

# THE IDIOT WITHIN THE CRIPPLE: THE MATERIALIST TURN IN LOCKE AND ROUSSEAU

Lucas G. Pinheiro  
University of Chicago  
[lucaspinheiro@uchicago.edu](mailto:lucaspinheiro@uchicago.edu)

Abstract prepared for the Midwest Political Science Association 2015 Annual Meeting

MPSA 2015 | April 19, 2015 | Chicago, IL

In her essay on the portrayal of disabilities in modern political theory, Barbara Arneil highlights the problematic conflation of physical and cognitive disabilities among modern political thinkers. She argues that the tendency of political theorists—from John Locke to Charles Taylor—to conflate both kinds of disabilities “is critically important, for if the *physically* disabled are systematically excluded from political theories ostensibly rooted in *rational* agency, it suggest there is *something* about disability itself ... that explains the long-standing exclusion and discrimination of the *physically* disabled.” I will argue in this paper that Arneil’s “something” is suggestive of a consistent structural condition within the theories of John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau that is responsible for excluding persons with both physical and cognitive disabilities in a particular way due to their “impairment.” In what follows I shall explore how the modern political thoughts of Locke and Rousseau exclusively, and structurally, marginalize physically disabled persons. I will use Arneil’s “something” as a starting point for discussing the place of physically disabled persons within the theories of Locke and Rousseau.

Arneil identifies what she calls “*something* about disability” as the overwhelmingly tragic narrative through which disability has been traditionally conveyed in western political thought. She argues that the conflation of physical and cognitive disabilities throughout modern political theory is grounded in the dominance of a “tragic narrative” that represents a “profoundly negative image for disabled persons,” a narrative she argues runs from John Locke up to Martha Nussbaum (232). What Arneil calls a “meta-narrative of conflating negative images” (231) is undeniably tied with the medical model of disability, for it uncritically endorses the widely accepted view that a disability, either physical or cognitive, is an undesirable impediment characteristic of an individual, rather than a socio-spatial construction.

While a compelling and accurate critique of the problematic modern political narratives of disability, Arneil’s conclusion does not fully explain *how* physically disabled persons are excluded from modern political theories. Rather, she suggests a reason as to *why* physical and cognitive disabilities have been traditionally conflated by modern thinkers. My goal in this paper, then, is to provide an alternative answer to Arneil’s “something” by answering both *why* and *how* physically disabled persons are excluded from political theories ostensibly rooted in rational agency. I argue that Locke’s and Rousseau’s exclusion of physically disabled persons from their political theories has its roots in a materialist sentiment. Their materialism, I argue, makes the connection

between mind and body an explicit concern in their thought. Accordingly, then, the development of a healthy and robust able-body is seen an indispensable requisite for the development of a child's cognitive faculties and, ultimately, his full rationality.

I contend, throughout this paper, that the exclusion of physically disabled persons from the educational treatises of Locke and Rousseau is premised upon the a priori assumption that a disabled child is incapable of fully developing his or her cognitive faculties in order to reach the "age of reason." This 'natural' incapacity, then, is seen as a product of a disabled body, which, due to its malfunctions and abnormalities, precludes the development of a rational mind—whose faculties are intrinsically dependent upon the development of a healthy and able body. This underlying connection between the development of the body and the faculties of the mind highlights an important maxim of exclusion that allows their political theories to exclude physically disabled persons without betraying their compulsory foundation of rational agency. This maxim, which will be the recurring theme of this paper vocalizes the underlying sentiment that within every "cripple" lies an "idiot."

I situate what I have called the "anti-Cartesian materialism" in Locke and Rousseau within the ableist nexus of exclusion in their political theories. I argue that the overlying connection both thinkers make between the development of an able-body and the maturation of cognitive faculties is used as a premise for exclusion in their educational treatises. Whereas for Locke this is realized through *tacitly* excluding physically disabled pupils due to the failure of his framework to accommodate somatically deviant bodies, it is, for Rousseau, materialized in an overtly *explicit* exclusion of the "cripple."