

Foucault and Feminist Philosophy of Disability, by Shelley L. Tremain, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017, 258 pp., \$29.95, ISBN 978-0-472-05373-5 (paper). DOI: 10.3998/mpub.8504605

For these last two decades, the work of Shelley L. Tremain has been a point of reference in strands of disability studies scholarship rooted in the philosophical ideas of Michel Foucault. This monograph consolidates Tremain's position as a prime user of Foucault's work in disability studies, showing how his work is amenable to critical extensions in areas he did not explicitly consider. While clearly positioned in philosophy as a discipline, Tremain's latest book shows how aspects of disability studies can call into question notions and practices of philosophical theorising; for this reason, this book is equally a book of philosophy of disability as much as it is a book *about* philosophising about disability in contemporary times. The book elegantly interweaves different registers of philosophical argumentation, genealogical analysis, feminist critique, political theory, and data from empirical research insofar as they all bear upon disability studies.

Tremain's opening premise in the introduction of *Foucault and Feminist Philosophy of Disability* is that philosophy devalues disability by not considering it a proper object of philosophical inquiry, treating it instead as a human disadvantage, an inherent flaw, or a politically neutral characteristic. For Tremain, this is contributing to the marginalisation of philosophical analyses of disability and, moreover, of disabled philosophers from the profession. Tremain presents her book as engaging with two spheres of analysis: first, what she calls a *reconstructive-conceptual* sphere in which she draws on Foucault's work to present a critique of dominant conceptions of disability (including within disability studies) and to develop a historicist and relativist philosophy of disability; and, second, what she calls a *metaphilosophical* sphere in which she investigates the mechanisms that sustain the disciplinary marginalisation of disability. Through five carefully crafted chapters, Tremain's book pursues different facets of this guiding premise.

In Chapter 1, "Groundwork for a Feminist Philosophy of Disability", Tremain lays out the theoretical terrain and key problematics of the rest of the book. She contests what she calls 'a naturalized narrative' about disability perpetuated, for example, in the political theory of John Rawls and the use of the case of Phineas Gage in cognitive science by arguing that such theoretical outlooks rest on a questionable cluster of assumptions about disability, namely that it is prediscursive, transcultural and transhistorical. She strongly counters these assumptions and their pernicious effects as they manifest in theorising disability and institutional practices, biases and attitudes toward disabled philosophers. The fundamental theoretical insight of her position is that disability is a historically and culturally specific phenomenon that depends on a complex apparatus of power for its social reality. This explains Tremain's turn to Foucault's theoretical 'tool box' to problematise, denaturalise and debiologise disability. Her aim is less to propose an explicitly normative feminist account of disability than to invite a "conceptual revolution" (3) in how the 'apparatus of disability' is theorised and discursively, materially and socially produced.

In Chapter 2, "Power and Normalization", Tremain sustains her account of the discursive, historical, cultural and social construction of disability through a consideration of how Foucault's different conceptions of power as normalisation, discipline, government of conduct, biopower and security bear upon the theorisation of disability. This chapter serves as a systematic introduction to some of Foucault's key notions as well as a more specialised application of Foucault's insights into the study of disability.

In Chapter 3, "Historicizing and Relativizing Philosophy of Disability", Tremain puts forward her robust account of disability, which she presents as rivalling that of proponents

of social models of disability as well as that of those who criticise the relevance and utility of Foucault's ideas for disability studies. The latter have criticised Foucault's work on the basis of it providing too thin a conception of subjectivity and identity, and for over-emphasising language, discourse and representation over the material body. In this chapter, Tremain responds to these criticisms through a careful reconstruction of Foucault's arguments to show how his work can illuminate theoretical debates on disability and even motivate certain impassés in disability studies. Through the use of Judith Butler's views on sex and gender and a discussion of Ian Hacking's ideas on discursive construction or what he calls 'making up people', Tremain goes on to deconstruct the distinction between impairment and disability that is crucial to dominant social models of disability. Moreover, in this chapter, she also puts forward a careful rebuttal of Tobin Siebers'¹ objections to Joan W. Scott's critique of the foundational epistemological role typically afforded to first-person subjective experience. Tremain highlights that Scott's argument (to a significant extent, following Foucault) is not that the social constitution of experience renders it epistemically irrelevant, but rather that one cannot think of a 'ready-made' experiencing subject since the subject itself comes into being through the experiencing. Tremain fruitfully notes that this critique of the constituent subject (in favour of the constituted subject) is not an attack of work in disability studies that relies on the personal experiences of disabled people; to the contrary, it presents critical opportunities to engage with the discourses, norms and power relations that are shaping processes of the formation of disabled subjects and subjectivities.

In Chapter 4, "Foucault, Feminism, Disability", Tremain considers feminist criticisms that have characterised Foucault's work as exemplifying male biases. As a source of this critique, Tremain points to Foucault's discussion of the nineteenth-century case of Charles Jouy, a 'simple-minded' adult farmhand who was incarcerated in an asylum after being accused of engaging in sexual activity with an underage girl, Sophie Adam. Tremain presents the accepted feminist interpretation of the Jouy case (expounded in the work of, for example, Linda Alcoff) as holding that due to his position of power relative to the girl, Jouy's actions amount to sexual abuse and pedophilia, and therefore Foucault's tone when characterising the furore caused by the case as petty and inconsequential is considered by such an interpretation as inappropriately insensitive, masculinist and sexist. Tremain proposes a complex reading of the Jouy case that responds to these feminist criticisms of Foucault and, in so doing, introduces a disability studies perspective that is typically missing in Foucaultian analyses of this case. Tremain argues that the expansion of the remit of psychiatric power – to which Jouy was subject – was reliant upon the association between 'idiocy' or 'imbecility' and danger, an association that continues to discriminate against disabled people. Although sympathetic to feminist goals, Tremain accuses feminist interpretations of Jouy as overlooking the social positioning of Jouy as a disabled person and, in this oversight, sustaining certain ableist assumptions and prejudices about disabled people and their lives.

In Chapter 5, "Bioethics as a Technology of Government", Tremain presents a critical evaluation of the academic field of bioethics through an analysis of debates on prenatal testing, screening, human embryonic stem cells (hESC), euthanasia, the doctrine of informed consent and the principle of autonomy. For Tremain, the genealogies of the socio-political apparatus of disability and bioethics intersect, particularly on the use of genetic technologies. Tremain characterises bioethics as a product of biopower and a neoliberal governmentality of security that complements the emergence of risk as a technology of modern government, and as also actively contributing to the construction of impairment as a disadvantageous natural human attribute. For Tremain, the

governmental character of bioethics is not an accidental feature but is its impetus, thus implicating philosophy, alongside cognitive and related sciences, in the subordination of disabled people. Tremain contests the current situation that, for disability to be treated as 'philosophically interesting', it must be framed as a bioethical issue since this contributes to the depoliticised, biologised and medicalised conception of disability that prevails in debates in bioethics. Tremain anticipates that the argument she presents in this chapter might cause a backlash "that may range from condescending amusement and dismissal to skepticism and even hostility." (177) For this reason, she clarifies that her intention is less to prescribe alternative bioethical positions but rather to invite a reconsideration of normative presuppositions and power relations that are sustaining contemporary debates in bioethics, especially in how these impact the treatment of disability in such debates.

Tremain's book is tightly argued, with parts of it being meticulously and studiously presented, particularly her discussion and application of Foucault's works with regard to disability studies, and other parts being vehemently (almost polemically) argued, such as her critical engagement with various disability scholars. The book presents detailed accounts of debates in disability studies, most notably on power relations and embodiment, but does not sufficiently engage with other debates in disability studies on, for example, the ethics and politics of vulnerability and care. With regard to Foucault's work, a discussion of how his later works on ethics can further illuminate debates in disability studies would have been welcome. Moreover, while the book makes its points of contention with rival positions clear, it would have benefitted from aligning itself alongside more sympathetic viewpoints and theoretical allies, especially with regard to complementary feminist philosophies of disability such as those presented by Eva Kittay and Susan Wendell.

In its entirety, as well as in its individual chapters, Tremain's *Foucault and Feminist Philosophy of Disability* is an important contribution to disability studies, philosophy of disability and philosophy in general. Tremain presents solid and, far more often than not, convincing arguments on disability; her politically engaged analysis is also a challenge to philosophy itself on the role it plays in the marginalisation of disabled people. The book concludes by noting that the task of improving disabled lives and, particularly, the professional situation of disabled philosophers "extends beyond the pages of this book and any other" (205); nonetheless, this task would be harder to imagine without the rich work of Shelley L. Tremain.

Note

1. It is of some relevance to note that *Foucault and Feminist Philosophy of Disability* was awarded the 2016 Tobin Siebers Prize for Disability Studies in the Humanities.

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