Disability and Environmental Political Theory

Nancy J. Hirschmann, The University of Pennsylvania

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This paper considers environmentalism from a disability perspective. Disability is rarely even mentioned, much less engaged, by environmental theory. And since very few political theorists write about disability at all, it shouldn’t be surprising that environmental political theorists ignore disability. *The Oxford Handbook of Environmental Political Theory* contains one article that mentions disability; in “Bodies, Environments, and Agency” Teena Gabrielson says she will “draw on the work of feminists and disability theorists to suggest the value of conceptualizing agency as relational, socially distributed, and embodied” to develop a new materialist understanding of agency as important to environmental theory; but she draws on disability scholar Rosemary Garland Thompson and my own very brief piece in *Politics & Gender* to gesture toward an idea of agency that moves away from the liberal ideal, which then ties to environmental theory through a consideration of fire.[[1]](#footnote-1) Though one appreciates her acknowledgement of disability’s relevance to environmentalism, and her efforts to attend to these literatures, the connection between disability and environment is loose and indirect.

Yet I have been thinking about whether considering disability might help us formulate good environmental political theory. In my abstract for this conference, I said that I was hoping to provide an overview of the two fields of disability theory and environmental political theory, in order to identify points of tension and complementarity; and that I hoped to come up with some suggestions about how environmental political theory can move forward on questions of disability. The paper that I have had time to write comes nowhere near such a comprehensive and ambitious project. All I have been able to put together here are some very basic preliminary thoughts. Environmental theory is a new field for me, mapping onto disability theory which is a new field for most of the discipline, and so my hope is to benefit from hearing the other presentations and the ideas that people here have to share as I cogitate on how to bring these various strands, all of which seem to be excluded from each other, together.

The concept of “the environment” has almost always been an important concept to disability studies, most centrally “the built environment.” Under the so-called “social model of disability,” for instance, it is maintained that disability is not a condition of bodies themselves—which would be the medical model, the idea that disability is a medical disorder, a biological or physical defect that needs to be treated or cured. Rather, on the social model, disability is the result of how human-made environments are structured to favor certain kinds of bodies and disfavor others, to which it is unreceptive, even hostile.[[2]](#footnote-2) For instance, consider architecture that incorporates stairs instead of slopes or ramps; it disables bodies that use wheelchairs for their mobility. Sidewalks with curbs similarly hamper wheelchair mobility and other kinds of mobility impairments. Visible crosswalks without auditory display puts vision-impaired persons at a severe disadvantage in navigating public spaces. Conferences like this, where the panelists sit at a distance from the audience, and there is no textual translation of what we are saying, much less sign language, turns hearing impairment into a disability. Disability, on this view, is not a condition of a body per se—not, for instance, the inability of a body to walk, or hear, or see—but is rather produced by the way that others have structured the environment. On this model, if we changed the environment to be more universally accessible, disability would disappear; bodily difference in terms of numbers of limbs, or the workings of the nervous system, or the level of vision or hearing, would be simply differences, like race and gender, that have no intrinsically negative moral or structurally disadvantageous implications.

The social model has come under attack by increasing numbers of disability theorists who point out that the extreme view of the social model seems to leave out the body itself. They, and I include myself in this group, want us to recognize the ways in which the body must be included in our understanding of disability. It is not always possible to accommodate disabilities out of existence—all things considered equal, for instance, it will take someone with no arms longer to get dressed in the morning than it takes someone with two arms. Cognitive impairment may prevent me from being able to learn to read. Granted, those two examples have social aspects to them—the kinds of clothing that are acceptable to wear, and the role literacy plays in living day to day—but the point is that some, if not most, disability qualities can be attached to bodies themselves regardless of the environment.

But the environment as it is currently built and structured, almost always makes all disabilities worse, more “disabling.” Similarly, the human-made environment can cause disabling impairments, bringing them into existence. This can happen directly, such as when landmines blow off limbs, or when a car accident on a high-speed interstate highway causes spinal injury that results in paraplegia.[[3]](#footnote-3) But it can also happen indirectly or secondarily, such as when too many years of too much stress at work makes a person eat too much, causing them to become overweight, as well as to suffer from chronic sleep deprivation which, when combined, make them more vulnerable to an autoimmune virus that will lead them to develop Type 2 diabetes.

All of this may be taking a rather loose sense of the concept of “environment;” or more specifically, it focuses on one kind of environment, the built environment. Just as environmental theory and political theory haven’t paid much attention to disability, disability theory hasn’t engaged much with environmentalism. Most accounts of the environment in disability scholarship don’t necessarily have anything to do with climate change, pollution, recycling, species extinction, rising sea levels, or the vast variety of other specific topics that environmental political theory attends to. Moreover, disabled people are often characterized as greedy consumers of energy and resources, since technology is frequently so central to adaptive devices.[[4]](#footnote-4) At the same time, the fact that disabled persons tend to be categorized as “vulnerable” often means society does not expect them to exhibit agency, indeed may not see disabled persons as capable of agency, as Jacobus tenBroek noted fifty years ago.[[5]](#footnote-5)

But the importance of the term “environment” to disability theory is what prompts my interest in environmentalism more broadly, and it is what has brought me to this paper and this panel. Because I wonder how thinking about disability’s conceptualization of and recognition of the environment and how it impacts, interacts with, and forms bodies can help us formulate a set of questions and inquiries into environmental political theory. For instance, and most directly, the notion of the built environment plugs directly into the analysis of the Anthropocene, the argument that humans have now shaped the “natural” environment to such an extent that, as Steven Vogel argues, the “natural” environment is always already “built”—specifically, shaped, determined and defined by the Anthropocene--then this suggests that “nature” doesn’t actually exist anymore, that the “environment” per se is always already “built” and that therefore we must develop “an environmentalism for the built environment.”[[6]](#footnote-6) Certainly political theorists, particularly feminist ones, have long engaged a critique of the concept of nature and the natural, and disability analysis has contributions to make to this. For instance, some of my examples of disability conditions before raise questions about naturalness; it may be natural for the body’s immune system to go into overdrive in response to its having too many bad things done to it (overeating junk food, not sleeping), but if the cause is artificial then what is the nature of this “natural” response? It may be a function of the natural way that the body works to lose feeling in my legs when my spinal cord is injured, but we wouldn’t call paraplegia a “natural” condition per se, it seems like it was something that was produced by human activity.

For my own work, I would like to hold onto the term “natural environment” to distinguish between, let’s say, the creek flowing through the woods behind my house, and the boarded walkway that one of my neighbors built so he could roll his wife’s wheelchair down to the water so she can be with him while he is fishing in the creek. Certainly, the creek itself has been shaped and affected by human action—it used to be dammed for production purposes in the early 20th century, for instance, which probably shaped the direction of its flow; massive runoff from development of impermeable surfaces cause the creek to swell significantly which has changed the shoreline and brought a surprisingly diverse mix of nonnative invasive weeds that changes from year to year. Similarly, when the 300 year old oak tree in front of my house started to fail, and was revealed to have had a serious hollow in the base of the trunk, my arborist said “these things happen” with a shrug of his shoulders, as if nature can’t be contained; but the very fact that my house existed in this space undoubtedly contributed to the tree’s decline, as did the fact that I live downhill from a neighbor who uses poisonous chemicals on his lawn which wash directly into my yard, despite the mountains of compost I apply every year. Or when the somewhat younger black oak out back was toppled by too much wetness on a steep slope causing the ground to soften too much for the roots to hold, this was undoubtedly vastly worsened by the fact that I live at the end of a cul-de-sac and a lot of runoff water heads down the street, into my driveway, and down the slope on which the tree grew. A Kibben argues it would seem “nature” is a concept that has been destroyed.[[7]](#footnote-7) But I’m not yet ready to let go of a basic distinction between “natural environment,” and built environment; in these cases, the built environment killed these trees, which were fashioned by acorns taking root in the grounds one to three hundred years ago. To deal with the ambiguity of that term, however, I will try always to put it in quotation marks.

But my point for this paper is that even if disability literature talks mostly about the built environment, insofar as Vogel is correct that the natural is always already built, then the insights of disability studies can potentially make important contributions to the environmental political theory literature. And indeed, perhaps there needs to be a third term—and it may already exist in environmental political theory that I have not yet encountered—to talk about aspects of “natural environment” that are immediately altered by human action. For instance, parallel to my queries above about autoimmunity and paraplegia, the flooding caused by intense hurricanes such as Florence or superstorm Sandy are “natural” and yet at the same time seem very “unnatural”—remember how bizarre it was to see New York City flooded, how “unnatural” it seemed. We may simply be using the term “unnatural” incorrectly when we say such things, but in that sense the term natural may be in the same state as the term disability, which is always uncomfortably contested and even confusing for those of us who write about it. I suggest the term “no-longer-natural environment.”

This is a key point on which I think disability has something to contribute, because the central contention between disability and environmentalism must center on the changes that humans have made to the “natural environment,” and not just the built environment as if it has no relation to the “natural,” as it appears in much disability theory. The connections between the social model and this “no-longer-natural environment” are potentially profound, in both the direct and indirect senses mentioned previously: for instance, flooding caused by rising sea levels and more intense storms make wheelchair mobility impossible, or at least more difficult: think of stories of disabled persons who were trapped in nursing homes in New York. More indirectly, air pollution to which a baby is exposed in utero could produce a neural tube defect, a disability with which both the baby and her parents must contend.

Disability also proposes very specific challenges and questions to the norms of environmental theory. Ableism can result from environmentalist efforts at sustainability; the most talked about in recent months were community and commercial efforts at sustainability that involved the elimination of plastic straws--which are helpful to enabling people with upper body impairments to drink fluids. As Neil Adger argues, “economic changes associated with increases in income inequality concentrate resources in fewer hands and in particular places. It has been shown both theoretically and by wide observation that such concentration leads to decisions on environment being made by groups who can insulate themselves from its consequences.”[[8]](#footnote-8)Not only can a directly parallel argument be made for race and disability as he makes for class, but the majority of disabled persons live in constrained economic circumstances. This does not mean that a disabled person cannot ask for a straw at a restaurant; but it does mean that the initial policy itself was not created with disabled persons in mind. And unless they point out the issues in a way that has political force, their perspective will not be heard.

Conversely, attempts to ameliorate the disabling effects of specific impairments can appear to harm the “natural” environment, such as when hardscape surfaces are built in natural spaces like beaches or forests to enhance access for mobility impairments. Can efforts toward sustainability and toward disability accommodation be reconciled or are they inevitably at odds? Is environmentalism as it is practiced and expressed in the twenty-first century disablist? I worry about the overall utilitarian bent of some environmentalist theory; in dealing with large scale environmental questions such as species preservation, it is difficult not to think of how particular changes that an ethical environmental policy requires must appeal to the needs of the many in preserving the health of the planet.[[9]](#footnote-9) Will disabled persons be sacrificed on the altar of consequentialism—as often happens in political theories of justice—in the face of global disaster? Answers to these questions depend on the theoretical values and principles underlying our approach to environmental problems, which, I maintain, are largely ableist.

The imbrication of disability and ableism in environmentalism is complex and multi-layered. On the first layer is simple exclusion. Disabled people are often neglected during disasters; Hurricane Katrina and superstorm Sandy are only two examples of persons with disabilities being virtually abandoned, yet in the former we hear a great deal about racial injustice but little about disability. Heatwaves are another example, as disabled people make up a disproportionate number of fatalities but are rarely recognized as such (though some may be included in the category of the elderly, whose danger is often stressed in the popular press).[[10]](#footnote-10)

A second is the ways in which climate change produces disability which is unacknowledged, often because the link between disability and climate change is not always visible, obvious, or direct. As Paul Mohai argues, “mainstream” environmental movements (and I fully recognize that oxymoron) ignore social justice and equality issues; yet we have documentation that there is a disproportionate impact of environmental issues on people of color and poorer populations; this is difficult to see and measure at times because environmental injustices are not immediately obvious.[[11]](#footnote-11) Brooke Ackerly and Katy Attanasi, for instance, argue that deforestation, a global phenomenon, has forced Bangladeshi women to have to walk farther to gather the family’s supply of water, which they carry back balanced on their heads. Such heavy head-loading causes physiological problems including prolapsed uteruses in these women—an “invisible disability” until they become pregnant and are thereby more likely to die in childbirth.[[12]](#footnote-12) So the significance of global capital for the production of these negative affects on women requires a feminist analysis to draw the connections. But since such harm also produces disability—not as an innocent “difference” that the social model urges we consider it, but as a negative bodily condition that compromises these women’s quality of life—it similarly requires a disability centered analysis.

Yet disabled people and a disability perspective are generally not included in major international conferences on climate change. There is a certain unwillingness or at least a lack of attention to the need to accommodate the needs of disabled people in climate discourse and policy-making, what Wolbring calls a form of “adaptation apartheid.” He maintains that this is not just innocent ignorance, but rather that ableism is major problem in the environmental movement; society expects the disabled to cope with certain forms of climate change on their own, and does not incorporate such considerations into its approaches.[[13]](#footnote-13)

The growing literature on environmental justice, which importantly documents the disproportionate impact and greater vulnerability of the poor and racial minorities to the immediate effects of environmental pollution and degradation, has not generally extended to include disability as a category of analysis, or disabled persons as a group so effected. This could in part be geographical—class and racial segregation may group racial minorities and poor persons in particular regions or neighborhoods where hazardous waste sites, incinerators, and toxic dumping from factories are particularly acute, whereas disabled persons are dispersed and spread out across class, race, and other determinants of geographical distribution.[[14]](#footnote-14) But much of it may also be due to epistemological ignorance, as disability does not get onto many scholars’ radars. Still further, at least some of it may be attributed to active resistance and exclusion.

Yet there are several ways in which a disability perspective can further environmentalism and environmental political theory. The first pertains to perspective; as Abbott and Porter note, disabled people have had to develop the skill of understanding and appreciating the limits of things, rather than insisting on limitlessness. This kind of viewpoint would be in keeping with what Julian Agyeman calls a “just sustainability paradigm,” which gives priority to ideals and values of justice and equality while keeping in mind the importance of the environment and its continued protection; for instance, promoting pedestrian-friendly (and wheelchair friendly? he does not discuss disability, but the principle could be the same) streetscapes while working within sustainability principles. He notes that there is a tension between present and future generations but that they can be resolved through thinking over the long-term consequences of present action. For instance, could we not have closed down coal mines without pushing West Virginia and Kentucky voters into the arms of Donald Trump if the Obama administration encouraged the construction of green energy businesses in those states through federal tax or other incentives? Though this is not his example but my own, I think it is that same kind of thinking that is needed to reconcile the needs of disabled persons and environmentalists without stimulating the irrational and over ableist fears of the latter.[[15]](#footnote-15)

Abbott and Porter also note that disabled persons have vast experience with overcoming barriers and responding to risk, all of which make their insights valuable and useful to environmentalist debates. The daily requirements of negotiating a physical environment, whether “natural” or “built,” tends to produce a skillful set of problem-solving abilities, and gives them useful insights about the value of interdependency and scarcity, as well as the importance of human relatedness.[[16]](#footnote-16) It also gives them insight into the very idea of what constitutes our “environment,” and may help broaden our understanding of what an environmental political theory should be thinking about.

All of these pertain more or less to a loose construction of the social model, specifically referring to the ways that human bodies do, can, and must relate to the physical world around us. But another aspect of disability theory that may be useful for a disability political theory pertains to bodies themselves. The strains of disability theory that have been pushing back on the social model to reclaim the concept of the body for disability has a considerable degree of overlap with a new emerging theme in political theory, called “new materialism.” It has struck me how many environmental theory articles are concerned with the idea of agency, much like Gabrielson’s article in the Oxford Handbook mentioned earlier, and particularly the agency of nature, and of bodies’ interaction with nature, beginning with Jane Bennet’s *Vibrant Matter* and particularly developed in anthropology’s “ontological turn” and the work of Beth Povinelli and Karen Barad.[[17]](#footnote-17) My thoughts on this are too under-developed to write anything of substance here, but the ways in which agency is structured by and through entities that have heretofore been seen as excluded by agency is a theme that I have been working on in another context, specifically regarding the will’s location in the body and not just in the mind; and it is something I would be happy to talk about in the discussion.[[18]](#footnote-18) I am not sure that I agree with the stress on the agency of nature, particularly to flora, but insofar as others think this is key disability may hold some promise as Gabrielson suggested. My point is that a disability perspective can contribute to the more complicated way of thinking about the relationship between human bodies and the environments in which we are located that we are seeing in some environmental theory, the ways that we shape and affect them, and the ways in which they shape and affect us, and attending to disability would be useful for disability political theory.

1. Teena Gabrielson “Bodies, Environments, and Agency” *The Oxford Handbook of Environmental Political Theory,* Edited by Teena Gabrielson, Cheryl Hall, John M. Meyer, and David Schlosberg (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016, 399-400; Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, “Misfits: A Feminist Materialist Disability Concept,” Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy 26, 3 (2011).: 591–609; Nancy J. Hirschmann, “Feminist Thoughts on Freedom and Disability” (corrected title from “Feminist Thoughts on Freedom and Rights,” errata in v. 8 n. 3) *Politics & Gender* 8, 2 (2012): 216–22. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. On the medical and social models, see Barbara Arneil and Nancy J. Hirschmann, “Disability and Political Theory: An Introduction”, in *Disability and Political Theory*, ed. Barbara Arneil and Nancy J. Hirschmann, Cambridge University Press, 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Of course one could argue that the paraplegia is an “indirect” result of the proliferation of high-speed highways and a culture that is overly dependent on the automobile, resulting in so many cars on the road that drivers becomes frustrated and drive aggressively as a result; as well, the increase in driver distraction from phones as well as on-board systems built into cars could also be said to be an indirect cause of the paraplegia. See John Meyer, *Engaging the Everyday: Environmental Social Criticism and the Resonance Dilemma* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015), esp. ch. 6, “Automobility and Freedom.” The distinction between direct and undirect is not perfect, but it is nevertheless relevant. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. David Abbott and Sue Porter, “Environmental Hazard and Disabled People: From Vulnerable to Expert to Interconnected” *Disability & Society*, vol. 28, no. 6, 2013, pp. 839-852; 847; see also Paul Pepper, “It’s Not Easy Being Green.” *Disability Now*. 2007. <http://www.disabilitynow.org.uk/living/style/its-not-easy-being-green>. Accessed online December 1 2008; this website is no longer active however. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Jacobus tenBroek, “The Right to Live in the World: The Disabled in the Law of Torts,” *California Law Review* 54.2 (May, 1966): 841-919. See also Jacobus tenBroek, “The Disabled in the Law of Welfare,” *California Law Review* 54.2 (May, 1966): 809-40. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Steven Vogel, *Thinking Like a Mall: Environmental Philosophy after the End of Nature?* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015), 7. On the idea that human are always already post-nature see Bill McKibben, *The End of Nature* (New York: Random House, 1989). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See Vogel, 16, for a similar notion of nature which he calls “biological,” which I do not really accept, since we tend to think of biology as pertaining to fauna (including humans), not flora, despite David George Haskell’s argument in *The Song of Trees: Stories from Nature’s Great Connectors* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. W. Neil Adger, “Inequality, environment, and planning,” *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space*34, 10 (2002): 1716-1719; quote on p. 1717. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Peter Singer’s work on animal rights, only late linked to environmental issues, and who has made it clear that he believes persons with “severe” disabilities should not be permitted to exist is the most obvious. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Gregor Wolbring, “A Culture of Neglect: Climate Discourse and Disabled People.” *M/C Journal*, vol. 12, no. 4, 2009. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Paul Mohai, et al. “Environmental Justice.” *Annual Review of Environment and Resources*. Vol. 34, 2009, pp. 405-430 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. See Nancy J. Hirschmann, “Invisible Disability: Seeing, Being, Power,” in *Civil Disabilitites: Citizenship, Membership, and Belonging*, ed. Nancy J. Hirschmann and Beth Linker, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Gregor Wolbring, “A Culture of Neglect: Climate Discourse and Disabled People.” *M/C Journal*, vol. 12, no. 4, 2009. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. On environmental reacism, see for instance Kimberly P. Fields, “Beyond Protest: The Effects of Grassroots Activism on Maryland and Pennsylvania’s Responses to Environmental Justice” (2018) *Environmental Justice*, Vol. 11, No.1, 15-28. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Julian Agyeman, “Toward a ‘just’ sustainability?” *Continuum*, vol. 22, no. 6, 2008, pp. 751-756. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Abbott and Porter, “Environmental Hazard”. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. ##  Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Duke University Press 2010); Elizabeth Povinelli, *Geontologies: A Requiem to Late Liberalism* (Duke University Press 2016); Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Duke University Press 2007).

 [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. For instance, I have been writing on the concept of the will as located not only in the rational, choosing mind but also in the body itself, which would seem to have complementary or parallel relationships to the idea that a river or a tree has agency. Cf. Gabrielson, “Bodies, Environments, and Agency”; Sharon Krause “Bodies in Action: Corporeal Agency and Democratic Politics,” *Political Theory* 39(3) (2011): 299–324, and her more recent work in progress on eco-responsibility; and Vogel, *Thinking Like a Mall*, particularly chapter 6, “The Silence of Nature.” [↑](#footnote-ref-18)