

The Big Normate Does Not Exist: Hegel, Lacan, and Disability

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1. The constitutive role of disability in the process of subjectivisation

Lacan's early theory of the mirror stage describes the process by which an infant (which is not yet a subject) begins to build up an imaginary self-identification – a proto-'ego' or 'I' – through a process, not of truthful recognition, but of fictive *misrecognition*. Put simply, the relative wholeness and autonomy of the entity reflected in the mirror presents a phantasmatic ideal, an 'imago', which belies the infant's experiences of bodily incompleteness, fragmentation, clumsiness, and incapacitation. Though the 'little man' remains 'trapped in his motor impotence and nursling dependence', Lacan writes, he nevertheless discovers in the mirror a 'specular image' which will serve throughout life as the substrate or 'root-rock' of all those secondary identifications by means of which he will progressively ensconce himself within the socio-symbolic order as a libidinally 'normal', mature subject.¹ Crucially for Lacan, however, this ego-form is constitutively unattainable, a mere 'ideal-I'; it is situated 'in a fictional direction that will forever remain irreducible for any single individual or, rather, that will only asymptotically approach the subject's becoming, no matter how successful the dialectical syntheses by which he must resolve, as *I*, his discordance with his own reality'.² The ego, in short, is the object of a never-ending fundamental project by which the subject desperately tries to overcome the ineliminable lack at the heart of its own being. No matter how complete or successful this ego becomes, it can only ever approximate (approach asymptotically) the desired state of originary perfection.

Three points of clarification are in order. *First*, the state of wholeness represented by the image in the mirror is apprehended, never as such, but always only negatively, in the form of its absence; it is a retroactive (*nachträglich*) construction which comes into being in the act of egoic misrecognition itself. What the infant discovers in the mirror, in other words, is not the solution to a problem but rather *the problem itself*, one that did not exist until it was presented in the form of its solution – not unlike the way in which falling in love creates the very unhappiness

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1 Jacques Lacan, Bruce Fink (tr.), 'The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience', in *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006), 76.

2 *Ibid.*, 76.

that subsequently determines the meaning and truth of the entire past history of one's current relationship (or, as Lacan would say, that 'quilts' the relationship). So far from being a source of inner peace, the ego is rather a *lure* that keeps the subject trapped in a cycle of perpetual insecurity and dissatisfaction. *Second*, this initial problem first conjured by the appearance of the spectral image is not one of *mere* empirico-physical imperfection or inadequacy, but rather concerns the very phenomenality of embodiment as such. As Shildrick writes, precisely because the infant is psychically exposed from birth to 'images of castration, mutilation, dismemberment', and the like, i.e., '*imagoes of the fragmented body*', it follows that the 'stability and distinction of normative embodiment' demands 'a re/suppression of the dis-integration which belongs to the subject as embodied', and a corresponding 'lifelong desire to recognise oneself, and to be recognised as a unified and stable self'.³ *Third* and finally, the emergence of this (retroactively constituted) problem of embodiment is both conceptually isomorphic with and temporally proximate to the way in which the subject emerges as a subject of lack in the process of socialisation qua integration into the socio-symbolic (i.e., linguistic) order – or, expressed in psychoanalytic terms, as (symbolically) 'castrated'. Subjectivity proper, i.e., as constituted by desire, is born in the recognition of the desire of the (m)Other, i.e., in the child's awareness that it is not the exclusive object of the (m)Other's attention (I cannot recognise myself *as recognised* by another until and unless I am not the *sole* focus of her attention; being looked away from is the *a priori* condition of being looked at). What the subject is always trying to recover – that which constitutes the cause of its desire – is the 'lost object', the constitutively absent 'Thing-in-itself', '*das Ding*', which first appears at the moment when the (m)Other's desire reveals itself to be the desire of/for another.

Taking these three points together allows us to draw two important conclusions. *First*, it must be said that the process of ego-formation is ontologically correlated with a *traumatic confrontation with disability*, now properly understood as the dis-integration intrinsic to embodiment as such; the image in the mirror is the spectral negation of the infant laid bare in the 'organic inadequacy of [its] natural reality'.⁴ What is more – and to repeat – the spectral image, this 'root-stock' of subsequent identifications, insofar as it *elicits* this impotence and inadequacy in the very process of (seemingly) rectifying it, cannot but fail to deliver on the promise of full integrity which it holds out: every imaginary embellishment serves only to expose further embellishment-requiring imperfections, *ad infinitum* (a phenomenon which is evident from even the most parochial experience of seeing one's reflection in an actual mirror). Lacan's own choice of example is unusually apt here. Lacan describes how he has often had the occasion

to reflect upon the striking spectacle of a nursling in front of a mirror who has not yet mastered walking, or even standing, but who – though held tightly by some prop, human or artificial (what, in France, we call a *trotte-bébé* [a sort of walker]) – overcomes, in a flutter of jubilant activity, the constraints of his prop in order to adopt a slightly leaning-forward position and take in an

3 Margrit Shildrick, *Embodying the Monster: Encounters with the Vulnerable Self* (London: SAGE Publications, 2002), 79–80.

4 Lacan, 'The Mirror Stage', 77.

instantaneous view of the image in order to fix it in his mind.⁵

In other words, the image which the infant ‘fixes in her mind’ as the raw material for subsequent ego-curation is one whose integrity is *already* compromised by a vulnerability which the eventual removal of the walker will only displace and defer, never overcome.

Second, there is every reason to think that the disclosure of the inadequacy of embodiment elicited by the identificatory misrecognition of/in the spectral image not only accompanies the process of castration but indeed is fundamentally and irreducibly linked to it. The subject, that is, cannot but discern that the constitutive impotence and instability exposed by the image are somehow deeply implicated in its failure to secure the unmediated desire of the (m)Other. What this means is that the lifelong project of curating the ego-ideal has a twofold significance: the phantasy of full *jouissance* is concomitant with the phantasy of total emancipation from the finitude of embodiment, i.e., from disability. The ego that would be the sole object of the (m)Other’s attention and affection would also and necessarily be one unburdened by limits to what it can do. ‘The illusory ideal whole of the non-disabled’ subject, Dan Goodley writes, ‘is sustained by the localisation of lack in the disabled body: there is castration, not here’.⁶ Or as Tobin Siebers nicely puts it, ‘the body posited by social constructionism is a body...infinitely teachable and adaptable’. This perfectly able body ‘is a prop for the ego, a myth we all accept for the sake of enjoyment, for we all learn early on, as Lacan explains, to see the clumsiness and ineptitude of the body in the mirror as a picture of health – at least for a little while’.⁷ In short, the road to boundless love is paved with dreams of absolute freedom.

2. Disability as the ‘master trope of disqualification’

What we have been calling the ‘(m)Other’ has a strictly formal rather than empirical status. It refers not to any actual others – and certainly not to any actual mothers – but rather to a deep structure of (socio-)psychical subjectivity as such. Put simply, the (m)Other signifies that from which ultimate satisfaction qua full, unmediated love and attention are sought, that which enfolds the promise of *das Ding* within itself. Insofar as this ‘Thing’ is constitutively lost, however, the (m)Other is also inextricably bound up with the source or agency of the manifold prohibitions which render it inaccessible, i.e., the source of ‘the Law’ in the most general sense, what Lacan sometimes calls the ‘*Nom-du-Père*’, the name/no of the Father qua Law-giving authority (*nom* and *non* are homophones in French). To repeat, ‘Mother’ and ‘Father’ denote not any ‘real’ persons here but rather abstract functions or positions which structure the socio-symbolic order itself (though these functions may well be, and often are, carried out by actual mothers and fathers in real life). In other words, the Other (or ‘Big Other’) is itself ontologically and irreducibly contradictory – fractured, dis-integrated, ‘barred’. Dangling out the promise of a fulfilment to which it forever denies

5 *Ibid.*, 75–6.

6 Dan Goodley, *Disability Studies: An Interdisciplinary Introduction* (London: SAGE Publications, 2011), 132.

7 Tobin Siebers, *Disability Theory* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2008), 60.

access, it is the engine of a desire which is condemned to perpetual oscillation between fawning obedience and the temptation to anarchic transgression.

The Lacanian concept of the Other is roughly equivalent to what Rosemarie Garland-Thomson calls – drawing attention to its norm-generating and normalising functions – the ‘normate’. As she puts it, the normate ‘usefully designates the social figure through which people can represent themselves as definitive human beings’.⁸ As a *social figure* rather than a sociological category, the normate – or what we might call, playfully echoing Lacan, the ‘Big Normate’ – is not an empirical collection of really existing people but a structure governing how subjects relate to other subjects. It is true, of course, that certain really existing people seem to belong to the Normate more than others, but the important thing to grasp is that *this is true for everyone equally, qua subject*. The Normate is not a club to which a few unlucky souls are denied membership; one cannot be ‘in’ or ‘out of the Normate in this sense. The Normate is rather that to which the subject remains always and forever *extimate* vis-à-vis others who cannot but appear to it either as privy to a *jouissance* to which it is denied access or else as somehow complicit in such denial. Thus if the Normate names ‘the constructed identity of those who...can step into a position of authority and wield the power it grants them’, we should not take this to mean that one is ever in a position to fully own this identity oneself; it is always and necessarily the authority of another. This is what Lacan is getting at when he says, obscurely, that the Other does not exist. The Other/Normate is an ‘illusory, ideological’ entity, ‘an image that dominates without material substance, a phantom “majority” opposed to an overwhelming and equally illusory “minority”’.⁹

The Normate, then, and crucially, is always encountered in the form of a *barrier* which the subject must negotiate in pursuit of an authority and acceptance which remain forever out of reach. On the basis of what we have outlined above, it should by now be clear that the name for this barrier is, in a word, *disability*. If the Normate, as Garland-Thomson argues, is ‘the figure outlined by the array of deviant others whose marked bodies shore up the normate’s boundaries’,¹⁰ then ability, as Tobin Siebers succinctly puts it, ‘is the ideological baseline by which humanness is determined. The lesser the ability, the lesser the human being’.¹¹ These (phantasmatic) ‘definitive human beings’ circumscribed by this barrier are those whose infinite poietic plasticity and perfect wholeness and stability are the ideal and model of all ego-formation. This is likewise what Mitchell and Snyder are getting at when they describe disability as the ‘master trope of human disqualification’.¹² Although they are more interested in the ways in which disability functions in narrative representation (qua ‘narrative prosthesis’), their underlying theoretical assumption is more radical. ‘For all populations’, they claim, ‘physical and cognitive limitations constitute a baseline of cultural undesirability from

8 Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 8.

9 *Ibid.*, 32.

10 *Ibid.*, 8.

11 Siebers, *Disability Theory*, 10.

12 David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2000), 3.

which they must dissociate themselves'.¹³ This unambiguous indictment of 'all populations' suggests that there is something *primordially* disturbing about disability which subtends the specificity of every particular socio-cultural construction of disability, such that 'physical or cognitive inferiority has historically characterised the *means by which* bodies have been constructed as "deviant"'.¹⁴

To describe disability as the master trope of human disqualification is to posit that 'disablisation' is the logic of social exclusion as such: exclusion is accomplished through ascriptions of disability, while counterclaims to participation in full humanity almost always involve challenging or disproving such ascriptions. One important implication of this is that the recuperation of a given marginalised identity is usually accomplished through a procedure of decoupling from another identity which henceforth assumes the excluded status of the former. This is evident, Mitchell and Snyder argue, from the fact that as 'feminist, race, and sexuality studies sought to unmoor their identities from debilitating physical and cognitive associations, they inevitably positioned disability as the "real" limitation from which they must escape'.¹⁵ Even within disability communities themselves the same dynamic of recuperation-through-exclusion plays itself out, for example, in the way in which disabled people are routinely forced to exploit 'institutionally enforced hierarchies of disability' which presuppose a rank ordering of disabilities according to their degree of assimilability. For example, it is often noted that 'the fate of people with physical disabilities has often depended upon their ability to distance themselves from their cognitively disabled peers'.¹⁶

3. Disability and concrete universality: the constitutive exception

Thus far we have been sketching out the rough contours of an ontology of disability which can be summarised in two key points. *First*, disability was seen to be a basic structural feature of subjectivity qua irreducible component of desire. It manifests itself in the form (for the most part unconscious) of an ineliminable limit – what the German philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte calls a 'check' (*Anstoß*) – on the subject's power to master its own fate. Disability is a constitutive inadequacy which the subject is always already in the process of struggling to overcome in and through its project of curating an ego-ideal whose seamless integrity, stability, and autonomy attract and hold the full, unmediated attention and loving acceptance of the Other. As Lennard Davis writes, "The disabled body, far from being the body of some small group of victims, is an entity from the earliest of childhood instincts, a body that is common to all humans".¹⁷ Expressed in a different idiom, insofar as Lacan at least partially assimilates the Other to God,¹⁸ we might say that the project of ego-formation can be re-cast in terms of what Sartre describes as the fundamental project of becoming God qua (impossible) endeavour to establish ourselves as the foundation of

13 *Ibid.*, 3.

14 *Ibid.*, 2 (my emphasis).

15 *Ibid.*

16 *Ibid.*, 3.

17 Cited in Shildrick, *Embodying the Monster*, 80.

18 See Slavoj Žižek, 'The Big Other Doesn't Exist', *Journal of European Psychoanalysis* (Spring–Fall, 1997).

our own nothingness. Subjectivity or 'being-for-itself' is defined, Sartre says, by desire in the sense that the subject wants to take over the 'impermeability and infinite density' of nature or 'being-in-itself', i.e., wants to 'escape from contingency and facticity' and thus 'be its own foundation'.¹⁹ The 'fundamental value' animating all human life is thus 'the in-itself-for-itself, the ideal of an absolute permanence and stability of being to which 'we can give the name "God"'. Simply put, 'human-reality' is 'fundamentally the desire to be God'.²⁰ Desire accordingly signifies the subject's attempt to reacquire the lost object by obliterating any distance or distinction between the Other and itself. To do so, however, demands an 'escape from contingency and facticity', the annulment of all limitation, permeability, and vulnerability – the ascension to absolute freedom qua simultaneous and instantaneous realisation of all possibilities.

Second, and consequently, disability was seen to be the logic of all social exclusion. If the Normate represents the ideological ideal of human plenitude, and if ability is the name of that self-constituting boundary behind which the Normate sequesters and regulates itself, it follows that ability is the index of one's participation in humanity, such that to dehumanise another person is always to implicate him or her – somehow and to whatever extent – in a negation of the power to engage in that primordial struggle against one's natural instability, vulnerability, etc. which constitutes the essence of 'human-reality'. It is important to grasp this in its full significance: disability represents the impossibility, not simply of *recovering* the lost object, but more profoundly of fully engaging in *the struggle for recovery at all*. It is, of course, commonplace to deny desire to disabled people, but this is here meant in a fully ontological rather than a merely ontico-empirical sense. It is not simply that disabled people lack sexuality, etc. (this is of course false, but beside the point here), but instead that to be marginalised or excluded as disabled is to be denied *desire as such*, in that what is being ascribed is an *insurmountable limit* to one's ability *even to fantasise*. In other words, one's physical and/or cognitive differences are held to make it impossible even *to let oneself be duped* by the ideal of an ego whose immunity to all 'contingency and facticity' might secure the infinite love of the Other. Human-reality is defined by the power, not actually to *become* God, but rather to *pursue* God, and to be (defined or excluded as) disabled is to be compelled to resign oneself to the hard fact of the futility of this pursuit and the illusoriness of ultimate *jouissance*, i.e., to the ineluctability of castration. This is precisely what it means to say that the Normate is the baseline for inclusion in humanity. To be empirically constituted as disabled is to be dehumanised qua denied the 'definitive' human phantasy of merging with the Other by becoming the ground of one's own being. One is human just to the extent that one is able to dream the impossible.

Julia Kristeva is not wrong, then, when she invokes an 'isolated world of disability' – 'another world, an antiworld, the world of disability cut off from the world'.²¹ The point is not that the

19 Jean-Paul Sartre, Sarah Richmond (tr.), *Being and Nothingness: An Essay in Phenomenological Ontology* (New York: Washington Square Press, 2018), 735.

20 *Ibid.*, 747.

21 Julia Kristeva, Jeanine Herman (tr.), 'Liberty, Equality, Fraternity, and...Vulnerability', *Women's Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 38, No. 1/2, 'Citizenship' (Spring/Summer, 2010), 254. See also Josh Dohmen, 'Disability as Abject: Kristeva, Disability, and Resistance', *Hypatia*, Vol. 31, No. 4 (Fall, 2016), 762–78.

'really' (empirically) disabled inhabit a kind of ghetto-(anti-)world to which the 'really' abled have banished them (sociologically speaking, of course, and to repeat, this is frequently the case), but rather, and more fundamentally, that ability just *is* the most general operator of the Normate's logic of inclusion/exclusion, that which polices the boundary that circumscribes the ideological domain of 'definitive human beings'. Disability is implicated *a priori* in every gesture of exclusion; it is the *name of the Outside* ejected in and through the Normate's self-constituting sequestration. This notion of an antiworld inhabited by the less-than-fully-human – of a group whose particularity consists entirely in its passive constitution as the wholly negative other excreted by the active self-defining/enclosing of another group – can be further clarified with reference to the Hegelian/psychoanalytic concept of concrete universality, or what Kisner terms the 'constitutive exception', meaning an exception without which the rule that excepts it could not exist. Such an exception is 'oxymoronic', Kisner explains, in that it 'cannot be merely excluded from the universal because the universal is constituted through it, and yet at the same time it cannot be included within the universal because of its very exceptive character.'²² In ordinary life, of course, it is the rule, not its exceptions, which we take to constitute the universal (e.g., all chairs must partake of some universal 'chairness' which allows us to distinguish them from all other things in the world that are not chairs). The idea of the constitutive exception flips this reasoning on its head. It refers not to any mere 'abstract universal' qua sterile property which, like the Cartesian *cogito*, is equally present in all particulars, but rather to something which, as Žižek puts it in *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, is

opened up by the symptomatic void in the order of Being, by the necessary inconsistency in its structural order, by the constitutive presence of a *surnuméraire*, of an element which is included in the totality of Order, although there is no proper place for it in this totality, and which, *for this very reason – since it is an element without further particular specifications –* professes to be the immediate embodiment of the Whole.²³

The classic example here is that of the German and the Jew under Nazism. As McGowan nicely summarises it, 'The attempt to assert German particularity establishes an opposition between two particulars (German and Jew), but one of these particulars must take on the form of the universal in order to define the other. In an ironic twist, however, it is not the German' but rather the opposing particular, the Jew, which 'comes to act as universal because it provides the basis through which one can identify oneself as a German'.²⁴

Now if what we have argued above is true, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that disability is the *ultimate constitutive exception*, the master exception that constitutes the inner truth of every other. If it is indeed 'those who are excluded, with no proper place within the global order, who directly embody the true universality, who represent the Whole in contrast to all others who

²² Wendell Kisner, 'The Concrete Universal in Žižek and Hegel', *International Journal of Žižek Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (2016), 13.

²³ Žižek in *ibid.*, 5, 13.

²⁴ Todd McGowan, *Emancipation After Hegel: Achieving a Contradictory Revolution* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 193–4.

stand only for particular interests', then disability, as the *denial of the very nihilation constitutive of existence* – a kind of *premature death*, an externally imposed *fixity of being* which kills the *desire* for the in-itself-for-itself (= God) – is nothing if not the most 'radical universality'.²⁵ 'Is nothing' – that is to say, in the eyes of a Normate which is itself nothing outside of its omnipresent gaze, the universal can only ever appear as pure negation, nullity. Just as the Nazi 'philosopher' Alfred Rosenberg could only describe Jewishness as an 'anti-race' – the absence of a distinct racial identity²⁶ – so too can the Normate only articulate its particular identity (viz., its investment in the phantasy of a limitless potentiality-for-being) by opposing itself to another particular which it ejects out of the process of its own self-sequestration, one which has only a negative and opposing (non-)identity: the 'dis-abled'.

This example is useful in that it draws much-needed attention to the political dimension of universality. As Kisner notes, the power of the concrete universal lies in the fact that it alone is in a position to expose the hypocrisy – the mere one-sided particularity – of every purportedly abstract universal. Only the concrete universal is in a position to say, 'The former universal...is a false universal, not because it excludes us and we demand recognition, but because by excluding us it fails to be truly universal'.²⁷ In doing so, it exposes the contradiction inherent in every abstract universal as such (i.e., as dependent upon what it excludes), which in turn opens up the possibility of a political project focused no longer on this or that particular demand, but on the universal claim that resonates in every demand.²⁸ Put in other words, the constitutive exception is, in Hegelian jargon, 'singular' rather than merely particular; it is a 'particular-become-universal' as opposed to just another particular which could be set off against other particulars as so many 'special interests'. For this reason, 'the constitutive exception is the singularity which, as self-relating universality, is the concrete universal that can inaugurate a new beginning'.²⁹ Such a new beginning would not be like the reactionary pseudo-beginnings of fascism, Stalinism, etc., which marshal a false universality in the service of the hegemonic domination and destruction of other particulars; there is no way for the figure of the asylum seeker, the disabled, etc. *qua singular* to assume vis-à-vis another the position and status of the Nazi vis-à-vis the Jew, insofar as these figures acquire their identity only and precisely in the way in which they expose the sham universality of the special interests that eject them. But nor would it mean, as Kristeva advocates, simply encouraging non-disabled people to acknowledge their own irreducible vulnerabilities.³⁰ It would rather – at least this is the hope – be one that could, by laying bare the *inherent failure of the universal itself*, serve to mobilise what Žižek calls a 'political logic of the excess constitutive of every established Order',³¹ and thus to open up entirely new ways of thinking about humanity and human freedom as such. The claim ventured here is that disability might constitute the axis – a little tilted, to be sure – around which such a new

25 Kisner, 'The Concrete Universal', 13–14.

26 McGowan, *Emancipation After Hegel*, 194.

27 Kisner, 'The Concrete Universal', 14–15.

28 Žižek in *ibid.*, 15.

29 *Ibid.*, 26.

30 See Dohmen, 'Disability as Object', 764.

31 Kisner, 'The Concrete Universal', 16.

political logic might turn.

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