Review of “Foucault and the Government of Disability”

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This book is a collection of sixteen essays, as well as an introduction by Tremain, that focus on the relevance of Foucault to disability. It sets out to explore both the contributions Foucauldian analysis can lend to disability studies, as well as how disability studies, or the interpretation and classification of disability, may affect Foucauldian scholarship. It is important to note for disability theorists that, as Tremain indicates, "an argument about disability that takes Foucault's approach would be concerned to show that there is indeed a causal relation between impairment and disability" (Tremain, 2005, p. 11). Additionally, "though a goal of this book is to provide a sociopolitical analysis of disability, no one model, doctrine, or vocabulary with respect to disability governs the essays that comprise it" (Tremain, 2005, p. 13). This is important as it allows *Foucault and the Government of Disability* to bridge the gap between contemporary UK Social Model theorists and those who hold the view I am more sympathetic towards, or the perspective that classifies disability as a complex relationship between impairment (or functional limitations) and disability (or how that impairment manifests itself socially). This allows disability theorists to approach Foucauldian scholarship, an area that may indeed, be foreign to them, through a relatively unbiased lens. It allows for the undogmatic treatment and revealing of the perceived benefits that Foucault can lend to disability scholarship and it is largely, a success at doing so.

This volume is organized around 4 particular foci while not being structured to such an extent that it limits the discussions contained within each particular section. That is to say, many authors take the liberty to operate outside of, and indeed, oftentimes bridge to, other portions of the book with their ideas. The first section centers around Epistemologies and Ontologies, and includes notions of subjected bodies, reason, truth, and legal identities. The essays in this quarter of the book adopt Foucault's concern with issues such as the relationship between power and knowledge, as well as the constitution of subjects through juridical, medical, and administrative practices.

Perhaps the strongest essays in this portion are Bill Hughes' "What Can a Foucauldian Analysis Contribute to Disability Theory?" and Barry Allen's essay "Foucault's Nominalism". Hughes argues that the usefulness of Foucault's work for disability theory is limited. Although Foucault's work can show that impairment is a social construction, Hughes believes it is a case that could be made without Foucault, and that additionally, people with disabilities would benefit more from diverging arguments that "valorize their voices, their embodied experiences, and their collective efforts to establish rights and overcome discrimination" (Hughes in Tremain, 2005, p. 79). This claim can be
demonstrated most clearly when examining his claims about both the body as well as the implications of Foucault's work for questions of agency. Hughes argues that Foucault does not appreciate the ways in which "practical sensuous activities constitute social life" (Hughes in Tremain, 2005, p. 80). Because in Foucault's work, the body is perceived of as a target, upon which power is directed. The body is necessarily a passive entity to Foucault, without agency. Hughes however, wants the reader to believe that the body is made by, and makes, the world around it. He concludes by stating that Foucault's work cannot provide a way to explain how people with disabilities have actively transcended their dependency as subjects.

Allen's work can be regarded as a rejoinder to Hughes' project. While both advance similar topics, and while I tend to disagree with Allen, his prose is at times, much clearer. Allen's essay outlines a critical perspective on Foucault's nominalism. He claims that impairment is real, though not a naturally given abnormality. He claims it is better classified as an artifact of knowledge that measures deviation from the norm. He likens norms and normal cases to statutory laws and criminals insofar as they exist, and are real, but only because people take them seriously as objects of knowledge.

However, Simo Vehmas (2008) claims, and I think rightfully so, that we must make a distinction between the subjective and the objective in the ontology of disability. He claims, that "in the ontological sense, objective and subjective are predicates of the entities in the world". (Vehmas, 2008, p. 22). Objective entities, in the ontological sense, are existent independent of any perceiver. If Vehmas is correct, things such as pains are subjective insofar as they are dependent upon a perceiver being present to experience it. Vehmas invokes the imagery of a mountain and claims that mountains are ontologically objective because if we ceased to exist, or if there was nothing perceiving a mountain, it would nevertheless, continue to exist – a mountain's mode of existence is independent of perception. Individuals with Trisomy 21 (or the chromosomal disorder caused by the presence of an extra twenty-first chromosome) are not inherently predisposed to oppression, because the extra twenty-first chromosome exists independently, regardless of how we feel about its presence. The presence of an additional chromosome does however, include what Vehmas refers to as "observer-relative features" as well (Vehmas, 2008, p. 22). These observer-related features do not add any material objects to reality, but they do, according to Vehmas, add epistemically objective features where the features exist relative to human beings.

Thus, I believe Allen is incorrect when he asserts "no science can precriptively define a normal or healthy life. There are no 'objective facts' about which bodily conditions are vital or normal and which are healthy or sick" (Allen in Tremain, 2005, p. 96). Nevertheless, both Hughes and Allen make meaningful contributions to the contemporary debates surrounding the ontology of disability within disability studies.

The second portion of Foucault and the Government of Disability draws attention to the importance of historical, conceptual analyses for disability theory. Licia Carlson's chapter "Docile Bodies, Docile Minds: Foucauldian Reflections on Mental Retardation" is in my opinion, the strongest essay drawing upon historical considerations in the collection. Carlson offers a critical philosophical analysis of the category of "mental retardation". She claims, and convincingly so, that most contemporary philosophical discourse presumes the self-evidence of what she views to be a problematic and complex category – that of mental retardation. She attempts to demonstrate how "Foucault's work problematizes what is taken to be self-evident with respect to institutions, power,
and certain classifications of individuals" (Carlson in Tremain, 2005, p. 133). She argues that a Foucauldian approach allows the contingent nature of mental retardation to become evident. Foucault helps disability theorists to understand how institutions, as sites of disciplinary power, perpetuated negative attitudes pertaining to the cognitively disabled. Carlson claims that it is imperative to consider how these institutions affect our conceptions, and definitions of mental retardation.

The third portion of the book is perhaps the most interesting section. Titled "Governmentalities", this collection of five essays is quite broad in subject matter. Nevertheless, these essays share a concern for normative analysis. Most of the contributions offer meaningful suggestions for actual policy reform, regardless of the topic being covered. These essays use Foucault's tools to interrogate various real-world manifestations of disabling government. Anne Waldschmidt's "Who is Normal? Who is Deviant? 'Normality' and 'Risk' in Genetic Diagnostics and Counseling" is in my opinion, not only the best chapter of this section, but of the entire collection. While it tends to be more colloquial than other offerings, it is nevertheless, a rigorously argued essay. She claims that normality no longer implies conformity to norms. Instead, Waldschmidt claims that normality provides choices and allows change – it meets the needs and wishes of vulnerable populations. She argues that the line between normality and deviance, once rigid, is shifting and often viewed as unnecessary altogether.

Waldschmidt contextualizes this claim through an examination of genetic diagnostics. She describes how "normalization wishes can be harnessed...to indicate how the normalization that Foucault (1991) called 'governmentality' is part and parcel of a new form of self-regime" (Waldschmidt in Tremain, 2005, p. 192). She makes a distinction between normative norms (the power of legal and social norms imposed upon people) and normalistic norms (the view individuals have of themselves in comparison to others). She argues that contemporary power relations are more concerned with regular behavior rather than rule-conforming behavior. More specifically, Waldschmidt believes the ways in which society, the state, and people are governed are based upon normalistic norms, and not normative norms. She concludes by advancing the claim that such a distinction can be introduced for the betterment of genetic diagnostics and counseling.

Finally, the fourth section of this collection comprises two chapters that examine the inextricable relation between political and ethical considerations. Julie Allan's chapter, "Inclusion as an Ethical Project", argues that the Foucauldian conception of ethics introduced in his later writings offers a promising way in which to frame the responsibilities of all individuals in the promotion of inclusion. She argues ultimately, that inclusions starts with ourselves, and that inclusion is not a project that we do to an small group of individuals, but rather, something that we must do to ourselves. She argues that when inclusion is recast as an ethical project, it takes us into what she refers to as the politics of desire.

From the perspective of a disability theorist, Foucault and the Government of Disability reads as a disability studies reader - it advances interrelated arguments surrounding contemporary debates focused on the experience of disability. The topics covered examine a breadth of issues required to understand and advance contemporary disability theory, with one important difference – the presence of Foucauldian analysis. Conversely, from the perspective of a scholar of Foucault's ideas, I suspect this collection offers an incredibly interesting and creative Foucauldian analysis that has
stepped outside the bounds of traditional Foucauldian scholarship. Tremain has done an exceptional job at organizing and procuring important, rigorously argued, and entertaining essays for her collection. Unfortunately, I cannot speak to the necessity of this book for a scholar of Foucault's ideas, as I am certainly not one of them. That said, from the perspective of a disability scholar, I can with little reluctance, recommend this book to my colleagues. I suspect it will do one, if not both, of the following things: 1) provide an examination of an old debate in a new light, thereby providing new reasons for or against your current position; 2) provide evidence of the emergence of a new debate as demonstrated by an examination of the work of Foucault.

This book should be a mandatory read for anyone interested in contemporary philosophical debates surrounding the experience of disability. From bioethics, inclusive education, to politics, Foucault and the Government of Disability provides the reader with both a thorough background in, as well as foreshadowing of the future, of disability theory.

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Bibliography
