

Handicapped Spaces: Disability, Identity Politics, and Embodiment in Collaborative Artwork

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For many spectators, the world of “art” is defined by products and producers – individual artists who, through some process of physically manipulating various materials (including their own bodies), create a product that can then be engaged with or viewed by the spectator. However, this view is problematized by the introduction of multiple artists collaborating to produce a singular work, as the addition of parties to this productive space confuses obvious attributions of agency throughout the process of creation. Bodily limitations, for instance physical disability, can produce anxiety about a person's potential status as “full contributor” to the artistic enterprise. In such cases, I would suggest that the art is better construed as having been produced by a single artistic body that coheres due to the physical and creative interdependence of its members. However, this coherence is still beholden to a multiplicity of wills, and, whether rightly or wrongly, many consider agency to be compromised if the agent in question lacks full bodily functioning¹. I will suggest that this construal of the artistic group as a singular body enables us to distance ourselves from the identity politics of disability and instead consider the agency of the unit, which, on a Nietzschean interpretation, itself already consists of a diversity of wills struggling for representation. In so doing, we can see the artistic project as an entirely collaborative act, and avoid projecting a paternalistic lens of compromised ability onto its creators.

On a Nietzschean view, “what defines a body is [the] relation between dominating and

1 It is worth noting here that the phrase “lacks full bodily functioning” is itself problematic, as it depends on a specific interpretation of what “full bodily functioning” entails that may (and perhaps ought to) be contested. Disabled artists can and do produce art – the idea here is only to highlight that their productive 'range of motion' is likely bounded in ways that able-bodied artists need not confront. On some interpretations, such antecedent parameters are sufficiently restrictive as to inhibit the full exercise of an agent's autonomous will.

dominated forces. Whether chemical, biological, social, or political, every relation of forces constitutes a body” (Weinstein 307). On this account, the notion of corporeal boundedness need not map on to what we consider a human 'body', because 'bodies' can be defined wherever the interplay of forces exists. As a result, any individual human being is also embodied in many additional bodies, which range from the 'body' formed through a relationship with another person to the “body politic” that contains all citizens of a nation. For artists whose relationship involves both creative collaboration and physical disability, the forces that bind them appear to be both creative and life-sustaining.

How such a collaboration should be construed, however, is not so straightforward in the philosophical literature. For most of philosophical history, disability has simply been conflated with *inability*, as it was only when “19th century scientific thinking put variations in human function and form into categories of abnormality and deviance” that a discrete category of disabled persons was introduced into philosophical discourse (Wasserman). Because philosophy is so deeply concerned with problems of free will and agency, often those who lack what has been conventionally considered “normal” human functioning are *prima facie* excluded from the conversation². If they are included, it is typically to consider the obligations of “normal” people toward them from the point of view of social justice, as opposed to an account for disability within broader theories of agency (a positive account of which would exceed the capacity of this paper).

For example, one of the most influential works on justice theory in the last fifty years is John Rawls's A Theory of Justice. Rawls's theory introduces the concept of justice as fairness, which he sees as underlying the social contract that all free and rational persons would accept from an idealized

2 One may object that this account conflates what could be called physical free will and agency (the ability to move about freely) with intellectual free will and agency (the ability to exercise full mental functioning). It may be the case that these notions are discrete, and ought to be considered separately to best get at the heart of the matter here. However, for many philosophers this is a false dichotomy. On such a view, will is embodied or manifested in behavior, so there is no way to curtail physical capacities without a subsequent curtailment of the actualization of desired behaviors. For example, suppose there is a patient at a hospital who appears to be in a persistent vegetative state, but in fact is experiencing completely normal mental functioning. It would be misleading to say that he retains truly free will of any kind when he is in fact incapable of physically producing outcomes in the external world.

original position. While this original position is often characterized as a “state of nature” - an imagined primitive time period during which people elected to cooperate and form societies instead of fending for themselves – Rawls imagines an “original position of equality”, a hypothetical situation in which people are behind a veil of ignorance as to their class positions, assets, abilities, conceptions of the good, etc. “Since all are similarly situated and no one is able to design principles to favor his particular condition, the principles of justice are the result of a fair agreement or bargain” (Rawls 12). Rawls suggests that two main principles would emerge from this original position, “the first [requiring] equality in the assignment of basic rights and duties” and the second holding that social and economic inequality is only justified if the aggregate well-being of society – specifically its least advantaged members – increases as a result (Rawls 14-15). These “least advantaged” individuals include those for whom class, race, or gender biases precluded the possibility of adequately developing their talents, or those whose achievable level of material well-being is generally very low³. As many disabled people struggle to find outlets to cultivate their skills or obtain quality educations in the face of physical disadvantages, they seem like potential candidates for this group. However, “[t]o simplify the problem of measuring citizens' needs in the initial construction of his theory, Rawls assumes that all people are fully functional over a whole lifetime. By hypothesis he thus eliminates disease, disability, and premature death as sources of inequality” (Daniels 2). Despite his rhetoric about the least advantaged members of society, “Rawls's strategy has been to postpone the question of our obligations towards the disabled, and exclude them from the scope of his theory... he thinks that we should first work out a robust and convincing theory of justice for the “normal” cases and only then try to extend it to the “more extreme cases”” (Robeyns).

Because of this orientation around “normal” cases, Rawls's conception of the desired ends from the point of view of justice as fairness are skewed toward those of “able-bodied, non-dependent,

3 See Daniels, pg. 1.

caregiving-free individual[s]”. In response to this, many scholars of marginalized groups have come to prefer the so-called capability approach, which “entails two core normative claims: first, the claim that the freedom to achieve well-being is of primary moral importance, and second, that freedom to achieve well-being is to be understood in terms of people's capabilities, that is, their real opportunities to do and be what they have reason to value” (Robeyns). Because the capabilities of individuals with disabilities vary from those of the able-bodied, their desired ends are likely to be respondent to their unique physical circumstances, and the capability approach allows for a broader range of metrics by which to adjudicate well-being. For instance, someone who depends on readily available access to care networks may rate this as a much more important contributor to well-being than other more conventional standards, such as income. The flexibility of the capability approach allows for a better reflection of human diversity, and one that does not hew towards a “normal” status quo.

However, even as the capability approach attempts to account for human diversity, it runs the risk of being stigmatized by it. With the metrics for evaluating well-being run through the filter of identity politics, it is hard to escape the often marginalizing features that define disability or membership in other minority groups (such as race, sexual orientation, etc). While this filter is certainly useful for understanding how particular bodies navigate social spaces, it can also end up serving as justification for paternalism or accusations of epistemic unreliability. “The observations and judgments of all stigmatized minorities are frequently discounted, but people with disabilities face a distinct handicap. There is a powerful, pervasive tendency, among philosophers, social scientists, and laypeople to dismiss their self-appraisals as reflecting ignorance, self-deception, defensive exaggeration, or courageous optimism” (Wasserman). If a disabled person is always first and foremost disabled, there will be a tendency to view any of her observations as necessarily mediated by and reflective of her disability. While the motivation for this tendency might even be positively valenced – such as a sense of empathy or charitable obligation to put oneself in someone else's shoes – the impacts

can yield a further entrenchment of discriminatory social policies or attitudes.

I suggest that my reframing of the artistic collaboration as producing a singular body could provide some solvency for this worry. By avoiding the emphasis on individual artists, we are able to sidestep the issue of contextualized expectations and consider the work of art separately from the identity politics of its originators. The work is not the product of this or that person or type of person, but rather a newly constituted artistic body that is more than the sum of its physical parts. Returning to Nietzsche's account of bodies and their relationship to willing, I hope to clarify how the individual wills of the artistic collaborators can be viewed within this newly formed entity.

Nietzsche as a philosopher is very concerned with the problem of willing, and his views on the matter often appear contradictory. At once, he seems to endorse the position that there is no freedom of will, no unfree will, and sometimes no will at all (Nehamas 186-187). However, what Nietzsche really has in mind when making such assertions is that “[w]illing seems... to be above all something *complicated*, something that is a unit only as a word- and it is precisely in this one word that the popular prejudice lurks, which has defeated the always inadequate caution of philosophers”. In particular, Nietzsche suggests that the process of willing can be parsed into three discrete components:

1. “A plurality of sensations, namely, the sensation of the state “*away from which*,” the sensation of the state “*towards which*,” the sensations of this “*from*” and “*towards*” themselves, and then also an accompanying muscular sensation”
2. “A ruling thought”
3. “An *affect*, and specifically the affect of the command” (Nietzsche 215)

This division further implies that for any actualization of the act of willing, there will be the dominating command and the subordinated will, whether the “body” we have in mind is that of a single person or a broader collective. The value of this view is that any body, disabled or not, has this profusion of wills as the milieu within which its actions are generated, so we need not worry about or

even incorporate the particular physical limitations of a specific person into our consideration of their act of willing.

Thus, I have argued that this non-traditional interpretation of willing can better account for artistic agency in collaborative communities, whether or not the members of these communities are themselves bound by physical interdependence or care-giving relationships. Thus far, philosophy as a discipline has inadequately addressed the issues impacting well-being for disabled or marginalized populations, instead focusing on the “norm” and hoping to extrapolate the conclusions that apply to it once a good theory has been put forth. This risks normativizing the status quo, and leaving populations that are already marginalized by the majority even more on the fringe. The capability approach, while novel and noble in its attempts to speak to the wide variety inherent in humanity, runs the risk of reinforcing boundaries of “minority” identity by relying on them as a filter through which to adjudicate well-being. While some disabled artists seek to be a voice for the community of disabled persons, others seek to simply generate art for the sake of producing new meaning, however that may be construed. The constant ascription of and interjection by identity and its accompanying political assumptions can serve more to stigmatize than aide in the appreciation of their work. Utilizing a theory of the will and embodiment that allows for a plurality that is not dependent on particular hallmarks of identity can liberate such marginalized artists from the tyranny of their own identities.

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Recess's Critical Writing program commissions emerging writers to pursue the underlying theory and contemporary criticism that informs individual Session projects, initiating a meaningful exchange between artists and writers while facilitating the mutual production of new work.