

A TURING TEST FOR DISABILITY STUDIES

Marissa Brostoff

A TURING TEST FOR DISABILITY STUDIES: ACADEMIA AND THE IDEOLOGIES OF INTELLIGENCE¹

I. COGNITIVE DISABILITY AND THE UNIVERSITY

Disability studies has hit an impasse. The rapidly growing field, which originally focused on constructions of physical disability, has been reorienting itself for several years now toward investigations of cognitive impairment. As a result, it can no longer ignore what appears to be a glaring, frustratingly self-reflexive problem: How is academia, which worships the labors of cognition, in any position to deconstruct the ideology of cognitive disability?

Both Enlightenment and minority discourses tend to make a pair of assumptions that, disability theorists argue, pose particular problems for people with cognitive disabilities: first, that self-representation, individual or collective, is indispensable to political agency; and second, that such representation takes the form of rhetoric. The struggle to gain access to rhetoricity, then—the ability to “speak” and to “be heard”—is a central project for anybody who seeks to transform its status within an assemblage like law, medicine, or academia. Indeed, this is not a bad description of how disability studies itself emerged: Academic members of a marginalized group—in this case, primarily people with physical disabilities—originated new critical practices in their disciplines informed by their subject positions.

Cognitive disability appears to challenge this model because it is a social process in which a diagnosis of mental illness strips its subject of rhetorical clout: “If people think you’re crazy, they don’t listen to you.”² It is a forceful point that cuts through the tortured history of attempts to construct—or deconstruct—cognitive disability. Yet cognitive disability also raises the specter of rhetorical blockages at the level of the body. Rhetoricity is denied to people who need assistance in order to speak or write and thus

¹ This essay is for Marlene Brostoff, brilliant special educator, who started it all.

² Catherine Prendergast. “On the Rhetorics of Mental Disability.” In James C. Wilson and Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson (eds.) *Embodied Rhetorics: Disability in Language and Culture* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2001), 45-60.

challenge traditional notions of self-representation.³ In either case, how can people whose marginalization is so closely tied to difficulty communicating break down the structures of knowledge and power that produced that marginalization? Does cognitive disability reveal an outer limit of the difference model of social theory, beyond which subjects cannot speak for themselves and therefore must remain silent?

In one sense, academia is just another assemblage on a list that also includes the legal and medical establishments, relevant to the political status of cognitively disabled people primarily in that it functions as a gatekeeper, accrediting or barring individuals from full participation in these other *dispositifs*, which can confer life and death. And yet within the field of disability studies, conversations about cognitive disability seem inexorably to drift in the opposite direction, working their way upstream from law or medicine toward the academy itself, which is represented as the apotheosis of inaccessibility. A recent volume on cognitive disability and moral philosophy, for instance, features an odd exchange between philosopher Martha Nussbaum and literary theorist Michael Bérubé. Nussbaum's contribution to the volume is a radical critique of the principle of "one person one vote," arguing that adults whose cognitive disabilities prevent them from casting a ballot should be granted representation by a guardian. It is a proposal with clear political exigency for an underrepresented class and provocative implications with regard to more general questions of representation and justice. Thus it seems like an odd step backward—or, more precisely, inward—when Bérubé concludes his enthusiastic response by proposing that "this conception of surrogacy poses an underrecognized challenge to disability studies."⁴ The field, he claims, has overlooked cognitive disability in favor of physical disability because of misplaced pieties about the constructed nature of disability and taboos on "speaking for others". We are going to have to get over ourselves, he argues, because "you don't find a lot of people with severe cognitive disability holding academic positions."⁵

³ Lewiecki-Wilson, Cynthia. "Rethinking Rhetoric through Mental Disabilities." (*Rhetoric Review* 22 (2): 156–167, 2003), 157. Lewiecki-Wilson specifies that she is talking here about the needs of "the severely mentally retarded and mentally ill," but does not clarify the boundaries of this category (157). Terminology poses myriad problems here. The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* uses "cognitive disability" to refer to impairments often identified as "intellectual and developmental disabilities". Writers coming from outside this medicalized discourse, including many disability theorists, tend to use the term in a more general and instrumental sense to refer to any condition that impairs a given function, like rhetoricity. Since my own concerns here are tied up with the question of academic discourse—which, I will argue, only fitfully engages with medicalized categories—I will use "cognitive disability" in this latter broad sense.

⁴ Bérubé, Michael. "Equality, Freedom, and/or Justice for All: A Response to Martha Nussbaum." In Kittay and Carlson (eds.) *Cognitive Disability and Its Challenge to Moral Philosophy* (Chichester, West Sussex; Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 97–110.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 102–103.

What are we to make of Bérubé's insistent self-reflexivity, capped by the sarcasm with which he dissociates his profession from a never-quite-specified range of cognitive states? We can begin to answer this question by considering philosopher Licia Carlson's evocation of cognitive disability as "the philosopher's nightmare." It is easy enough to imagine why such a claim could be made on the basis already discussed: The fact that the world is full of people who do not function as model Enlightenment subjects—figured here as crystalline writers and commanding speakers—is a headache for any philosopher whose theories demand that things be otherwise. But that is not quite what Carlson means. Rather, she has adapted the phrase from critic Georgina Kleege, who writes that Hollywood's portrayals of blindness:

reveal something disturbing about the filmmakers' vision of the world. The blind are a filmmaker's worst nightmare. They can never be viewers, can never be enlightened and dazzled by the filmmaker's artistry. So filmmakers treat the blind the way we all deal with nightmares: they belittle them, expose their weakness, make them at best pitiable, at worst somewhat unsavory.⁶

Philosophers, here, imagine people with cognitive disabilities the way filmmakers imagine blind people: as an unappreciative audience for their own brilliance. In this account, cognitively disabled people are abstracted into a kind of uncanny double of the philosopher or, we might surmise, of anyone whose sense of self is intimately bound up with intellectual performance. This antinomy is built upon a fantasy that one could radically separate "the cognitively able," who will spend their lives within spitting distance from the academy, and "the cognitively disabled," who will be categorically excluded from it.

Other critics take as a given that there are in fact countless individuals with cognitive disabilities toiling at every level of the university—and yet come to similar conclusions. Composition and rhetoric theorist Margaret Price makes the fullest case to date that academia defines itself around the exclusion of cognitive disabilities from dyslexia to autism to Down syndrome to the brain fog associated with chemotherapy or migraine.⁷ Price herself identifies as cognitively disabled, yet maintains that in the eyes of the university, her presence there constitutes a paradox. The root of the problem, she argues,

⁶ Carlson, Licia. *The Faces of Intellectual Disability Philosophical Reflections* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2010), 4.

⁷ Price, Margaret. *Mad at School: Rhetorics of Mental Disability and Academic Life* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011), 19.

is that the academy—"for thousands of years...understood as a bastion of reason"—seeks "not just to omit, but to abhor mental disability—to reject it, to stifle and expel it."⁸ From Aristotle to contemporary critical pedagogy, she claims, reason and inheritors like "criticality" have marginalized subjects who "[fail] to 'make sense' on a neurotypical scale."⁹ Academia, then, is more than one cognitively ableist site among many; it is the very citadel of rationalism and therefore the epitome of exclusion.

I know what she means, and I think most academics would similarly find it hard to feign ignorance with respect to the situation she describes. The figure of the able mind—or, to use the shorthand ubiquitous in everyday speech but unspoken in disability studies, the idea of "intelligence"—is indeed crucial to understanding the demands of the contemporary academy. But the first clue that there is something missing from Price's argument is her failure to historicize. Western educational institutions up through and beyond the Enlightenment period were structured around the exclusion of certain kinds of bodies on the basis of social status, but no free-floating concept of intellectual ability provided a technology with which to differentiate among the minds of elites.¹⁰ Cognitive variation surely existed during these times and places as much as any other, but the notion that individuals could be intellectually superior or inferior in some general sense did not.

Attempts to delineate a category of people specifically via their supposed lack of intelligence, rather than imagining this lack as one element of the more general inferiority of a race, gender, class, or nation are quite recent, emerging as part of the twentieth-century ideology of meritocracy which came to full flower in the United States after World War II. The same context produced the rationalized subject who can deal with "fast academia," characterized by inflexible deadlines, with overcrowded classrooms, and impenetrable bureaucracies.¹¹ Such demands are not part of some age-old tradition of humanistic education, but have been imposed on it by fiat.

Is the idea of intelligence inseparable from its racist, classist, sexist, colonial, and at times eugenicist history? If so, when an academic asks a colleague whether

⁸ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 44.

¹⁰ Goodey, C. F. *A History of Intelligence and "Intellectual Disability": The Shaping of Psychology in Early Modern Europe* (Farnham, Surrey; Burlington, VT: Ashgate., 2011), 6.

¹¹ Gill, Rosalind. "Breaking the silence: The hidden injuries of neoliberal academia." In Róisín Ryan-Flood and Rosalind Gill (eds.) *Secrecy and Silence in the Research Process: Feminist Reflections* (London: Routledge, 2009), 228-244.

a lecture, or a lecturer, was “smart”—or calls an administrative decision, or an administrator, “stupid”—is she casually endorsing this history? And if not, what *does* she mean? Suggestive of mental capacity itself, intelligence is the bogeyman under the bed of disability theory’s cognitive turn. Our highest and lowest senses of ourselves as academics are caught up in the term. On the one hand, many of us, regardless of our theoretical differences, deeply value habits associated with intelligence, like thoughtfulness and judgment, and see knowledge not just as coterminous with existing power structures, but as potentially subversive. Our Enlightenment colors show in our concern with the link between epistemology and ethics, despite the range of ways in which we have interpreted it, from Great Books movement founder John Erskine’s traditionalist notion of “the moral obligation to be intelligent” to feminist standpoint theory’s maxim that social marginality produces epistemic privilege. On the other hand, in a way that at least *feels* prior to the pressures of the neoliberal university, academics are obsessed with and insecure about intelligence as a commodity of which one cannot possibly have enough in order to succeed in their cutthroat profession. In sum, then, we have a confused notion of intelligence that is set against the technoscientific ideal that would automate thinking, and yet depends upon positive reinforcement from an academic system inextricable from it.

My contention, then, is that thinking about cognitive disability in relationship to academic discourse involves awkwardly collapsing two very different discourses around intelligence. It is tempting to characterize this division as reflecting a split between “the two cultures” of intellectual life after the Second World War: scientists and “hard” social scientists on the side of quantity, standardization, and testability; humanists in literature and the “critical” social sciences on the side of quality, the immeasurable, the untestable. There is some truth to this, but it recapitulates the problem with Price’s argument by conflating the fruits of our intellectual labor with their conditions of production. The gap I am trying to highlight here cuts not between disciplines but between two different systems through which intelligence is produced, which might best be understood via economic metaphors. Thus I characterize standardized intelligence in terms of its production through what I describe as a populational model, and non-standardized intelligence in terms of a relational model that produces it.

The fantasy of populational intelligence is that intelligence, unlike other personal qualities we claim to value—kindness, empathy, spirituality—can exist in a vacuum, uninflected by any relation to objects outside itself, as undifferentiated mental capacity. And yet relation is quietly preserved in

this ideology, not via the knower's relationship to the known (the province of epistemology, and one in which intelligence testing advocates are not interested because it suggests that no test can be "pure"), but via her relationship to other knowers: She is deemed intelligent or not based on comparisons that can be drawn between her own test results and those of other test-takers in the population. Indeed, the knower, under the regime of testing, *is* the known—the test results that supposedly provide an X-ray of her mental capacities become epistemological fodder for the testing apparatus.

Where populational intelligence is consonant with the zero-sum spirit of capitalism, relational intelligence functions in accord with the spirit of the pre- or extra-capitalist gift economy, in which gifts—or states of "giftedness"—must be passed along through a community in order to retain their vitality. Here I am following folklorist Lewis Hyde, who argues that despite the commodification of art in the modern period, gift economies continue to inform the way in which artists and writers, including academics, describe and perform their creative process. Terms like "gifted" and "genius" that have now taken root in the language of standardized intelligence refer, in the model of the gift economy, to dynamic relationships with a variety of objects that together produce "distributed cognition"—or what, in accordance with the gift economy's demand for motion, we might describe as *redistributed cognition*.¹²

Both of these models, like the theories of cognitive disability cited earlier, associate cognitive ability with communication. But, as the logic of the gift economy recognizes, communication—and thus rhetoricity—is at the minimum a two-way transaction. In information theory (which might just as well be called "intelligence theory"), communication is the transmission of a message, which is to say, the transmission of a difference.¹³ Without the ideology of standardized intelligence, what we call cognitive disability is, simply, difference. Cognitive disability can indeed be understood as interrupting the smooth transmission of messages, but in the long term, this is a value-neutral proposition, for without an artificially preordained threshold, we can't know in advance what kind of results any such difference will yield.

¹² Chen, Mel Y. Keynote lecture. Cripistemologies: a disability studies mini-conference. Center for the Study of Gender and Sexuality at New York University. New York City, 19 April 2013.

¹³ Gleick, James. *The Information: a History, a Theory, a Flood* (New York: Vintage Books, 2012), 161.

II. ECONOMIES OF THE INTELLECT

In her profoundly influential book *Epistemology of the Closet*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick identifies a split between what she calls “minoritizing” and “universalizing” understandings of human difference. Addressing perspectives on sexuality, she distinguishes between a minoritizing viewpoint from which sexual orientation is “an issue of active importance primarily for a small, distinct, relatively fixed homosexual minority,” and a universalizing perspective from which it is “an issue of continuing, determinative importance in the lives of people across the spectrum of sexualities.”¹⁴ Disability theorists have imported this distinction into their own field, but unlike Sedgwick, who sees minoritizing and universalizing views as existing in perpetual and productive tension, they have to a large extent argued for the specificity of disabled identity, claiming that universalizing concepts of ability devalue the embodied struggles of disabled people.¹⁵ The examples drawn from disability studies in the previous section, whether they focused on a broad or narrow range of cognitive types, all operate within a minoritizing framework in the sense that they identify cognitive ableism as affecting a particular group of people: “the cognitively disabled.” Yet this kind of unalloyed minoritizing seems especially inappropriate here because both populational and relational understandings of intelligence are themselves universalizing discourses: They rest upon economies that can only exist at the level of a population or a community. Standardized intelligence must be accumulated on one side of the bell curve for it to remain intelligence, while the gift must be passed along throughout a community for it to remain a gift.

Minoritizing discourses tend to organize themselves around a central binary that demarcates one term as both norm and ideal, and another as deficient or perverse: white/“colored,” male/female, straight/gay, physically able/physically disabled. Needless to say, the way that power flows through such hierarchies is much more complex than those binaries alone can narrate. But “cognitively able/cognitively disabled,” I argue, does not really fit on this list at all. These latter categories emerged from a notion of intelligence inseparable from technologies of measurement that produce not a central binary but a *scale*—in its original and still conceptually dominant form,

¹⁴ Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Shame and Its Sisters: A Silvan Tomkins Reader* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996).

¹⁵ Mollow, Anna. “Identity Politics and Disability Studies: A Critique of Recent Theory” (*Michigan Quarterly Review*, 2004).

the scale of IQ.¹⁶ As Stephen Jay Gould writes, it is through “the reification of intelligence as a single measurable entity” that modern conceptions of intelligence and cognitive disability become mutually constitutive. In this model, “the plethora of causes and phenomena grouped under the rubric of mental deficiency” can “be ordered usefully on a single scale, with its implication that each person owes his rank to the relative amount of a single substance—and that mental deficiency means having less than most.”¹⁷

Critiques of the IQ test—its specific biases, as well as the more general hubris of attempting to measure a person’s cognitive potential in a three-hour window—are widely familiar, and I won’t detail them here.¹⁸ What I want to emphasize is that the system of populational intelligence *inherently* produces an underclass because it formalizes within academia as “a manufactured shortage economy of smartness.”¹⁹ To maintain the shape of the IQ test’s distinctive bell curve, that is, the number of people with abundant intelligence must be directly proportional to the number of people with intellectual deficits, with the majority of the population clustered in the middle. The history of IQ is thus a history of bizarre attempts to keep this supposedly free-market economy of capacity at its “natural” balance. In the 1920s, for instance, psychometricians realized they had both a social problem and a math problem on their hands when they discovered that, based on the scores of one hundred sixty thousand army recruits they had tested, “the average mental age of white American adults” lay “three years below what it should be.”²⁰ In recent decades, the test has been readjusted every few years to prevent inflation. The “Flynn effect,” a phenomenon identified in the 1980s, revealed that IQ scores have gone up continually since the first tests were introduced early in the twentieth century. To mask this effect, “IQ tests are periodically re-standardized—deliberately devised to be a little bit ‘harder’ than the previous version—in order to keep the mean at 100,” which suggests that “some persons who currently qualify as [intellectually disabled] would not if given an older, simpler version of an IQ test.”²¹

¹⁶ Lemann, Nicholas. *The Big Test: The Secret History of the American Meritocracy*. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000), 5. Standardized tests that have followed in the IQ test’s footsteps—such as the SAT—do not always claim to test innate intelligence. Yet results correlate highly with IQ results and, just as importantly, the test is widely perceived as an index of intelligence.

¹⁷ Gould, Stephen Jay. *The Mismeasure of Man*. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1981), 151. This was not always the case even within the construct of IQ itself. Not just the difference but the incommensurability between “intelligence” and cognitive disability was central to Alfred Binet’s original conception of IQ, before his tests migrated to America and took on an ontological life of their own.

¹⁸ See Gould, 1981, and Lemann, 2005.

¹⁹ Chen 2013.

²⁰ Gould, 1981, 196.

²¹ Brosco, Jeffrey P. “The Limits of the Medical Model: Historical Epidemiology of Intellectual Disability in the United States.” In Kittay and Carlson (eds.) *Cognitive Disability and Its Challenge to Moral Philosophy* pp. 27-54 (Chichester, West Sussex; Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 43.

IQ, moreover, is centered around a mean (the “average intelligence” demarcated by a score of 100) that is posited as lower than ideal—though where the ideal actually lies remains mystified by the system. Only in Garrison Keillor’s Lake Wobegon can it be the case that “all the women are strong, all the men are good looking, and all the children are above average.” In the rest of the world, only the first two boasts make sense unless our frame of reference expands beyond our community and we begin comparing our town’s children to the ones who live across the tracks.

Finally, the cross-populational power of this system lies in its flexibility, the way in which it values and devalues people beyond the direct evidence of their test results. Even under the broadest rubric of cognitive ability and disability, it is difficult to think of a state of mind that could not be described with reference to intelligence testing. This is clearest vis-à-vis a diagnosis like “mental retardation,” in which the score itself, posited as pure deficiency, points directly to a diagnosis.²² But learning disabilities, too, rely on IQ in that they are diagnosed on the basis of a *discrepancy* between IQ and academic performance.²³ Here, the system recognizes that cognitive ability and cognitive disability are not mutually exclusive, but insists that they can be made commensurate, meaning that academic performance must, like intelligence itself, be boiled down into a single signifying number—by replacing one test with two. Likewise, the way we divide mental illness from cognitive disability seems to abide by a circular logic. Forms of cognitive dissonance associated with “psychological” conditions like depression or schizophrenia are made legible by the fact that they are seen to impair a *preexisting* intelligence; so, for that matter, are states of impairment associated with a physical ailment, like migraine or stroke. These categories can maintain their integrity only if we radically separate disability (figured as cognitive absence) from illness (understood as extra-cognitive presence).

The contemporary university, in its obsession with the metrics of brain power, is clearly enmeshed in the logic of populational intelligence. But its hold, I would argue, is not totalizing. The relationship of academics to quantifiable intelligence must be understood in tandem with the very different way in which intelligence is conceived within the relational discourse of the gift economy. Lewis Hyde describes the gift (as most famously conceptualized

²² Harris, James C. “Developmental Perspective on the Emergence of Moral Personhood.” In Kittay and Carlson (eds.) *Cognitive Disability and Its Challenge to Moral Philosophy*, pp. 55-74 (Chichester, West Sussex; Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 59.

²³ Fletcher, Jack M. et al. “Intelligent Testing and the Discrepancy Model for Children with Learning Disabilities.” *Learning Disabilities Research & Practice* 13(4), pp.186–203, 1998.

by Marcel Mauss) as a kind of life force that flows between bodies and objects, illuminating them as long as it continues to be passed along.²⁴ If it is hoarded, quantified, or even bartered, it loses its properties of fertile self-increase; in Marxian terms, it has use value but no exchange value. The creative person in this economy is understood to be, literally, gifted. Her productivity depends upon the beneficence of forces that originate outside of her, though she can cultivate those forces by giving them what they want, which is to travel and multiply. “Once an inner gift has been realized, it may be passed along, communicated to the audience,” Hyde writes. “And sometimes this embodied gift—the work—can reproduce the gifted state in the audience that receives it.”²⁵

Hyde argues that artists have continued to organize their communities around latter-day gift economies despite simultaneously being drafted into the market economy. Indeed, the gift economy continues to shape the guiding metaphors and practices of academic production. In traditional gift communities, “‘status,’ ‘prestige,’ or ‘esteem’ take the place of cash remuneration.” Likewise, when academic research scientists produce work meant for consumption by fellow community members, they gain status within the community but not financial reward; “manuscripts submitted to scientific periodicals are often called ‘contributions’” because “they are, in fact, gifts.”²⁶ Conversely, popularizations may yield hard currency, but not communal respect. This is precisely what is meant by “selling out.”

The logic of the gift economy is everywhere visible in philosophical conceptions of the intellect. Heidegger, for instance, draws an etymological connection between “thinking” and “thanking.” For him, “the highest and really most lasting gift given to us is always our essential nature, with which we are gifted in such a way that we are what we are only through it.” Thus, “the supreme thanks...would be thinking...and the profoundest thanklessness, thoughtlessness.”²⁷ The *possibility* that humans could learn to think—“our being able to think, and even gifted for it”—is assured by the fact of human rationality.²⁸ But we do not possess the *capability* of thought because this gift always withdraws. Therefore, “we are still not thinking; none of us, including me who speaks to you, me first of all.”²⁹

²⁴ Hyde, Lewis. *The Gift: Creativity and the Artist in the Modern World*. (New York: Vintage Books, 2007).

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 195.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 100-105.

²⁷ Heidegger, Martin. *What Is Called Thinking?* (New York: Perennial Library, 1968), 142-143.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 17.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 19.

According to this account, stupidity is something like folly—an aspect of the human condition we can all fall prey to, and can all push against. It is a kind of bad faith. And thus it is emphatically unlike disability. Indeed, metaphors of disability can be used to connote what stupidity and its relatives are not. As Nietzsche puts it, “Error...is not blindness, error is cowardice.”³⁰ When he asks rhetorically, in *Ecce Homo*, why he is so clever, his answer has nothing to do with “nature” or “nurture,” the twin versions of an origin story for ability and disability. It has nothing to do with origins at all. Rather, his choice of intellectual preoccupations (not wasting time on “questions that are not real ones,” like those internal to religious thought) makes him clever. He is smart because of what he thinks about; he does not think about those things because he is, in some pre-existing way, smart.³¹ Intelligence, for Nietzsche, is embodied—he recommends diets and exercise regimes advantageous for its production—but to embody it requires an existential choice at every turn. These accounts of intelligence and stupidity do not engage with the notion of cognitive difference, leaving them open to Licia Carlson’s suggestion that to acknowledge it would be to make the philosophers’ nightmare come true. And indeed, one does find occasional hints within philosophical discourse that this is so. Hannah Arendt’s *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963), a harrowing critique of the rationalized mind that links the automated slaughter of Hitler’s death camps to the innocuousness of technical intellectualism, also rarely but disquietingly links the language of stupidity and the language of cognitive disability. As Arendt famously argues, Adolf Eichmann, far from the “evil genius” of the romantic imaginary, was something of an idiot—a drone who excelled in some limited scope as a calculator, but never engaged in anything like what Arendt (following Heidegger) called thinking. Putting a fine point on her thesis that there exists “a strange interdependence between thoughtlessness and evil,” Arendt clarifies that Eichmann “was not stupid. It was sheer thoughtlessness—something by no means identical with stupidity—that predisposed him to become one of the greatest criminals of that period.”³² Yet elsewhere she does refer to the SS commander as “a textbook case of bad faith, of lying self-deception combined with outrageous stupidity.” And while she emphasizes that his stupidity was part of an epidemic that engulfed all of German society,³³ she does not resist pointing out more closely biographical etiologies of Eichmann’s *Dummheit*. After an

³⁰ Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm. *Ecce homo: how to become what you are*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 4.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 19.

³² Arendt, Hannah. *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. (New York: Penguin Classics, 1994), 247.

³³ *Ibid.*, 52.

undistinguished childhood in which, she writes sardonically, he was not “the most gifted” student, he finally discovered an aptitude for himself—at last, “some special qualities”—which happened to be in the logistics of mass death.³⁴ Upon his capture, forced to communicate with interrogators who did not share the grotesque logic of the Nazi worldview, Eichmann proved—in Arendt’s view—truly unable to do so:

Dimly aware of a defect that must have plagued him even in school—it amounted to a mild case of aphasia—he apologized, saying, ‘Officialese [*Amtssprache*] is my only language.’ But the point here is that officialese became his language because he was genuinely incapable of uttering a single sentence that was not a cliché.... The longer one listened to him, the more obvious it became that his inability to speak was closely connected with an inability to think, namely, to *think* from the standpoint of somebody else.³⁵

In the causal chain Arendt posits here, Eichmann’s inability to think is intertwined with a “defect” affecting his ability to speak, which produces a reliance on cliché, and hence a susceptibility to officialese (and to murder). The defect thus shares the origin point of the crime. And so for a moment Arendt seems to recapitulate the logic she attributes to the Reich, which augurs an “automated economy [in] a not-too-distant future” in which “men may be tempted to exterminate all those whose intelligence quotient is below a certain level.”³⁶ Arendt was not the first or the last to indulge in this slippage; we all noted George W. Bush’s awful SAT scores and grade point average with a smirk. In Bush’s case, of course, that smirk is about the fact that some mysterious mechanism of affirmative action allowed him to ascend from Yale to Harvard to the presidency, despite these dismal scores. But if we are to follow the substance of Arendt’s argument and not her detours, we will have to insist that whatever banal evil lies in Eichmann’s heart is there because of a deep thoughtlessness, a resistance to thought, not because of difficulty with—or even a privileged indifference to—standardized tests.³⁷

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 45.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 46-49.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 287-289.

³⁷ Arendt, Hannah. “Thinking and Moral Considerations: A Lecture” (*Social Research* 38 (3): 417-446, 1971), 445. In reflections on *Eichmann in Jerusalem* written a decade later, Arendt seems to reject the slippage between cognitive disability and stupidity, writing that “thinking in its non-cognitive, non-specialized sense as a natural need of human life, the actualization of the difference given in consciousness, is not a prerogative of the few but an everpresent faculty of everybody; by the same token, inability to think is not the ‘prerogative’ of those many who lack brain power but the everpresent possibility for everybody—scientists, scholars, and other specialists in mental enterprises not excluded—to shun that intercourse with oneself whose possibility and importance Socrates first discovered.”

For why, outside a deficiency model of intelligence, would the kind of difference we call cognitive disability make a person think less? If to be cognitively disabled is, almost by definition, to lack a natural acquaintance with the customs of the world one has been born into—to feel, in Temple Grandin's words, like “an anthropologist on Mars”³⁸—then cognitive disability could be understood as *demanding* that a subject thinks about actions that are automatic for neurotypicals. In this sense, cognitive disability functions as an antidote to automation, a check on any tendencies toward mental bulldozing. It creates the feedback loop that in cybernetics (and in the gift economy) allows for learning to take place.³⁹ Like mutations in the gene pool, moreover, such detours have the potential to produce something new. “In every questioning glance of an animal there flickers a new form of life that could emerge from the distinctive species to which the individual belongs,” Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer write in their essay “The Genesis of Stupidity.” They describe a Darwinian swerve that has nothing to do with the social Darwinist logic of scalable intelligence. When stupidity emerges in this ecosystem, it is as a “scar” that forms precisely when such swerves are thwarted, the point at which they can develop on their own course no further: “Like the species of the animal order, the mental stages within the human species, and the blind-spots in the individual, are stages at which hope petered out.”⁴⁰

This idea itself is hardly radical; if anything, today it registers as cliché. It's built into the idea of “special” education. It's visible in the way communities of people with Aspergers syndrome have aligned themselves with science fiction and fantasy fan culture, which ask their audiences to ponder, and construct, alternative worlds. It emerges in the biographies of the many artists, scientists, and writers whose stories are often framed by what they've “done with” their cognitive disabilities. And it's there, too, in the biographies of artists, scientists, and writers whose fame is *not* generally framed that way. In *Stupidity*, Avital Ronell's tour through that concept's status in philosophy, “disability” only comes up once. The disabled subject is Kant, and his disability is a rhetorical one. “Kant writes like a pig,” Ronell contends bluntly, and he knew it: “Kant's inability to write wounds and embarrasses the philosopher.... Time and again Kant contends that he is lacking in talent, unable to present his thought; these negative attributes invariably place his

³⁸ Sacks, Oliver. *An Anthropologist on Mars*. New York: Knopf, 1995.

³⁹ *Shame*, 13; Hyde, 24.

⁴⁰ Horkheimer, Max and Theodor Adorno. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. (New York: Continuum, 1989), 257-258.

judgment and talent at issue.” But his incapacity generates a workaround—his “dry, laborious, bitter” style—that he so successfully rebrands as a marker of intellectual superiority (“dry” and “laborious” become “objective” and “scientific”) that not only are its origins in impairment forgotten, but the workaround itself becomes an ideal: “ever since Kant, as Heine and Nietzsche remind us, in order to be a philosopher one has to write badly.”⁴¹

With this in mind, we can read the philosophers’ self-professions of stupidity and slowness as universal pronouncements, but we can also read them as accounts of struggles with cognitive disability. They are matched by a performative element via some of the most familiar stereotypes of intellectuals, perhaps especially those within academia: Professors are absent-minded; intellectuals are neurotic, prone to paralysis and anxiety, plagued by tics, verbose to the point of being unable to communicate, cognitively lopsided; genius goes hand in hand with madness. The persistence of the gift itself in the modern period could be read as schizophrenic. In this light, philosophy is the writing of cognitive disability.

What is radical about this notion is taking it seriously rather than perverting it into tokenization. Let us return to Sedgwick’s project with regard to the play between minoritizing and universalizing discourses around sexuality. Sedgwick provoked readers to consider that same-sex desire, far from being transhistorically locked out of the Western canon, in fact occupies the very heart of that canon in the form of an “open secret.” During the culture wars of the 1980s, out of which she was writing, a commonplace way of dismissing the notion of literary history outside the dominion of white men was to ask, as Saul Bellow did, whether there had ever been “a Tolstoi of the Zulus.”⁴² Sedgwick queers this smugly self-perpetuating line of inquiry by asking in response,

“Has there ever been a gay Socrates?
Has there ever been a gay Shakespeare?
Has there ever been a gay Proust?”

⁴¹ Romano, Carlin. “Harold Bloom by the Numbers” (*The Chronicle of Higher Education*, April 2011). Ronell, Avital. *Stupidity*. (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 282-283. There are many iterations of the notion that exceptional difficulty with language can produce exceptional reckonings with it, but my favorite is Thomas Mann’s reversal of the zero-sum logic of the intelligence scale: “A writer is someone for whom writing is more difficult than it is for other people” (When we encounter the reverse sentiment, it sounds alarmingly tone-deaf—like Harold Bloom’s boast about being able to read 1,000 (or 400, depending the source) pages an hour).

⁴² Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Epistemology of the Closet*. (Berkeley, Calif.; London: University of California Press, 2008), 51.

—and replies that, “if these questions startle, it is not least as tautologies.”

⁴³ So when disability theorists argue that it is, in fact, people with cognitive disabilities who are by definition the bane of Western thought, my impulse is to ask,

Has there ever been a mad Nietzsche?
Has there ever been an autistic Wittgenstein?
Has there ever been a dyslexic Flaubert?

Critical leverage resides here in the fact that “the very centrality of this list and its seemingly almost infinite elasticity suggest that no one *can know in advance* where the limits of a gay-centered inquiry are to be drawn, or where a gay theorizing of and through even the hegemonic high culture of the Euro-American tradition may need or be able to lead.”⁴⁴ If we cease to count writers as “really” cognitively disabled once they gain recognition, we have acknowledged the category as utterly contingent. This is not at all to say that the experience of cognitive disability can only be redeemed via the professionalization of the intellect. But it is to say that there is a danger in the otherwise incisive notion of cognitive disability as rhetorical disability: Used in a totalizing way, it threatens to erase the histories of cognitively disabled writers and philosophers who have, ultimately, been able to speak and be heard—and thus, by extension, the possibility for other people with cognitive disabilities to do so. Indeed, the most striking irony of Margaret Price’s argument is that in her attempt to be inclusive, she winds up reifying a notion of cognitive disability as deficiency. What, she repeatedly asks, can be done to include the student who *can’t* reason, or express, or convince? Even taking cognitive difference into account, there is no mental category that in some one-to-one way, precludes any of these things from happening; likewise, reason, expression, and persuasion are not discrete entities that can be subtracted from writing. Writing can only be “diagnosed” *post facto*, always in the form of a comment on style, and such attempts are prone to facile reductivism.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 52.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 53.

III. RECLAIMING THE GIFT FROM “GIFTED EDUCATION”

Those of us who have made it through an undergraduate course of study in the humanities and come back to the academy are gradually disabusing ourselves of the notion that the contemporary university constitutes an ivory tower. But I would contend that we still see ourselves as aristocrats with respect to the regime of testing. We are “smart enough” or rather “too smart” to succeed in that economy, the thinking goes, for it rubs coarsely against the grain of our delicate spirits. Then we get back to the business of thinking we are “not smart enough” to succeed in academia. Perhaps our spirits were insufficiently delicate after all.

This double consciousness is supported by the belief that we can still differentiate between the commodity and the gift, that we can operate within both economies without losing track. But I think we have passed that point and instead, in conflating these economies, have unwittingly adopted a philosophy we might call intellectual Calvinism⁴⁵: We choose to believe that real intelligence resides in the soul, and in the absence of any way to calculate it directly, we can only look to our status within the academy for signs of divine favor. As Rosalind Gill writes, academic biographies

sometimes include struggle, but always feature ‘doing well’ (passing exams, achieving plaudits, winning prizes). Being hard-working, self-motivating and enterprising subjects is what constitutes academics as so perfectly emblematic of this neoliberal moment, but is also part of a psychic landscape in which not being successful...is misrecognized—or to put that more neutrally, made knowable—in terms of individual (moral) failure.⁴⁶

This is a description of *genius*, in the original sense, growing so intertwined with its commodification that academic “failure”—which is to say, the failure of the academic system—will leave it not just abandoned but crushed.

The technoscientific regime, up to and including the corporate university, would like nothing more than to blur these distinctions to the point that we forget the gift economy, even in its shadow version, ever existed. One of

⁴⁵ I owe this evocative term to my friend Hannah May.

⁴⁶ Gill, Rosalind. “Breaking the silence: The hidden injuries of neoliberal academia.” In Róisín Ryan-Flood and Rosalind Gill (eds.) *Secrecy and Silence in the Research Process: Feminist Reflections*, pp. 228-244. (London: Routledge, 2009), 235.

the most pernicious ways it has already succeeded is via the construction of “gifted education.” The most familiar and important critique of this system, of course, is based on the expensive insult done to those children not selected to be part of this system—the majority, by definition, in the manufactured shortage economy of smartness, and the overwhelming majority of poor students and students of color. But this construction also does violence to those children who *are* selected, by conflating the language of the gift and the language of the commodity in a foundational act of “identification.” Label a kid gifted and you estrange her, deeply and uncannily, from her gifts, her *genius*, her *daemon*. If she is always already “gifted” because of the score she got on a test she may or may not remember taking, her real gifts have been rationalized and contained, just as their existence has been denied altogether in those less fortunate. What commerce can she have with those gifts later that will not yield redundancy or disappointment? The final word on the subject should perhaps be Lewis Hyde’s: “We should not speak of another’s genius; this is a private affair.”⁴⁷

The fight to keep humanistic education alive, to maintain the gift economy in the face of all this, *is* the fight against ableism in the academy. Small classes, flexible deadlines, an understanding that there is sometimes a fine line between educator and therapist, emphasis on projects rather than standardized tests or grades, communal spaces where it is okay to talk and also okay to read a book, an uncanny mix of bodies and minds—what students in special ed classes (ideally) get is what students and teachers in PhD programs (ideally) get, and what everyone deserves. In and outside of disability studies, we should call for special education for all.

⁴⁷ Hyde, 68.

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