

## The Disabling Ontology of Ableism

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What are the impediments to a capability approach to education for individuals with disabilities? Ashley Taylor's essay explores this query by asking essentially three questions: (1) Does a capability approach minimize how disability is viewed by society? (2) Do theorists of the capability approach need a more reality-based approach to inclusive education that takes into account how society views disability? And (3), how exactly are "valuable functionings," central to the capability approach, defined normatively and procedurally? Taylor follows these three questions with the contention that "a [capability approach]-informed framework of educational justice ... [needs] to balance educational justice with the aim of *normalizing* disability with a sensitivity to the existing conditions of disability exclusion." The questions Taylor presents are important, raising not only normative and procedural issues, but also ontological questions about the meaning of disability and ableism. After embarking on a sympathetic critique of Taylor's argument, I will make clear what ontological questions need to be asked in order to evaluate any theory of justice aimed at the inclusion of students with disability.

As Taylor points out, the capability approach is an attempt to redress troubled relations between justice and equality, in order to address in a practical manner the distribution of resources necessary for a dignified life. As theorized by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum, the capability approach "attends to the actual differences among individuals in their capacity to convert material resources into opportunities." Proponents believe that the capability approach provides a necessary corrective to the primary social goods approach initially proposed by John Rawls forty years ago. To review briefly, Rawls' theory of primary social goods argues for an abstract calculus of social interests as the only rational approach to competing claims for resources. In contrast to the "original position" theorized by Rawls — in which decision makers do not know what abilities they have — the capabilities approach takes an "on the ground" metric for the distribution of resources raising questions about what resources individuals have available to them to "achieve valuable functions" in their respective "beings and doings."<sup>1</sup>

Taylor turns to Lorella Terzi for a developed example of the capability approach aimed at the education of individuals with disability.<sup>2</sup> Terzi, according to Taylor, believes the capability approach "promising" because of its emphasis on disability as simply one aspect of human diversity, thus normalizing disability vis-à-vis other aspects of difference. In her assessment of Terzi's argument, Taylor worries that a capability approach generally engages in a hasty rejection of the social model of disability that regards disability as primarily a social construction. At the core of Taylor's critique of the capability approach is a concern that its proponents do not take seriously enough the institutional and cultural impediments to a project to "normalize" disability even if, arguably, disability is widely distributed. The

capability approach therefore attempts to normalize disability in the hopes that by doing so, resources for students with disabilities to achieve valued “beings and doings” are justified. While the capability approach makes “difference” its mechanism for determining the distribution of resources, it still does not go far enough to ensure that society will agree to distribute resources for students with disabilities, Taylor argues. The question I pose at this point is why? What stands in the way? Why is it that Taylor can rightly register concern that attempts to “normalize” disability might “serve to mask existing structures of power by concealing the fact that disability is not included in the public consciousness of diversity and difference?” In response, I suggest consideration of not only the “public consciousness” but also individual consciousness as both a product and producer of that public consciousness. In a brief return to Terzi’s text, let me recall Terzi’s discussion of distinctions made between “disability” and “impairment” (because I think it is central to the questions Taylor raises). “Impairment, either physical or mental, relates to some loss of some aspect of functioning.”<sup>3</sup> Disability, however, “is the inability to perform some significant functionings that individuals are on average and typically able to do under favorable conditions . . .”<sup>4</sup> Despite the distinction made between the words impairment and disability, both etymologically and culturally, these words connote brokenness, and a sense that something is spoiled, incomplete, and diminished. These connotations associated with impairment and disability bear further analysis as they apply to the public and individual consciousness.

The problem Taylor raises about the capability approach is equally applicable to all models of disability that impact resource distribution questions. The problem is that all conceptions of disability, whether aimed at the individual as the focus of remediation, or aimed at society as being in need of reform, do not sufficiently address the origins of the prejudice against disability and impairment. Unraveling this problem requires an ontological inquiry; while an ontological inquiry does not solve practical problems, it may clear the way for conceptual models of education and thereby inform the discussion of justice, equality, and resource distribution for educating students with disabilities.

By following an analysis of disability provided by French historian Henri-Jacques Stiker, I suggest that the roots of prejudice against disability lie deep in ancestral memory in the various responses to difference.<sup>5</sup> In general, responses to “difference” have been premised on its containment, excision, or elimination. This is still true today, even if unconsciously, in the discourses of integration, which seek to make the different other into the *same*. Let me point out that the concept of community rests on recognition of similarity among its members, and in the history of the species — in any species — recognizing one’s conspecifics serves a vital function. The obverse of community is immunity. Almost all societies everywhere have sought to *immunize* (etymologically meaning to “release one from obligation”) themselves from the existential threat that impairment and disability represent. This explains why the overarching concern of education as practiced is to make each individual autonomous and “responsible” for herself — thus Michel Foucault’s analysis of disciplinary technologies to make others fit.

Impairment and disability, like death itself, strike at the heart of epistemological and moral certainty. The fear of disability is evident in the imprecise construct of the normal that seeks to reify a concept into fact. As the social model of disability holds, the *meaning* of disability — no matter what impairment is involved — is utterly contingent. However, impairment as a loss of function or an issue of function cannot be ignored in educating students with disability. The dynamic between impairment and disability in consciousness is inescapable, but not insurmountable, at least not in education, which is, after all, the manner in which all obstacles to inclusion are first addressed.

While it may seem that I have gone far afield in my response to Taylor's important essay, let me explain why I have not. Again, Taylor asks whether attempts to normalize disability "distract" from how disability is actually viewed. She asks whether proponents of the capability approach "can afford to minimize the significance of these social realities in its efforts to attend to disabled students' needs and to their capabilities for democratic participation." The answer to this question is surely "no." However, I must leave it an open question as to whether particular proponents of the capability approach actually minimize the significance of social prejudice against disability. It is not clear to me that Terzi, Nussbaum, or Sen minimize societal views of disability. Nevertheless, Taylor's questions about obstacles to inclusion are questions that need to be asked, no matter the theory of justice applied — a capability approach, a Rawlsian resourcist view, or some combination of the two. My point is to ask deeper questions of the "obstacles" to inclusion. I conclude that "balancing" approaches toward inclusion with considerations of equality and justice does require a common ground, an accessible understanding as to why ableism is a fictitious account of real human beings. Asking such deep ontological questions is also a preliminary activism in answering questions about the indexing of so-called valued functionings. Again, I turn to Stiker, who describes disability as an "eruption of the real," and not aberration.<sup>6</sup> Inclusion provides opportunities for shared narratives and a familiarity with the range of human being, appearing, and functioning that makes such being, appearing, and functioning "real" in the common narrative. Thus, an instance of "atypical functioning" is not wrong; it is just real.

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1. See Martha Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 25.

2. Lorella Terzi, *Justice and Equality in Education: A Capability Perspective on Disability and Special Educational Needs* (London: Continuum, 2008).

3. *Ibid.*, 97.

4. *Ibid.*

5. Henri-Jacques Stiker, *A History of Disability*, trans. William Sayers (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1999).

6. *Ibid.*, 6; to "borrow a phrase from Clément Rosset."