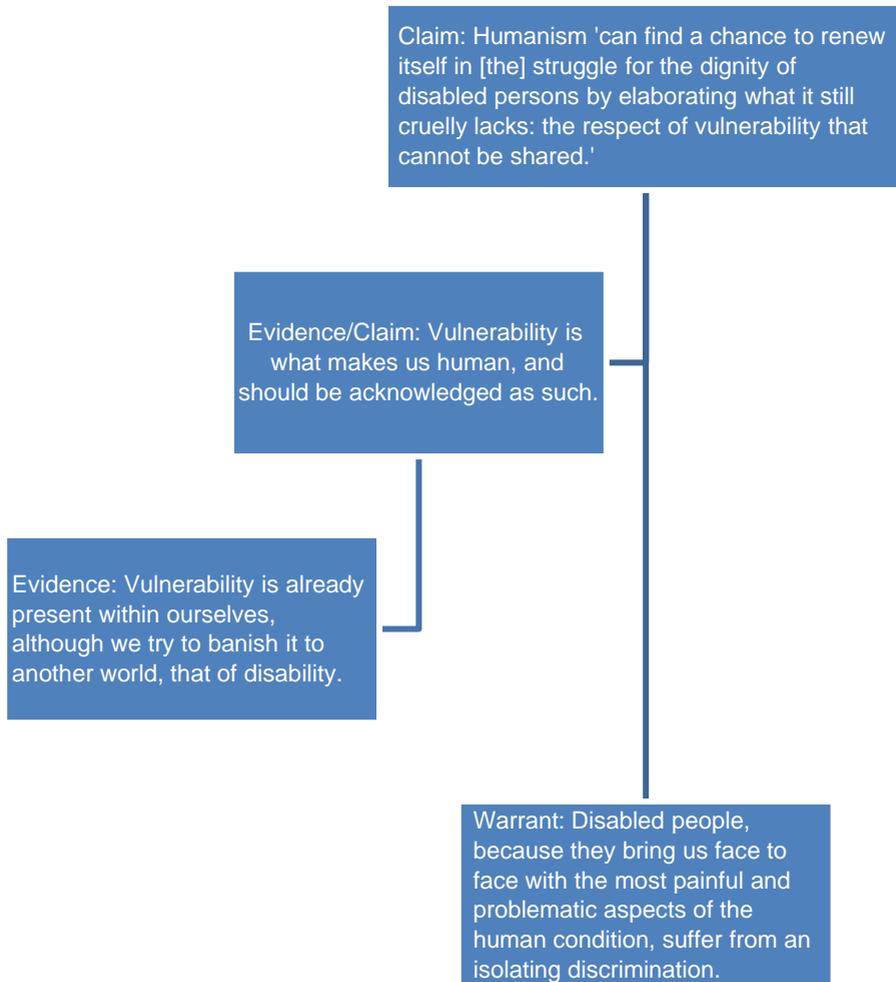


Figure 1. Kristeva's macro-level argument.

which disabled people are positioned in a separate world, essentially isolated and vulnerable, does not encourage interaction between the disabled and the non-disabled. In a descriptive sense, it is inaccurate – even in France. While it is crucial to speak for the voiceless and promote the cause of the vulnerable and isolated, it is unfortunate, even patronizing, to assume that extreme isolation applies to any and all people with disabilities. Kristeva's dichotomies are to a certain extent effective as contrastive and dramatic devices, but they are highly counterproductive in both an empirical and an ideological sense.

Kristeva's voice in the disability field is an important one, both because of her intellectual stature and because of her influence in shaping French policy. The reason I've applied rhetorical analysis to one of her texts on the underlying problematic of disability is both to demonstrate the pitfalls of a certain kind of essentialism, and to show how that essentialism can be reproduced by textual means.

Figurations of distance, of gaps and abysses, proliferate throughout Kristeva's text. Although she stresses the importance of the expression 'being in a situation of

handicap' (Kristeva 2010, 259) her use of the terms 'disabled' and 'non-disabled' belies the implications of that expression. The absolute identification of disability with vulnerability and isolation serves to reify the very problems that Kristeva is trying to solve. Her approach turns the disabled/non-disabled distinction into an insurmountable barrier. If her ambition of *true interaction* is to be realized, her rhetoric of difference must be abandoned.

Note

1. The artist is John Cadigan; extensive information on the film is available at <http://www.peoplesayimcrazy.org/>.

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