

Jennifer Scuro

Addressing Ableism: Philosophical Questions via Disability Studies
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Reviewed by Shelley L. Tremain, 2018

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Philosophy of disability is a relatively recent subfield of philosophy that both builds upon the political motivation and insights of disabled people's movements and draws upon work done in a range of other subfields within philosophy and a variety of disciplines across the university. The most recent writing in philosophy of disability focuses critical attention on the demeaning conception of disability that continues to prevail in the discipline of philosophy and the ways in which this conception--according to which disability is a "natural" disadvantage--has shaped the composition of both the discipline and profession of philosophy (for example, Tremain 2017). Put briefly, philosophy of disability remains marginalized in the discipline of philosophy, including in feminist philosophy, while disabled philosophers continue to be excluded from adequate employment in the profession. A growing number of philosophers of disability persistently produce work that challenges this grievous state of affairs.

Addressing Ableism: Philosophical Questions via Disability Studies, by Jennifer Scuro in collaboration with Devonya Havis and Lydia X. Brown, is a vital new contribution to the annals of philosophy of disability and to philosophical discourse more generally, a contribution that all philosophers of disability and feminist philosophers--not to mention all feminist philosophers of disability--should take time to read. The book spans a wide spectrum of issues and concerns that the disability studies community has introduced into academic discourse, considers the political character of the ontological and ethical claims of other philosophers of disability, incorporates Scuro's personal reflections on her own social and institutional position as a white, nondisabled philosopher of disability with a disabled child, and highlights a fascinating and provocative dialogue that Scuro engages in with Havis, a Black disabled woman, and Brown, a disabled queer of color. Indeed, the attention that Scuro gives to the details of oft-overlooked conflicts and controversies that surround critical work on disability, the diversity and volume of research that she uses throughout the book, and the centrality to the aims and design of the book of the dialogue among Scuro and her interlocutors are among the book's most notable strengths. Taken

together, these elements of *Addressing Ableism* combine to make it a unique philosophical journey.

In the prologue of *Addressing Ableism*, Scuro sets out to describe the "scale and scope" of ableism by asking what ableism is, what ableist thinking does, how ableism can be resisted, and how it should be confronted (xix). Scuro (relying on a definition of the concept of ableism that Fiona Kumari Campbell [2009] has articulated) asserts that ableism is an omnipresent, underdetermined bias, often trivialized and seldom recognized as a form of oppression (xx). It is thus the daunting task of the philosopher of disability to demonstrate that disability and ableism are political in character and should be understood as such. If we address ableism directly by mapping out its scale and scope, Scuro writes, we may recognize strategic ways to resist ableist bias and confront it. To instigate this sort of critical movement, Scuro organized the book around concepts that she thinks can enable the depth and parameters of ableism to be outlined for these purposes: experience, diagnosis, intersectionality, precariousness, and prosthesis.

In the first chapter, "Experience," Scuro describes her own relationship to disability and ableism, underscoring how this relationship has involved a process whereby, as she learned more and more from the disability studies literature and disabled activists, she began to more clearly understand her ableist privilege and ambivalent ("interloper") status with respect to both theoretical work on disability and her positioning in the disability studies community and to think more critically and politically about both the special education system to which her daughter has been assigned and the educational system vis-à-vis disabled people in general. These circumstances and influences, Scuro points out, motivated her to question dominant social messages that previously led her to blame herself (rather than current social arrangements) for her daughter's situation and ultimately motivated her to ask: can parents be allies? (3-4, 7, 11). As Scuro indicates, the writing of philosophers such as Emmanuel Levinas, Hannah Arendt, and Sandra Bartky, along with the work of disability theorists such as Mia McKenzie and Rachel Cohen-Rottenberg, have enabled her to find responses to this question, among others.

In "Diagnosis," the second chapter, Scuro interrogates medicalized understandings of disability and the role that they play in the reproduction of an ableist social environment. This chapter is the most scholarly one, in a conventional philosophical sense, and, among other things, traces a genealogy of the term *diagnosis* to ancient medical literature where the term was connected to avoidance of "hopeless cases," as well as to prognosis in the Hippocratic tradition (21-23). The discussion in the chapter uses Teresa Brennan's work on affect theory as a new paradigm in order to understand the phenomenological consequences of receiving an authoritative diagnosis, connecting these insights to Judith Butler's insights about livable lives (22). In my view, these insights could be analytically complemented with Foucault's call for a history of the examination as an individualizing and totalizing instrument of modern power and my own claims about the diagnostic style of reasoning.

The three-way dialogue among Scuro, Havis, and Brown, in the chapter titled "Intersectionality," occupies almost a third of the text of *Addressing Ableism*. It is in the context of this dialogue that many of the tensions and contested concepts of the disability studies literature are broached, especially with respect to identity and self-identification, hierarchies and horizontal oppression in the disabled people's movement, and the concept of intersectionality itself. Although some philosophers might be inclined to skip over this chapter of the book, deeming it to lack the rigor

of philosophical argumentation, to do so would be a mistake: many of the book's gems can be derived from the dynamic interaction of these interlocutors (41-93).

The fourth chapter, "Precariousness," draws especially on Butler's idea of precarity as an ontological condition, distinguishing it from precarity as a sociopolitical circumstance. As Scuro explains it, precariousness is "the ontologically complicated source of" ableist affections, "the fertile ground of ableism in its multiplicity and its multiplication" (96). Although the existential fact of precariousness attests to our ineluctable interdependence, Scuro points out, imposed frameworks of value render some lives more grievable than other lives, some more worthwhile. Thus she argues that precarity, in this ontological sense, is fundamentally implicated in ableism and the veneration of ablebodiedness.

Scuro conceives the claims that she makes in the fifth chapter, "Prognosis," as intimately tied to the claims of the previous chapter. Her aim in the fifth chapter is to "counter the emergence of the normal body" (122), the body that is deemed "less precarious" and simultaneously more grievable than the disabled body. These chapters, that is, the fourth and fifth chapters on "Precariousness" and "Prognosis," lead Scuro to pose the question "Is a Non-Ableist Future Possible?" at the outset of "Parts and Wholes," the book's epilogue in which she brings together the reflections and musings of the earlier chapters, helpfully reminding her audience of the book's central motivational assumptions and suggesting what the future of philosophical work on ableism and disability could look like.

I hope that my discussion in this review captures the unique contributions to philosophy of disability that *Addressing Ableism* offers. I enthusiastically recommend it to feminist philosophers unfamiliar with engagements between disability studies and philosophy, as well as to feminist philosophers whose own work both produces and draws upon these two areas of inquiry.

References

Campbell, Fiona Kumari. 2009. *The contours of ableism: The production of disability and abledness*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

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