Time to (un)learn: Rethinking philosophy through Disability Studies

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ABSTRACT

In this article, I consider the potential of Disability Studies to change the attitude of those philosophers who continue, if unintentionally, to conceive philosophy only as a "scientific discipline" and the philosopher as a "specialist" and an "expert". My main point is that the insights and knowledge coming from outside of the disciplinary boundaries, especially from minority or marginalized thinking, can play an essential role in finding a way out of an evident crisis of philosophy. Disability Studies, with their insistence on the various processes of disablement from which the very idea of disability emerges, may help philosophers, among others, to redirect their attention on the fundamental philosophical notion of the "human being" and to the infinite ways through which a dominant understanding and model continuously develops of the human being, whose "ability" and "normality" end up being taken for granted.

1. Philosophy and disability: an elusive relationship

In their *Introduction* to the recent *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy and Disability*, the editors Adam Cureton and David Wasserman stress that philosophers have shown an interest in disability issues for at least thirty years: the initial articles were published in the mid-1980s, and the number of contributions has been clearly growing from the onset of the new millennium (Cureton & Wasserman 2020, xxiii; see also Kristiansen et al. 2009; Ralston & Ho 2010). In the same volume, Shelley L. Tremain, the initiator of a new sub-discipline in philosophy she named some years ago "philosophy of disability" (see Tremain 2024a, 1; for a more detailed introduction, Tremain 2017; 2024b), links that initial interest to the developments of cognitive science and bioethics, as well as to a renewed engagement in issues of social justice after the publication in 1971 of the very influential John Rawls' *A Theory of Justice* (see Tremain 2020, 82). In her opinion, however, mainstream philosophers seem to take for granted "the

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metaphysical status and epistemological character of the category of disability and designation itself, casting them as self-evident and thus philosophically uninteresting" (Tremain 2020, 82).

In agreement with Tremain's critical remark, in this article I will not try to answer the question of what philosophy can say about, and do for, disability (see, e.g., Vehmas 2012). On the contrary, my guiding question is what Disability Studies can say about, and do for, contemporary philosophy and especially for those philosophers who continue, intentionally or not, to understand and perform "philosophy" as a "scientific discipline"[1] besides all others, bound to obey codified ways of thinking and methods. Of course, not all philosophers adhere to that particular understanding of philosophy, and there are indeed attempts to fight for different understandings and practices of philosophy. But as it should become clearer in the following, it seems at the same time undeniable that those who want to be inserted in the category of philosophers are expected, if implicitly, to accept and follow a certain definition of philosophy.

More in particular, and especially if they are also professors and scholars inserted in academia, today's philosophers are called and expected to define and practice philosophy in a way compliant with a specific set of rules that emerged during the consolidation of the dominant version of Western modernity and Western modern science, a process at the end of which a particular meaning of philosophy (e.g., "systematic philosophy") became the only correct or "authentic" one. Among other things, this led to the marginalization of divergent philosophical attitudes, though luckily not to their elimination, as well as to the establishment of the philosopher as a "specialist" and an "expert" in philosophy.

This is the main reason why my criticism is not directed to one or another of the strands, schools, or sub-disciplines of a coherent entity called "philosophy" but to the general attitude to which philosophers trained in the current educational institutions (notably, Universities) are expected to conform in order to be accepted as members of the scientific community of authentic philosophers. Just because of such a situation, mainstream philosophers usually keep missing the main points raised by fields of inquiry situated outside of the disciplinary boundaries, like the one known under the general label "Disability Studies", for which disability – rather than a natural fact or condition – is a product of a process of disablement (Monceri 2025).

[1] On the origins of scientific disciplines during Western modernity see Stichweh 2001.

Moreover, in this situation, non-mainstream philosophers seem to be compelled to resort to the creation of ever "new" sub-disciplines to trespass disciplinary boundaries in the attempt to perform philosophy in direct contact with the questions and issues arising within their life context, avoiding the usual narrative of a philosophy that would do better to cut itself off from practice and life, in order to correctly perform theory. This might even be the case with the "philosophy of disability", to the extent that it is understood as a *sub*-discipline or an example of "applied" philosophy. The subversive potential of a philosophy of disability runs namely the risk of being neutralized by normalizing it as a hierarchically subordinated part of a general system of philosophy.

Now, one of the central points of this article is that the philosophical investigation of disability should imply acknowledging that the situation described above is also the outcome of the lack of interest, on the part of established mainstream philosophers, in questioning the very notion of "ability", rather than the derivative dis-ability, once you uncover the presence and persistence of an ideology of *ableism*, as Gregor Wolbring (2008) underlines. Indeed, we can surely speak of an *ableistnormativity*, as Fiona Kumari Campbell (2009) has already shown[2], just as we can speak of *heteronormativity* in the field of sex, gender and sexuality[3]. Hence, the main issue philosophers should address is the deconstruction of the notion of ability and the model of the human being concealed behind that notion, whose characters have been singled out during the development and establishment of that dominant version of Western modernity to which also philosophy significantly contributed, ending up suggesting that the *ideal* human being and the standard reference model for all of us and all over the world, should be the male, white, Christian, heterosexual and *able-bodied* "modern man" (for a more detailed discussion, see Monceri 2017).

Therefore, as far as I can see, the inability of (a large part of) contemporary philosophers to radically address the process of disablement depends on the one hand on the fact that they do not usually question the notion of disability. They take it for a self-evident notion, not least because they take for granted the

[2] As with hetero-normativity, ableist-normativity refers to "the compulsion to emulate the norm through the internalization of ableism", with the result that ableness/able-bodiedness becomes compulsory, and that such "ableistnormativity results in compulsive passing, wherein there is a failure to ask about difference, to imagine human be-ingness differently" (Campbell 2009, 4).
[3] For the notion of heteronormativity cfr. Warner 1991, whereas for a joint discussion of "compulsory able-bodiedness" and "compulsory heterosexuality" see McRuer 2006.

notion of ability as one of the characters of the typical human being, with the result that dis-ability may end up by simply meaning a "lack of ability" on which it is not necessary to say anything more. On the other hand, however, it seems to me that philosophers usually go on confusing disability and impairment, even when they explicitly acknowledge their difference. The term "disability" ends up incorporating that of "impairment", even though the distinction between disability and impairment is surely one of the most influential ideas within the field of Disability Studies since their beginnings.

It should not be forgotten that this very distinction has been at the basis of the emergence through the 1970s of the so-called "social model of disability", which is currently considered, not only in Italy[4], as "a scientific truth and an operational tool" indeed "a paradigm because it contains that set of approaches, explanatory schemes, problem solutions that address the issues of disability" (Schianchi 2021, 16, my translation). The binary impairment/disability is already well present in what Mike Oliver (1981, 28), the first activist and scholar to coin and suggest the expression "social model of disability", wrote to define it: "This new paradigm involves nothing more or less fundamental than a switch away from focusing on the physical limitations of particular individuals to the way the physical and social environments impose limitations upon certain groups or categories of people"[5].

Now, almost all philosophers would currently accept the idea suggested in the above quotation that disability is a broad term hinting at the circumstance that the difficulties of "living with an impairment" are due not only, and sometimes nor even primarily, to that impairment but are the result of the negative social evaluation of it and the subsequent construction of structures of exclusion. This acknowledgement, however, does not seem to have deeply affected the overlapping between disability and impairment in philosophical discourse on disability, with the result that the point of reference of such discourse can still

[4] The specific references that the reader will find in the article to Italy and the Italian literature are due to the fact that the Author is an Italian philosopher interested also in contributing to broadening the still clearly underdeveloped academic debate on Disability Studies in their country, especially in the field of philosophy, not least by means of (critically) addressing the already available works (see, more broadly, Monceri 2025).

[5] For an introduction and discussion of Mike Oliver's thinking see, in Italian, Marchisio & Monchietto 2023.

be found, in the great majority of cases, in the so-called "medical model of disability", which has been the social model's original critical target (for a definition see, among others, Kafer 2013, esp. 5).

Things being so, it appears less surprising that the philosophical discourse concerning disability is usually to be found in the field of moral philosophy/ethics and bioethics, to the extent that the former undertakes the charge of finding the general value framework of reference from which the latter move for elaborating those "principles" to be applied to the life (*bios*) of the concrete disabled individuals (well, "patients"). However, though this relevant issue cannot be adequately touched here (see, among others, Tremain 2008; Tresky 2008; Ouellette 2011), from this discourse the reference to the political dimension and especially to the exercise of power implied in imposing the authority of those principles even to dissenting individuals, is often completely excluded.

This situation may also explain, at least partially, why philosophers, especially in Italy where Disability Studies is still largely unknown in its various articulations and positions, invariably resort to categories such as "relation(ship)"[6], "care"[7], and "vulnerability"[8] shaped abstractly by means of linking them to the history of Western philosophy – that is to the positions of the great philosophers of the Western "tradition". After the theoretical construction is adequately completed by means of this reconnection with the tradition, as it were, such categories become the model to be applied to the object "disability" to solve the issues it poses. This process, however, excludes from the onset any possibility for disabled individuals – an expression I prefer to "persons with disabilities" – to let their voices heard, let alone participating in the definition of an academic discourse *that concerns them* not least because it has consequences for their concrete lives.

In other words, all suggestions and proposals by moral philosophers and especially bioethicists are presented as something that has indeed taken under due consideration the "needs" of "vulnerable people", do they consist, to

[6] The reference to the notion of "relation" is not only to be found in the field of philosophy, but also in other disciplines, such as sociology and pedagogy. See, among others, Ferrucci 2004; Schianchi 2021. Of course, the idea of a "relational model of disability" is well present also in international literature: see, notably, Shakespeare 2014.

[7] On the Italian reception of the notion of care, care ethics (or ethics of care), and the relating ethical and political debate see, among others,; Brotto 2013; Mortari 2015; Pulcini & Bourgault 2018; Vissio 2018; Adorno 2019; Pulcini 2020; Dadà 2021.

[8] See, among others, Giolo & Pastore 2018; Zanetti 2019; Furia & Zullo 2020; Dadà 2022. For a more critical position see the interesting work by Bernardini 2017; see also Bernardini 2018.

take just a couple of instances, in a "bioethics for disability" based on a new or "renewed humanism" (Gensabella Furnari 2014, 316), or in the suggestion for a "maternalistic ethics" based upon some version of "maternal thinking" (Dadà 2021). The point, however, is that such "new" and more "inclusive" models are constructed by referring only to the canon of philosophy and its authors (say, Immanuel Kant, Emmanuel Lévinas, etc.), simply adding works (written by authors such as Martha C. Nussbaum, Joan C. Tronto, Eva Feder Kittay or Virginia Held), which can be of use in importing the "ethics of care" in Italy, establishing it as the best model to be implemented at the global level – almost the only game in town, so to speak – when it comes to deciding what should be done with that group of "vulnerable persons" called "the disabled".

Hence, though philosophers usually approach disability from the perspective of an "ethical consideration", they do not see that they are rather taking a strongly *political* stance, either by avoiding the interaction with those who are concerned, or by establishing a hierarchy between the knowing subject (the philosopher), and the object to be known ("the disabled"). Moreover, when moral philosophers/ethicists try to apply their positions to the political sphere, they very often seem to rely, more or less critically, on the notion of a variously reconfigured "social justice" of Rawlsian descent, perhaps because this allows them to more easily subordinate politics to ethics.

Of course, this is not to say that other approaches to the notion and social implications of "justice" are not there, as is the case with the different approaches centered on the notion of "care" and suggesting related ethics of care (for a more detailed discussion see Monceri 2025, chap. 4). Anyway, this does not lead to overcoming or replacing the Rawlsian approach altogether, but rather to "a sort of *division of labor* between the two ethical perspectives", since "evidently, *care of the world* needs both of them" (Pulcini 2013, 16). More importantly, it seems clear even in such cases that the distinction between an ethical and a political stance, between ethics and politics, is solved in favor of the preeminence of the former over the latter, so running the risk of further obscuring the incidence of (the exercise of) power embedded in any ethical approaches, including the ethics of care (more deeply, Monceri 2025).

Be it as it may, the point is that even when philosophers try to come closer to the concrete life of the people involved, they do not usually consider *their* opinion, nor the struggles of disabled individuals, even against an idea of "social justice" or of an "ethics of care" to which they have not explicitly consented (for a critical discussion of Rawls' positions see Simplican 2015). As a

matter of fact, both have been and keep on being constructed by so-called "normal" members of the political, social, cultural, and ethical community. And worse still, those "normals" are also called to administrate the concrete allocation of services connected with social justice and "care" *in the place of* "the disabled" and *in their behalf*, even in the absence of any participation by the part of the latter, or of their explicit consent to be represented by the former.

In short, the disturbing circumstance that disabled individuals are hardly considered as legitimate partners of political negotiation, and that therefore they seem to be more *ex-post* objects of the actions promoted in their behalf by those legitimated to do so (the "normal people", "the able-bodied"), than *ex-ante* protagonists of their construction, seems to be unknown and/or unperceived by most philosophers. And of course, being one of them, I must also add that this situation may surely emerge from the fact that, generally speaking, even political philosophers seem to have very little to say about such and similar issues. Indeed, it is a little bit confusing to note that political theory and political philosophy are not yet very active in the discourse concerning disability, due to the obvious and numerous political issues emerging from the process(es) of disablement (but see Arneil & Hirschmann 2016). In a sense, they seem almost totally handing over the epistemic authority to speak about disability to moral philosophers and (bio)ethicists, almost as if they would also be convinced that disability pertains to the realm of "the moral" and not of "the political".

To be sure, this may be a legitimate position, but still, it has the result of reiterating what is already there – old wine in new bottles, so to speak. The outcome of such and similar positions is either that it is not a priority to meet the expectations of concrete "persons with disabilities", or it is dangerous and risky because it presupposes the "re-inclusion" of such persons, so disavowing the idea that what has been since long canonized and diffusely accepted by the community of self-appointed "normals" might not be that good. However, the good and the just have been, and continue to be, shaped according to the views and positions of the "normal people/able people", who can think and act as "morally able subjects". Moreover, as fully human beings they can speak also in behalf of others, whereas those "Others" cannot speak (if not partially) even for themselves. Now, such a paternalistic approach is still the one typical of Western philosophy in the still dominant version that emerged in the Modern Era, and nothing would change by transforming it into a maternalistic one, surely not in respect of its patronizing character.

In short, the crisis of contemporary philosophy is well deeper than a simple need for "labels" or "adjustments", because it has to do with the genealogy of the dominant understanding and model of philosophy as part of the system of Western modern science. It is namely undeniable that, to say it in Tremain's (2019, 133) words, "a certain limited number of subfields of philosophy – metaphysics, ethics, logic, epistemology, and philosophy of language – are widely regarded in the contemporary discipline of philosophy as foundational to it". This has the not negligible consequence that other "subfields" are not perceived as philosophy in a proper sense and should be considered as "applications and contingent derivatives of these foundational subfields" (Tremain 2019, 133). As it clearly emerges from the previous quotations, not only newer (sub)fields such as philosophy of disability to which Tremain refers, but also older and indeed original branches of philosophy, such as political philosophy, do not figure in the top-ranking positions.

Although much more could be said and many examples given in this regard, I will be content with adding that even the distinctions and hierarchies between what is proper or serious philosophy, and what is not, have no "real" or "objective" basis. They have rather to do with a political decision by the part of the "scientific community" of philosophers to marginalize those strands of philosophy that are more immediately perceived as "applied", dealing with concrete individuals and the matters of their everyday life – though, with the remarkable, but not singular, exception of bioethics. Therefore, the interesting side of the construction of such distinctions and hierarchies is that it can help uncover the stereotypical and still dominant assumptions about the more general relationship between philosophy and "real life". The former should namely engage with abstract notions and problems with the (ideal) aim to elaborate abstract models in the form of self-referential systems able to answer any foreseeable question, to then apply them to the latter as an object.

2. Is philosophy at an impasse?

In the previous section, I addressed a few reasons why most of academic philosophers do not engage with disability and disablement. In short, what is expected from philosophy as a "scientific discipline" is to elaborate models using reworking already given notions and categories and by deploying the correct way of thinking, to then re-apply such models to disability, disablement, and the disabled individuals as if they were "objects". Moreover, if philosophy is understood

as a "discipline", which is "*the primary unit of internal differentiation of the modern system of science*", and not "a merely trivial structural aspect of modern science" (Stichweh 1992, 4), it may be defined as a set of certain and objective knowledges, that can be achieved once and for all by going through the correct training, at the end of which an individual can become an "expert" in philosophy. The philosopher as an expert can count on an amount of selected and specific knowledge, as well as on competences and skills, that can be applied without questioning nor challenging their assumptions any longer.

The dark side of this comfortable and re-assuring situation is that the need is no longer there to go looking for "novelty" and "innovation". Rather, the expert philosopher is expected to rethink again and again the knowledge transmitted by "tradition" and acquired by means of being instructed within the institutionalized systems of education (especially the Universities[9]), going into more and more detail. This is one of the main reasons why philosophy seems today unable to address radically and critically burning issues, coming from the reality of everyday life outside of the academia. In fact, philosophers do not undergo a dedicated training *to this end*. And to make matters worse, the stable collocation of philosophy within the system of modern science resulted in a firm belief that it would be possible to separate the philosopher as a neutral, objective, detached "specialist" and "expert" – a proper "scientist" – and the philosopher as an individual sharing that same everyday life with their fellow beings (as well as the entire environment, for that matters).

The problem with such a situation is that the knowledge at the philosopher-as-an-expert's disposal very rarely includes knowledge coming from outside the borders of the discipline, referring mainly, if not exclusively, to the canonized one, validated and accepted by that *scientific* community which is however clearly a *political* community, whose survival depends on imposing an internal consensus, especially over too much dissenting or eclectic members (on this and similar issues see Feyerabend 1987, 88ff.). In this way, the traditional canon of philosophy is continuously reaffirmed, at the expenses of innovative thinking that may come from the consideration of edge issues, indicating the urgent need for change in thinking and often suggested from outside of the academia.

[9] This is of course one of the reasons why authors coming from the decolonial camp suggest, with very good reasons, that the Western(ized) university systems should undergo a process of decolonization. See, among others, Grosfoguel, Hernández & Rosen Velásquez 2016.

The fact, however, is that the philosophy experts, due to their specialist training, are no longer well-equipped for thinking otherwise, a circumstance already underlined by Paul K. Feyerabend back in 1978, when he happened to write that "it is surprising to see that philosophers who were once inventors of new world views and who taught us how to look through the status quo have now become its most obedient servants: *philosophia ancilla scientiae*" (1987, 40). To be sure, this situation of knowledge stagnation and self-reproduction is still there, as well as the specialist training from which it originates, with the result that philosophy, as a whole, seems to be really in a deadlock, getting out of which is a very difficult task.

The criticism of philosophy as unable to effectively cope with burning or edge issues in many fields, including disablement and disability, comes also from the camp of Disability Studies, especially from authors (and activists) closer to the British social model of disability, who prefer sociology understood as a discipline able to engage with "social facts" in their concreteness, especially in its empirical and quantitative version. To give a relevant instance, also Mike Oliver has expressed an unflattering opinion on philosophy, writing on the occasion of a Review Symposium dedicated by the well-known Journal *Disability & Society* in 2007 to the newly published book by Tom Shakespeare (2006), *Disability Rights and Wrongs*, in which the author distanced himself from the British social model of disability, and suggested a shifting to a "relational/interactional model".

According to Oliver, that shift was also the result of the fact that the originally transgressive potential of empirical sociology "has lost some of its sense of direction in recent years and, like Shakespeare, has come under the influence of philosophy", to which he immediately adds that "while not going quite as far as Marx in his dismissal of philosophers, I remain convinced that its only use is as a career opportunity for middle class intellectuals who can't get a proper job" (Sheldon, Trausdóttir, Beresford, Boxall & Oliver 2007, 230) . Indeed, just the fact that Shakespeare himself states that his book "draws heavily on philosophy" leads Oliver to conclude that in his view that book "adds to the mystification of disability relations and doesn't produce a single, concrete proposal as to what should be done" (Sheldon, Trausdóttir, Beresford, Boxall & Oliver 2007, 230).

Of course, such and similar positions caused a reaction by the part of philosophers, to the extent that some years later Christopher A. Riddle (2013,

377) could state that "recent discussion surrounding the conceptualizing of disability has resulted in a stalemate between British Sociologists and Philosophers". Such stalemate emerged primarily from the circumstance that, as already Shakespeare had done, "many Bioethicists and Philosophers have embraced an 'interactional approach' to disability" (Riddle 2013, 377), instead of the British social model, because they maintain that replacing the social model with the interactional model would be more useful to analyze and render the concrete aspects of disability. And it should not be forgotten that the advocates of a relational/interactional model, among them Shakespeare[10], accept in principle the "biopsychosocial model" at the basis of the *International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF)* (see World Health Organization, from now on WHO, 2001; for a critical discussion Monceri 2025, chap. 5), that is the standard of reference all over the world, a model that should stop the long-lasting quarrel between the medical and the social models of disability.

In fact, the explicit aim stated in the ICF is to overcome the opposition between the medical model and the social model of disability moving from "an integration of these two opposing models", in the attempt "to achieve a synthesis, in order to provide a coherent view of different perspectives from a biological, individual and social perspective", through adopting "a 'biopsychosocial' approach" (WHO 2001, 20). This attempt to reconcile the medical model with the social model can surely count on "new directions in medical sociology" according to which "the impaired body is increasingly conceived of as neither medical nor social, mental or physical, but as an intersection of the biological, psychological and social" (Imrie 2004, 292). Anyway, on the one hand, some difficulties emerge from a general lack of clarification of the constitutive characters of the bio-psycho-social theory. On the other hand, it should be highlighted that despite the ICF does not expose the theoretical and cultural origins of that theory, "it is derived from structural functionalism, or a conception of society which [...] exists on different and distinct levels of organization" (Imrie 2004, 297), though another origin is indeed constituted by the psy-sciences.[11]

[10] See what Shakespeare (2014, 79) writes: "The medico-psycho-social model that lies at the heart of the ICF helps us understand the complexity of disability". It seems also interesting to note that Shakespeare does not use the term "bio-", but directly the term "medico-".

[11] For a reconstruction of the development of the functionalist model applied to disability see Boorse 2010.

Beyond such general critical remarks, Colin Barnes, a renowned exponent of the British social model, stresses that the attempts to include "social model insights" within the ICF seems to be hardly successful, in that "it is sufficient to point out that it is a three-tier construct, albeit with different terms for disability and handicap – 'activity' and 'participation' respectively – and founded on western notions of 'scientific' medicine and normality" (2012, 20). Moreover, "the ICF is presented as apolitical and acknowledges the role of the environment in shaping our understanding of disability", but "the inference that impairment is the main cause of disablement is clearly retained in its title: the 'biopsychosocial' model of disability" (Barnes 2012, 20).

The bio-psycho-social approach as a way to reconcile the medical model and the social model seems to characterize also the so-called Nordic relational model of disability that has proven appealing to many philosophers around the world, and particularly in Italy, where the idea that "disability" is a relationship is very diffused, if "disability" can be considered as "the result of a relationship between the person and the environment", pointing to the circumstance that "there is a gap between individual functioning and the demands of the society or environment" (Mallet & Runswick-Cole 2014, 20). In the Italian mainstream academic and public discourse on "disability" this approach seems to be very useful not least because it resonates better within a cultural context still clearly imbued with values drawn from the Christian-Catholic worldview, as well as with a sometimes rather acritical trust in the "expert knowledge" of medical sciences. Moreover, apparently, the adequacy is not questioned of a synthetic operation leading to merge the medical and the social models, and there is hardly a preliminary discussion of the presuppositions either of the medical, or of the social model.

Anyway, the definition of disability as a relationship between the person and the environment leads at least to the discomforting consequence that a problematic recovery of a medical approach to the "impaired body" is surely needed. If it is namely true that the relationship named "disability" has indeed a social and environmental aspect that may be controlled through political interventions, inspired by values such as democratic participation, social justice, equal opportunities, and "care", it cannot be denied that a relationship always implies reciprocity. This means that the "impaired" individual is expected, implicitly or not, to be compliant with the notion of "normality" elaborated by "not-impaired" individuals. Hence, a kind of "compulsory normalization" is still at work even in

the relational model, as an ideal situation toward which the persons with disabilities should willingly strive, by overcoming their "impairments" through a voluntary subjugation to medical interventions targeted to guarantee them a healthier and as normal as possible life – that is a life that falls within the value range fixed by compulsory able-bodiedness or ableistnormativity.

Now, it seems undeniable that addressing *this* and similar issues would be one of the tasks of philosophical reflection, but the problem is that to simply start such (critical) discourse philosophy should be reconfigured as a more transgressive discipline than it currently is – kind of an *in/discipline*, to use the well-chosen label suggested by Ingram (2022, 93) for Mad Studies (see also Monceri 2022; 2025). But current philosophical discourse about disability continuously reiterates the idea that not *all* branches of philosophy and not *all* philosophers should engage with disability, on the basis of the idea that though "philosophy of disability is a multifaceted discipline", it is more specifically "an area of inquiry in which metaphysics, phenomenology, and ethics intersect" (Ralston & Ho 2010, 15), so suggesting again that only specific branches of philosophy are properly adequate to fulfil the task. Things being so, it seems not strange that even in the title of philosophical works devoted to disability it is easier to find terms such as "metaphysical" (e.g., Riddle 2013) or "ontology" (e.g., Vehmas & Mäkelä 2009), than, say, "political" or "epistemological" – not to speak about the ubiquitous presence of "ethics" and "bioethics".

Hence, I cannot help but agreeing once again with Tremain's position already introduced above, according to which (many) philosophers still adhere to a "conventional view of philosophy" for which there are a few core subfields of philosophy, especially metaphysics, ethics, logic, epistemology, and philosophy of language, while all the other subfields are hierarchically ranked under them. For those who accepts a distinction between "core" and "applied" subfields of philosophy "the questions and concerns that make up the former subfields are generally regarded as timeless, disinterested, and universal in character, and, alternatively, the questions and concerns that constitute the latter subfields are generally taken to be accidental, interested, and partial" (Tremain 2019, 133).

By the way, also Tremain's philosophy of disability falls within the "accidental, interested, and partial" subfields, and this is one of the clearest pieces of evidence that a hierarchy does exist even between more and less legitimated ways of doing philosophy, which depends on the original compliance by the part

of philosophy with the Western modern system of science, as one of its disciplines. The scientific community of philosophers, in its turn, has among its tasks that of assuming the non-neutral, and indeed *political*, role of gatekeeper towards those versions of philosophical thinking that the mainstream, dominant bunch of philosophers considers at any given moment "undesirable" for whatever reason, so marginalizing them through the exercise of the power to exclude.

But the fact remains that the exclusion of critical thinking, especially in the form of a political philosophy which seems nowadays subordinate to ethics, and the renewed, widespread, calls for metaphysics and ontology as the proper fields within which "disability" should be investigated, fail in answering the requests coming from the concrete individuals, outside of the academia. Philosophers seemingly adhering to a conventional view of philosophy and its articulations maintain, as Simo Vehmas and Pekka Mäkelä (2009, 53; see also Vehmas 2012) do, that "we can be more flexible and efficient in aiming to increase equality and well-being of all individuals in society when our politics is grounded on proper ontology", adding that "ontology based on facts rather than representations is better also in political terms".

They also stress that "people need tablets, operations, therapies, and other remedies that should be based on medical facts" (Vehmas & Mäkelä 2009, 53), though it remains not well clear why this should concern only "people with disabilities" and not "all human beings", so becoming mainly a question of allocating resources, moving from *political* decisions concerning which groups of people should be benefitted and which not. Therefore, I find that such positions would benefit from a confrontation with subfields of philosophy such as a political philosophy freed from the bonds of ethics, at the aim to reflect more critically especially on the idea that "impairment in general is often both a brute fact and an institutional fact, and disability is an institutional fact based on the hierarchy of facts which all ultimately rest on brute facts" (Vehmas & Mäkelä 2009, 53).

Though this is not the place to delve more deeply into the issue, it can be stated that reducing the complex issues surrounding disablement to the assumptions and presuppositions of philosophy qua ontology seems not sufficient to address the circumstance that hierarchies between human beings are never established on the basis of "brute facts", but by means of *evaluating* them. Indeed, resistance is there to this still dominant posture, and not only by the part of philosophers of disability who, according to Tremain (2024a, 3), "provide insights that talk back to the dominant conceptualization of disability that is constitutive of bioethics, cognitive science, and mainstream political philosophy

and ethics especially". Such and similar statements may surely constitute the basis to start a deeper self-reflection on the part of all philosophers, independently of their belonging to one or the other branches of a philosophy still conceived as a tendentially closed and hierarchical system.

3. Conclusion: what philosophy can (un)learn from disability

The previous reconstruction has been conducted in the service of the idea that it is the task of current philosophy to focus on what Disability Studies can do for it, and especially for the philosophers, who have been themselves disabled just through the codification of philosophy as a "scientific discipline" and the philosopher as an "expert". Through this change of perspective, an experiment of *cripping* the philosophical gaze through disability[12], philosophers of all persuasions might see things from an odd and unusual angle, trying to reflect on ourselves instead of on "them" – again, to reflect on "philosophy", instead of "disability" – at the same time empowering minority thinking coming from the margins or the peripheries (also in geo-political terms) by listening deeply to what it has to say and to suggest.

It seems namely undeniable that if philosophers keep on reflecting on disability as if it were a simple object, instead of a product of the jointly epistemological, ethical, and political processes of disablement, they will remain inevitably trapped within the game of the dominant version of Western modernity, which successfully neutralized the transgressive potential of a philosophy understood as a continuous criticism of the obvious, to transform it in another tool to justify and reproduce the status quo. However, to actualize this transformative potential of philosophy, to be performed jointly in theory *and* in practice, *philosophers* should be able to let themselves be touched by the diverging stimuli coming from their environment, particularly from its margins, from the marginalized individuals in any given spatial and temporal context. In this sense, philosophy – whatever its branch or "disciplinary" connotation – cannot help but be inherently political, because one of its main tasks is to unmask the untenability of any claims to universal and definitive truth, since what we name truth is but

[12] The idea of "cripping" philosophy, in the sense of deliberately making it "crip" to show the non-obviousness of taken-for-granted assumptions, mirrors the already known process of "queering" philosophy, understood in the same sense, to unmask the non-obviousness of philosophy's assumptions concerning sexual, gender and sexuality matters. For an application of a queering philosophical gaze to issues relating to political thinking see, e.g., Monceri 2017.

the outcome of infinite negotiations that are inevitably partial, ephemeral, and doomed to be overcome.

Now, if philosophers (and hence, philosophy) accept being affected by the complex set of phenomena briefly indicated by the label "disability" they may discover that just considering it in a non-obvious manner would allow them to reach the heart of any ethically oriented reflection on discrimination, overlapping with the question: "Is distinguishing between human beings morally licit?". If the answer is a positive one, another question immediately arises: "On the basis of which criteria, selected by whom, how, and for whom?". Put differently, the ethical question immediately shifts to an epistemological and political one, because the individuation of the individuals entitled to choose the criteria gives to them a power to enforce those criteria even against the will of the individuals excluded from their elaboration. And those entitled to decide may always have the possibility to invoke an ethical justification for their non-ethical and even immoral exercises of power, counting on a well-founded expectation to be believed by the rest of the "normals", if only they will be capable to adequately exploit their cognitive, ethical, and political competitive advantage.

In connection with the investigation of the above-mentioned questions and issues, the extreme relevance for philosophical thinking shows itself of the impaired and disabled individuals, as well as of the knowledge produced by them and their disabled and non-disabled allies, in a word of Disability Studies and, more broadly, disability thinking in all articulations and evolutions, especially the most radical ones[13]. In short, what all of them can teach to contemporary philosophy consists in posing radically the fundamental question of whether an entity called a "human being" may truly be defined, a question which is perhaps the most constitutive for philosophy. In fact, if you cannot define what a human being should properly *be* and which features it *should* have, it seems impossible to elaborate further categorizations.

[13] Alongside with Critical Disability Studies, who has since long questioned the dominance of the social model of disability, at least Crip Theory, Mad Studies and approaches aiming to decolonize Disability Studies must be mentioned. Among the copious literature, see for Critical Disability Studies: Meekosha & Shuttleworth 2009; Goodley 2013; Goodley, Lawthom, Liddiard & Runswick-Cole 2019;. For Crip Theory, see McRuer 2006; 2018. For Mad Studies, see Beresford & Russo 2022; LeFrançois, Menzies & Reaume 2013; Russo & Sweeney 2016. For decolonial thinking and *Disability Studies*, Grech 2009; 2015.

Put differently, the ultimate questions that impairment and disablement pose to philosophical reflection concern the presence in any time and space of a dominant model of human being, whose "normality" and "ability" end up being taken for granted. And differently from those philosophers adhering to the relational/interactional models of disability, I find that just the so-called impairment is incorrectly taken as the starting point to evaluate *if and to what extent* a concrete body may be properly *human*, just by evaluating its variation(s) from the fixed standard, which are usually considered "natural" or "brute facts" that you might simply observe, describe, explain and above all *measure*.

In this context, a philosophical investigation should aim at continuously deconstructing the idea that the so-called impairment is an indisputably "natural fact" and therefore something *objectively* given, to replace it with the recognition that the very notion of impairment is but the outcome of a value judgment *made by someone towards someone else*. Such value judgment transforms a "corporeal variation", inserted in an indifferent continuum, in a lack of "ability" (a "dis-ability") that should just therefore be considered as establishing an undesirable situation from the viewpoint of a "normal human being". As a matter of fact, defining impairment as a "natural fact", and particularly as a "biological fact", makes it possible to exclude all those concrete bodies presenting more or less pronounced variations from the dominant model of the "human being", conventionally elaborated and enforced by those who reciprocally understand themselves as normal fully human beings.

As a result of such definition, starting from the very moment in which they are judged as impaired, those concrete bodies undergo a process of disablement that excludes them from the group of the normal fully human beings, reiterating and reaffirming that exclusion through the exercise of power over those not-fully-human bodies, including the power of thinking, speaking, and acting in their behalf and in their interest. To tackle *this* issue head-on, however, as I hope to have shown in the previous sections, it is necessary that philosophers recognize that they must accept a change in attitude, firstly by acknowledging that philosophy cannot be confined within the label of a "scientific discipline", and the philosopher within the label of an "expert". Only after *individually* achieving that properly philosophical attitude, by means of a preliminary operation of decolonizing the self, to be conducted despite of, and even against, the encrustations of tradition and the complaint of its advocates, philosophers may legitimately ask what philosophy can do for Disability Studies, and for minority and dissenting thinking in general.

Among many other things, this process surely presupposes admitting one's own constitutive ignorance of the knowledge produced by "them" – i.e., all those who are not "us" –, and consequently the readiness to achieve that knowledge not as a simple addition, or an adornment to one's own already achieved expertise, but as knowledge just as foundational as that reached through the usual training to become a proper "Western modern philosopher". And it may even be that at the end of this difficult training to self-awareness, very expensive in terms of time and energies, the philosopher would discover that it was indeed nothing extraordinary, consisting simply in admitting that other worldviews, knowledge, and wisdom are to be welcomed and integrated in the self, instead of systematized and controlled – in a word, something that a philosopher should already know.

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