

A Case for Vindication: Psychoanalytic Insights on Disability

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Abstract

In theorizing disability, scholars have often tended to appropriate conceptual paradigms from a variety of different disciplines, ranging from sociology to psychology, literary theory to cultural studies. It is however noteworthy that they have invariably tended to express a disposition of marked reluctance with regard to extrapolating paradigms from the field of psychoanalysis, in spite of the immense influence it commands. This of course is neither baffling nor unwarranted for the truth is psychoanalytic insights regarding disability for the most part characterize it in an essentially negative light, which upon scrutiny reveal themselves to be tellingly lopsided and unjustified. The expressed objective of this paper is to expose this pervasive trend of disparagement that informs psychoanalytic discourses on disability, via critically reviewing some notable concepts put forth by leading thinkers in the field. The ultimate goal is to vindicate disability from the blemish cast on it by psychoanalytic insights over the years.

Keywords: Disability, psychoanalysis, insights, exception, mirror stage.

In the annals of intellectual scholarship, few disciplines have elicited controversy to the scale of psychoanalysis. After all, though there is no denying that insights posited by experts in the field have significantly bolstered our knowledge regarding the murky terrain of subjective reality, it is hard to overlook that many of them have been tellingly contentious, even frankly offensive. Yet for all the fuss, there could be no doubt as far as the thoroughness with which psychoanalytic insights have probed aspects relating to the workings of the human mind and its repercussions. The extensive scale of topics they have explored, which widely range from the obvious as childhood and sexuality to the tellingly divisive as the defences and the complexes, most amply bear out the point. Disability for some reasons however oddly stands out as a concern that is by and large neglected in this regard. This indeed is rather baffling for as Brian Watermeyerrightly points out, “One would imagine that cultural and

personal aspects of bodily difference would be important to a discipline concerned with human subjectivity” (58). It is nonetheless noteworthy that baffling as this is, it becomes worse when we consider the fact that whatever negligible little has been dealt with, is also none too progressive, in fact, is downright denigrating. To quote Watermeyer again, “this work has tended to reinforce prejudices regarding the emotional functioning and potential for productivity and intimacy of disabled people”(59). The fundamental aim of this paper is to call into question this apparent trend of deprecation that informs psychoanalytic insights pertaining to disability. To this end, it seeks to illustrate how such insights relating to the subject are for the most part lopsided and thus indelibly flawed. Considering the limited scope and space involved, the choice of insights for illustration has been restricted to specifically two concepts, the idea of exceptions by Freud and that of the mirror

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stage by Lacan. The ultimate goal in view is to vindicate disability from the blemish cast on it by psychoanalytic insights, so as to project it in a proper light.

The fact that psychoanalysis has paid very little attention to conceptualising disability, could be traced back to its very origins, to the work of its founding figure Sigmund Freud. Massive and diverse as his literary corpus is, comprising of such varied materials as essays, case studies, clinical notes and books, there is hardly any engagement in them with the notion of disability. In fact, the aspect that most conspicuously stands out with regard to Freud's treatment of the subject, is that he has blatantly abstained from engaging it. We can only speculate whether it is this indifference displayed by the founder that set the precedence for others in the field, but whatever it is, there could possibly be no ambiguity that in his vast literary corpus, prolific as it is diverse, disability is not even recognized, let alone be considered as a concept worth investigating by Freud. The only time he ever broached the idea was while formulating a series of character types encountered in the course of his psychoanalytic work, specifically while propounding his notion of exception. Set forth in a 1916 paper entitled *The Exceptions*, the notion denotes a neurotic syndrome peculiar to those suffering from a protracted illness acquired congenitally or in childhood. As the very term indicates, the condition involves displaying a marked reluctance to abide by the accepted codes of adult life, to the extent of claiming immunity or exemption from upholding them. Freud's postulation is that people with the syndrome regard themselves as having already suffered

sufficient hardship, and therefore as entitled to be exempted from the necessity of confirming to social obligations.

They say that they have renounced enough and suffered enough, and have a claim to be spared any further demands; they will submit no longer to any disagreeable necessity, for they are exceptions and, moreover, intend to remain so. (Smith 3101)

The upshot is that such individuals act as they please, neither bothering to take responsibility for the consequences of their conduct, nor paying any heed to moral or legal constraints. A classic instance cited by Freud himself in his paper is the figure of Gloucester in Shakespeare's *Richard III*. In the play, the congenitally malformed Gloucester is primarily portrayed as an embittered individual, whose sole aim in life is to ruin the happiness of others. It is however noteworthy that this inclination is not an outcome of a sadistic strain in his character, but a sort of recompense he seeks for being short changed by nature. This is to say, he sees himself as exempt from submitting to any moral or ethical considerations against doing wrong to others, as he himself has been wronged for no fault of his by providence. His logic is that nature has done me a grievous wrong in denying me the beauty of form which wins human love. Life owes me reparation for this, and I will see that I get it. I have a right to be an exception, to disregard the scruples by which others let themselves be held back. (Smith 3102)

It is noteworthy that at no point in elaborating his notion of exception, does Freud formally invoke the notion of disability. The idea comes into reckoning primarily as a type of chronic disadvantage that one could possibly be affected by,

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congenitally or in childhood. In other words, disability is engaged in the text by Freud not directly but more as an inclusive concern, and it is by no means approving or wholesome. As purported by him, people with disability do not have a fully developed ego. They are therefore incapable of making “the advance from the pleasure principle to the reality principle by which the mature human being is distinguished from the child”(Smith 3100). This is to say, they are fundamentally ill equipped to lead a normal adult life, where they would be able to subordinate their impulses of pleasure to a much higher claim that of necessity or acceptance. It must be conceded that Freud’s notion though essentially disparaging is not without basis. Practically all of us feel at times to some degree an inkling to exempt ourselves from the importunities of life on some pretext of infantile privation. This said it must however be pointed out that the idea is also extremely skewed. In characterizing congenitally deprived individuals as exception prone, Freud completely puts the onus on the individual, entirely overlooking the social component involved. This indeed is a critical omission for often it is the social component exemplified by public attitudes and expectations, which exercises a stronger influence on individual disposition. This is particularly true with regard to the syndrome described by Freud. After all, if Gloucester wants to play the villain, it is not primarily because he is malformed, it is rather because social expectations deny the warmth of romantic love to such malformed individuals. His body per se is not the cause for his desire to exempt himself from social obligations, instead it is the dire ramifications that he is

compelled to endure socially on account of it, which is to be held as truly culpable. He is in short, a victim of “stigma — the situation of the individual who is disqualified from full social acceptance” (Goffman X). Certainly, it must be acknowledged that the entire blame cannot be shifted to societal factors all together, but critically, neither should their influence be ignored.

If Freud’s opinion regarding disabled individuals is woefully misguided, at any rate, lopsided, that of Jacques Lacan’s is far from encouraging. Nowhere is this more evident than what is widely reputed to be his most significant contribution to the discipline of psychoanalysis namely his notion of the mirror stage. Formally set forth in a 1949 paper entitled *The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience*, the idea exemplifies a seminal notion in Lacan’s theory concerning human subjectivity. According to this theory, in which Lacan concentrates on charting psychic progress during childhood, subjective development occurs in terms of three specific phases. The first which starts from birth, is one in which the child exemplifies in essence a disjointed phenomenon, lacking any sense of organization or unity. As Goodley puts it, At the heart of the child’s psychic life is a fragmented body: the body is an assemblage of parts or pieces (arms, legs, surfaces), of turbulent movements. The child is a ‘hommelette’: a psychical scrambled egg whose processes remain anarchical and chaotically integrated(124). For Lacan, in this preliminary period, which is pre-linguistic in character, the child exists in a realm which he dubs the real. The mirror stage typifies the second

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phase in this sequence of development, which begins when the child completes six months. During this period, also pre-linguistic in character, the child relocates from the real into a new domain called the imaginary, where it remains till the age of eighteen months. The significance of the mirror stage lies in the fact that it is during this phase that the child comes to develop a unitary sense of self or ego. For Lacan, this development primarily occurs as an outcome of the child identifying its being with its reflection of its image in a mirror, which explains the term attributed to it. To quote Goodley again,

The real is now lost. Instead, in the reflection of the mirror, the child sees a unitary, whole self, which contrasts so markedly with the reality of its own fragmented, uncoordinated 'body in pieces' (*corps morcelé*).... It is salutary for the child because it gives them their first sense of a 'coherent identity', in which they see the first term, 'that is me'(125).

As acknowledged by Lacan himself, the primary inspiration for his mirror stage idea is allegedly derived from an experiment devised by the American psychologist James Baldwin. The experiment that pits a 6 month old human child alongside a chimpanzee of the same age, involves discerning how the two react to the spectacle of their respective images in a mirror. The result revealed that though at the start both subjects were fascinated by the sight of their specular images, the chimpanzee recognizing it as illusory quickly lost interest, while the infant convinced that the image is real grew increasingly captivated. The key to note here is that as in the experiment where the supposition of the child is fundamentally

imagined, in Lacan's theory too the ego formed as a result of the infant's identification is but a hallucination.

However, this captivation with the illusory whole self is actually a misrecognition (*meconnaissance*)... What we see is a fantasy of wholeness because the child is actually still chaotic (they are still in the real)(Goodley 125).

The child however remains oblivious, consolidating its newly acquired ego by becoming more attached to its mirror image. The attachment severs with the culmination of the mirror stage, but the ego does not become affected by it. This is ensured by the child's foray into the framework of language, which bolsters the ego by substituting the mirror image with linguistic symbols. Thus, unlike the first two, this final phase of development is strictly linguistic, marking the child's emergence from the imaginary domain into that termed the symbolic. At the age of 4 years, the tenure of the symbolic concludes, drawing the curtain on the process of early psychic development in childhood.

It is notable that unlike Freud's notion of exception which entailed an inclusive reference to disability, Lacan's mirror stage theory does not involve any reference to it at all. This however should not be taken to posit that it utterly precludes any implication concerning disability. The truth is it very much does, and is no less prejudicial or tarnishing than Freud's. To elaborate, the mirror stage exemplifies a pivotal phase in the progress of human subjectivity in that it marks the time during which the child comes to develop an ego. This formation however is critically contingent on the child's visual system, which is required to be fully

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developed, in any event not defective. As Dylan Evans explains,

.... the ego is the result of identifying with one's own SPECULAR IMAGE. The key to this phenomenon lies in the prematurity of the human baby: at six months, the baby still lacks coordination. However, its visual system is relatively advanced, which means that it can recognise itself in the mirror before attaining control over its bodily movements.(118)

The obvious implication is that children with congenital visual impairment do not experience the formation of the ego, or if at all they do so, it happens much later after they have gained a definite degree of motor control. From this it naturally follows that such subjects come to develop an ego that is not fully functional, or at any rate, that which is disparately conditioned from the majority. What this of course posits is that disabled people are innately incapable of evolving into a fully matured adult, or in a more positive vein, inherently different from the rest, which is not saying much. Lacan's pronouncement on people with disability in short, is thus essentially the same as Freud, and it is equally unjustified. After all, though he constantly altered his views regarding the mirror stage throughout his career, nowhere does Lacan even attempt to explain the glaring omission of disability from his scheme of things. The mirror stage hence far from being revelatory, is in actuality mystifying as far as disabled subjectivities are concerned. Ingenious as it is, it leaves a number of crucial questions unanswered, such as how do visually disabled individuals develop a sense of selfhood, and what are the permutations to be taken into consideration to account for the lack of an adequately developed visual system.

The very nature of disability is such that it typifies an extremely challenging notion to theorise. As Rachel Adams and associates point out, "meanings we attribute to disability are shifting, elusive, and sometimes contradictory" (30). In the context of psychoanalysis however, there is apparently no ambiguity with reference to how disability is to be regarded. As borne out by arguably the two most leading thinkers in the field, disability represents a pathological catalyst, which implies that disabled individuals by default are not normal, not the same as the rest at any rate. This view, though tellingly spurious as illustrated, is nonetheless potentially damaging with far reaching implications to reckon with. After all, in spite of being widely regarded as a hotbed of controversy, none could deny the fact that psychoanalysis exemplifies an influential terrain of human wisdom. Thinkers as Freud and Lacan are not only notable scholars in the field, but have become household names whose ideas epitomize noteworthy concepts, subscribed and alluded to by scores across the globe. It is therefore vital that disability be consciously vindicated from the blemish in which it has been conceptually cast by scholars in the field. If not done so, it runs the very realistic risk of perpetuating itself in the general imagination as a fundamentally negative phenomenon. It is indeed vital that we realise that such an endeavor of course is not merely a stopgap enterprise, something we could afford to cease after a transitory engagement. It is rather a continuous process that has to endure ceaselessly, so that disability would be projected in a progressively positive light, and perhaps eventually reach a

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situation where psychoanalysis actually becomes its conducive ally.

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