

# Art and Disability or Disabled Artists are Victorious in at Least Two Senses

**João Vicente Ganzarolli de Oliveira**

Professor and researcher of the Centre of Reference in Assistive Technology of the Tercio Pacitti Institute of the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (CRTA-NCE/UFRJ), Brazil. He is the author of books and articles on Disability Studies, History of Culture, Aesthetics and Philosophy of Art.  
Email: jganzarolli@usa.com

*The refusal to take sides on great moral issues is itself a decision. It is a silent acquiescence to evil. The Tragedy of our time is that those who still believe in honesty lack fire and conviction, while those who believe in dishonesty are full of passionate conviction.*

Fulton Sheen

*Beauty will save the world.*

Fyodor Dostoyevsky

**Abstract** – This article addresses the relationship between art and disability; in doing so it highlights the role of Christianity in general and Catholicism in particular as the great benefactor of the disabled. Special attention is also given to the possibility of disabled people becoming professional and successful artists. In times like ours, when so many people prefer to hear and read half-truths and lies than to face truth and reality as they are, political correctness has become the one that pulls the strings. Given that “Nature is the realm of freedom”, as Alexander von Humboldt once said, I do hope my comments on art and disability will be of utility for those interested in Disability Studies; and in doing so, I also hope it can contribute for facilitating the entry of the disabled – be he artist or not – in the job market in general.

**Keywords** – Art, Disable Artist, Victorious, Senses.

## I. A HISTORY OF ABSENCE

Reality is always wider than our data about it. Even in the case of a grain of sand, and no matter the approach taken, a full understanding is impossible for us – let alone a delivery in full of the meanings and interpretations contained in this little reality’s portion. That is the reason why a complete history is a history that has never been told nor written and will never be. Notwithstanding its unquestionable merits, Richard Overly’s *Complete History of the World* is a labour of Sisyphus. It is impossible to write a complete history of any subject whatsoever, much less the world as a whole. History is a modest science, in which doubts very often outnumber certainties, and exceptions defy rules. Historians’ accounts are, at best, tiny tips of icebergs, most of which will always remain submerged in the depths of the past. This is even more true for a history of a phenomenon like disability, where gaps are legion and reliable data are like a drop of water in the desert.

It is about a history of absence. Historical books on disability do exist and some of them are absolutely worth reading – to name but a few, *Der Krüppel. Ethnologia passionais humanae* (Klaus Müller, Germany), *Los ciegos em la historia* (Jesús Montoso Martínez, Spain), *Historia de*

*las deficiencias* (Antonio León Aguado Díaz, Spain), *Les musiciens aveugles dans l’histoire* (Louis Ciccone, France), *A epopéia ignorada. A pessoa deficiente na história do mundo de ontem e de hoje* (Otto Marques da Silva, Brazil) –, yet they are all doomed to be incomplete, which is obviously the case with this article; in other words, all those writings are deficient (lat. *deficiens* : “not having enough of something that is important or necessary”<sup>1</sup>), a denomination that might be used as a synonym for “impaired”, “handicapped”, “disabled” and many other terms connected with the issue in question.

## II. DISABILITY, SUFFERING IN GENERAL AND CATHOLICISM

Suffering does not provide enough explanation at a purely human level; one has to accept it as a mystery beyond comprehension and turn it over to God, who has no obligation to justify His plans for us.<sup>2</sup> As for the causes of suffering, be it moral or physical, we can restrict them to just two: the loss of something we had, or the lack of something we would like to have; hence the rule: the less demands we have and the smaller they are, the closer to true happiness we get. We all know that “Physical or mental abnormalities, congenital deformities, traumatic amputations, serious illnesses and disabling consequences, be they temporary or permanent, are as old as humanity itself”.<sup>3</sup> In pre-historic times,

It is almost certain that a pre-historical child born with deformities or appearing extremely weak would have been eliminated in some way, either in that she seemed to lack the basic requirements for surviving on her own, or owing to beliefs that linked disability to evil spirits, deities of punishment, or even in view of utilitarian reasons.<sup>4</sup>

The same cultural practices that lead to discrimination or even to annihilation of the weak (be he disabled, sick or just undesirable) can emerge in the most diverse historical and geographical contexts: from ancient Greece and Rome (Plato, Spartans in General, Seneca) to 21<sup>st</sup> century’s Ghana and Western supporters of euthanasia, the examples are legion.<sup>5</sup> Defender of *functionalism* (“the

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/deficient>, consulted September 12, 2015; see also FREUND 1866, p. 748.

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, SHEEN 1958, p. 242 ff.

<sup>3</sup> MARQUES DA SILVA 1987, p. 21.

<sup>4</sup> Idem, p. 37.

<sup>5</sup> “The popular support (for assisted suicide) is rooted in disability discrimination. It’s rooted in the idea that life with a disability is a fate worse than death”, Amy Hasbrouck told The Catholic Register during a break at the Euthanasia Symposium 2013 in Toronto” (SCHADENBERG

belief that what defines human persons is what they can and cannot do”), the Australian ethicist Peter Singer went so far as suggesting, in 1993, that “no newborn should be considered a person until 30 days after birth and that the attending physician should kill some disabled babies on the spot”.<sup>6</sup> In Canada – a country that espouses religious pluralism, thus (so far) a non-Muslim country –, Muslims have already been imposing their own discriminatory rules against non-Muslims, seen by them as non-humans to whom only three options ought to be given: Islam, sub-citizenship (i.e., *dhimmitude*, in practice = slavery) or death.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, as Jacques Barzun used to say, “Political correctness does not legislate tolerance; it only organizes hatred.” Although a Canadian by birth, 21 years old Austin Lewis “has been rejected for subsidized housing at a unit on Merton Street, in the city of Toronto, where he currently lives, because he is not Muslim. Lewis continues to look for a place to live”.<sup>8</sup>

A handicap (*viz.*, a disability, an impairment, a deficiency etc.) usually denotes the lack of something that should exist in a living body in a certain place and under certain conditions that we call *normal* –yet it does not. Something important is missing in somebody; philosophically speaking, disability tends to be included into the philosophical category of *non-being*. (Sometimes, deficiency manifests itself through an excess of something undesirable: a hump, hyperdactyly [a congenital physical anomaly in humans, cats and dogs, and that consists in having supernumerary fingers or toes] etc.). Ancient philosophers, namely Plato and Aristotle, tended to find justifications for condemning disabled people to exposition of even death. Following the teachings and steps of Jesus, early Christians outperformed “the reciprocal hospitality that had prevailed in ancient Greece and the family-orientated obligations of the Romans”; in doing so, they catered to “particular groups marginalized by poverty, sickness and age”.<sup>9</sup> They inaugurated the systematic practice of charity in the West – if not in the world –, and this revolutionary attitude must have included the acceptance, the social inclusion and integration of disabled people in general, who obviously belonged to the group of the underprivileged, which presupposed impoverishment, discrimination, prejudices of all kinds and even abandonment. As medical historian Fielding Garrison points out, before the time of Christ, “the spirit towards sickness and misfortune was not one of compassion, and the credit of ministering to human suffering on an extended scale belongs to Christianity”.<sup>10</sup>

Most of today's globalized world thinkers and authors tend to ignore, despise or even deny the reality of the measureless debt the Western civilization – let alone

humanity in general – owes to the Catholic Church. Reasons for such disregard are many. Some of them are simple, others not; they range from ignorance, envy and presumption to ingratitude, personal resentments and bad faith. “Hospitals, social assistance, care for the disable and charitable activity in the West – if not in the world – are all catholic inventions. The extend and importance of that dynamism became clearer when it was extinguished. Sixteenth-century England is an eloquent example. Supported by his protestant fellows and apparently driven by greed, King Henry VIII “suppressed the monasteries and confiscated their property, distributing it at rock-bottom prices to men of influence within his realm”.<sup>11</sup> Persecution against the Catholics (in particular priests, monks and nuns) provoked the decline of Catholicism in England, the corollary of which was the disappearance of all those typical Catholic benefits. The entire population of the Kingdom was affected; the lack of hospitals, social assistance, care for the disable and charitable activity caused frustration, which led to popular anger, which led to popular rebellion, such as the Pilgrimage of the Grace.<sup>12</sup>

More than one century after the end of King Henry VIII-Elizabethan era, Samuel Johnson (1709-1784), though not himself a Catholic but “ever awake to the calls of humanity”, had the courage to put that

It has now been fashionable, for near half a century, to defame and vilify the house of Stuart, and exalt and magnify the reign of Elizabeth. The Stuarts have found few apologists; for the dead cannot pay for praise, and who will, without reward, oppose the tide of popularity? Yet there remains still among us, not wholly extinguished, a zeal for truth, a desire of establishing right in opposition to fashion.<sup>13</sup>

All of these issues lead us to focus on the so called *Golden Rule* (“One should treat others as one would like others to treat oneself; one should not treat others in ways that one would not like to be treated”), a moral principle that acts as a counterweight to the *Law of the Jungle*<sup>14</sup>; the *Golden Rule* is something already existent among ancient peoples (notably Egyptians, Mesopotamians, Jews, Chinese, Jews, Indians, Persians and Greek), and that Christians brought to perfection both in theory and practice (see, for instance, Luke 6: 31).

<sup>11</sup> WOODS, Jr. 2012, p. 183.

<sup>12</sup> See

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/AntiCatholicism\\_in\\_the\\_United\\_Kingdom](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/AntiCatholicism_in_the_United_Kingdom), consulted December 14, 2015.

<sup>13</sup> BOSWELL 1999, p. 180 and 182.

<sup>14</sup> “The law of the jungle is an expression that means ‘every man for himself’, ‘anything goes’, ‘need of the sole outweighs the need of the many’, ‘survival of the strongest’, ‘survival of the fittest’, ‘kill or be killed’, ‘dog eat dog’ and ‘eat or be eaten’. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the Law of the Jungle as ‘the code of survival in jungle life, now usually with reference to the superiority of brute force or self-interest in the struggle for survival’. It is also known as jungle law or frontier justice. The phrase was used in a poem by Rudyard Kipling to describe the obligations and behavior of a wolf in a pack. However, this use of the term has been overtaken in popularity by the other interpretations above” ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Law\\_of\\_the\\_jungle](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Law_of_the_jungle), consulted December 14, 2015).

2013, consulted October 14, 2015; see also [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Disability\\_in\\_Ghana](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Disability_in_Ghana) consulted October 14, 2015; and AGUADO DÍAZ 1995, p. 33 ff).

<sup>6</sup> KLUSENDORF 2009, consulted November 15, 2015.

<sup>7</sup> See, for instance, IBN KHALDUN 2008, I, 2. For those who want to go a little deeper on the complicity of Canada, Europe and the West in general with Islamic ideology, see BAT YE'OR 2014, p. 155 et passim.

<sup>8</sup> MADONIK 2015, consulted November 15, 2015.

<sup>9</sup> RISSE 1999, p. 19.

<sup>10</sup> GARRISON 1914, p. 118.

### III. DISABILITY AND ART

Disability is a universal phenomenon: far from being something exclusive of mankind, it may affect all living beings, since it stems from the vulnerability of life itself. Mutual assistance in case of disability can be observed among certain animals, e.g., cetaceans – what allows us to say that the *Golden Rule* is not a privilege of ours; it does exist, here and there along with the same *Law of the Jungle*, within the animal kingdom. Art, on the other hand, is something that only human beings are able to produce and enjoy. Originally, “art” means any kind of human intervention in Nature which results in a product that Nature alone is not capable of producing; aesthetic context comes later, very later. In this sense, a pre-historic tool is as much artistic as a Vincent van Gogh’s canvas. Man is the only living being who *creates*, strictly speaking. Many other animals can build their own dwelling, and even fabricate and use tools for their own purposes (monkeys, elephants, cetaceans, canines, bears, beavers, parrots, owls, gulls, crows, ravens, cephalopods and even insects<sup>15</sup>). Yet all of their works are inscribed in a very limited range of possibilities: a beaver will never built a beehive, neither will a bee built a beaver dam; in normal conditions beavers and bees do not even have the power of choosing between building and not building. They are compelled by Nature to act just as they do – full stop. Their works are nothing more than natural extends of their own bodies.

Of course, human works can also be seen as a body extension of ours. The crucial point is that these works are not necessarily connected neither with feeding, defence nor reproduction – in one word, with *survival*, the basic goal of every living being. In their broad sense of complements of Nature that Nature itself does not produce, technical (derived from the Greek word “*téchne*” = “art”), i.e., artistic (derived from the Latin word “*ars*” = “art”) products – contrary to what Aristotle, Ortega y Gas set and philosophers in general use to say – did not appear together with man; our first ancestors are seven million years old, yet during more than four million years, the pre-historical man did act on Nature as a modifying agent: physiological, anatomic and neurologic conditions prevented him from being a tool maker, let alone an artist – in the aesthetic sense, as the *Homo Sapiens sapiens* will be, at least since the last 40.000 years.<sup>16</sup> (Certainly, our cousin, the *Homo neanderthalensis*, was not indifferent to beauty; evidence of deliberate decoration and aesthetic intention in his objects testifies in favour of this thesis; a *neanderthalian* flute, 45.000 years old, supports the same conclusion.<sup>17</sup>)

According the pre-Socratic philosopher Anaximander of Miletus, man can be defined as *an animal provided with hands*.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, hands, properly said, are a gift we are the

only ones to have in the whole animal kingdom; *human* hands were given to us 2,5 million years ago and it was thanks to them that we could start to transform stones into tools and so on: the doors were opened for the fabrication of objects (initially purely functional, subsequently functional and aesthetic, and at a later stage, purely aesthetic). Notwithstanding, a man without hands – or who cannot use them due to paralysis or similar diseases – is still a man. He not only is able to fabricate and use his own tools, but he can also enjoy and create artistic objects, aesthetically speaking. This is precisely the case of the Irish drawer, painter and writer Christy Brown (1932-1981) and a myriad of other artists, the most talented and famous of whom belonging to the Association of Mouth and Foot Painting Artists of the World (MFWA) (*Vereinigung der Mund- und Fussmalenden Künstler, VDMFK*), founded and first chaired by the Liechtensteiner Arnulf Erich Stegmann (1912-1984) in 1956.<sup>19</sup> With regard to Christy’s left foot, he himself wrote that “My heart gave a leap of pure joy. (...) The rest of me was useless, worthless, and that one limb, my left foot, was the only workable thing in my whole body”.<sup>20</sup>

Considered by the New Zealander expert Marc Alexander as “one of the most remarkable men the 20<sup>th</sup> century produced”<sup>21</sup>, Erich Stegmann was affected by polio; he was

born deprived of the use of hands and built a successful career in Germany as a painter who painted with his mouth. (...) Erich Stegmann travelled around the world seeking artists who “could not use their hands” and wanted to accompany him in his dream of creating an organization that granted them independence through selling their works.<sup>22</sup>

*In Stegmann’s own words,*

What difference does it make how a picture is painted? A painter does not mean only a pair of hands – he paints from his heart what his eyes see... Pictures are like children who leave home. Nobody asks them whether their father has lost a foot or an arm.<sup>23</sup>

Disabled artists are victorious in at least two senses: of having overcome the difficulties inherent in disability as well as in art.

### IV. NATURE: REALM OF FREEDOM

Vision and hearing are the aesthetic senses par excellence, as the Greeks have correctly stated.<sup>24</sup> During the High Middle Ages, Saint Thomas Aquinas went so far as to consider the act of seeing as a metonymy of the aesthetic phenomenon as a whole. Beautiful things,

<sup>15</sup> See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tool\\_use\\_by\\_animals](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tool_use_by_animals), consulted December 14, 2015.

<sup>16</sup> See LEAKEY 1997, p. 30 et passim.

<sup>17</sup> See EDWARDS 2013, p. 256; and SCHRENK & MÜLLER 2005, p. 101 et passim.

<sup>18</sup> See ARISTOTLE nd (*De partibus animalium*), IV, 10.

<sup>19</sup> See ALEXANDER 1995, p. 7 et passim; and TOVAE et alii nd, p. 28 et passim. As for Stegmann’s motherland, “Blink and you might miss Liechtenstein: the pocket-size principality is so small (...) that a cross-country run really means across the whole country” (LEVITON et alii 2005, p. 735).

<sup>20</sup> BROWN 1998, p. 123.

<sup>21</sup> ALEXANDER 1995, p. 7.

<sup>22</sup> STEGMANN et alii sd, p. 4-5; see also G ANZAROLLI DE OLIVEIRA 2007, p. 123 et passim.

<sup>23</sup> Cited by ALEXANDER 1995, p. 7.

<sup>24</sup> See, for instance, PLATO nd (*Hippias Major*), 298d sq.

according to the Scholastic giant, are “those which please when they are seen”: *pulchrasunt quae visa placent*.<sup>25</sup> Circa nine hundred years before, Saint Augustine went much further: sensibility as a whole was metaphorically turned into a visual matter.<sup>26</sup> On the eve of Modernity, Alexander von Humboldt said that “The eye is the organ of the *Weltanschauung*”.<sup>27</sup> Such claims are irrefutable; their foundations stem from physiology: in normal conditions, no less than 80% of our knowledge of the world we live in originate from the visual cortex – assuming, of course, that “Nothing is in the intellect which was not first in the senses”.<sup>28</sup> Yet, it is possible to cite a significant number of artists who triumphed over the absence of either one superior sense or even both of them. Giants like Goya and Beethoven, who became deaf, or like Milton and Antonio de Cabezón, who became blind, do not require further clarification; but let us also not forget names like those of the French sculptor Louis Vidal (1831-1892), who lost his sight due an eye disease contracted in his youth, and the North American writer Hellen Keller (1880-1968), who was both blind and deaf.

*Being disabled does not forcibly mean to be unable*: from the ancient philosopher Didimus to the contemporary scientist Stephen Hawking, a myriad of examples prove this rule. Certain autists – not withstanding their mental and social handicap – are gifted with extraordinary musical talent. The North American Thomas Wiggins (1849-1908), aka “Blind Tom”, in addition to being blind, was also a slave and mental handicapped (as an adult, his lexical asset never exceeded one hundred words); on the other hand, he was a prodigy on the piano: at the age of four, he could play from memory a Mozart’s sonata he just listened; six years old, he improvised; seven, he gave his first concert; adult, he could play 5.000 musical pieces by ear, since, being blind, he could not read music; he is now regarded as an *autistic savant*.<sup>29</sup>

Any investigation on disable people is, first of all and most of all, an investigation on man, and any investigation on man is, necessarily, an investigation on life itself. Some thirty years ago, Professor Dietmar Todt, the reputed behavioural biologist, wrote a book that stresses our inevitable dependence on life, as well as the impossibility of our existing in a place where there is no life.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, we are social beings, as Aristotle stated more than 2.000 years ago.<sup>31</sup> Yet we are far from being the only living beings that live in society; several other animals behave in the same way.<sup>32</sup> Given that nature is the realm of

freedom<sup>33</sup>, with regard to us, *Homines sapientes sapientes*, nothing can be more anti-natural than political correctness and the suppression of free-speech upon which it is carried out as such.

## V. WORK AND DISABILITY

Issues like ability (and inability) to work have always been delicate throughout history. In contemporaneity, they have become critical, given, among other things, the search for a precise definition for *disability*, along with the growing awareness that “being disabled does not mean being unable” (that is to say: a burden” for the society in general; *there is not even a single case in which a person – be her able or disabled – can be of some great utility for herself and the others*, as the Basque author Narciso Irala used to highlight in his essays and conferences around the world some decades ago.<sup>34</sup> It is high time to give due scholarly attention to such subjects and to spare no efforts to change pictures such as this described in the passage that follows:

An estimated 386 million of the world’s working-age people have some kind of disability, says the International Labor Organization (ILO). Unemployment among the persons with disabilities is as high as 80 per cent in some countries. Of the some 70 million persons with disabilities in India, only about 100,000 have succeeded in obtaining employment in industry.<sup>35</sup>

The deeper we delve into this still largely unknown ocean called “disability”, the more issues emerge; and the more we study such issues, the more complex become the questions concerning the disabled and the more difficult becomes to find satisfactory answers for them. Whatever the case, one can never avoid the fact that employment plays one of the most important parts of the welfare and rehabilitation of the disabled. Widening and diversifying opportunities for the disabled is not a favour the society in general does for the disabled; it is about a to duty him and to herself, since there is no disabled human being, no matter how severe his disability is, that cannot be rehabilitated, thus becoming socially useful in a way or another.

Derived from the Greek word *ergon*, “work” refers originally to our capacity of producing something useful for us our fellow men.<sup>36</sup> As any other kind of work, a *work of art* is the fruit of the effort and capacity for producing, that gravitate within the same semantic constellation created by the concept of *work*. As any other person who works (i.e., produces), the artist – be he disabled or not – expects to be rewarded for his job: “People who work have a job, usually one which they are paid to do”.<sup>37</sup> Is

<sup>25</sup> SAINT THOMAS AQUINAS 1980, I, Q. 5, art. 4, ad primum.

<sup>26</sup> See SAINT AUGUSTINE 1968, X, 35; and also ARNHEIM 1974, p. 166 et passim; and ESPÍNOLA VEIGA 1983, p. XIV.

<sup>27</sup> “*Das Auge ist das Organ der Weltanschauung*” (ALEXANDER VON HUMBOLDT 1978, p. 52).

<sup>28</sup> ARISTOTLE nd(*De anima*), III, 429b.

<sup>29</sup> See CHANGEAUX & DEBRU 2010, p. 158-159; and [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blind\\_Tom\\_Wiggins](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blind_Tom_Wiggins), consulted November 11, 2015).

<sup>30</sup> DIETMAR 1989, p. 5.

<sup>31</sup> See ARISTOTLE nd(*Politics*), 1253a; 1278b.

<sup>32</sup> See, for instance, PORTMANN 1953, p. 65-103; and CHANGEAUX & DEBRU 2010, p. 81 et passim.

<sup>33</sup> “*Die Natur aber ist das Reich der Freiheit*” (ALEXANDER VON HUMBOLDT 1978, p. 1).

<sup>34</sup> See, for instance, *Controle cerebral e emocional*, São Paulo: Loyola, 1970, p. 125 et passim.

<sup>35</sup> <http://www.disabled-world.com/disability/statistics/>.

<sup>36</sup> See Anatole Bailly. *Dictionnaire grec-français*, Paris, Hachette, 1990, pp. 798-799.

<sup>37</sup> Andrew Delahunty. *The Collins Cobuild English Dictionary*, London, The University of Birmingham/Collins-Cobuild/HarperCollins, 1995, p. 1.930.

must be stressed that the social integration and inclusion of disabled people into the labour market is much more a matter of providing them opportunity than of their ability to deal with them. “Being disabled does not mean to be unable”, the saying goes; and what is more, reward does not forcibly mean “money”, and that is also valid for any and all person, no matter her level of *ability*, so to say. In every kind of work, material reward is always a consequence of a spiritual acknowledgement: the recognition and the gratitude for something that has been done for the benefit of some other creature(s) in this common home that we call world.

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