Disposable dispositions:

reflections upon the work of Iris Marion Young in relation to the social oppression of autistic people.

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Introduction

- Applying the theories of Iris Marion Young (1980, 1990, 1997) to the social position and oppression of autistic people.
- The concepts of 'Asymmetrical symmetry' and the 'Five faces of oppression' are explored in this regard.
- Concluding with some final remarks about the 'disposable disposition' that this can entail.

Asymmetrical symmetry

- Model of moral interaction between people, as opposed to what she described as 'symmetrical reciprocity' (Behabib, 1991).
- A model of moral interaction predicated on symmetry between self and other, with the perspective of each being reversible.
- Such a moral argument (as with dominant theories of empathy and 'theory of mind') rely upon those within an interaction being of a similar social 'disposition', and that individuals are able to assume the point of view of others in order to conclude upon moral decisions.

Vestehen and asymmetry

- For Young (1997), to assume the ability to possess full 'verstehen' (social understanding) of the other, is neither possible, nor even desirable in terms of ethical engagement.
- A point echoed by neurodivergent activists and scholars (Milton, 2012, 2014a, 2014b, Chown, 2014) in the context of interactions between autistic and non-autistic people (referred to as the 'double empathy problem').
- Young (1997) argues that asymmetry between people in interactions arises due to the great diversity of life histories and social positions that people inhabit.
- A point also echoed in Milton's (2014a) account of the 'embodied sociality' of autistic people or Hacking's (2009) account of 'biolooping' effects.

Humility and making oneself 'strange'

- For Young (1997), the 'equal treatment' of individual people could not override nor redress group-based oppression.
- Instead, much as Milton, Mills and Jones (2016) do in relation to practitioners working with autistic people, Young (1997) advocates a standpoint of moral humility and 'wonder' in the face of the other.
- She states that one's starting point should be the assumption that one cannot see the social lifeworld through the perspective of someone else, and thus one must wait to learn and gain a gradual understanding through listening and engaging with the other person.
- Therefore, in this analysis, humility and the suspension of judgment become the basis for Young's (1997) ethics. In order to do this, Young (1997) suggests that one should also see one's own position as 'strange' in order to interrogate it.

The five faces of oppression

- One of the most celebrated aspects of Young's work was her model of the 'five faces of oppression' (Young, 1990).
- In her critique of more classical Marxist explanations of oppression, she suggested that capitalist economic exploitation was but one 'face' of oppression. The other faces of oppression as stated by Young (1990) were that of:

- Marginalisation
- Powerlessness
- Cultural Imperialism
- Violence
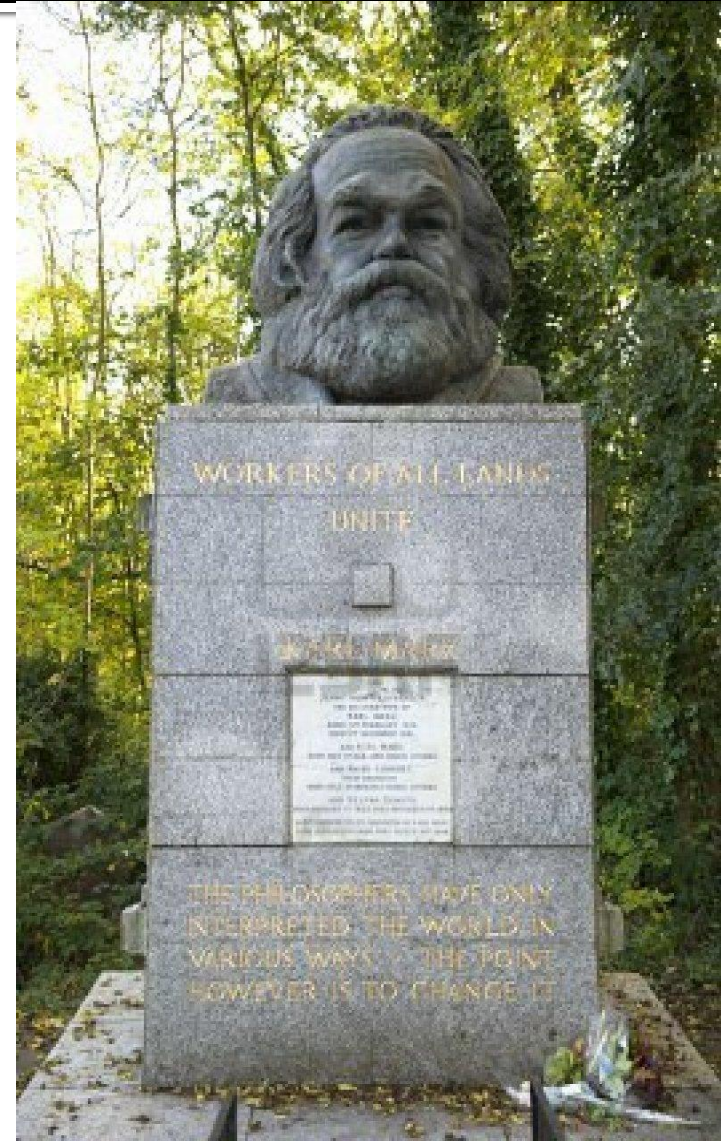
Marginalisation

- Marginalisation for Young (1990) is a process of exclusion whereby a group of people are reduced to a lower social status and the margins of society.
- Marginalisation can in some ways impact upon an individual in greater ways than economic exploitation of labour, when people are seen as incapable of being a 'functional' wage-labourer.
- By relegating a whole class of people as incapable of useful participation in social life, a group can be subjected to severe material deprivation and even extermination.

Powerlessness

- For Young (1990), the effects of powerlessness in society inhibit a person's autonomy and expose them to harmful treatments due to their lowered social status.
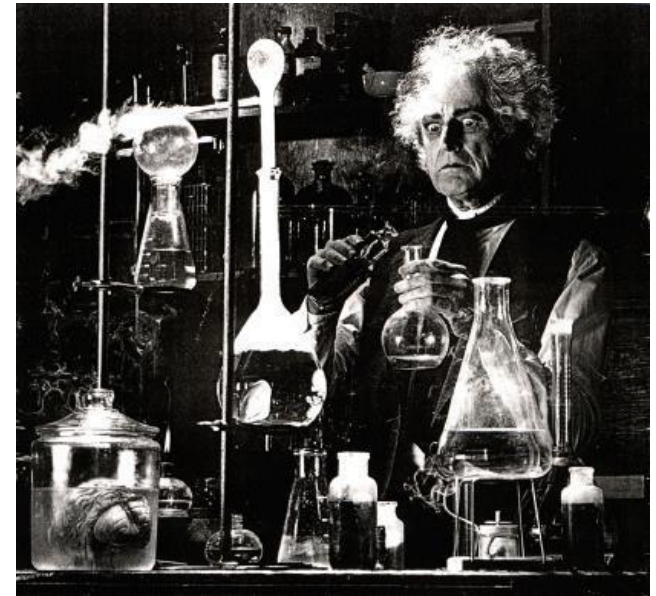
Cultural imperialism

- The process of cultural imperialism according to Young (1990) involves the establishment of ruling class ideology as the hegemonic norm.
- Those that have power in society can determine how those in a position of powerlessness are interpreted and talked about.
- Notions such as 'ableism' and 'mansplaining' can be seen as having roots in similar notions of a taken-for-granted unconscious frame of reference which renders the 'other' invisible.

Violence

- The most visibly obvious form of oppression is that of violence. Members of oppressed groups will often live in fear of violent attacks upon them.

The five faces of the oppression of autistic people

- Autistic people often report staggeringly low levels of employment or satisfaction with their work and pay (Milton and Sims, 2016).
- Autistic people are some of the most marginalised in society, historically depicted as embodying 'deficits' in their social being, incapable of full socialisation and personhood (Milton, 2014b).
- When autistic people are seen as 'having challenging behaviour', or have additional intellectual impairments, the loss of liberty is common, with such marginalisation often leading to gross injustices, violence against the person, and a position of powerlessness (Justice for LB, 2016).

The non-autistic imperialism toward autistic culture

- A very familiar form of oppression for autistic people is that of cultural imperialism (Milton and Bracher, 2013).
- Indeed, the entire neurodiversity movement could be seen as a response to such a way of being and emergent cultures being wholly pathologised within a medical model perspective.
- "…right from the start, from the time someone came up with the word 'autism', the condition has been judged from the outside, by its appearances, and not from the inside according to how it is experienced." (Williams, 1996: 14).

Psychsplaining

- "Those categorised by psych-professionals are often reduced within such relationships to that of the 'sick role' (Parsons, 1951), with one's own interpretations of oneself undermined by the 'expert knowledge' being projected upon the autistic person, who by default is positioned in a relatively powerless social position of medical 'patient'." (Milton, 2016)

Embodied sociality

- In her work, Young (1980, 1990, 1997) explores differences between people through a gendered and embodied phenomenological perspective.
- Young (1980) discussed how girls become conditioned and socialised into viewing their own bodies as weak and fragile, with consequences for their self-identity and life-chances.
- For Young (1980, 1990, 1997) each person's standpoint, or social 'disposition' in Milton's (2014a) analysis of 'embodied sociality' is constituted in its relations to others.

Disposable dispositions

- When a person is 'othered' to the extent of being not seen as fully human, as is often the case with social attitudes toward autistic people, particularly those with significant intellectual impairments, one's disposition can become that of the socially 'disposable'.
- Unfortunately, this can be evidenced in the horrendous barriers to a happy and autonomous life autistic people currently face (Justice for LB, 2016).

Conclusion

- Perhaps there is one advantage of occupying such a disadvantaged social position however? And that is, who better to highlight the inadequacies of an ethical model based on symmetrical reciprocity?
- In doing so however, autistic scholars and activists can find a rich theoretical framework for such pursuits in the work of Iris Marion Young (1980, 1990, 1997).

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