Epistemology from Disability, Epistemology of Disability

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ABSTRACT

The article aims to explore how disability represents a resource of knowledge, in both personal and scientific domains. The intertwinement of these two spheres is captured by the concept of 'cripistemology'. In the first section, I will explain why such an analysis is necessary, highlighting how disabled people are routinely dispossessed of knowledge and subjected to epistemic injustice and exclusion. I will consider how social epistemology has largely ignored disability, even though disability is at times appropriated as a prosthetic rhetorical device. I will discuss the widespread perception of disabled people as epistemically incompetent, focusing on two specific contexts in which they are often denied authority over their own experiences of disability: discussions of well-being and participation in medical encounters. I will then turn to hermeneutical injustice, analysing the limited dissemination of the concept of ableism—a crucial political and sociocultural epistemic resource. I will also address material forms of exclusion from knowledge, particularly how segregation and isolation significantly harm disabled people's access to epistemic participation. In the second section, I will consider two forms of epistemic reparation or resistance. Firstly, I will examine the epistemic standpoint of disability, considering how lived experience fosters specific personal expertise in creating access, orienting technoscience, and managing pain. Secondly, I will consider disability as an epistemological standpoint, examining how it can positively impact the critical analyses of it conducted by disability studies. In this context, I propose the notion of disabled people's position as one of epistemological susceptivity. Namely, disabled scholars do possibly have an epistemic privilege, but further factors elicited specifically by the category of disability must be addressed.

1. Introduction

"Disability is an art", claims the dancer Neil Marcus: "it's an ingenious way to live" (in Siebers & Levin 2010). In this quote, the argument of the article is immediately outlined. *Can* disability represent a set of rules and technical expertise sustained by creative improvisation, and thus be a unique resource of knowledge, sometimes inaccessible otherwise? If yes, in which terms? Before answering this question, I will clarify *why this exploration is needed*. Namely, I will consider cases in which disabled people endure dispossession of their knowledge or forms of epistemic injustice and exclusion. Firstly, I will examine

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two situations where disability prompts testimonial injustice: the testimony about one's well-being and participation in medical exchanges. Secondly, I will consider how disabled people endure hermeneutical injustice, examining the concept of ableism and how they are excluded from the epistemic domain because of inaccessibility and segregation. Thirdly, the *pars construens* of the article will investigate two forms of *reparation* and *resistance* to the harm and injustice discussed: the acknowledgement of the expertise that arises from the experience of disability and the fertility of considering a disability standpoint within disability studies. In this last part, I will propose the concept of epistemological susceptivity, to value disabled scholars' role and, at the same time, consider which other factors are needed.

In doing so, I will explore the connection between traditional social epistemology and disability-centred analyses of scientific and personal knowledge. The first part crafts a conversation with Miranda Fricker's work, and the analyses by other scholars of epistemic injustice, while the second part traces a connection with feminist standpoint theory.

Furthermore, the intersection of feminist social epistemology on the one hand and disability studies and crip theory on the other can help to unveil the potential *relationships* between the *epistemic* terrain and the *epistemological* one; in other words, in which terms the baggage of personal experiences can have a solid impact on scientific knowledge. This article contributes to the recent discourse on *cripistemology* (Johnson & McRuer 2014a, 2014b, 2024). Cripistemology reflects the intersecting aim of this contribution: it condenses the meta-reflection of disability studies as an area of inquiry, without forgetting disabled people and their possible expertise and contributions, both within and beyond academia (Hamscha 2023, Hickman & Serlin 2019, Nijs & Heylighen 2015). 'Crip' is a term reclaimed by some members of the disability community. *To crip* means adopting experimental approaches to disability and valuing nonconforming ways of experiencing oneself and the world (Kafer 2013, McRuer 2006, Sandahl 2003). Placing 'crip' at the forefront of 'cripistemology' reflects the audacity to reveal usually *unthinkable* aspects of disability: what so far has remained removed, or at the margins, of an already marginalised area of inquiry (Hall 2024: 165).

Disability studies do theorise about their epistemological status and disabled people's epistemic standpoint but do not typically ground their analyses on the debate and the traditional sources on epistemology, with a few recent exceptions that show familiarity with analytic philosophy (Barnes 2016, Scully

2020, Tremain 2017). Nonetheless, this literature has rarely transcended the boundaries of disability studies. It is therefore crucial to favour this intersection.

My aim is epistemological, but this caveat must not drain epistemology from its ethical and political charge (Dotson 2012, Fricker 2007, Haraway 1991, Pohlhaus 2017, Toole 2019). The intention is to put in conversation different traditions that share a social justice lens and attention to power dynamics: social epistemology – especially the work influenced by feminist theory –, disability studies, and crip theory. These research fields unveil how epistemic resources are distributed and how epistemic reliability is stitched into subjectivities. In these analyses, "existing structures of power and domination" are recognised as salient in knowledge production, exchange and access (Scully 2020: 298): they can induce limitations and injustice or guarantee a privilege. Therefore, my analyses involve an ethical-political foundation, aiming to outline forms of *reparation* and *resistance* to injustice and exclusion in the claim to knowledge.

2. Disability, Epistemic Injustice and the Dispossession of Knowledge

In the last few years, references to epistemic injustice have been rampant. The concept identifies, as Fricker explains, the cases that involve "a wrong done to someone specifically in their capacity as a knower", which means "to be wronged in a capacity essential to human value" (2007: 1, 44). Epistemic injustice erodes subjects' capacity to communicate proficiently and to make sense of their own experience. This phenomenon can be deeply disruptive on a social level, undermining individuals' and groups' full participation in society, and reinforcing already existing discriminations and inequalities. In this framework, scholars have proposed useful distinctions and sub-categories of Fricker's original framework (Kidd et al. 2017), have pointed out that the genealogy of the concept can be traced further back than this "origin" story (Pohlhaus 2017), and have unveiled how the research field of epistemic injustice can in itself be a vehicle of epistemic injustice (Dotson 2012). Given the abundance of applications of the concept, the analyses here will be restricted to some specific framings that can provide helpful insights into disability.

Social epistemology has largely paid attention to the nature of the *subject of knowledge*, attempting to unveil how different locations and consequently different privileges variably produce epistemic successes or, vice versa, failures. Being embodied and embedded, this subject is also immediately immersed in inter-relationality. The *situatedness* of the subject in the social arena has become a relevant starting point in defining epistemic and epistemological

theories. Furthermore, feminist and decolonial approaches have emphasised that how *we know* and how *we are perceived as knowers* is a gendered and racialised process (Harding 2009, Mignolo 2007, Pitts 2017, Tuana 2017).

By placing the experience of the subject of knowledge at the centre, inquiries on epistemic injustice often make references to a generic "Speaker" and "Hearer" (Fricker 2007, Wanderer 2017): figures that immediately recall disability. Social epistemology would therefore largely benefit from analyses from disability studies in tackling the construction of the *knower*/the subject who shares *knowledge* (Reynolds & Timpe 2025). Disability studies have widely addressed how sensory variabilities and mental/physical disabilities can heavily influence how exchanges of knowledge occur. Analyses of epistemic injustice should diversify accordingly: for example, the fact that someone *listens* through Sign Language, *speaks* but not through verbal communication, or does not have a vertical posture when talking (e.g., lies in bed, crawls, is in a wheelchair, and so on) are salient features that produce variable outcomes in communication and in accessing knowledge.

It is noteworthy, however, that the only reference to disability in Fricker's seminal text is a negative one: she defines the phenomenon of hermeneutical injustice – examined more deeply below – as a form of "cognitive disablement" (2007: 151). Proposing the example of sexual harassment, Fricker explains that it has not always been codified as a "distinctive social experience", leaving subjects with an epistemic lacuna: both the harasser and the harassed are therefore left "*cognitively handicapped*" until the concept becomes a widespread epistemic resource (2007: 151, emphasis mine). In this way, the cognitive distortion produced by hermeneutical injustice is suffered by both the perpetrator of violence and the victim. By equating disability – albeit in a metaphorical way, (Mitchell, Snyder, 1997, 2000) – with the experience of lack of knowledge, ignorance and epistemic limitation, Fricker frames it as *a consequence of injustice* that needs to be rectified.[1]

The topic of disability is particularly urgent with respect, more generally, to the domain of knowledge, and, more specifically, to the allocation of epistemic credibility and authority. The most frequent reading of the relationship between *disability* and *knowledge* is the one of *absence*, *lack*, and *deficit*, in a two-fold way: (I) narratives *from* the experience of disability are not commonly

[1] To my knowledge, Fricker's reference to disability in this context has not been discussed. Shelley Tremain, however, has pointed out the tendency of (feminist) social epistemology to employ ableist metaphors, such as "epistemic deafness" or "meta-blindness" (2017: 175).

shared as if they were relevant resources, and (II) disabled people are routinely positioned in the field of incompetence. As Susan Wendell points out regarding the first process,

> Like women's particular knowledge, which comes from access to experiences most men do not have, disabled people's knowledge is dismissed as trivial, complaining, mundane (or bizarre), less than that of the dominant group. (1989: 120)

Gaile Pohlhaus describes this phenomenon as "epistemic labor invalidation", namely: the process of devaluing specific "epistemic tasks", regarding them as irrelevant (2017: 21). The second point – the presumption of incompetence – concerns formal terrains such as education and the process of job recruitment, but also daily interactions that involve the employment of assistive technologies, the relationships with caregivers, and the material encounter with the world in general.[2] Through an intersectional lens, this form of ableism follows, unsurprisingly, a gendered route. Jackie Leach Scully defines this process endured by disabled people in social interactions as "global epistemic incapacity" (2018: 116, Catala 2024, Dohmen 2016, 2020).

Therefore, it is primarily essential to challenge the notion that disabled people *do not know*. Moreover, I aim to claim an even more counterintuitive perspective: that in some conditions and some cases, disabled people could even possess *more* knowledge – not in general, for example, because they have a specialised job, but more specifically sparking from the experience of disability itself. I will consider some forms of this knowledge in the third and fourth sections.

Beyond the general presumption of incompetence, detectable in many different contexts, disabled people have also been routinely *dispossessed* of their baggage of knowledge and competence *concerning disability* – both their own and intended as a socio-cultural category –, which appears even more striking. The forms of this exclusion will be outlined below, following two sub-categories identified by Fricker as declinations of epistemic injustice: (I) testimonial injustice and (II) hermeneutical injustice.

2.1 Disability and Testimonial Injustice

[2] See, for instance, Antonopoulos et al. 2020; Michalko 1999; Rodd et al. 2014; Smith 2005. I have myself tackled disabled people's presumed incompetence in care and assistance elsewhere (Montalti 2023). See also Garland-Thomson 2012; Hamraie 2017; Piepzna-Samarasinha 2018.

Broadly speaking, a 'testimony' is a meaningful proposition about a state of affairs, which is reported to others to generate assent to its truth. *Testimonial* injustice occurs when someone is given less credibility due to their social identity: for example, because of non-epistemic factors such as gender, age, race, weight, disability, class, and so on. The concept identifies a systemic attribution of untrustworthiness that does not depend on individual characteristics. This process, Fricker explains, "cuts ethically deep" (2007: 145). It represents structural harm towards the subject's agency in the social arena, although the examples that can be provided may appear mundane and confined to specific events.

> Testimonial injustice denies one access to what originally furnishes status as a knower. No wonder, then, that even relatively inconsequential testimonial injustices can carry a symbolic weight to the effect that the speaker is less than a full epistemic subject: the injustice sends the message that they are not fit for participation in the practice that originally generates the very idea of a knower. (Fricker 2007: 145)

If social epistemology has examined how social identifiers such as gender and race impact someone's credibility, the consideration of disability has largely remained within the disciplinary boundaries of disability studies. An exception may be represented by the analyses of healthcare and medicine by Havi Carel and Ian James Kidd (2014, 2017). Disabled people, as pointed out by Shelley Tremain, are routinely discredited:

> As philosophers and theorists of disability have repeatedly shown, people who, for any number of reasons, do not conform to highly-regulated standards of (for instance) social behavior and interaction – such as people who are classified as "mentally ill" or are perceived to be "insane" – are routinely discredited, ignored, vilified, and stigmatized. (2020: 178)

In this sub-section, I will address specifically two contexts in which this lack of credibility can be detected: (I) the testimony about one's well-being; and (II) the participation in medical exchanges.

Concerning the former example, statistically speaking, disabled people report a quality of life only slightly lower than that of non-disabled people. This phenomenon is usually called the "disability paradox" since this statistic is highly underestimated: non-disabled people believe that living with a disability is much worse than it is reported by the involved subjects (Albrecht & Devlieger 1999, Amundson 2005, Cushman & Dijkers 1990, Gerhart et al. 1994, Scully

2020). Thus, there is a large gap between these two perceptions. More importantly, disabled people are frequently not believed when, asked about their perception of quality of life, they answer that they are generally happy and do not perceive their disability as a burden.

Disabled people have always claimed – wherever listened to – that the major problems they face can be handled through changes in social policy, reconsideration of economic structures, and progress in people's attitudes and cultural representation. Their well-being largely depends on the availability of adequate accommodations and on the fact that their accessibility needs are met. In general, disabled people report developing practices of adaptation that make their lives as rich and full as those of others, together with a supporting social system (McBryde Johnson 2005, Paolini & Paolini 2022, Piepzna-Samarasinha 2018, Wong 2020).

However, if they claim to have a good quality of life, their self-reflective testimony is perceived as a subjective, incorrect, and unreliable interpretation, or it seems merely the result of reduced expectations due to their disabilities. Our scepticism towards such statements stems from the fact that they are very far from what is typically portrayed about disability. The most pervasive narratives surrounding disability present it as a personal and family tragedy, a collection of deficits, and a condition to be "overcome" through personal commitment, medical care and technological interventions. Disabled bodyminds are expected to be fixed: if this aim is not achievable, it is culturally unthinkable to have a good quality of life (Barnes 2016, Clare 2017, Grue 2015, Kafer 2013). Because of these narratives, the idea that experiencing a disabled bodymind can be neutral or even positive sounds paradoxical.

All of this can be summarised in the common expression "better dead than disabled" often rebutted by disabled activists who desire to fight back against this argument (Not Dead Yet, Carr 2024, Reynolds 2017). The unchallenged conflation of disability with pain, physical or psychological, can produce dramatic consequences in the lives of disabled people – especially if it stems from the structural unfolding of testimonial injustice: namely, when we should be inclined to believe otherwise. What happens if disabled people are not considered credible when talking about their own experience of disability? Through this lens, we can read, for example, the media representation of disabled people's murders by family members or caregivers, more often than not described as "mercy killings" (Perry 2017). In general, narratives and practices that actively reinforce or promote the erasure of disability, based on disabled people's supposed "best interest", are hard to defy, even if generally disabled people

claim to be in a different position. Their claims do not pass the test of reliability when they specifically affirm a position so rarely represented, namely, the potential overlap of disability and well-being, even though they report first-person experiences. The lawyer and disability activist Harriet McBryde Johnson explains, recalling her meeting with Peter Singer:

> I used to try to explain that in fact I enjoy my life, that it's a great sensual pleasure to zoom by power chair on these delicious muggy streets, that I have no more reason to kill myself than most people. But it gets tedious. [...] [T]hey don't want to know. They think they know everything there is to know, just by looking at me. That's how stereotypes work. They don't know that they're confused, that they're really expressing the discombobulation that comes in my wake. (2003)

The second example I want to briefly explore is the asymmetry within therapeutic relationships. The hierarchy usually established in this territory is not unexpected and condemnable per se, since there is an epistemological gap between patients and medical professionals. However, even though the latter possess specific training and knowledge, it is important to underline that patients too can have expertise on their conditions, and can intervene in aspects that do not directly concern medical judgment: for example, weighing risks and expectations. As Carel and Kidd note, the choice to privilege this hierarchy is not a neutral move:

> Healthcare systems rely on complex structures of epistemic norms and expectations, both implicit and explicit, that create knowledge asymmetries – for instance, privileging the knowledge derived from medical training and theory, rather than that potentially rooted in patient experience, which effectively limits epistemic authority to healthcare practitioners. (2017: 336)

This critique of the healthcare system, from the patients' perspective too, is not new but has not always been framed through the conceptual tool of epistemic injustice.

Even though this aspect may characterise any physician/patient relationship, it is necessary to acknowledge how ableism can specifically "shape the generation and application of scientific knowledge as well as the promotion of various medical practices" (Ho 2022: 327). Disabled people, but also neurominorities, are often considered less reliable concerning the management of impairments and the description of their experience (Catala 2024, Ho 2022, Moore 2023, Patsavas 2014, Scully 2020). In medical exchanges, healthcare professionals are used to address non-disabled companions, or generally do not pay attention to their perspectives (Paolini & Paolini 2022, Baggs 2013, N. A.

2021). Often, disabled people are neither believed nor considered as epistemic agents in their own care. In a process that ends up being ableist and classist, disabled people nonetheless find a possible way out insisting on their qualifications, for example when they have a highly-skilled job or teach at universities, to acquire "credibility as human being[s]" (Peace 2012, McBryde Johnson 2005). Before the concept of testimonial injustice was defined, Wendell describes in her terms the lack of credibility suffered by disabled people in this terrain:

> The cognitive authority of medicine plays an important role in distorting and silencing the knowledge of the disabled. [...] Unless you are very lucky in your doctors, no matter how trustworthy and responsible you were considered to be *before* you started saying you were ill, your experience will be invalidated. *Other* people are the authorities on the reality of your experience of your body. [...] Because almost everyone accepts the cognitive authority of medicine, the person whose bodily experience is radically different from medical descriptions of her/his condition is invalidated as a knower. (1989: 120)

The point raised here is not that medical knowledge does not count, obviously, but that it should not represent the only knowledge that matters. Medical authority on disability can "radically [undermine]" disabled people's "relationships to reality" and their bodyminds specifically (Wendell 1989: 121). Furthermore, this "deeply felt invalidation" (Wendell 1989: 121) can jeopardise the very same relationship between disabled people and the medical and clinical world, and can also produce practical, dramatic outcomes, as far as putting disabled people in danger.

The category of disability is subsumed almost exclusively in medicine, psychiatry and rehabilitation. Following the so-called medical model of disability, the major social aim concerning disability is the restoration of functionality and appearance to come as close as possible to the standard. Disability studies and activism, therefore, criticise the *hegemonic dimension* of the medical discourse and practice: disability is, in this sense, *over-medicalised*, in a process that has been defined as "medical imperialism" (Grue 2015: 53, Clare 2017, Kafer 2013, Oliver 1990, Zola 1977). It is also noteworthy in this argument that disabled people – differently from women in court, a frequent example of testimonial injustice – *do spend a lot of time* in the medical context: the jeopardization of their epistemic agency might occur quite often. If disability is considered primarily as a phenomenon of medical interest, and disabled people are excluded from this circle of knowledge – because dismissed as patients, and rarely

involved as professionals[3] –, they endure a form of epistemic injustice particularly alarming concerning their own identity. In other words, disabled people appear, in this sense, as merely *epistemic objects.*

2.2 Disability and Hermeneutical Injustice

The phenomena described above are also enabled by the process of hermeneutical and material exclusion discussed now. Hermeneutical injustice happens *before* an actual communication takes place. With this concept, Fricker defines those cases in which subjects may lack the theoretical, conceptual, and linguistic tools to analyse their experience, particularly in the case of discrimination and violence. They are unjustly excluded from the *intelligibility* of those experiences. Whenever there is "a gap in collective interpretive resources" (Fricker 2007: 1), the subjects may find it difficult to adequately record specific events or experiences and communicate them to others (I have already mentioned Fricker's example of the concept of sexual harassment).

In the case of disability, a relevant example is the role (not) played by the concept of ableism in the social arena. Disabled people's understanding of their own experience in the world can take shape with the apprehension of this concept. I am not claiming that there is no awareness of the forms of exclusion suffered; however, through the process of "engineering" of the concept of ableism, disabled people can become aware that oppression, inaccessibility, and injustice are not an individual destiny but a process of structural violence and discrimination.

> [T]he hermeneutical resources that [...] disabled people required in order to collectively understand the *political character of their situation* were unavailable to them. In short, these people have been, and indeed continue to be, *habitually subjected to hermeneutical injustice*. (Tremain 2017: 178, emphases mine)

Because of this case of hermeneutical injustice, disabled people are hindered in their capacity to be *interpreters* of phenomena which are simultaneously personal and political. However, even if such experiences can be recognised by disabled people who experience them – in this case, under the umbrella of the term 'ableism' –, this does not guarantee effective communication of this epistemic content to the dominant group, since this conceptual framework is still not widespread and shared in our communities.

[3] On the biases against disabled students or professionals in medicine and healthcare sectors see Hamraie 2017, Kuper et al. 2021, N. A. 2021.

I will add a further aspect to this framework, specifically drawn out by the issue of disability. I argue that disabled people suffer a peculiarly dramatic form of exclusion from the formal or informal processes of exchange of knowledge and from access to conceptual resources.

Firstly, disabled people are frequently marginalised in Education and culture, which prevents them from accessing adequate epistemic resources: for example, they are discouraged from pursuing a Bachelor's degree, they might not receive the necessary adjustments in class, or they might not find accessible cultural products (Hamraie 2017, Kearney 2011). Secondly, they are also actively segregated, which prevents them from materially accessing social spaces (Mitchell & Snyder 2015). A part of the disabled community is still institutionalised or generally may find difficulties in going out: urban spaces might be *inaccessible* (both in terms of architecture and negative social attitudes), or they might have insufficient assistance. Despite the scarcity of accessible epistemic resources, isolated and institutionalised people might still offer useful conceptualisation, but this knowledge does not widely circulate. As Carrie Sandahl highlights,

> However cripistemology evolves, it must include [...] our brothers and sisters who have the most to lose in becoming visible—those who are completely socially marginalized, stigmatized, and hidden away in institutions (residential, prisons, etc.). What they know, how they know, and why it matters is most threatening to the status quo. (in McRuer & Johnson 2014b: 157)

The exclusion from the group of epistemic agents is not only a form of individual injustice but has consequences on a wider scale, directly linked to hermeneutical injustices. In our case, for example, the isolation of many members of the disability community from knowledge development and circulation also implies that disabled people have *a weaker impact* in the crafting of hermeneutical tools that can foreground the comprehension of their experience of discrimination. The lack of the mentioned process of comprehension – let's say, the "organizing and making sense of experience" of ableism (Scully 2020: 307–308) – interests both disabled people and non-disabled people but certainly produces more direct harm to the former. Material exclusion can therefore favour processes of hermeneutical injustice, reducing the agents that can both *develop* useful conceptual tools and *benefit* from their spreading.

Ableism – which is the missing epistemic resource on which I am focusing here – is also *at the basis* of the exclusion described. As discussed, disabled people are frequently dismissed as epistemic authorities, both in general and

concerning their own experience of disability. A similar claim on this circular logic is made by Amandine Catala concerning autism:

> if the dominant understanding of autism as a disorder or a set of deficits is correct – that is, if indeed we are fundamentally flawed, deficient human beings – why should we be included in the production of hermeneutical resources that aim to describe us or interpret our experiences? (2024: 249)

A short circuit between the processes explained so far emerges: ableism shapes a hierarchy between epistemic agents marginalising disabled people, testimonial injustice deprives them of credibility (even concerning *their own experience of disability*), and because of hermeneutical injustice and material exclusion disabled people are closed off from *accessing* hermeneutical resources and *share* them in the social arena. Given this framework, the more tenacious narrative on disability is one of deficit and lack, while updated and more just narratives struggle to sediment.

3. The *Epistemic* Standpoint of Disability

Within discourses on epistemic injustice, it is important to consider and support forms of "epistemic resistance" or "epistemic insurrection" (Kidd et al. 2017). As claimed by José Medina,

> We need to cultivate hermeneutical openness and self-critical hermeneutical capacities that can make us more attentive to blind-spots, lacunas, and interpretative failures. (2017: 48)

I will consider two forms of resistance to the forms of harm and exclusion described in the previous sections. I will assess here knowledge *from* disability, focusing on the epistemic domain, while in the next section, I will explore knowledge *of* disability, focusing on the epistemological one; however, this distinction should not be read as a bifurcation of the two.

Here I will examine the passage from *experience* to *expertise* in daily lives – obviously, without claiming to be exhaustive. The premise that must be made is the diversity of the disability community, which is held together by a coalition of affinity (Montalti 2020) composed of subjects who present and experience bodily differences, varying degrees of pain, multifaceted forms of mobility, and heterogeneous ways of navigating the space (Scully 2020: 304–305). So, expertise can also be highly diversified. However, given the pervasiveness of ableism, they share similar experiences of discrimination and exclusion. On the

brighter side, they can experience similar feelings of joy and richness, especially thanks to a process of politicisation of disability.

The embodied experience of being disabled, and the social attitudes that disabled people face, are the basis of specific expertise: they generate epistemic and practical contributions (Garland-Thomson 2002: 20).[4] Disabled people "have experiences, *by virtue of their disabilities*, which non-disabled people do not have, and which are sources of knowledge that is not directly accessible to non-disabled people" (Wendell 1996: 68–69, emphasis mine, Duggan in McRuer & Johnson 2014b, Wilkerson 2015). The reference to *accessibility*, in this context, is an ironic overturning. In this framework, disability does not embody restriction, limitation, and lack, but can be redefined as a source of creativity, richness, adaptability, and competence. Navigating it also means producing innovative knowledge, unforeseen ways of life, and alternative relationships: "the generative and flourishing beauty of c/krip ways of knowing and being" (Taylor & Orning 2020: 677).

In a way, this is rooted precisely in their oppression: living in a structurally marginalising society, not only through architectural barriers but also social and cultural ones, requires perseverance and inventiveness. Following David Serlin, "discrepant sensorialities" in general pave the way for "forms of (creative) improvisation, rather than forms of (routinized) habitus" (2017). The very "dissonant" (Serlin 2017) nature of disabled people's being-in-the-world can foster an adaptive drive (Dokumaci 2023, Garland-Thomson 2011). From a material point of view, it can elicit creative manipulation and management of spaces to navigate them more profitably.

> Disability can develop advantageous expertise as one navigates barriers and unsupportive material and attitudinal environments. For example, managing disability can sharpen strategic planning and time management skills. (Garland-Thomson 2012: 356)

Disabled people can construct unexpected ways of conceiving and inhabiting them, and contribute to architectural design (Boys 2017). They can be considered experts in creating radical, collective, transversal accessibility, inventing ways to carry out actions and structure events that take into account the needs and characteristics of different bodyminds (Kafer 2016, Piepzna-Samarasinha 2018, Wong 2020). In this framework, I do not refer exclusively to "physical"

[4] It is interesting to note that these arguments within disability studies are rarely grounded on the theory of embodied cognition. An attempt to situate the issue at the intersection of the two traditions is offered by Mackenzie & Scully (2007) about the development of moral imagination.

impairments, which are most of the time implied with the term 'accessibility' (e.g., adjustments for mobility, such as ramps and elevators, or adjustments for sensory disabilities, such as the use of Braille and Sign Language). People with cognitive disabilities, learning disabilities, and neurodivergent are helping shape spaces that are not emotionally and sensory overwhelming, are fighting to establish clearer navigation systems in confusing venues (such as hospitals), and are co-crafting more accessible communication exchanges through simpler, plain language (Disability Matters & Humanising Healthcare 2024, Kinnaer et al. 2016, Piepzna-Samarasinha 2018).

Furthermore, their intimate assemblages with medical-assistive technologies can stimulate expertise and skills to design and "hack" them, ensure greater functionality, guarantee a better integration into daily lives, or fix them. In general, given these first-hand experiences, disabled people should be considered assets in designing and updating technologies (Hamraie and Fritsch 2019, Nelson et al. 2019, Shew 2020). Scully summarises a set of experiential learning allowed by moving in a wheelchair:

> [it] ranges from technical data about types of wheelchair, through social *nous* about how pedestrians and drivers respond to wheelchairs in public, to financial information about the relative costs of chairs and repairs, and about funding sources, embodied knowledge about handling the chair through space, and on and on. This kind of specialized experiential knowledge generally does not enter the collective stock in any substantial or accessible form. (2020: 302)

Users of insulin pumps repair them and decide to change the settings, patients with implantable cardiac defibrillators autonomously solve the problem of improper shocks, non-verbal people address the problems in the use of standard devices of alternative communication, and disabled people's perspective, in general, can highlight ableist and gender-normative narratives inscribed in technoscientific outputs (Baggs 2015-2018, Berk 2018, Forlano 2016, Oudshoorn 2020, Weise 2020).

In addition, the personal experience of living with a disabled bodymind can foster "management" skills concerning diverse forms of suffering (Patsavas 2014). As already discussed, it is problematic to flatten disability with suffering; however, the avoidance of the experience of pain is equally troublesome, reinforcing normative assumptions about bodyminds. It is also important not to overlook the potential overlaps between disability on one hand and chronic illnesses and psychiatric conditions on the other, given that the latter ones *can* imply suffering (for example, chronic fatigue, acute physical pain, and mental pain)

(Price 2015, Wendell 1996). Assuming that each subject composes a personal and cosmological relationship with pain, it is nonetheless useful to collectively enhance our capacity to *live with pain*. Following Leah Lakhsmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, this experience can grant the development of "crip emotional intelligence": namely, the capacity to decode others' distress, suffering, and difficult times, and to build relationships based on care and mutual support as a consequence (2018). The dissemination of this knowledge can mark a profound departure from oppressive and limited cultural narratives that prescribe competition, hyper-productivity, and the extraction of endless mental and physical resources – even in academia (Montalti 2025; Serlin 2017; Wendell 1996, Wilkerson 2015, Wong 2018).

4. The *Epistemological* Standpoint of Disability

Disabled people, as already discussed, are most of the time dispossessed of knowledge of disability, especially because medicine and healthcare are perceived as the only valid grounds to debate it. The discourse of disability studies represents a (potential) form of resistance to epistemic injustice, overturning this perspective. Primarily, it does not treat disability merely as a medical category, but as an assemblage that interests – among others – the sociological, philosophical, economic, cultural, and historical levels. Secondly, contributions from disabled scholars are recognised as valuable assets.

Here, I will focus on the role of the disabled standpoint within disability studies, linking the *epistemic* and the *epistemological* dimensions.[5] As clarified by Johnson and McRuer, the term *cripistemology* is useful here because it "[places] crip(s) at the beginning or centre of the production of knowledge" (2014b: 158). Respecting the dual ethical and epistemological nature of the paper so far, I argue that disabled people should be guaranteed a significant role in disability studies for two reasons. Firstly, it is fair that they exit the ghetto of being exclusively "passive, silenced" epistemic objects, and acquire a primary role in theoretical frameworks that concur in addressing disability. They must have the opportunity to fight back against the injustices mentioned so far and become "active producers of knowledge" (Mitchell & Snyder 2005: 633), which can also happen thanks to this research field. Secondly, and this is the point examined in more detail, I claim they can hold an epistemic privilege.

[5] I will not explore the possibility that disability can be an advantageous asset in other fields of knowledge that do not directly concern it.

Standpoint epistemology, grounding the analyses in Black Feminism, has positively addressed the question of whether personal experience can enhance scientific analysis. Standpoint epistemology argues that knowledge is not neutral or universal but influenced by the sociocultural and historical positioning of the knowing subject: it is *situated*. It also claims that the knowledge "extracted" from a position of marginality, and anchored in one's social experience, is not only different but even *more extensive*. The social position of marginalisation provides a privileged perspective for understanding power dynamics and structures of oppression, in particular *their oppression* (Haraway 1991, Harding 1986, Hill Collins 1986).

The theory has met with criticism because, differently from traditional epistemology, has valued "nonepistemic features" as salient in the process of knowing: the social identity of a subject, and "one's position of marginalization", are considered a gateway to more accurate knowledge *on specific issues* (Toole 2019: 598–599, Dror 2023). Traditional epistemology has instead always worked to "[purify] science" from possible biases, including the elements related to the knowing subject (Michalko 1999, Nijs & Heylighen 2015: 146). I will present here the elements that support a standpoint epistemology (or *cripistemology*) of disability. I will also consider which other factors should be taken into account to provide a satisfactory philosophical framework and examine the risks of some of the arguments put forward in support of standpoint theory.

Firstly, by pointing out the significance of subjects' *social* experience – namely, the identitarian traits that determine this experience –, *corporeality* may not be necessarily recalled in the framework. Feminist philosophers such as Donna Haraway have struggled to bring this out clearly: the body is always both "structuring and structured" in epistemology (1991). The embedded nature of subjects is also an aspect particularly significant in disability epistemology: corporeality, instead of being considered a threat, promises an opening to a multifaceted process of meaning-making and comprehension: "the disabled body is not so much a body of failure as a body that opens our eyes to a myriad of ways in which we can make sense of our being in this world" (Hamscha 2023: 434, Scully 2008). Rosemarie Garland-Thomson goes as far as to ironically alter "standpoint theory" in "sitpoint theory", to highlight that a different body – for example, one sitting in a wheelchair – may produce an entirely different knowledge framework (2002: 20–21).

Specific *standpoints* or *sitpoints* enable the strategies to navigate society and open experiences inaccessible otherwise (sometimes because not regarded as valuable). This attention to material aspects of everyday life can also positively impact academic research, helping to disclose that more practical and corporeal issues, normally marginalised, are valid and can be admitted to scientific debate. In this sense, disabled people's "experiential knowledge of the social world will tend to generate more accurate propositional knowledge about the social world" (Catala 2024: 245) than merely descriptive knowledge – such as my own, as a non-disabled researcher in disability studies – because of the proximity to the issues examined, and this knowledge can be helpful to advance the research. For example, the practice of creating accessibility can produce analyses of how processes of exclusion and inclusion work in the social world and how they can be dismantled (Hickman & Serlin 2019, Piepzna-Samarasinha 2018, Wong 2020). Or again, living crip sexuality, not intended as a limitation but even as a potential expansion of possibilities, can favour the development of critical analyses on the dominant heteronormativity and on how this system is rooted in compulsory able-bodiedness and able-mindedness (Shuttleworth & Mona 2021).[6]

As mentioned, standpoint theory involves not only the concept of situated knowledge but also specific epistemic privilege guaranteed by oppression. The "socially marginalized" subjects "are aware of both their own 'outsider' experiences, as well as the dominant group's 'insider' experiences" (Dror 2023: 623, Haraway 1991, Hill Collins 1986), and this argument is also persuasive concerning disability. In other words, not too dissimilar from William Du Bois's concept of "double consciousness" concerning blackness (2018), disabled people, like other marginalised groups, *live in two worlds at the same time*. This duality *can* – but not necessarily will – allow a clearer view. It is important to specify, however, the risk of claiming that their epistemic advantage stems solely from their experience of oppression, thus tying it to a negative experience. This is problematic not only because it does not bring out positive experiential baggage, but also because the aim is to undermine ableism: disabled people's epistemological contributions should not be linked to a 'resource' that we hope will eventually diminish.

[6] Furthermore, knowledge and research follow certain rhythms because the subject is embodied and embedded. For example, having a disability dictates a certain temporality and strategies in reading, writing, presenting at conferences, etc. I have examined this point elsewhere (Montalti 2025).

Nonetheless, it is reasonable to claim that disabled people certainly have the possibility of "understanding the emotional costs of oppression" (Dror 2023: 630), and are more motivated to unveil these processes. As already discussed, disability is not necessarily co-extensive with pain and suffering (physical or psychological). However, feminist scholars related to the social model of disability have emphasised the urge to explore what they call "psycho-emotional disablism", which includes "intended or unintended 'hurtful' words and social actions of non-disabled people (parents, professionals, complete strangers, others) in inter-personal engagements with people with impairments" (Thomas 2007: 72). The damage resulting from psycho-emotional disablement can be profound: it not only represents a form of social oppression but also changes one's inner voice. So, about the specific knowledge that disabled people might access and eventually transpose into their research on disability, the impact of oppression on psychological well-being is certainly worth mentioning.

Given these points in support of a disability standpoint, I also want to clarify that "standpoint" does not equate exactly with "identity" but rather is a collective ground that can be achieved starting from similar social and bodily experiences and through *theoretical and political work* to elaborate them. As Sandra Harding has always claimed for "traditional" standpoint epistemology, "[a]chieving a standpoint requires *scientific work* to see beneath the ideological surface of social relations that we all come to accept as natural" (2009: 195). It requires the willingness to *unlearn*, to disengage with the existing imaginary and theoretical frameworks on disability (Puar in McRuer & Johnson 2014b).[7] "Identity", as Haraway argues, "does not produce science; critical positioning does": "[t]o see from below is neither easily learned nor unproblematic, even if 'we' 'naturally' inhabit the great underground terrain of subjugated knowledges" (1991: 191–193). The same point is raised by Margaret Price on disability:

> All of us [disabled, neurodivergent, etc] know in our bones what it is to be "rendered invisible" – unthought – unmade as a human being. Yet that knowledge does not always translate into an ability to think, desire, or know differently. A process and practice of unlearning must take place (and continue). (in McRuer & Johnson 2014b: 162)

[7] The process of unlearning can be facilitated by personal experience of disability but it can also have an impact the other way around: reflecting on disability on a theoretical level can change one's experience of oneself, whether one is disabled or not.

Therefore, I also argue that these informed perspectives, albeit favoured by embedded and embodied experiences, must be supported by an epistemological commitment. Within the scientific debate, knowledge stemming from first-hand experiences must be re-elaborated thanks to theoretical tools and must be accompanied by the ethical-political choice to *think differently* – in other words, to change paradigmatic and dominant narratives on disability.

The choice to not excessively insist on identity and rather point at the fertile conjunction of the experience emerging from social processes, power imbalances, and specific embodiments on one hand *and* the activity of the subjects of theoretically reworking this material on the other is also conveyed by the concept of cripistemology. Cripping involves practices of mobilisation, dislocation, and negotiation of boundaries, refusing to reinforce static identity politics (Mitchell & Snyder 2005, Nash in McRuer & Johnson 2014b: 151). A rigid distinction between disabled and non-disabled can certainly be helpful to address the specific adjustments and welfare support needed by the former, but also risks excessively *othering* them (e.g., "*their*" knowledge, "*our*" attention to it, etc.). This move can foster a ghettoisation of knowledge that should instead be brought "into as shared social life", as an accessible resource (Wendell 1989: 121). The reference to the framework of cripistemology can also allow us to include a further aspect that interests the disability standpoint: the boundaries between 'disability' and presumed 'ability' falter or can abruptly change. We all are, as disability scholars often point out, only *temporarily non-disabled.* In this sense, the disability standpoint is quite different from other ones (gender, race, etc., perhaps with the only exception of class), presenting as mobile and flexible.[8]

Therefore, in my perspective, we must consider the intertwinement of several factors to correctly address a disability standpoint epistemology: the set of conceptual tools acquired doing scientific research; the role of individual ex-

[8] In this passage, I do not mean to flatten the experience of – for example – trans people or Black people. The social response could greatly vary concerning gendered characterisation and whiteness/blackness continuum; they are traits that can be differently interpreted depending on the context. What I mean is that beyond the plan of self-perception (e.g., discovering one's racialisation), every one of us could find herself disabled, but not suddenly become, for instance, Afro-Italian or cisgender. Even if someone can actively decide to be a lesbian because of political reasons, or it is possible that growing up someone understands to be trans, these changes are characterised by a form of agency and intention that are absent in the case of, e.g., traumatic events that end up in disability, etc. I thank one of the reviewers for inviting me to clarify this aspect.

perience of disability; the network of knowledge in which the knower/researcher is immersed; the partial artificiality of the category of 'disability'; the active impetus to deconstruct biases and to challenge structural forms of violence (be it internalised oppression or the perspective socially assigned to other marginalised group). In this sense, I am not arguing that non-disabled people cannot play a role in this process, but that the disabled point of view must play a leading role for disability studies to progress and propose increasingly advanced theories not only on oppression but in general on disabled experience and disability as a social identity.

To summarise, I will call the position I claim here *epistemological susceptivity*. The concept is here intended as a neutral or positive predisposition: it conveys an increased responsiveness to the environment and the inclination to turn this into knowledge. With this definition, I argue that disabled people *do* have proximity to certain information, both concerning marginalization and the richness opened up by their embodied and social experience. At the same time, the outcomes of this proximity must be implemented by the other factors discussed. This position presents the advantage of avoiding the philosophical slippery slopes of a "hard" version of standpoint theory – which would not take sufficiently into account specific considerations elicited by disability, such as the permeability of the category. It also keeps track of potential internalised oppression and the theoretical efforts needed to challenge dominant narratives on disability. At the same time, it usefully accounts for disabled people's knowledge and expertise, challenging the forms of harm, injustice and inclusion presented in the first part, not sufficiently considered in social epistemology.

5. Conclusion

Disability studies have addressed epistemic and epistemological issues. However, as mentioned, this attention has rarely connected the area with social epistemology and has rarely implemented philosophical methodologies and tools. Just to name two examples, Simi Linton has advocated for the need to "formulate the epistemological foundation" (1998: 120) of disability studies to provide them with the necessary scientific rigour, methodologies, and disciplinary strength, whereas Rod Michalko reminds us that every "process of knowledge production is surrounded by issues of authority and legitimacy" (1999: 175). In these terms, Michalko claims that disability studies are equipped to explore questions such as: "What counts as knowledge? Who counts as a knowing subject?" (1999: 175).

In this article, I have sought to valorise this theoretical backbone while bringing it into conversation with feminist social epistemology. I referred to the polyvocality of the concept of cripistemology as a useful point of departure to address how the epistemic and the epistemological merge: in other words, the connection between knowledge both *from* disability and *of* disability. In this dual framework, disability can be a catalyst for expertise and resources. However, ableism can be an obstacle to the valorisation of epistemic baggage sparked from the experience of disability, both as a form of self-reflexivity and as an epistemological standpoint. In Louise Hickman and David Serlin's words, "cripistemology emphasises the role that disabled subjectivity can play in both the undoing of traditionally assumed ways of knowing as well as the questioning of how we know disability" (2019: 135).

As a premise, I have exposed how traditional social epistemology has mostly ignored the case of disability. Then, I have explored how ableism can produce the dispossession of knowledge on disability. In considering the lack of credibility assigned to disabled people in medical exchanges and considerations of their well-being, I have referred to the concept of testimonial injustice. In investigating how disabled people can rarely access and share knowledge of disability, I have employed the concepts of hermeneutical injustice and material exclusion. I have also pointed out how the social incapacity to identify the role of ableism in these processes of epistemic injustice is *itself* a consequence of hermeneutical injustice. Concerning both contexts, I have mentioned the dangerous outcomes that can originate from the forms of epistemic injustices identified.

I have then proposed two forms of epistemic resistance, considering primarily the urge to disseminate the existence of specific disability expertise. I have explored how the necessity to adapt can allow disabled people to creatively engage with the material world, both concerning spaces and the technologies they use. Accessibility is an expertise that must be valued in the sociocultural arena. I have also mentioned the experiential baggage in managing pain.

Then, I have focused instead on the role of disability standpoint in disability studies. In this regard, the processes of exclusion and hermeneutical injustice previously described must not end up nourishing an idea of stagnation and passivity; "the inadequacy of the available conceptual resources" (Toole 2019: 604) can motivate them to produce better conceptualisation and theories. I have claimed, in conversation with standpoint epistemologies, that personal experience *does* provide a "latent" epistemological advantage. At the same time, to proficiently contribute to the field of disability studies, it should be

channelled in a collective effort to advance theories of disability. In other words, experience equips subjects with a set of raw materials that can quite easily become knowledge. I called this position *epistemological susceptivity*. As Emma Kivisild poetically puts it:

> Cripistemologies are epistemologies of slipperiness and clouds of meaning. So even though experience is not necessarily a way to authentic knowledge, is it a way to slide at the edges, inhabit the clouds? (in McRuer & Johnson 2014b: 151)

Lastly, given the final considerations on methodological aspects of disability studies, we must not shy away from making ethical and practical considerations as well, which will certainly be tackled in my future work: for example, on how disabled people's presence in disability studies could be ensured, or which forms of familiarity with disability should be implied in doing this research as non-disabled scholars, whenever we are not doing strictly empirical research – for example, concerning the choice of the sources in our bibliographies or the encounters we make with it also beyond our work lives.

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