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Author Joel Michael Reynolds is an assistant professor at Georgetown University and a senior research scholar at the Kennedy Institute of Ethics focusing on philosophy and disability. *The Life Worth Living: Disability, Pain, and Morality* is an exciting and, at times, challenging exploration of the themes in the book’s subtitle—disability, pain, and morality. As a disabled academic, I found the journey in this volume particularly interesting because, often when we (disabled people) least expect it, we must make the case that our lives are worth living. The book illustrates the degree to which ableism (discrimination or prejudice against disabled people) permeates widespread understandings of disability in almost every aspect of personal, social, and cultural life.

The book is divided into three sections: pain, disability, and ability. In each section, Reynolds documents how disability is conflated or merged with each respective factor. This conflation has led to a hierarchy of humanity relating to degrees of worthiness and arbitrarily determining who is worth more and who is worthless based on a subjective valuation of characteristics. The basis for this ranking draws on the ancient beliefs of philosophers such as Aristotle and others. Aristotle's approach to the body that equates disability with a lack of humanity, weakness, and related negative language (deformity, crippling) strongly influences how disability is understood today. This underscores the largely unquestioned, arbitrary, subjective valuation of accepted ways of being, thinking, and doing. It is from here that the naturalness and superiority of non-disability is reinforced. Likewise, disability is usually equated with harm, suffering, and pain. There is little understanding of the reality of disability that is not imbued with ableism.

In a book that is both refreshing and hopeful, Reynolds offers a novel approach to the elements outlined above. He questions, refines, and expands existing concepts that are no longer constrained by the historic, culturally comfortable simplistic understandings that have gone before. Adopting a phenomenological, experiential analysis of disability moves away from the flawed
framework that fits the genetic, eugenic trope arbitrarily dismissive of the “other,” however that is formulated or understood.

Reynolds’s discussion traces the understanding of disability in Western culture through the ages. The author provides a critical, detailed interrogation of the overly simplified way in which disability is widely perceived. Examining the numerous connections and intersections between culture, society, the individual, and medical concepts such as “able,” “typical,” and “standard,” he subjects them to much-needed scrutiny. He provides an overdue reimagining of value in the context of disability and difference. A natural element in the richness of the human condition, disability is not presented as tragic, negative, pathologized, a threat, or a weakness. It is an important shift away from traditional binary understanding of the variety and richness that is the human condition.

Reynolds’s exploration of pain examines how the origins of the word itself have strongly influenced current negative beliefs and associations. The author also questions the concept of pain, its layered complexity, how it is approached, and the role of pain in life experience, as well as cultural understanding that is often stigmatizing. Citing the assumption of viewer normalcy, Reynolds raises interesting questions concerning the arbitrary identification of defect. Its relationship to medicine is particularly interesting where he highlights the naturalization of pathology. There is an intense dis/ease, the personal failing problematized as individual weakness. At times, key points of the discussion are obscured by the author’s density of language, but the use of journal entries enables the reader to better understand the fluid daily realities of pain in the context of experience.

The author’s discussion of the theories associated with disability highlights the significance of an historical shift away from charity and a medicalized understanding of disability, the transformational thinking around the concept of disability itself, and the emergence of the social model of disability, recognizing numerous social cultural factors and their impact on the lives of disabled people. Furthermore, there is the addition of the political experience of disabled people. This action is pivotal and questions the overarching problematizing of disability. Importantly, Reynolds notes some criticisms of this model in that it provides a somewhat superficial recognition of biological and psychological realities of impairment. He writes about a post-social model and recognizes complexities and intersections found within this arena. However, complexities need not be interpreted as difficulties. There is an uncertainty created by shifting language and aversive ableism, which focuses on those people who are progressive and well-meaning yet still participate in biased actions or thought.[1]

The author advocates a change in direction, a further evolution in thinking, stressing a natural expectation of the presence of disability and certain types of bodies. This would move beyond traditional notions of ability and capacity and what fits where, valuing the inherent creativity in a new skill set and the necessity to reconfigure requirements on an ongoing basis. It would recognize the impact of small changes and that difference is simply that. Abilities need not have values or expectations attached to them. What is the difference between concern and control? There is a fine line between objectification, pity, and loathing; the differences are only a matter of degree and reflect arbitrary valuing of certain ways of being and doing, coupled with subjective devaluation of social expectation capacity and ability. Cultural understandings influence nature, access, and capacity of care. Cultural comfort zones are the foundations, which conform to traditional beliefs focusing on the individual.

Reynolds promotes moving away from personal regulation of pain and disability associated with suffering and moral or biological weakness and urges deconstruction and reconfiguration of
current understandings of disability as being disruptive. Rather, he urges, present disability pain as requiring a specialized, valued skills set.

Joel Michael Reynolds’s *The Life Worth Living: Disability, Pain, and Morality* presents an interesting perspective that is well worth pursing while at the same time underscoring the entrenched belief systems that work as a barrier to substantive social change for disabled people.

Note


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