

Encountering Physical Difference: Models of Experience and Dialogue

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Abstract: This paper utilizes Hans-Georg Gadamer's classic philosophical study of the art of interpretation, *Truth and Method (Wahrheit und Methode)* (1960), to examine literary critic Leslie Fiedler's 1996 collection of essays on bioethics and disability, *Tyranny of the Normal*. Because Fiedler's primary analytical model centers around the experience of engaging an abjected Other and subsequently revising one's self-conception based on this experience, it is useful to examine Fiedler's arguments with respect to Gadamer's theories of the hermeneutic circle, the historicity of experience, and the dialectical nature of understanding. Viewing these writings through a Gadamerian lens allows us to devise critical readings of the crucial social moment when the nondisabled "normal" individual and the person with a disability meet. Conversely, Gadamer's text allows us to develop important criticisms of Fiedler's work centered on the ahistorical and non-dialectical character of Fiedler's interpretation of nondisabled individuals' encounters with disability. Juxtaposing these two thinkers allows us to develop philosophical, psychological, and ethical warrants for disability rights activists' assertions that the lives, medical treatments, media representations, and political destinies of people with disabilities must not be determined by the non-disabled alone.

Key Words: hermeneutics, communication, experience

Since the 1990s, Disability Studies as an academic discipline has demonstrated a profound capacity for generating insights and interconnections with disciplines in the Humanities. It is also evident that engaging in academic inquiry from the perspective of Disability Studies can inspire productive study of texts that make no overt mention of disability, leading us to explore new and creative applications of "traditional" or "canonical" texts to the study of theories of disability. Indeed, on March 7, 2004 the Modern Language Association Conference on Disability Issues in the Profession officially recommended that universities, "Incorporate a disability studies perspective into courses across the curriculum" (p. 1).¹ Both projects handily refute critics of Disability Studies who deny it academic legitimacy on the grounds that it "push[es] parochial ideologies...lack[s] intellectual credibility, and...contribut[es] to the balkanization of learning" (Longmore, 2003, p. 5).

The present paper engages in the second mode of study: Engaging in academic inquiry from the perspective of Disability Studies to inspire productive study of texts that make no overt mention of disability. I utilize Hans-Georg Gadamer's classic philosophical study of the art of interpretation, *Truth and Method (Wahrheit und Methode)* (1960), to examine literary critic Leslie Fiedler's 1996 collection of essays on bioethics and disability, *Tyranny of the Normal*. Because Fiedler's primary analytical model centers around the experience of engaging an Other and subsequently revising one's self-conception based on this experience, it is useful to examine Fiedler's arguments with respect to Gadamer. Though Fiedler does not cite, much less discuss Gadamer's work, the latter's theories of interpretation, the historicity of experience, and the dialectical nature of understanding, prove strikingly applicable to Fiedler's writings. Viewing these writings through a Gadamerian lens allows us to devise critically productive readings of Fiedler's model of human normality and abnormality and his discussion of the crucial social

moment when the nondisabled individual and the person with a disability meet. Conversely, Gadamer's text allows us to develop important criticisms of Fiedler's work centered on the ahistorical and non-dialectical character of Fiedler's interpretation of nondisabled individuals' encounters with disability. Furthermore, juxtaposing these two thinkers allows us to develop some philosophical, psychological, and even ethical warrants for disability rights activists' assertions that the lives, medical treatments, media representations, and political destinies of people with disabilities must not be determined by the nondisabled alone.

Leslie Fiedler's Model of Encountering Human Differences

The short title essay of Fiedler's 1996 collection continues the work of his 1978 *Freaks: Myths and Images of the Secret Self*, in which he offers "freakishness" as an analytical category of disability.² This concept allows Fiedler to construct an explanation of society's continual fascination with disability while exposing and challenging pervasive assumptions of "normality." Fiedler's project uses his reading of experiences between "normals" and "Freaks" to contest, and ultimately refute, the dominant culture's belief in "the Normal" as a definitive, naturalized category of social differentiation. In both texts, Fiedler's arguments explicitly emerge from his conception of a core experience, the direct viewing of the "Freak" (a direct experience that, as we shall see, nonetheless demands interpretation). In *Freaks* Fiedler observes that this "confrontation in the flesh... is, in fact, a chief occasion for this book" (p. 16). While textual and cinematic presentations offer startling images of disability, Fiedler believes such presentations are much less powerful removed from the direct experience of viewing an "abnormal" person. In Fiedler's theoretical dynamic, only an immediate encounter with the abnormal Other provides the "sense of quasi-religious awe" with which all societies have confronted disability, and it is thus only through this experience that the viewer truly confronts his or her own "Secret Self." Thus, in Fiedler's psychological explanation for the "moral model" of disability, physical abnormality has captivated societal interests throughout history because by "experiencing" it, so-called nondisabled individuals rediscover their own deeply buried, primal perceptions of themselves as freakish.

Fiedler's model of the experience of a meeting between nondisabled and abnormal individuals is essentially a four-stage process: assumption, recognition, surprise, and revised recognition. Fiedler considers a person freakish if the individual's physical condition makes him or her appear, in comparison with societal generalities, radically and disturbingly other than "normal." At the moment of confrontation with a freakish individual, a nondisabled viewer perceives one of "those wretched caricatures of our idealized body image, which at first appear to represent what is most absolutely 'Other'" (Fiedler, 1996, p. 152). The viewer approaches the Freak with preconceived, socially and psychologically constituted assumptions about what a "typical" human body is, and the initial impression that the Freak is "absolutely 'Other'" initially supports such prejudices, "Thus reassuring us who come to gape that we are 'normal'" (p. 152). However, the ambiguous appearance of the Freak soon makes the viewer perceive him or her not only as radically different but also as possessing definitively human characteristics, a point of common ground for our perception and intellectual processing of the experience. When such a recognition is made, a moment of shock occurs. This recognition of commonality with the Freak throws the viewer back upon his prejudices regarding Otherness, resulting in a revelation of what Fiedler terms "the Secret Self," his term for a psychic construct of deep-seated personal shame, guilt, or anxiety. If the Freak is like the viewer, the viewer is also like the Freak. A subsequent

psychological revision of this revelation makes the viewer aware that all “normal” people feel, at times, out of place or “freakish” when confronted by societal dictates of what is physically “normal.” (At some point in our lives all of us have looked in a mirror and worried, “I look so strange because I weigh too much/too little,” “I have too much/too little hair,” and so forth). Because there is always a fantasy image already underlying it, even the seemingly objective experience of perception is a thoroughly complicated one.

Although his basic pattern for the experience is the same, Fiedler also offers an alternative reading of the psychological dynamics of the confrontation between nondisabled viewer and Freak. Depending on the Freak’s physical difference, the viewer’s initial assumptions can also be fractured and recognized as false with respect to unique aspects of the human physiological condition. For example, most people approach other individuals with prejudices about human “scale,” thus, when one sees a person of short stature, these prejudices are thrust into the forefront of one’s consciousness and called into question. Prejudice of scale is revealed as a preconception rather than a universally applicable truth of nature. In two primary ways, therefore, the experience of viewing the Freak causes the viewer to reconsider the prejudices he holds, either about himself or about humanity as a general intellectual category.³ If Fiedler’s model is correct on this score, this imperilment of beliefs and understandings, imagined as foundational to common existence, constitutes one explanation for the fear disability often elicits from the nondisabled population.⁴

Hans-Georg Gadamer’s Understanding of Experience

In one sense, Fiedler’s calling the viewing of the Freak an “experience” may indeed be an accurate description. According to the German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002), “experience is always initially [an] experience of negation: something is not what we supposed it to be...Every experience worthy of the name thwarts an expectation” (1960, pp. 354, 356). Gadamer’s work is one of the twentieth-century’s most important treatments of “hermeneutics,” or the study of interpretation. As described in *Truth and Method*, Gadamer’s conception of the hermeneutic circle (the process by which individuals interpret aspects of their world) seems quite similar to the conceptual processes illustrated by Fiedler. Deriving his ideas partly from Heidegger, Gadamer (1960) writes, using textual explication as an example, “A person trying to understand a text is always projecting...The initial meaning emerges only because he is reading the text with particular expectations in regard to a certain meaning...Working out this fore-projection...is understanding what is there” (p. 267). When does “understanding” occur? For Gadamer, it begins when aspects of experience of an Other conflict with prejudices about that Other, when one is “pulled up short” by the object of experience (be it a text, a person, or an event). One always makes unconscious assumptions when approaching objects of experience; indeed, for Gadamer these would not be objects for experiencing if one did not have these preconceptions. All understanding is thus motivated by a moment of misunderstanding. When these assumptions are not called into question or brought into conflict with a particular experience, one’s approach to the Other involves assimilation rather than genuine “understanding.” In genuine “understanding,” however, the process of experience makes us conscious or aware of our own prejudices. All understanding must contain a moment of self-reflection.

According to Gadamer (1960), “Hermeneutic work is based on a polarity of familiarity and strangeness” (p. 295). The “familiarity” allows prejudices to be applied in an initial reading

of experience, enabling us to engage the Other on some common ground, while the “strangeness” throws us back upon ourselves and keeps the hermeneutic circle moving forward productively. Fiedler’s model does seem, therefore, to describe a hermeneutic circle. The “understanding” of the Freak as a revelation of the “Secret Self,” or as a challenge to our preconceptions of the human condition, occurs through an experience in which we are “pulled up short” by the simultaneous “familiarity and strangeness” of an abnormal person. According to Gadamer (1960), the hermeneutic circle results in “Insight” when our experiences have made us realize the falsity and inadequacies of our assumptions, when we are made aware of “the limitations of humanity” because “experience is the experience of human finitude” (p. 357). Similarly, in Fiedler’s formulation, in the experience of viewing the Freak one realizes that one’s own body deviates from an “ideal” physiology, that there are, in effect, limits to how “normal” anyone’s body can be. Or, we realize that our conceptual categories for humanity, such as those regarding scale, do not hold universal currency.

In many ways Fiedler’s ideas may be reconciled with Gadamer’s assertion that to appreciate the true value of experience one must accept human finitude, in a double sense, as an essential element of the human condition: Experience relies on finitude to produce it and finitude is the self-reflexive object of experience. According to Fiedler (1996), a manifestation of the societal anxiety of physical abnormality is the “Cult of Eternal Youth” that has “driven a population growing ever older and fatter to...popping amphetamines—or removing with the aid of plastic surgery those stigmata of time and experience once considered worthy of reverence” (p. 156). This so-called “experience,” in terms of participation in events over time, marks the body (whether through scars, which speak to an event that touched the body physically, wrinkles, which might be due to stress or an emotional touching of the body, or the alteration that occurs when organic matter ages). Such marks of temporality indicate the truth of the body’s past existence, but the obsession with youthful appearances deliberately strives to erase those traces. The “Cult of Eternal Youth” interprets, Fiedler would say mistakenly, aging or aged bodies as unattractive, thus medical technology must elide the evidence of humanity’s “finitude.” We might say the Cult’s proponents presume to be non-human, to set themselves apart from what Heidegger imagined as the essential human beingness in time. From a Gadamerian perspective as well, this effort is strikingly misguided as it represents an attempt to deny the truth of humanity’s historicity. Only through the hermeneutic experience, in which understanding occurs, can one realize the fallacy of the illusion that “everything can be reversed, that there is always time for everything” (Gadamer, 1960, p. 357).

In terms of the historicity of human existence, the “Cult of Eternal Youth” demarcates the limit of Fiedler’s connection to Gadamer. The Freudian foundations of Fiedler’s model of understanding led him to construct theories of experience that differ markedly from Gadamer’s sophisticated conception of history and tradition. In attempting to trace the origin of a fascination with human physical differences to determine which came first, living human abnormalities or the imaginative constructions of potential abnormalities in art, Fiedler (1978) explains that we should seek “that psychic need...in depth psychology, which deals with our basic uncertainty about the limits of...our egos...in childhood such uncertainty is strongest” (p. 27). Arising from our “primordial fears,” people with physical abnormalities basically represent the return of the repressed, the hidden distressful feelings of monstrosity that initially arise in the childhood experience of “each sex’s early perception of the other’s genitalia in adult form,” which causes all children to feel freakish either in terms of excess (for males) or deficiency (for females) (p. 32). Fiedler’s reading of the experience of viewing the Freak is, therefore,

essentialist and universalist. Anyone viewing the Freak at any time, in any cultural context, will necessarily have an experience equivalent to anyone else; after all, the need to view the Freak is "a hunger in all of us" created from primal psychic disturbance (1996, p. 150).

Considering encounters with a Freak from the perspective of a common human experience of freakishness or perceived freakishness allows Fiedler to accomplish two goals. It lends support to his efforts at questioning the very idea of normality as a monolithic category, and it allows him to position himself as an "authority" on disability. If all of us carry a feeling of freakishness buried deep in our psyches, then we must eventually "realize that *there are no normals*" (1996, p. 153). In addition, the notion that freakishness is a common human experience enables Fiedler to speak definitively on the subjects of bioethics and disability, subjects with respect to which, as a literary man, his authority might be questioned. Granted, Fiedler (1996) begins his essay with the disclaimer that he is not a "doctor or a nurse or a social worker...only a poet, novelist, critic," in an ironic nod to the authorities celebrated by those who subscribe to the medical model of disability. If all humanity is in the same psychic condition, the thrust of the essay as a whole argues against a disclaimer that soon appears meaningless (p. 153). Because Fiedler, like all of us, experiences the common human condition of freakishness, he is just as qualified to speak on the subject as anyone else—abled or disabled. Indeed, in his essay, Fiedler frequently incorporates personal anecdotes of his own experiences with "abnormal" people.

A Gadamerian Critique of Fiedler's Model

While Fiedler's arguments about universal human feelings of freakishness, feelings realized with disturbing clarity when one directly encounter the Freak, make the admirable argument for broader egalitarian views of human physicality, they are nonetheless problematic because they fail to take into account the impact of history and tradition on experience. As Gadamer (1960) tells us, experiences and experiencing subjects are always embedded in history, and it is this very embeddedness which allows understanding to occur, for, "To be situated within a tradition does not limit the freedom of knowledge but makes it possible" (p. 361). It is a necessary fact of human existence that "traditions" predetermine how one understands oneself as a subject who can have an experience. Traditions also construct the way in which a text, work of art, or other person is presented as an object for experience, determining the context within which the object will be, at least initially, perceived. Because "we are always situated within traditions," we must realize that our historical foundations "always have a predeterminate influence on any experience," including these that are seemingly subjective. Our "History does not belong to us," Gadamer (1960) stresses, "We belong to it" (pp. 282, 276). Consequently, we also cannot assume that experiences in different historical periods have similar meanings for various participants. To do so would be to assume that "subject" and "experience" are essential categories that remain unchanged by history because they are not constructed by and through history. As historian Joan Scott (1993) argues, experience is not "confined to a fixed order of meaning" but is a "process" the context of which changes significantly over time (p. 409).

Ignoring the fact that history is constitutive of experience, Fiedler grounds his reading of the experience of viewing the Freak in a fundamental and universal egoistic aversion to human difference. As a condition of her or his humanity, every human being has encountered him or herself as freakish in childhood and repressed the terrific anxiety of this realization. Such a perspective assumes the preconceptions that one applies to the experience of viewing

abnormality are common to all historical periods and contexts. While they may reinforce or reflect general society views of normality, they are not themselves constructed by history. Historical changes only impact one's ability to gain access to the freak or the medium through which one gains this access (side-shows have virtually disappeared from American culture, for instance, but motion pictures are now a dominant visual medium). These historical changes do not, however, influence the core experience itself. An example of Fiedler's extreme ahistoricism may be seen in the governing "iconic" model of abnormality he adopts in *Freaks: Myths and Images of the Secret Self*. In this text he gleans a three-term system of categorizing "monsters" from a Babylonian tablet dated 2800 B.C.E.—a tablet widely believed to be the earliest known written reference to disability—and then uses this system to analyze views of Freaks in fourteenth-century medico-religious interpretations of monsters, the side-show, Victorian fiction, Freudian stages of development, Depression-era cinema, and finally, contemporary medical practices.

The shortcomings of Fiedler's model reveal the advantages of Gadamer's ideas for historical scholarship on disability. While Fiedler's theories about the experience of viewing the Freak, if true, may tell us something about the human psyche, they provide no information about the unique social contexts in which this psyche operates. An example from literary studies demonstrates that the history within which the experiencing subject is embedded is crucial to an understanding of how abnormality gets conceptualized by the nondisabled viewer. Felicity Nussbaum (1997), a scholar of eighteenth-century Anglo women's literature, has discovered that various popular tracts of the period consider "deformities" or "defects of nature" as inclusive of such simple facial features as freckles, moles, and squinty eyes as well as impairments that today might be labeled more severe congenital conditions. Oddly enough, even virgins were considered "deformed" by some by virtue of the period's attitude towards femininity. As Gadamer (1960), who completely avoided utilizing the most powerful hermeneutic model of his day, psychoanalysis, tells us, the meaning of an object of understanding is always "co-determined also by the historical situation of the interpreter" (p. 296). Does not such a broad conception of abnormality in the eighteenth century indicate not simply a different use of the term "deformity," but an entirely different "situation" or horizon of understanding disability when compared to the present day? Can we say that a person living in eighteenth-century Britain would have even a remotely equivalent "experience" viewing the Fiedlerian Freak as the twenty-first century viewer of a motion picture monster or an individual in a wheelchair on a weekly television drama?

Imagining a more historical hermeneutical consciousness than Fiedler, Gadamer (1960) writes that, "Understanding is to be thought of less as a subjective act," (we might say, merely the return of the repressed for each individual viewer of the Freak), "Than as participating in an event of tradition" (p. 290). Human existence is characterized by its embeddedness in "the continuity of custom and tradition." Thus, the "event of tradition" is an ontological occurrence in the life of the individual (Gadamer, 1960, p. 297). True understanding is not the self-contained operations of a mind discrete from other minds. Rather, true understanding occurs in the larger context of an experience constituted by elements of the human past that have been preserved socially and personally and render present experiences meaningful. Gadamer calls this process the "hermeneutical productivity" of tradition. Consequently, he is also concerned with the way in which our understanding, though conditioned by our traditions, in turn creates new traditions and new horizons of understanding for the future, what he terms the "texture of reciprocal effects" that characterize human experience (Gadamer, 1960, p. 282).

This discussion of the mutually effective relationship of present understanding and traditions, presented in Part Two of *Truth and Method*, represents a further consideration of the purposes expressed in the introduction to the text. Gadamer (1960) writes that his book is meant as a description, a narrative of how the historical “unity of the world in which we live” consists of “the way we experience one another, the way we experience historical traditions, the way we experience the natural givenness of our existence” (p. xxiv). The “way” does not refer to a particular method that produces a monolithic, “correct” interpretation of the world. Rather, Gadamer suggests the “unity of the world,” or the primary standpoint from which our understanding occurs at a given moment, is constructed out of the traditions of prior understanding and culturally specific world views of which individuals are the recipients and repositories. This received “unity of the world” is subsequently reformulated by the operation of our processes of understanding, “the way we experience,” in the present.

In Fiedler’s formulation, the “unity of the world” is constructed by the “desperately” maintained distinction between self and other. We have pre-existent notions of the “normal,” and the use of these notions is a means of dealing with the facts of our freakishness and the presence of people who are simply born radically different than others. Though these elements construct the foundations for knowledge of our “normal” world, Fiedler does not present the “unity” itself as historical in the Gadamerian sense. As a result, he fails to admit that this unity, and therefore any understanding of disability, will change over time due to the “texture of reciprocal effects” between tradition and understanding. For example, after Fiedler discusses cosmetic or so-called corrective surgery as a modern medical response to human freakishness, he concludes that eventually only the economically poor will be freaks because they will be the only ones unable to pay for de-freakment procedures. Yet Fiedler’s conclusion really only addresses demographic realities, identifying how the category of “Freak” might undergo a shift in the population. He does not, however, consider the potential for alteration in the understanding of freakishness itself, due to a mutually effective relationship between traditional notions of human difference *and* poverty, and present experiences with medical technology.

A future in which “correction” of all deformities is possible would of necessity disrupt “the way we experience the natural givenness of our experience” and therefore alter profoundly our understanding of abnormality itself. As a result, the other elements that compose the unity of our world would also change, particularly “the way we experience one another.” In Fiedler’s model, our traditions cast deformity in a pejorative light because it is a primal source of personal anxiety and fear. Furthermore, our new experiences with technology in the modern era have encouraged us to believe deformity does not have to be part of the “natural givenness of our existence.” Even assuming Fiedler’s model to be accurate in these assessments, abnormality would still necessarily be experienced in relation to a different horizon of understanding. In Gadamer’s (1960) terms, each person will have “acquired a new horizon within which something can become and experience for him” (p. 354). In this hypothetical future world, might we not in fact come to read a disabled person whom we encounter as either exhibiting the “vices” of the poor (“she is too indolent to earn the money to correct her deformity”), morally weak (“she has not made the effort to improve herself”), or irrational (“technology has enabled her to change herself if she chooses, so how could she possibly wish to do otherwise”)? Failure to correct a deformity could even come to be coded socially as indicative of a psychological disorder, reflecting depression, low self-esteem, or anti-sociality. In such a ghastly future the unity of the world would undergo an alteration. The potential for enforcing the distinction between normality and abnormality can be imagined as increasing via socio-political and technological mechanisms

of control. To borrow a phrase from Harlan Hahn (1987), “The contours of [one’s] perceptual range [would] narrow” as the concept of “normalcy” would become ever more solidified. Indeed, Hahn has argued persuasively that contemporary mass media and advertising have already produced this social and psychological effect.

While Fiedler ignores the dynamic interaction between tradition and understanding, Gadamer (1960) both theorizes and discusses its revolutionary potential. In the words of the latter, “Tradition is not simply a permanent precondition; rather, we produce it ourselves inasmuch as we understand, participate in the evolution of tradition, and hence further determine it ourselves” (p. 293). Just as we cannot assume the individual’s understanding of physical abnormality is the same across different historical periods, we cannot assume the traditional structure within which “the Freak” gets understood is fundamentally unchanging. Though one’s encounter with human physical difference at the present time is conditioned by tradition, it may also in turn contribute to the construction of the conceptual structures and societal conditions that determine how such difference will be encountered and, on a more basic level, considered “freakish” in the future. Certainly, then, age-old conceptions of monstrosity could affect us today. In Gadamer’s conception of the relationship between tradition and experience, each encounter with disability also offers the opportunity for revising not only the present encounter but the “horizon” of understanding carried into and shaping future experiences. From this perspective, there is great potential and hope for realizing the alteration of social constructions and perceptions. Even dominant, politically powerful, and seemingly unassailable perceptions of human physical difference can be changed.

As Gadamer (1960) observes, even at the individual, subjective level, “one’s experience changes one’s whole knowledge...we cannot have the same experience twice” (p. 353). The hermeneutic circle is, as its name suggests, a figure of continual motion. Because the understanding of the interpreter is continually being re-shaped through experiencing an object, her “discovery of the true meaning” of an event “is never finished” (Gadamer, 1960, p. 298). These unending operations of understanding constitute “truth.” Like Joan Scott, Gadamer (1960) argues that “experience is a process...It cannot be described simply as the unbroken generation of typical universals,” largely because “universal” is itself a fore-conception or prejudice and fore-conceptions are necessarily questioned, altered, reconfigured and/or rejected in the course of the hermeneutic experience (p. 353). We might argue, therefore, that one of Fiedler’s primary conceptual errors lies in his assumption that the Freak “means” the repressed Secret Self. His model of the experience of viewing the Freak describes the discovery of what has remained buried, and once this meaning has been recovered, the experience is complete and terminated. Without the recovery of the repressed truth of common human freakishness—a recovery that serves to elide rather than recognize, accept, and understand difference—there is no experience. Thus, each experience of the Freak essentially conveys the same information. Yet, as Gadamer (1960) teaches us, “truth” lies not in a definitive and recoverable meaning but in the process of understanding itself. An experience has “its proper fulfillment not in definitive knowledge” but in openness to the ways in which one’s understanding can be changed after encountering the claims made by the Other (p. 355). Understanding is not something a person “has” or something that can be recognized as the property or province of a single individual but is continually unfolding. In reality, after experiencing the realization of our own freakishness, our next experience of the Freak should be fundamentally different. It is through this continually changing interaction that we truly understand ourselves and the “abnormal” Other as well as the dynamic relationship between the two.

“Openness”: Gadamer’s Vision of Interpersonal Encounters

For Gadamer, such dynamic relationships are significant because he believes all experience has a dialectical element, a quality of dialogue and exchange. Understanding occurs through a process where we develop, in Gadamer’s words, “The truth that becomes visible to me only through the Thou, and only by my letting myself be told something by it” (Gadamer, 1960, p. xxxv). In some ways, Gadamer’s descriptions of experience as dialectical are restatements of his basic arguments about understanding. We approach an object with our own preconceptions and horizon of understanding (the first term of the dialectic) and engage the ways in which the object of experience contests or confirms these preconceptions (the second term of the dialectic). This view of experience is, for Gadamer, profoundly ethical. It prompts the call made in the forward to his text for human understanding based on “dialogue” rather than Platonic logic. This approach demands “openness” on the part of the interpreter of any experience. If experience is dialectical, it follows that “we cannot stick blindly to our own fore-meaning about the thing if we want to understand the meaning of another” (p. 268). To do so is to reject the possibilities for the object of experience to influence and change our preconceptions. Instead, “All that is asked is that we remain open to the meaning of the other person or text. But this openness always includes our situating the other meaning in relation to the whole of our own meanings” (p. 268). Given our embeddedness in history, we can never stand completely outside of our own situation and view the Other on its own terms. But if we did not remain within our subject position, we would have no standpoint from which to understand the Other at all. This recognition constitutes Gadamer’s critique of historicism. To maintain the integrity of the dialectic for both participants, one must also recognize and accept the fact that the Other always occupies a position of radical difference from oneself; that is to say, in the case of an experience with another person, one must always allow the Other his or her unique subjectivity.

In *Truth and Method*, these ideas about the dialectical element of experience are often advanced as part of discussions about interpreting texts or works of art. As a result, Gadamer’s ideas about hermeneutic understanding have been criticized for being overly academic. Some critics contend Gadamer’s theories of dialectical experience fail to account adequately for the dynamic relationship between two human agents. Consequently, Gadamer is taken to task for supposed failure to consider the operations of power and authority in the practice of hermeneutics. However, when Gadamer’s considerations of human interaction are compared with Fiedler’s—the latter of which seem preeminently concerned with humanity, human response, and the authority and power of norms—it is apparent that Gadamer develops an astute and humane vision of the interpersonal, dialogical aspects of hermeneutics. In Gadamer’s view, human finitude continually provides a check upon the ego by reminding us that we can never fully elude our limitations. Furthermore, his discussions of interpersonal experiences are closely related to considerations of the exercise of power and subjection. Fiedler, on the other hand, continually and uncritically figures the Freak as an object for speculation rather than as an individual participating in experience.

Gadamer realizes fully that hermeneutics takes on a unique character when it involves two minds because both are simultaneously the interpreter and the object of interpretation.⁵ Unlike an encounter with a text or work of art, “This kind of experience is a moral phenomenon—as is the knowledge acquired through experience, the understanding of the other person” (p. 358). For Gadamer, it should be stressed, “the moral” is not Kantian or Protestant

(that is, dependent fundamentally on the private, internal conscience) but emerges out of mutuality, out of interpersonal relations. If experience is dialectical, each participant in the dialogue must affect, and be affected by, the other's claims to truth or no genuine and useful understanding or experience occurs. Each person who encounters and interprets another must learn something not only about himself but about the other person on the other's own terms. This means accepting the other person as a unique individual embedded in her own context and traditions. When the participants of an interpersonal encounter do not carry on a dialogue of historically transmitted and determined communication, they do not engage in a productive experience. Instead, a single pole of the interaction, or each pole separately, establish the rigid but fallacious categorization of himself as sole interpreter. The other person is an object for, but not of, interpretation. In such a case the interpreter, as Gadamer contends, "himself cannot be reached" (1960). The interpreter's sole objective is to gather information while making his "own standpoint safely unattainable" (p. 303). When an individual refuses to remain open to the "otherness" of the other person and refuses to allow that his own preconceptions might change as a result of learning from the other, the interpersonal encounter fails to produce any "understanding."

The Problems of Interpersonal Encounters with Disability

Interpersonal encounters may also be prevented from being truly dialectical, according to Gadamer (1960), when "the Thou is acknowledged as a person, but despite this acknowledgement the understanding of the Thou is still a form of self-relatedness" on the part of the viewer-interpreter (p. 359). Such an approach can generate a situation in which, "One claims to know the other's claim from his point of view... In this way the Thou loses the immediacy with which it makes its claim... it is co-opted and preempted reflectively from the standpoint of the other person" (, p. 359). Understanding is displaced in favor of appropriation. The "immediacy," (or in this statement, the lack thereof), refers to the uniqueness of a true experience where one sees the other person as an individual distinct from, and unassimilable to, oneself. When Gadamer writes that in a "one-sided conversation" the other's immediate claim is "co-opted and preempted reflectively," he advances two significant arguments. First, because the individual viewing himself as the experiencing subject assumes the other merely tells him about himself (as in Fiedler's model of the nondisabled viewer's encounter with disability), the other functions solely as an object, a mirror. As Gadamer later writes, "A person who reflects himself out of the mutuality of such a relation... destroys its moral bond." This is true because he does not accept the deeply human "mutuality" of two individuals existing in the same position of subjecthood but only grants such subjecthood to himself (p. 360). Second, the experiencing subject comes to assume he can see through the other's eyes and thus anticipate the other's claims, even before any such claims are made. The other can only speak by serving as a mouthpiece for the interpreter. Moreover, "The claim to understand the other person in advance functions to keep the other person's claim at a distance" (p. 360). The "standpoint" of the interpreter, perceived to be a position of intellectual power and authority, remains "safely unattainable" while the other and his or her claims remain essentially in subjection to the interpreter's conceptual horizon. Not only is this colonization of the other's subjectivity typically a problem for academics studying minority cultures, it also lies at the heart of humanitarian socio-political efforts to "help" people with disabilities while excluding these people's participation in such efforts.⁶

When, after reading Gadamer on the dialectical elements of experience, we reconsider Fiedler's depiction of the experience of viewing the Freak, this description appears non-dialectical and therefore extremely problematic. Fiedler's model is rigidly self-reflective. The viewer engages the abnormal individual, is confronted with his own fore-conceptions about normality and his own buried and anxious deviations from it, and finally comes to see the Freak as a representative of his own repressed "Secret Self." While this model resembles a hermeneutic circle, the viewer in fact learns nothing about the Other on the Other's own terms. In a way that would make Gadamer shudder, Fiedler's hermeneutic circle only makes one pseudo-revolution. The experience collapses into narcissism, and Fiedler's model recognizes no "claim to truth" the Freak can make that is not predetermined in the interpreter's psyche. The Other is either "like me" or "unlike me" while the "me" itself is never really challenged or dislodged. The one-sidedness of this encounter, in which the Freak serves only as the catalyst for the self-education of the non-disabled viewer, parallels the subject of contemporary criticisms of the "individualistic" and "moral" modes of disability. The nondisabled majority often places the responsibility for bringing the world closer to the "essential truths" of humanity squarely on the shoulders of people with disabilities. The mentally retarded must reveal "true innocence" and the paraplegic the potential for triumph over adversity. This is necessary to attain some, albeit a limited, measure of social validation. The unique identity and historical traditions of the person with a disability are elided by the "larger meaning" relevant to all members of society that he or she is assumed to represent.

For Fiedler, particular differences in a viewer's experiences of Freaks are attributable simply to general categorical differences. Hermaphrodites call attention to our anxieties about sex but not scale, while Dwarfs and Giants call attention to our anxieties about scale but not sex. As previously noted, in Fiedler's text the essence of the experience of viewing the Freak is first an act of discovery—the recognition of the return of the repressed—and then an act of colonialism—taking over the Other and making it serve the self. It is decidedly not, however, a singular dialectic formed at a unique historical moment in which two people engage one another in a process of mutual understanding. In Gadamerian terms, an encounter of this sort is not a true experience because, with only one recognized hermeneutical consciousness present, there can be no dialogue. The viewer Fiedler describes does not have to struggle to situate himself "in relation to" the other's claims to truth (as Gadamer would say) in the course of having an interpersonal experience. Conversely, the Freak's understanding does not undergo any complementary process, as Fiedler does not see the Freak *inter-acting* in the experience as an individual whose traditions, claims and identity may be distinctly different from those of the viewer. In fact, the viewer never needs to speak to, question, or even simply listen to the physically abnormal Other to have a meaningful experience and achieve self-understanding.⁷

Fiedler's theoretical model denies the Freak a dialogical role. At the most fundamental level, the model assumes the experience occurs when one of the participants is considered "normal." The spectator who encounters a Freak is able to have an experience of understanding because the feelings of freakishness buried "in the depths of our unconscious" are brought to light (Fiedler, 1996, p. 152). For these feelings to be repressed in the first place, however, the spectator must have developed a sense of self based upon an assumption of "normality." Fiedler thus fails to address the crucial question: how would a spectator with a disability, who already knows he or she is considered freakish, experience an encounter with another physically abnormal individual? Presumably nothing would happen, no shock and no recognition, nothing about which to theorize. Thus, freakishness is only significant when, or because, it comes into

contact with the “normal,” and the fundamental experience theorized in *Freaks* and *The Tyranny of the Normal* necessarily assumes a non-disabled spectator and a disabled object. Ironically, then, Fiedler’s model of the experience of viewing the Freak can be disrupted by the introduction of physical difference.⁸ The unaccounted-for body in his model is the abnormal body situated as something other than an object of perception. I would suggest at this point that it is precisely this disruption of models of normalcy through the process of “coming into subjecthood” as a person with a disability that characterizes some of the best creative writing on physical difference, such as Christy Brown’s *My Left Foot* (1954) and Jean Stewart’s *The Body’s Memory* (1989).

It is somewhat surprising that Fiedler neglects to consider the experience of viewing the Freak could be dialectical. He makes a point of stressing that the loss of the circus sideshow in American popular culture and the rise of mass media representations of physical difference represent a loss of experiential contexts in “which full-grown oddities have looked down out of living eyes to meet the living eyes of the audience.” A “loss of the old confrontation in the flesh” Fiedler (1978) views, nostalgically, as also producing the less subversive encounters with physical abnormality in the image-dominated late-twentieth and early twenty-first centuries (pp. 18, 16). Unfortunately, Fiedler fails to address his ideas to the abnormal individual behind the “living eyes.” How do the dynamics of experience change when the Freak understands him or herself as being seen and subsequently communicates this recognition to the nondisabled viewer? When we do not direct our inquiry and communication towards the abnormal Other in any encounter—theoretical or otherwise—such powerful, significant, and provocative questions are not pursued.

I would suggest the primary reason for this absence, in Fiedler as in other academic inquiries into disability, lies in a failure to preserve the otherness of the physically different individual. According to Gadamer, understanding cannot truly occur unless a hermeneutic consciousness is put in dialogue with an Other whose integrity as other is maintained. This consciousness “must be, from the start, sensitive to...alterity” so the Other “can present itself in all its otherness and thus assert its own truth”; otherwise, there is no dialectic (Gadamer, 1960, p. 261).⁹ For Fiedler, the notion of “otherness” is only important because of its role in the interpreter’s repression. Unless one initially sees the Freak as radically abnormal, one does not attempt to reconcile this fore-conception with the contradictory element of the Freak’s humanity. It is in the course of this mental struggle that one realizes the Freak reflects the co-existent humanity and freakishness of one’s Secret Self. Fiedler thus ultimately desires a realization that the viewer and the Freak share a common human condition, “that *there are no normals*,” that, at heart, everyone is the same (Fiedler, 1996, p. 159). In the final analysis, Fiedler’s arguments serve to reject the otherness that could serve as a basis for Gadamerian dialogue. While Gadamer calls for us to accept and understand that some differences between ourselves and others cannot be breached entirely, Fiedler attempts to disabuse us of our “illusion” that people with disabilities are different from “normals.” In *The Tyranny of the Normal*, experience involves piercing through the façade of an otherness that operates as a psychic shield (like Freud’s Dream Work, as described in *The Interpretation of Dreams*), preventing us from realizing the truth that would liberate humanity. In the Fiedlerian universe, the preservation of otherness is profoundly bigoted and immoral.

The Promises of Interpersonal Encounters with Disability

Truth and Method reminds us, however, that we should be wary of collapsing distinctions of identity, of asserting that there really are no “abnormal others.” As Gadamer demonstrates, when we do not appreciate an otherness that is “*against me*,” we do not really allow the other’s claim to “say something,” because we have “always already smoothed [them] out beforehand” (p. 361). Put another way, the varying claims to truth made by people with disabilities are not interchangeable, and each disabled person’s statements cannot be enlisted solely in the service of developing nondisabled people’s self-consciousness and confirming their predetermined assumptions.

As British sociologist and disability rights advocate Michael Oliver observes (in a book published the same year as Fiedler’s *Tyranny of the Normal*), on a quotidian level people with disabilities are consistently oppressed by a mainstream society that refuses to consider its traditional assumptions and disability as engaged in a dialogue. As part of a devastating critique of the “medical model” of disability, Oliver (1996) points out that physicians continue to be socialized to believe they are disability “experts” and subsequently “impose” medical treatments on disabled people who were never consulted about their physical needs. When disabled people choose to actively “criticize or reject this imposed treatment,” these medical professionals “appear bewildered” (p. 36). Such bewilderment at the disruption of a one-sided interaction reflects the surprise the Fiedlerian viewer might feel if the Freak suddenly opened his mouth and spoke of the aspects of his experience that emphasized the radical differences between *his* life and the viewer’s.

Moreover, Oliver (1996) argues that academic studies of disability have “consistently failed to involve disabled people except as passive objects.” By “using the [disabled] person for someone else’s ends—the person’s actions do not belong to that individual, but to the researcher” (pp. 139, 140). We should be reminded at this point of Gadamer’s statement that one must be open to other people “not in the sense of simply acknowledging” their, sometimes radical, difference from ourselves, “but in such a way that [they have] something to say to me” (p. 361). It is therefore fitting that Michael Oliver’s solution to the problem of society’s failure to address the needs of disabled people involves developing new interactions between non-disabled and disabled people based on “reciprocity [and] establishing dialogue” (p. 141). Thus, we must continue to work, in the words of the Modern Language Association’s Conference on Disability Issues in the Profession (2004), to “Recruit faculty members, staff members, and students with disabilities.” We must also ensure, as Paul K. Longmore (2003) has recently written, that academic inquiries occur, “Between the disability community and research universities...The traffic of ideas and persons...should flow in both directions...The disability perspective, the insights, experience, and expertise of people with disabilities must inform research” (pp. 1, 223). Gadamer helps us understand that such a “dialogue” is not only crucial for genuine and productive human experience, but also a question of morality.

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Endnotes

¹ For recent examples of such interdisciplinary work, one might consider Susan Wendell's contributions to philosophy and women's studies, Martha Edwards' work in classics, Brenda Brueggemann's scholarship in rhetoric, and the recent History of Disability series launched by NYU Press and edited by Paul K. Longmore and Lauri Umansky.

² It may be important at this point to state that my choice of texts is not meant to imply that Leslie Fiedler's work on disability is especially worthy of negative criticism or that Hans-Georg Gadamer is the most useful philosopher for Disability Studies. Rather, both of these authors have produced highly imaginative, provocative, and at times sensitive works which, in my estimation, are well suited to an exploration of the particular issues I wish to discuss in this paper.

³ For another discussion of how people with physical differences challenge conventional beliefs about humanity, see Elizabeth Grosz, "Intolerable Ambiguity: Freaks as/at the Limit," in *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*, Ed. Rosemarie Garland Thomson is the title here APA style? (New York: New York University Press, 1996).

⁴ Paul K. Longmore discusses the manifestation of, and often the justification for, such fears in popular media in, "Screening Stereotypes: Images of Disabled People in Television and Motion Pictures," *Social Policy* 16 (1985): 31-37. APA?

⁵ Similarly, Hegel claims one only achieves true self-consciousness when the "object for consciousness" is the consciousness of another person.

⁶ For disability rights assessments and critiques of such movements, see James I. Charlton, *Nothing About Us Without Us: Disability Oppression and Empowerment* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998) and Joseph P. Shapiro, *No Pity: People with Disabilities Forging a New Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Times Books, 1993). For discussions of telethons as essentially "co-opting" the (perceived) claims of disabled people see Paul K. Longmore, "Conspicuous Contribution and American Cultural Dilemmas: Telethons, Virtue, and Community." In *Discourses of Disability: The Body and Physical Difference in the Humanities*. Ed. David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997) and [Anne Peters, "Telethons," *The Disability Rag* (May 1982). Page #s] APA?

⁷ Gadamer does not use the term "dialogue" to refer solely to verbal communication but emphasizes there must be some interchange of ideas between all the actors of an experience.

⁸ For a consideration of how deafness can disrupt contemporary literary and critical theory, see H. Dirksen L. Bauman, "Toward a Poetics of Vision, Space, and the Body: Sign Language and Literary Theory." In *The Disability Studies Reader*, Ed. Lennard J. Davis. (New York: Routledge, 1997). APA?

⁹ As previously noted, Gadamer derives this idea, in part, from Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, specifically the second on the master-slave dialectic which demonstrates there is no self-consciousness without an encounter with another self-consciousness.