

The Focus Of A Struggle For Civil Rights

[In the last few decades, disability theorists have argued for a social understanding of what it means to be physically disabled. The result is that illness is distributed even more inequitably than disease, following lines of wealth, race, and nationality. Disability is the focus of a struggle for civil rights. Like being gay in a homophobic culture, being disabled may be to one's detriment, but that's a social failing, not a natural inevitability. Physical disability is not, in itself, an obstacle to living well. It's a claim that provokes both puzzlement and resistance. Philosophers often treat the imposition of disability as a paradigm of injury or harm. If physical disability is a category of overt bodily malfunction, it's not akin to illness but disease. That means there is a sense in which physical disability cannot be bad for you in itself. If it makes life worse, that's because it affects how you actually live. Such bad luck! Maybe, the farmer replies. Such good luck! Maybe, the farmer replies. Such bad luck! Maybe, the farmer replies. Such good luck! Maybe, the farmer replies. A massive body of research has demonstrated that people who acquire a range of disabilities typically do not experience much or any permanent reduction in the enjoyment of life, a recent survey of the literature concludes. For all that, puzzlement persists. It is in that sense harmful. As the farmer's luck reminds us, there may be collateral benefits. But other things being equal, how can disabilities like these fail to make your life go worse? Isn't that what happens when you take away something good? The puzzle turns on mistakes about the nature of the good life that go back to Aristotle. It isn't just that Aristotle is preoccupied with the ideal life, the one you ought to choose if everything were up to you, nor that he would regard disability of any kind as incompatible with living well. It is that he thinks the best life is lacking in nothing. It is the most desirable of things, to which nothing can be added. Feel free to supply a list of your own. I'll bet its members won't have much in common. What this diversity reflects is a liberalization of what goes into living well in the long aftermath of Aristotle's ethics. It's not that anything goes. Aristotle may have been wrong to focus on a single ideal life, but he was right to affirm that some things are worth wanting, while others are not. Requested to do so, Bartleby in a singularly mild, firm voice, replied, I would prefer not to. Things spiral from there. Never giving any reason, Bartleby repeats his mantra. We may sympathize with Bartleby, but his desires do not make sense. But within those limits, we can flourish in many ways, doing countless different things. Once we absorb this pluralism, the idea that a good life is lacking in nothing begins to seem absurd. It is manifestly false of the lives I gestured at above, all of which have both faults and gaping omissions. Karl Marx wrote that in communist society, when something has value, that doesn't mean we should or must engage with it. At most, it means we should respect it as something worth protecting and preserving. But we should want them to survive for others to enjoy. In practice, a good life is selective, limited, fractional. It has good things in it, but the many it must omit don't necessarily make it worse. I have plenty going on. Disabilities prevent us from engaging with valuable things. They are harmful in a way. Veeck worked to integrate baseball, signing the first Black player in the American League. Veeck installed baseball's first exploding scoreboard, which shot off fireworks when the White Sox hit a home run. Harriet McBryde Johnson, born with muscular dystrophy, became a lawyer and disability activist. Surviving unexpectedly through middle age, unable to walk, she lost movement in her arms and the ability to swallow most solid foods. Yet Johnson's](#)

memoir tells the raucous stories of her protest at the Jerry Lewis Muscular Dystrophy Telethon, an impromptu campaign to sit on the Charleston County Council, a visit to Cuba, being photographed by The New York Times, and debating the philosopher Peter Singer, who believes that parents should be able to euthanize infants born with her condition. Her reply to Singer is a pithy expression of my argument. Are we worse off? Johnson asks. Not in any meaningful sense. There are too many variables. There is too much diversity, too much contingency, in the prospects for living well. If it sounds too good to be true, there are two things to say. Do we rely on fear and prejudice, or on meaningful testimony? For one, there's a distinction between being and becoming disabled. Being disabled is compatible with living a good life, but that doesn't mean that becoming disabled is not traumatic. Skeptical philosophers will ask why it's wrong to impose disabilities on others if they don't make life substantially worse. It's a fair question. Part of the answer is that adapting to disability is hard. Part is that it's wrong to interfere with someone's bodily autonomy, whether or not you do substantial harm. But there's a further point to make. But it's not okay to cause harm merely when the net result will not be bad. The recipients of this largesse may well be glad, on balance, they were hit. They'll recover from the injuries, use the gold to pay their medical bills, and have a wad of cash left over. But what their beneficiary did was wrong. The final complication is the most significant. I've been generalizing about physical disability, talking averages and what tends to happen as a rule. I do not mean for a moment to deny that there are experiences of disability that are profoundly difficult, ones that shatter individual lives. This is where poor accommodations matter most. It works best for philosophers like me.