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Disability, Normality and Absurdity

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Colin Cameron

I'd like to start by highlighting a few illustrative disabling encounters. Then I'd like to consider whether any insights into what goes on within these encounters can be gained from existential philosophy.

There's a branch of the Accessorize fashion shop near where Emmeline lives, but she doesn't often go there, though she likes the chain. That's because the assistant in this particular shop invariably greets her "Hello, Trouble!" Emmeline is a wheelchair user who is 36 and has a doctorate from University College London. Last time she went to the shop, a few months ago, the assistant kept her waiting for ages while she served a number of other customers. Finally she turned and said to Emmeline "Just teasing - I wouldn't really forget about you!" For some reason the assistant seems to think they are playing a game. It's completely baffling.

Alice had just about finished her weekly shop when she remembered she had not got her cherry tomatoes. She hurried to the back of the shop to the fruit and veg section and was approached by a middle-aged woman who asked "What's wrong with your legs?" She felt a little nonplussed at the woman's directness, but nevertheless found herself explaining

her impairment. She was left afterwards feeling unsure about what made it okay for this to happen.

I recall the time – twenty years ago now, when I was thirty – when I'd escorted the official from the Sports and Arts Foundation to the venue of his next meeting. He was visiting Newcastle and didn't know his way around. I'd finished my last meeting and was going that way anyway, so offered to show him. As we reached his destination I made to leave, saying "There you go, mate." He reached into his pocket, drew out a pound, and replied "Here you are, son. Buy yourself some chocolate."

Encounters like these – which take place everywhere all the time and are part of disabled people's everyday experience of life but have, perhaps, been little commented on - involve confrontation with the absurdity of life. You're in a state of unreflective consciousness, caught up in the stream of what you're doing, what you're thinking, what's going on, when some non-disabled person imposes themselves and brings back home to you the fact that there's an enormous gulf between the self-you-think-you-are and the self-they-think-you-are. You're busy relating to yourself as a complex individual. They see you as someone whose primary significant characteristic is that you've got something 'wrong' with you. From a situation a moment ago where you were a being-in-the-world you are reminded of your fundamental separateness from the world, of your aloneness in a cold universe.

You are taken aback at what's been said and at the assumptions being made about you. It's disconcerting, annoying, upsetting, and can be temporarily confusing as you try to figure out where they're coming from and how to respond. It's difficult, because often while the words themselves haven't actually been intended to be offensive, the layers of meaning that underlie them carry a weight of oppression. Yet it is during encounters like these, in the flow and flux of life, that you have to choose who you are and who you want to become.

Titchkosky and Michalko (2014:101) have described disability as 'a life that is lived in the midst of the meanings given to it'. Disabling encounters involve the imposition of a dominant understanding, a view which regards impairment as unfortunate, regrettable difference; and involve expectations that you will give your assent and act out your part accordingly as the grown-up child, the object of fascination, the compliant cripple. Reeve (2014) uses the term psycho-emotional disablism to describe the reasons why many disabled people internalise the values which oppress them and identify their own embodiment as the cause of the unwelcome intrusions and banal comments they receive. It is very easy when you tend to experience these things as individuals – when you're on your own - to imagine that they happen because of who you are *as* an individual. It is tempting to try and distance yourself from your impairment, to try and act as if this is something of minor significance to your life experience or something you've transcended.

What I'd like to explore in this paper is this question: can existential ideas offer any insight into what goes on in such encounters or on how they might be responded to?

As Kotarba (2009:140) describes it, existentialism is a sensibility, a way of life, a passion for living, an orientation to the flux and emergence of actual lived experience. It involves an alertness to being in the here and now, and rests on a number of assertions.

Among these are that human beings are not fixed selves; that we are what we choose to become; and that we have responsibility for who we become. In opposition to essentialist approaches, which argue that we arrive pretty much ready-made with a specific set of dispositions when we are thrown into the world (so that the rest of our lives involve a development of what was there at the beginning), existentialists argue that we are not determined solely by where we have been - but that we become ourselves through the decisions and choices we make as we go through life. We are constantly making sense of ourselves and figuring out who we are. Our identity and characteristics are a consequence – and not causes – of the choices we make. As Sartre (2007:22) says, 'Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself'.

Of course, this choosing ourselves doesn't take place outside the social contexts in which we find ourselves. Facticity places limitations on our freedom. We are always in a given world, with other people, and in situations which govern our experience. The problems and choices we are faced with need

to be made sense of in their cultural, social and political settings. In Merleau-Ponty's terms (in Kotarba, 1984), our becoming must be grounded in the real (social) world if we have any intention of coping with the given world.

Another major theme of existential philosophy involves our awareness of death, of the fact that one day soon we must die. It is this knowledge that makes life – brief and conflict-ridden – so inexpressibly important. It is all we've got. It is also this knowledge that makes anxiety a fundamental human characteristic: we are filled with conflict between potential and limitation. Heidegger (2005) explains, however, that this anticipation of death is not to be resented and avoided; rather, anxiety in the face of death brings an unshakeable joy – an awareness of the crazy, paradoxical nature of what we've got just by being here. Existentialists say that we each have a responsibility to take hold of ourselves and make ourselves count. What others say we are, or should think or do is, in the face of death, revealed as irrelevant.

Existentialists regard modern society as characterised by alienating structures that enforce conformity and prevent people from relating authentically towards themselves, from thinking about, understanding and realising their potential. Capitalism has little need for free individuals, it needs disciplined and docile populations who identify themselves as consumers, continually purchasing goods to sustain their 'strategic image presentation' (Lodziak, 2003:58); or who invest their time and energy in keeping up appearances and maintaining a narrative which says that 'all is well with us...

we are decent and reasonable'. In De Beauvoir's (1997:295) terms, for example, 'one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman'. Within patriarchal culture, being a woman is not so much a biological fact as it involves playing a role and being and conforming to what is socially expected. A similar point can be made in relation to disability: one is born with impairment or acquires impairment, but being a disabled person is part of a social process which involves becoming what one is required to be (Cameron, 2014a).

Moreover, as Sartre (2007) points out, humans have a tendency to be ambivalent about their own freedom and responsibility. Rather than acknowledge the responsibility involved in being an existing self, many choose *not* to think for themselves, but opt for the relative security and comfort provided by being part of what Heidegger has termed a 'They' (Wartenberg, 2013). Being the same as others, thinking the same things, doing things because it's what the others do and expect; holding ready-made opinions and attitudes circulated by the media, filling your life with meaningless distractions. These are ways of avoiding having to think about and deal with the difficult and challenging aspects of what being human is about, of trying to escape existential anxiety (Cameron, 2014b).

The downside of being part of a They is that it involves conforming to a set of norms, leading to a disquieting awareness of having settled for less than one has the potential to be: of making do with mediocrity. Nobody likes owning to mediocrity, and consequently identifies others outside the

norm as inferior in order to give himself a feeling of superiority at least to someone. Sartre explains anti-Semitism in this way and de Beauvoir sexism (Wartenberg, 2013). I'd suggest that we can explain disablism, and the condescending judgements expressed within disabling encounters, in this way too.

Finally, does existentialism offer any insight into how, as disabled people, we might respond to disabling encounters?

Camus (2005) asks us to consider Sisyphus – condemned by Zeus to eternally roll a large rock up a mountain. He suggests that we should think of Sisyphus as happy because he scorns Zeus. Explaining Camus' proposition, Wartenberg (2013:119) says of Sisyphus:

His scorn for Zeus and the fate to which he has been consigned allows him to take control of his own situation... Zeus may be able to condemn him to an eternally unachievable task, but he doesn't control Sisyphus' mind. Sisyphus doesn't identify himself as the victim of a cruel fate, but chooses to interpret his situation differently... Although his scornful reaction is predicated on his realisation that he will never succeed at his task, he has freed himself from a sense of defeat and succeeded at what Camus calls 'living in the absurd'.

Taking an existentialist perspective involves regarding the meanings others seek to impose as irrelevant. Disabled people who reject mainstream assumptions that impairment can only

be related to negatively – regarded as something to be endured or overcome – are in the business of deciding for themselves what matters. An affirmative view which says 'Impairment might be messy, painful, inconvenient, but it's an important part of who I am and I'm not prepared to apologise for it,' is one which challenges the meanings dominant culture seeks to impose through the microcosmic experience of disabling, invalidating encounters. To scorn the requirement to be normal (rather than necessarily the person conveying the normalising judgement) allows us to come out of those situations with self-respect intact. As Camus says, the absurd can be transcended by rebelling, by saying 'no'.

Tony recently went to buy train tickets at Euston Station. This was a straightforward transaction. As he thanked the sales assistant and was about to turn to go, the sales assistant looked across and asked him "What's wrong with you?" Tony did the usual confused look and then replied "There is nothing wrong with me. On the contrary, I am delighted with the excellent deal you have given me." As usual in these situations the sales assistant didn't get the point, and continued "No, why are you in the wheelchair?" Tony patiently explained that he uses a wheelchair because he had a spinal injury years ago, but that there is nothing *wrong* with him.

In conclusion, I'd like to emphasise that what I'm talking about isn't just about 'having the right attitude'. As the disabled comedian Stella Young (2014) says on 'inspiration porn', no amount of smiling ever removed a flight of stairs. Taking on an existential perspective as a disabled person

involves recognising your own responsibility for addressing the barriers which exclude. It implies activism. Sartre (2007) argued that in choosing for yourself you're choosing for everybody. This involves the right of everybody to their own embodiment, gender, class, ethnicity, sexuality, age. The interactionist Goffman (1990) may have suggested that it was for 'the bearers of spoiled identities' to take responsibility for other people's reactions to their difference, but I would contend rather that they have a responsibility to refuse to assent to the idea that they have spoiled identities.

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