

Why Does Intellectual Disability Matter to Philosophy?: Toward a Transformative Pedagogy

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Article abstract

This article explores what it means to include intellectual disability (ID) in philosophical discourse and in the philosophy classroom. Taking Audre Lorde's claim that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" as a starting point, it asks how certain forms of cognitive ableism have excluded ID from the "philosopher's house." Drawing upon Michel Foucault's work as a theoretical framework, part one critically examines the ways that ID has been included, excluded, and constructed within philosophical discourse. Part two then considers what it would mean for ID and people with an ID to be included in the philosophy classroom. It offers some examples of how the work in disability studies, philosophies of disability, and philosophy of art can lead to a more inclusive and transformative pedagogy that will generate new critical questions and expand our philosophical dwelling places.

Why Does Intellectual Disability Matter to Philosophy?: Toward a Transformative Pedagogy

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This article explores what it means to include intellectual disability (ID) in philosophical discourse and in the philosophy classroom. Taking Audre Lorde's claim that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" as a starting point, it asks how certain forms of cognitive ableism have excluded ID from the "philosopher's house." Drawing upon Michel Foucault's work as a theoretical framework, part one critically examines the ways that ID has been included, excluded, and constructed within philosophical discourse. Part two then considers what it would mean for ID and people with an ID to be included in the philosophy classroom. It offers some examples of how the work in disability studies, philosophies of disability, and philosophy of art can lead to a more inclusive and transformative pedagogy that will generate new critical questions and expand our philosophical dwelling places.

Philosophy has not traditionally devoted much attention to intellectual disability (ID), and when it has, it has often been in ways that are profoundly troubling (Carlson, 2009, 2019a; Kittay and Carlson, 2010; Simpican, 2015). In my book *The Faces of Intellectual Disability: Philosophical Reflections* (2009), I consider the possibility that ID is the philosopher's nightmare, given the emphasis in the philosophical tradition on reason and cognitive ability, and the connections between thought, language, moral status, and human flourishing.¹ In teaching philosophy to undergraduates, I regularly integrate critical disability perspectives into my courses, as disability speaks to many of the central questions asked in my discipline: What is a good life? What is the relationship between self and other? What is justice and what is the nature of oppression? How and what do I know, and how does one define epistemic authority? What does it mean to be human and to flourish? How can we create a community of solidarity? When considering disability in relation to these larger themes, specific questions regarding how disability is defined, by whom, and in what ways become central. One only has to consider the burgeoning areas of disability studies, philosophies of disability, and the numerous scholars who are directly challenging ableism with respect to cognitive and intellectual disabilities to recognize that ID *does* matter to philosophy. Yet what does it mean to include ID in the philosophy classroom, and in philosophical discourse more generally? And what ethical, methodological, and pedagogical considerations do these questions raise?

When philosophizing about ID, both within and beyond the classroom, it is not enough to address instances of its *absence and exclusion*; it is also important to consider the ways ID is *present and represented* in philosophical discourse.² Given that there are many people who will not be able to attend philosophy classes and engage in the practices of philosophizing, how can their voices and perspectives be included in ways that avoid re-inscribing ableist assumptions and forms of devaluation? In order to

¹ This idea was prompted by Georgina Kleege's discussion of Hollywood filmmakers' depiction of blind characters, in which she argues that the blind are the filmmaker's worst nightmare (Kleege, 1999).

² This is largely the subject of my book *The Faces of Intellectual Disability* (2009).

answer these questions, I will begin with a number of potential barriers to achieving this goal, drawing upon the works of Audre Lorde and Michel Foucault, and then turn to some ways in which the very dynamics they expose can serve as a springboard for bringing ID and philosophy together in generative ways in the classroom.

1. Cognitive Ableism and the Master's House

It is fruitful in a certain way to describe that which is, while making it appear as something that might not be, or that might not be as it is ... History serves to show how that which is has not always been; that is, the things which seem most evident to us are always formed in the confluence of encounters and chances, during the course of a precarious and fragile history. What reason perceives as its necessity, or, rather, what different forms of rationality offer as their necessary being, can perfectly well be shown to have a history; and the network of contingencies from which it emerges can be traced. (Foucault, 1998, 450)

Poet and feminist theorist Audre Lorde, in her short eponymous essay, famously states: “The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (Lorde, 1984, p. 1). What might this statement mean in the context of philosophizing about ID? If we consider the discipline of philosophy as the “master’s house,” where, if at all, is there a place for ID, both for ID as an object of philosophical inquiry, and intellectually disabled people as embodied subjects who might be present in the philosophy classroom? In one sense, it would not be difficult to conclude that there is no place within this house for ID as either object or subject, given the nature of philosophical inquiry. In his book *Academic Ableism*, Jay Dolmage discusses what he calls the “ableist apologia”: a response to the charge of ableism in higher education that boldly asserts, “Of course the academy is ableist” (2017, p. 35). If we focus more explicitly upon ID and philosophy, a version of this apologia might go something like this: “Of course philosophy classes are ableist with respect to ID. Insofar as both the methods and the content of philosophical inquiry depend upon reason and cognitive ability, it is self-evident that people with significant IDs cannot partake in philosophy.” The apologist might also advance a second claim: “ID, as an object of inquiry, has little relevance to philosophical questions and arguments, and has no place in a philosophy class.” In other words, given the nature, scope, and tools of philosophical inquiry, ID is at best marginal, yet more often irrelevant and beyond the purview of philosophy.

These two versions of the ableist apologia would suggest that ID occupies an uneasy, problematic, if not paradoxical place in the academy. As English professor Chris Gabbard writes in reflecting upon his relationship to his son August, “Especially in an academic environment that rewards being smart, how do I broach the idea that people with intellectual disabilities are fully equal? We academics advance in our careers by demonstrating how clever we can be, and because so much depends on flaunting intelligence, it is harder for us than for most people to steer clear of prejudice” (Gabbard, 2010).³ One form of this prejudice that can be found in philosophical discourse is what I have called *cognitive ableism*: “a prejudice or attitude of bias in favor of the interests of individuals who possess certain cognitive abilities (or the potential for them) against those who are believed not to actually or potentially possess them” (Carlson, 2001, p. 140). Though this brand of prejudice can still be found in philosophical works, there have been significant advances in further identifying and challenging its presence in philosophy.

Numerous philosophers of disability and disability studies scholars have turned to philosopher Michel Foucault to critique various forms of ableism (Tremain, 2008, 2015, 2017; Hall, 2016; Carlson, 2009, 2019b), and his work can be especially instructive in further examining how the tools of philosophy exclude ID or include it in problematic ways. In what follows I would like to briefly

³ For an in-depth account of this tension, along with a profoundly moving philosophical discussion of his son’s life, see Gabbard’s recent memoir *A Life Beyond Reason: A Father’s Memoir* (2020).

consider three ways in which Foucault's critiques can help to reveal how cognitive ableism works at a structural level in philosophy.

First, with regard to who can and cannot be a philosopher, Foucault's discussion of Descartes' *Meditations* in his *History of Madness* raises interesting questions about how madness is excluded from the very act of philosophizing, as the "madman" is incapable of partaking in Descartes' methodological skepticism. Foucault writes, "In the economy of doubt, there is a fundamental disequilibrium between madness on the one hand, and dreams and error on the other. Their situation is different by their relationship to the truth and he who seeks it; dreams or illusions are surmounted in the very structure of truth; but madness is excluded by the doubting subject" (Foucault, 2006). In Descartes' canonical text, it is clear that the very activity of philosophy precludes certain subjects from participation, and in Foucault's estimation, the possibility of doubting his own rationality is the one thing that Descartes leaves untouched.⁴ In a contemporary context, numerous disability scholars have pointed to the ableist and exclusionary nature of academia when it comes to mental illness and various intellectual and cognitive disabilities (Price, 2011). That "Unreason" is governed, disciplined, and often dismissed and excluded by the structures and mechanisms of "Reason" (to invoke Foucault's broad categories), shapes the ways in which the houses of higher education are profoundly inaccessible and even hostile to people with an ID.

A second dynamic that emerges from Foucault's work is the idea that institutions and their forms of discourse produce particular kinds of subjects. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault claims that the "penitentiary technique and the delinquent are in a sense twin brothers ... They appeared together, one extending from the other, as a technological ensemble that forms and fragments the object to which it applies its instruments" (1979, p. 255). In a similar vein, one can view the *presence* of disabled subjects (like "the severely cognitively disabled") as constructed and produced within academic disciplines like philosophy, while their genuine voices and actual embodied, active lives and perspectives are excluded.

One example of this can be seen in the ways that philosophers construct ID as an object of inquiry. In many instances, ID is present in philosophical discourse to identify the farthest limits of moral consideration, as a means of defining what *does* constitute full citizenship, personhood, or moral worth, only to exclude people with IDs from these concepts. If one looks at the history of philosophy, there are discussions of "idiots" and "imbeciles" (terms that were used in the past to signify forms of ID), yet when they are present, they are placed at the margins of philosophical inquiry and of personhood itself (Kittay and Carlson, 2010; Simplican, 2015). In more contemporary work, there are numerous examples of ID being invoked as a means to bolster the case for the moral status of animals, in ways that are morally troubling and that amount to forms of conceptual exploitation and dehumanization (Carlson, 2009; Crary, 2016; Kittay, 2005).

When philosophers use hypotheticals, or invoke "the severely cognitively disabled" as marginal cases in their theories without engaging directly with these person's lives, they risk constructing the "cognitively disabled subject" in ways that perpetuate stereotypes, and that present inaccurate, attenuated, and harmful portraits of them (Carlson, 2009; Vorhaus, 2014; Kittay, 2005). Moreover, insofar as the prison system requires the production of delinquents in order to sustain itself (Foucault has an entire chapter devoted to these self-authenticating mechanisms), one can ask whether there are similar dynamics at work in the realm of higher education such that the "abnormal" against which the cognitive "norm" is defined must be maintained.

A third example from Foucault's work that can be instructive when considering the presence/absence of ID in philosophy, and in bioethics in particular, is his history of the medical gaze

⁴ There is an interesting exchange between Foucault and Derrida regarding this passage in Descartes' *Meditations* and their respective interpretations of it. When I teach Descartes in our required interdisciplinary course "Development of Western Civilization," I include an excerpt from Foucault's text on this point, and it always generates a fruitful discussion about the inclusion/exclusion of "madness" and mental disability more generally in the history of philosophy.

in *The Birth of the Clinic* (Foucault, 1984). Foucault draws a parallel between the philosopher's and the doctor's gaze as he discusses the production of knowledge through a form of discourse that has already defined the parameters of truth and the normal/pathological:

The clinician's gaze and the philosopher's reflexion have similar powers, because they both presuppose a structure of identical objectivity, in which the totality of being is exhausted in manifestations that are its signifier-signified, in which the visible and the manifest come together in at least a virtual identity, in which the perceived and the perceptible may be wholly restored in a language whose rigorous form declares its origin. The doctor's discursive, reflective perception and the philosopher's discursive reflexion on perception come together in a figure of exact superposition, since *the world is for them the analogue of language*. (Foucault, 1984, 96)

Within the field of bioethics there are similar dynamics whereby the disabled subjects (particularly those with significant IDs) are constructed in specified ways by the dual medical-ethical gaze. Many bioethical problems bear the mark of certain ableist assumptions, arguments, and practices. While there are many examples one could point to, it is impossible as we are currently living through this historic pandemic not to think of the ways in which proposals for rationing protocols in response to COVID-19 devalue lives of people with disabilities, and the ways in which people with an ID in particular are rendered invisible and dispensable (Kittay, 2020; Ne'eman, 2020; Arc, 2020). Centuries after the emergence of the medical gaze that Foucault spoke about, we see the ways that the discourse and knowledge produced by the clinical gaze bioethics, and in philosophy and public policy more broadly, is constructing the "disabled subject" as one unworthy of resources, and as less valuable by virtue of her assumed deficiencies and lower quality of life.

Finally, Foucault's discussion of biopower has been harnessed by philosophers of disability to extend the critique of the ways in which disability is defined and pathologized, and disabled lives governed and deemed unworthy (Foucault, 1978). His work has been particularly salient in the context of bioethics, in which the undesirability of disability, and particular forms of ID specifically, often take centre stage in debates surrounding reproductive technologies, genetic testing, and human enhancement technologies (Tremain, 2008, 2017; Hall, 2016).

Considering Foucault's analyses in the context of ID underscores two features of the "master's house." First, the philosopher is assumed to be the expert who, by definition, cannot be intellectually disabled. Second, insofar as ID *is* present, it is often in the form of the philosophically *constructed* "intellectually disabled subject," who, when invoked in philosophical arguments, need not bear any resemblance to actual disabled people.⁵ These Foucauldian critiques also cast Lorde's assertion in a new light and raise additional questions: Must philosophy as a disciplinary dwelling place, and the philosophy classroom in particular, only permit ID to enter in forms constructed by able-minded philosophers? How can particular philosophical tools be employed in dismantling elements of the master's house? In order to answer these questions, it is useful to explore further who can gain entry, and how.

2. Who Gains Entry? From Constructs to Persons

Difference must not be merely tolerated, but seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic. Only then does the necessity for interdependency become unthreatening. Only within that interdependency of different strengths, acknowledged and equal, can the power to seek new ways of being in the world generate, as well as the courage and sustenance to act where there are no charters. (Lorde, 1984, p. 111)

⁵ This latter point is discussed in far greater detail in my book *The Faces of Intellectual Disability* (2009).

When considering how people with IDs can be incorporated into the philosophy classroom, it is important to make two related points. First, it is imperative to recognize that “ID” and “people with an ID” (by this I mean persons who bear the label “intellectually disabled”) are very broad, heterogeneous categories. Thus, calls to make the philosophy classroom more inclusive of people with an ID can mean a number of things: it may involve making it more hospitable to disabled students who are already present, and it may also mean finding ways to bring in people and the voices of those who are not. Second, when considering whether and in what ways people with IDs are absent, it is equally important to differentiate between those who cannot be present because of their capacities (i.e., those for whom engaging in philosophizing in the academic setting is not possible due to specific cognitive differences), and those who may be excluded because of non-ideal conditions (e.g., the exclusionary nature of higher education, the dominance of cognitive ableism in the educational pipeline, and other external constraints).⁶

In view of the potential presence and absence of these various student populations with IDs, there is much to say about the content and ethos that can contribute to a more inclusive and transformative pedagogy. First, it is imperative to create a space wherein the worth and dignity of all human beings, including the widest range and varieties of bodyminds and forms of neurodiversity, are affirmed and celebrated. This involves empowering voices that are present, enabling modes of communication that will permit participation, and recognizing the value of cognitive diversity (O'Donnovan; Carlson, 2019a). Moreover, not only can accessible course design and clear policies regarding accommodation benefit those disabled students who may be in the classroom, a commitment to universal design can enhance the educational experience and signify a commitment to disability justice for everyone in the class. Finally, a transformative pedagogical space will foster an ethical stance of humility in relation to disability. This involves acknowledging what one does and does not know, and considering a broad range of experiences and intersectional ways of being in the world that confer various degrees of epistemic authority to people's experiences.⁷

While Foucault's treatment of madness as a form of “Unreason” challenges the dominance of reason, not just in philosophy but more broadly, his work in *Discipline and Punish* suggests that institutions inevitably produce certain kinds of subjects and are self-authenticating in ways that are difficult to dismantle. Including Foucault's work can illustrate the contingency of categories and the productive power of institutions and particular forms of discourse, but this will not change the fact that the philosophy classroom itself still remains inaccessible to some people. What, then, might it mean to include voices of people with “profound” IDs⁸ who are not capable of themselves engaging in philosophical activity – those who will never be “students of philosophy”?

⁶ I would like to thank Kevin McDonough and Ashley Taylor for underscoring the importance of making this distinction. I would also like to add that the boundary between these two reasons for exclusion may not always be clear cut or obvious. For example, it may be due to the absence of certain conditions that someone is unable to cultivate the necessary capacities in order to then gain entry into the philosophy classroom. To fully address the question of what gatekeeping measures are in place (including cognitive evaluative technologies, and economic and social determinants, not to mention structural ableist constraints and forms of biopower) is beyond the scope of this paper. However, I am sympathetic to Nirmala Erevelles' emphasis on a materialist structural analysis as a means of identifying them. She writes, “For example, the everyday functioning of public schooling is predicated on the institutionalization of a complex array of evaluation strategies used to predict the productive capacity of future workers,” and ultimately argues that the entire edifice of special education, “through the articulation of an ideology of disability, appeals to abstract notions of efficiency, rationality, and equity rooted in a seemingly open, objective, and meritocratic science in order to reproduce in abstract form the dominant class relations, divisions of labor, and cultural hegemony present in twentieth-century America” (Erevelles 2000).

⁷ I will return to the idea of epistemic authority later.

⁸ I put this term in quotes because here, too, the categories that correspond with severity are not unproblematic or self-evident.

In her book *Learning from My Daughter: The Value and Care of Disabled Minds*, Eva Kittay offers readers an account of the journey she has taken “as a philosopher and mother of a daughter who, while lacking the characteristics so valued by philosophers – the ability to reason and fashion arguments – has taught me many unique lessons about what matters in life” (Kittay, 2019, p. 1). In Kittay’s book she not only reflects upon what her daughter, Sesha, has taught her in her personal life, she also focuses on the lessons that “profound” ID can have for philosophers. How, then, can the perspectives of people with “profound” ID be included? Why are they important and instructive for students of philosophy and philosophers alike? And in what ways might Sesha and others like her be both learners and teachers in unique ways?⁹

As many feminist philosophers have argued, the power of stories and “counterstories” can serve as powerful means of resistance to dominant accounts (Carlson 2016a). Thus, including narrative texts like Kittay’s can introduce the perspectives of disabled persons who would otherwise be left out of mainstream philosophical curricula. Film can also be another powerful source of counterstories, revealing lives and voices in ways that move beyond textual representations and discourses.¹⁰ These counterstories present embodied, rich, complex lives that are worthy of discussion in their own right, and that can also serve as an antidote to the attenuated portraits of ID and thought experiments that so often populate philosophy. This can be equally true of fictional narratives. As Michael Bérubé so powerfully illustrates in *The Secret Life of Stories*, not only can literature offer representations of ID (in specific “disabled characters,” for example), ID can also be “deployed” as a narrative strategy, as a device “for exploring vast domains of human thought, experience, and action (Bérubé, 2016, p. 2).

In the case of people with an ID who may not be able to speak for themselves through conventional means, the voices of their family members and caregivers can be powerful in presenting the textured and deep relationships that exist, and in some cases explicitly addressing philosophical and bioethical questions (Kittay, 1999, 2019; Gabbard, 2020; Kaposy, 2018). These testimonials can also reveal what it means for these individuals to be worthy of respect as persons (Vorhaus, 2006, 314). John Vorhaus writes, “A profoundly disabled person may be unable to speak or contribute to a process of rational argument ... But even when these capacities are absent, she remains a conscious agent, whose acts reveal intentions and purposes” (ibid., p. 316). Yet it is not always easy to discern these intentions and desires. Thus, these narrative testimonials can also reveal the challenges that accompany “giving voice” to and speaking with, about, or for another.¹¹ What establishes the epistemic authority that might be claimed in cases of those who are close to people with profound ID? In many cases, it is grounded in the knowledge they have through repeated contact with someone of that person’s needs, desires, and modes of communication, which may be less familiar or obvious to others. As Vorhaus (2014) goes on to describe:

It is often loved ones, carers and teachers who learn to notice the detail and rhythm of the lives of such people as Christiajeane, Clare, and Inaya. Their testimony provides evidence of how profoundly dependent human beings exhibit and develop their (limited) autonomy and of how they

⁹ There is a difference between the “lessons” that can be gained from reading narratives that bring people like Sesha and others to life, and being with them in the flesh. While in neither case are they “teaching” in the form of intentional activity, being in their presence and reflecting upon these experiences, or accessing them indirectly through others’ narratives, can be instructive and transformative. Again, thanks to Ashley Taylor and Kevin McDonough for drawing my attention to this distinction in the literature.

¹⁰ Some examples include *Praying with Lior*, *Fixed: The Science/Fiction of Human Enhancement*, and *Intelligent Lives*.

¹¹ Linda Alcoff addresses the intricacies of adopting this stance in “The Problem of Speaking for Others.” It is also important to consider the ways in which technology has become a means of communication, yet even here there are important political and ethical questions about “giving voice” to someone. Meryl Alper explores these in her marvelous book, *Giving Voice: Mobile Communication, Disability, and Inequality* (2017). She writes, “technologies largely thought to universally empower the ‘voiceless’ are still subject to disempowering structural inequalities” (p. 3).

first require an opportunity to live and learn in an environment designed to recognize their potential for expression, mobility, and comprehension ... Their experience has weight, both because it is their experience and for the illumination it casts on some of the more abstract questions that philosophy deals with. (pp. 621, 622)

At the same time, there may be good reason not to simply uncritically accept these persons as reliable experts and surrogate voices. It is important at once to recognize the epistemic authority that someone close to a person with an ID may have, while at the same time acknowledge that this is only part of a complete life story. As Stacey Simplican (2015) writes, “Because the history of exclusion is often cloaked in paternalism, self-advocates are especially skeptical of the ability of nondisabled people to speak for them and are concerned that their movement may be easily co-opted by professionals or parents” (p. 21). It is also necessary to consider that there are many forms of vulnerability related to this dynamic, and that unfortunate situations exist in which family members or caregivers may not always be the best advocates.¹² To have these discussions in a philosophy class means engaging in a critical dialogue that has already expanded the seats at the table, while at once recognizing the absences that must be considered and counted. I have found that these conversations have also prompted students to tell their own stories, to critically reflect upon aspects of their own existence as “bodyminds” (Price, 2011), and to consider creative ways to enable the inclusion of more voices. The presence and valorization of disability in a philosophy class can also serve as an invitation for students who have a direct connection to disability to share their own perspectives.

Even absent a live, embodied presence such as a fellow student, the inclusion of disabled lives in the classroom through narratives, vignettes, and the theoretical questions that emerge from them can be instructive and valuable. As Rosemarie Garland Thomson argues in making the case for conserving disability, disabled lives and perspectives can serve as epistemic, ethical, and narrative resources (2012). This opens up new possibilities for conceiving of and engaging with intellectually disabled individuals as persons with valuable lessons to teach or impart, rather than fixing them in the reductive (and often dehumanizing) position of passive objects of inquiry.¹³ In this way, people with an ID can inhabit the classroom as teachers in unconventional ways.

Moreover, with creative and expansive strategies and opportunities, people with an ID can become co-producers of valuable knowledge in a more formalized way. This is the focus of Ashley Taylor’s discussion in “Knowledge Citizens,” in which she considers the ways that collaborative research can be an antidote to the ableist and exclusionary assumptions that govern the production of knowledge in the academy, and in philosophy of education specifically. As she writes, “the question of whether individuals labeled with intellectual disabilities can be formalized by educational researchers is perhaps not primarily a question of cognitive ability or disability but one of opportunity and power (Taylor, 2018, p. 9). In some cases, it will also necessitate material and technological resources in order to enable certain persons to partake in these collaborative endeavours: “[I]t remains a pressing question, one which developments in technology and pedagogy should assist, as to what more can be done to utilize and develop forms of augmentative and alternative communication, so as to enable those who are profoundly disabled themselves to contribute to a research exercise of this kind” (Vorhaus, 2014, p. 622).

Expanding these pedagogical horizons can also involve discussions of ID that do not usually fall within the purview of typical philosophical treatments of disability. As I have argued elsewhere, unlike many other fields, philosophers are relatively silent about the transformative power of art and music in

¹² The heartbreaking case of Ashley X is one example that has received significant philosophical and bioethical attention. Many self-advocates have addressed these problems as well.

¹³ Of course, the problem of access and the extent to which the academy can find a place for these persons within the “master’s house” remains, as do the complex ways in which these perspectives are presented and examined by non-intellectually disabled teachers and students.

the lives of people with an ID (Carlson, 2013, 2015). Turning to alternate modes of expression (beyond the verbal and textual) in the aesthetic realm can offer a counterpoint to the *ableist apologia* that assumes that people incapable of communicating through texts and concepts have no place within philosophy. In “From the Crooked Timber of Humanity, Beautiful Things Can Be Made,” philosopher Anita Silvers (2000) argues that art can be transformative in unexpected ways, particularly with regard to perceptions of disability. Philosopher of music Philip Alperson (2009) calls upon philosophers to consider the humanizing and transformative power of musical encounters, and to include voices from the margins. When coupled with the philosophically rich accounts of and by people with IDs who express themselves through dance, music, theatre, and other artistic modes of expression, traditional philosophical questions regarding personhood, flourishing, and communication take on a different hue.

To offer one example, consider the nature of shared musical experience. Whether the person with an ID is the composer, performer, or musical witness, sharing in music in ways that do not rely upon text, verbal communication, or typical cognitive abilities that may govern other interactions can have both epistemic and ethical value. Through music, certain features and capabilities of a person who might otherwise have gone unnoticed or remained unexpressed can be brought into the foreground (Carlson, 2013). This can radically change the way in which a person is viewed, as it can confirm dimensions of personhood and possibilities of flourishing, and provide an antidote to ableist assumptions about global incapacity. In her discussion of Sessa’s profound capacity to appreciate and respond to music, Kittay (2019) writes, “My daughter’s appreciation of music is such that at times she can hardly contain her joy ... When it comes to the role of music in a flourishing life, as far as I can conceive of a flourishing life, she has at least one element of it in spades” (pp. 122–123).

In addition to being a vehicle that can yield important knowledge and self-knowledge, musical experience can also transform relationships and establish what phenomenologist Alfred Schutz has called the “musical we” (Carlson, 2016b). People with IDs who may have been viewed only as passive recipients of care become active subjects engaging and sharing in experiences with others, and this can reshape the contours of relationships, cultivate virtues, and enable new forms of solidarity. Incorporating these musical encounters into the classroom, be it through live shared experiences, testimonials, film/videos, or theoretical reflections and arguments that bring disability and the arts together, can be transformative insofar as it moves beyond a medical/therapeutic model of disability, and reframes concepts of flourishing, personhood, respect, and joy. In addition to challenging cognitive ableism, exploring and integrating the arts into philosophical discussions of disability can generate new epistemological, ethical, and aesthetic questions, and open new spaces for dialogue, human connection, and friendship.

3. Enabling the Transformative Classroom

If we return to Lorde’s notion that the master’s tools cannot dismantle the master’s house, I maintain that there *are* ways in which some of the critical tools of philosophical inquiry can be brought to bear upon the problem of ableism, disability oppression, and injustice. Yet given the textual, disciplinary, institutional, structural, and attitudinal barriers that may persist in rendering this space inaccessible to people with IDs, I want to conclude with some additional ways in which the philosophy classroom can be a site of critical contestation of the dynamics of ableism.¹⁴

First, there are philosophers whose critiques of the dominance and valorization of “reason” can offer important perspectives on how to challenge and respond to ableism. The brief consideration of Foucault’s texts in the preceding section is but one example of the ways in which critics of the

¹⁴ The ideas outlined below are based on my own experience of integrating discussions of disability, and ID specifically, into a broad range of my philosophy classes (including the history of philosophy, biomedical ethics, and feminist philosophy).

hegemony of reason might be brought to bear upon the very exclusionary practices that marginalize and devalue people with IDs. Second, in more direct ways, there are many philosophers of disability and disability theorists whose work is central to this project of “dismantling” ableist institutions, including higher education and philosophy itself. These voices, particularly those of disabled philosophers, can be instrumental in allowing students of philosophy to recognize that “disability” is not simply a static pathological state, but a complex nexus worthy of critical investigation and problematization.¹⁵ Finally, given the fact that ID still remains marginalized *within* critical disability theories, incorporating disability theory into philosophy classes can provide occasion to further examine the dynamics of cognitive ableism in disability studies and philosophies of disability. By expanding the course content to include ID as an area of philosophical inquiry underscores its importance as a topic worthy of interrogation, and connects disability to the fundamental questions of how we define our human nature, differences in bodies and minds, and the values and norms that structure society and identity. Moreover, including representations and performances of disability culture, disability arts, and disability pride can affirm disability as a positive and generative source of knowledge, and move beyond the restrictive realms of viewing it solely through the lens of the normal/abnormal dyad and deficit/medical/personal tragedy models.

By finding ways to make more voices present through a variety of means and methods, the classroom can become a place of transformative pedagogy committed to challenging the tools of oppression and exclusion, and to mobilizing the power of philosophical inquiry towards disability justice. Philosophy classes *can* be sites of resistance against cognitive ableism insofar as they problematize categories, theorize oppression, and recognize cognitive privilege. By recognizing people with IDs as epistemic resources and respecting them as teachers and learners, and by expanding our moral imagination through narratives, stories, and non-textual forms of communication and encounters, the philosophical dwelling places that we create in the classroom can become more habitable, inclusive, and humane.

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¹⁵ Shelley Tremain’s interviews with disabled philosophers in her “Dialogues on Disability” series are an essential contribution to this conversation (see <https://biopoliticalphilosophy.com>).

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