PROBLEMATISING 'ABLEIST' EPISTEMOLOGIES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

By Ursula Mary Blythe*

The 'body politic' is an ancient metaphor by which nations, societies, and public institutions are envisioned through a performative body which fuels 'ableism'. Whereas phenomenology examines the 'first-person experience' in order to navigate and resist ableism in social contexts. This short paper seeks to elaborate on the idea of the body politic in Western discourse whilst raising awareness of 'ableist' epistemologies in higher education (HE). My argument goes beyond the disability/impairment dichotomy of the 'social model' by drawing on philosophical theories of social constructionism and epistemic injustice, as well as revealing ableism as experiential for 'all body types' beyond disability ('DIS' hereafter).

Ableist paradigms were articulated through Plato's conception of the 'body politic' which equated to the analogy between political and physical fitness over illness, where the latter was deemed as weakness. Political morality was mapped to body perfection, so political failure was associated with human defectiveness (Doonan, 2021). Hence, ableist thinking is as old as the Western philosophical canon which has led to epistemic injustice concerning 'DIS' over the course of humanity. A succinct way to explain epistemic injustice is 'a wrong done to someone specifically in their capacity as a knower' (Fricker, 2007: 1).

A growing number of contemporary philosophers argue that 'the social' may not be physically existent, but it is nevertheless real because it determines how we live (Haslanger, 2012). Owing to 'ableism' being a prevalent issue in the sociopolitical context, it has genuine educational significance. For example, HE students and staff find themselves having to overcome barriers that are the result of ableist norms and practices. Young people with 'DIS' are particularly vulnerable to epistemic injustice as their voices are often ignored (Barnes, 2016).

There is no one who is not impaired in some way, but not everyone experiences the world as a person with 'DIS'. According to social constructionism, ableism marginalises physically impaired people (Haslanger, 2012); but I would argue that it also standardises all students and staff within academia due to epistemologies (i.e. ways of knowing) that are deep-rooted in social norms that determine which bodies matter. In other words, ableism is ingrained in the 'body politic' which holds that normal abilities are superior, so 'DIS' needs correcting (Wieseler, 2020).

Dolmage (2017) argues that for too long 'Disability has been constructed as the antithesis of HE, often positioned as a distraction, a drain, or a problem to be solved' (audio ref.). Ableism reveals itself through the academy's performative drive to 'accentuate ability, valorise perfection, and stigmatise anything that hints at intellectual, mental, or physical weakness' (ibid), even as we gesture towards the importance of equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI). Moreover, Campbell (2009) asserts that ableism is maintained by patriarchal mechanisms, productive technologies, and social phenomena over time and space, resulting in renewed epistemologies and ways of categorising people.

The reason this is important in HE is because didactic practices are extremely performative which foster repressive epistemologies through attitudinal, physical, and structural norms. In educational contexts, digital technologies have the potential both to extend and to erase the body. Historically, media sources in the 1950s believed that technology was ‘a mere extension of bodily skills employed for the satisfaction of bodily appetites' (Polanyi, 1958). Indeed, it has often been asserted that the online world makes life easier for students. However, the universal shift towards virtual self-management can limit epistemic communities.

Remote technologies can be both inclusive and exclusive, but either way they are changing how we experience academia. On the one hand, online learning equalises access to learning for anyone with the relevant technical resources. Likewise, assistive technology has been extremely productive for disabled students in plugging into HE via assistive devices and specialised software. This often equates to not having to travel to university which is beneficial if one is managing chronic pain. However, technologies have not reduced inequality of

HE students with 'DIS', as well as resources being limited via the DSA (disability support allowance).

One could argue that technology reflects universal principles of standard design and ways of functioning, making the body redundant and removing one's agency. Furthermore, virtual access to teaching is different from campus attendance and one's experience of university life. The growing reliance on teaching via such platforms as Teams and Zoom could mean that bodily diversity is further marginalised. This brings us back to the importance of phenomenology in order to unify 'DIS' without side-lining the body (Jenkins and Webster, 2021), as well as reducing epistemic injustice in HE.

Collaboration is key to placing the voices of 'DIS' at the centre of the debate and decision-making processes in HE. The development of different epistemologies disrupts the 'body politic' that sustains academic ableism. Doing so can inform**,** even transform sociopolitical norms and create a more inclusive and nuanced phenomenology of 'DIS' within the wider epistemic community.

KEYWORDS:

Ableism, body politic, 'DIS', epistemic injustice, higher education, phenomenology, social constructionism.

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As a humanities scholar, my interests include diverse epistemologies, ethics, and social philosophy. I am currently working on the phenomenology of gender and race. My dissertation research explores Ableism and Ways of Knowing. I facilitate philosophy in

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I have had some articles and blog posts published with the Wednesday Oxford Group, Philosophy Foundation, and MAP (minorities and philosophy) at Kings College London.

For me, philosophy in its contemporary form provides a lens to examine our ethical intuitions and sociopolitical praxis which encourages critique and human possibilities.