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Disability in the Middle Ages and Cultural History

Disability, poverty and the cultural framework including, amongst others, moral and theological concepts, intersect visually in a late-medieval painting. Medieval art did not just depict the seen, but in the unseen incorporated multivalent messages. One may elucidate this tension between the realistic and interpretative aspects of medieval art in the frequent depictions of one scene in particular: St Martin donating his cloak to a beggar. While the elements included in such depictions – of the saint, his horse, his cloak and a deserving recipient – are present in all visual representations of this scene, since at least the late tenth century, the precise constellation of these elements and hence the meaning to be read in this imagery changes over the course of the high and later Middle Ages, between the eleventh and fifteenth century. The imagery of St Martin with the beggar therefore makes for a perfect

Abb. 1: Anonymous Master: St Martin and the Beggar, c. 1490. Budapest, National Gallery.

visual barometer of the change in attitudes to and concepts of poverty and physical impairment, and the greater or lesser link between the two.

The fragment of an altar wing by an anonymous Swabian master, painted in 1490 and now shown in the National Gallery at Budapest depicts one of the most popular scenes from late-medieval northern (transalpine) art: St Martin high on horseback, preparing to cut his cloak in half with his sword, so that he may give one half to a cold and shivering beggar. Except that in this painting there is not the standard depiction of one beggar but of two beggars. On the left we observe the fraudulent beggar (*mendicus validus*), who is shown as able-bodied and of physical integrity, while on the right the truly deserving ›cripple‹, marked by his physical impairment, receives Martin's gift. I want to commence with my favourite saint and with a miracle – of sorts – because the image of St Martin dividing his cloak represents the most materialistic of medieval miracles: here in the widest sense the material is apparent in the miraculous, since the cloak is literally a material item. St Martin is an unusual saint, because he rarely performs anything supernatural, such as to cure people (more on thaumaturgic saints below), but instead is very down-to-earth. Martin divides his cloak, a material object, to share with a needy person. The ›miracle‹ only happens after the main event, namely the vision Martin has later that night in his dream of Christ visiting him with the fragment of robe Martin had given the beggar. But which beggar? Here we have the crux of the problem: if a beggar is meant to represent Christ, then how do we know that ›our‹ beggar is truly the right one, the deserving one, the one with material needs?

This essay will cover four themes relating to *disability* in the medieval period: an introductory exploration of the (modern and medieval) definitions of *disability*, the connection between poverty and *disability*, the impact of work and personal status on the *disabled* person and in conclusion some suggestions for which of several competing models of *disability* may be most appropriate for further research into and study of *disability* in pre-modern times.

I. Definitions of *disability*

It is advisable to try to distinguish between ›impairment‹ (the term preferred in the social model of *disability*) and ›*disability*‹ (the term preferred in the medical model of *disability*). In the terminology of *Disability Studies*, impairment is seen as the biological ›fact‹, the bodily manifestation, and describes the purely anatomical, so that impairment lacks social connotations. By contrast, ›*disability*‹ refers to the social constructedness of the relationship between the impaired body and the culture and society that body's owner inhabits.

In 1970s Britain the following definition was suggested:

> »*Impairment: Lacking part or all of a limb, or having a defective limb, organ, or mechanism of the body.* Disability: *The disadvantage or restriction of activity caused by a contemporary social organisation which takes no or little account of people who have physical impairments and thus excludes them from the mainstream of social activities.*«[1]

In other words, to paraphrase Simone de Beauvoirs famous statement on women, one may be born impaired but one is made *disabled*. The notion of the social construction of *disability*

1 Union of the Physically Impaired against Segregation, Fundamental Principles of Disability, London 1976, pp. 3–4, cited by: Colin Barnes, Geof Mercer and Tom Shakespeare, Exploring Disability: A Sociological Introduction, Cambridge 1999, p. 28.

therefore permits historical investigation and analysis. If *disability* is a social construct, as times and societies change, so should notions of what is and what is not *disability*. In contrast, the medico-biological model of *disability* regards impairment and *disability* as virtually synonymous, and treats *disability* as a ›natural‹ occurrence, thereby negating any necessity for historical explanation. If *disability* is natural, it is by definition unchanging and not within the realms of human agency, and it would therefore be futile to try and look for change let alone historical processes when discussing *disability*. If the medical model is used, then it is at the risk of »contaminating the […] evidence with modern cultural assumptions«.[2]

Yet impairment is ubiquitous in human society, and as far as we can tell from the archaeological record, has been so in past human societies.[3] It has even been demonstrated to exist in other vertebrate animals, as a number of archaeological finds of osteological pathologies in animal bones testify.[4] The World Health Organisation suggested that approximately ten percent of the world's population is either physically or mentally impaired at any given time, which means that we may assume a similar proportion for past societies as well, the Middle Ages being no exception.[5] Impairment therefore is and has been a factor in a large number of people's lives, so one can study the implications and effects of impairment, in past as well as present societies.

There are a number of problems relating to a study of impairment and *disability* in historic societies. To begin with, there is the wide scope of *disability*, both as linguistic term and as biological condition in the shape of impairment; there are many different kinds of states of impairment, and there is also no one singular agreement in modern times on what constitutes ›*disabled*‹. A list of impairments compiled in 1980 by the World Health Organisation was the closest thing to this, but not everyone is happy either with these definitions, or with using them.[6] Essentially, definitions of *disability* are arbitrary and entirely subjective.

Maybe one way, for some people, to define a *disability* would be through an index of visibility, that is, the more noticeable an impairment is to others, the more of a disability it becomes.[7] Greater visibility of an impairment would therefore bring with it greater cultural or social consequences for the affected individual. The distinction between visible and invisible *disability* has important consequences for social expectations, that is, whether a person's *disability* is visible to others or not makes a profound difference as to how that person is

2 Martha L. Edwards, Deaf and Dumb in Ancient Greece, in: Lennard J. Davis (ed.), The Disability Studies Reader, New York, London 1997, pp. 29–51, at p. 29.

3 Cf. Don Brothwell/A. T. Sandison (eds), Diseases in Antiquity, Springfield 1967, which examines all kinds of pathologies from skeletal evidence with a wide-ranging geographical and historical scope.

4 Skeletons of severely arthritic dinosaurs, to name but one example, have been discovered.

5 S. H. N. Wood, International Classification of Impairments, Disabilities and Handicaps: A Manual of Classifications Relating to the Consequences of Disease, Geneva 1980.

6 Ibid., pp. 27–29. This was the first internationally accepted attempt at defining what *disability* is; it distinguished impairment (the loss of a normal function of a bodily part), *disability* (a restriction resulting from impairment) and handicap (the disadvantage for an individual resulting from impairment or *disability*); these definitions were very much in the vein of the medical model and have therefore been heavily criticised by the *disability* movement.

7 In this context it is worth quoting a modern person's own words with regards to perceptions of disease and visibility. A French speech therapist, aged 24 in 1960, who was an informant for a study on illness and self, said: »As long as I don't see the external damages caused by the disease, I am not scared, but as soon as I see the damages […] one disease, for example, that would scare me would be leprosy, because it would eat up parts of one's own body«, cited by: Claudine Herzlich and Janine Pierret, Illness and Self in Society, trans. E. Forster, Baltimore 1987, p. 41.

perceived by their society. »And because invisible disabilities are not readily apparent, their existence in the population tends to get forgotten or dismissed as inconsequential when the subject of disability is raised.«[8]

Some physical impairments that we would now call ›*disabilities*‹ were recognised as such by medieval people, in other words the crippled (*contracti, defecti, decrepiti*), blind (*caeci*), mute (*muti*) or deaf (*surdi*) people, epileptics (*epileptici* or people with *morbus caducus*[9]), and children born with congenital deformities. The non-specific invalids, the *infirmi*, are probably the nearest thing the Middle Ages had as an equivalent to the modern umbrella-term ›*disabled*‹. Besides *infirmus*, there are any number of other vague references to *disability* as a concept, e. g. *deformans, impotens, debilitans, defectus*. So apart from the direct, precise terms, we can never be too certain that the vaguer terms actually imply the notion of *disability*, as they would in our parlance. If one accepts the distinction between the two terms ›impairment‹ and ›*disability*‹ as being contrasting notions, one a physical, the other a cultural one, then that raises the important question: What constitutes a *disability*, or an ability for that matter, in a given culture? To answer this the crucial point to be borne in mind is that ›*disability*‹ is a cultural construction. *Disability* has no »inherent meaning«[10] outside of culture; one cannot therefore speak automatically of all impaired persons as *disabled* at all times, in all places. However, there are certain cultural similarities in which the Middle Ages did, in fact, have a concept of *disability* akin to the modern notion, namely an idea of *disability* as something that is tied up with social, legal and economic status, not just with meta/physical phenomena.

II. Poverty and *disability*

Medieval notions of poverty distinguished between voluntary poverty, which was understood as part of a religious vocation and was praised, and involuntary poverty, which was seen as resulting from a situation of social distress and increasingly came to be despised.[11] The phrase the »poor of Christ« (*pauperes Christi*), meaning the religious poor, becomes frequent from the eleventh and twelfth centuries onwards.[12] Apostolic poverty was something to be

8 Sharon Dale Stone, The Myth of Bodily Perfection, Disability and Society 10 (1995) 4, pp. 413–424, here p. 417.

9 Epilepsy is sometimes referred to as gutta caducus (in thirteenth and fourteenth century English manuscripts), so that even though gutta mostly refers to the more specific gout, gutta can also mean an ailment in general. Cf. R. E. Latham, Revised Medieval Latin Word-List from British and Irish Sources, London 1965, s. v. gutt/a.

10 Edwards, Deaf and Dumb in Ancient Greece, p. 29.

11 However, Otto Gerhard Oexle has argued that the contrast between voluntary, religious poverty on the one hand, and involuntary, economic/social poverty on the other hand, has been exaggerated; furthermore poverty had come to be defined through manual labour in the high middle ages, so that in the case of St Elisabeth her aspirations to voluntary poverty included the real, involuntary poverty and physical work of the lower orders. Otto Gerhard Oexle, Armut und Armenfürsorge um 1200. Ein Beitrag zum Verständnis der freiwilligen Armut bei Elisabeth von Thüringen, in: Sankt Elisabeth. Fürstin, Dienerin, Heilige. Aufsätze – Dokumentation – Katalog, Sigmaringen 1981, p. 78–100, at p. 79 and 92.

12 Cf. Karl Bosl, Potens und Pauper. Begriffsgeschichtliche Studien zur gesellschaftlichen Differenzierung im frühen Mittelalter und zum »Pauperismus« des Hochmittelalters, in: Id., Frühformen der Gesellschaft im mittelalterlichen Europa. Ausgewählte Beiträge zu einer Strukturanalyse der mittelalterlichen Welt, Munich, Vienna 1964, p. 106–134, at p. 121. On poverty and the mendicant orders in particular, see David Burr, Olivi and Franciscan Poverty: The Origins of the *usus*

imitated voluntarily by those people who according to their original status (one may here think of St Francis, the wealthy merchant's son) were neither materially poor nor socially powerless. Because the involuntary poor, who had not chosen to be poor, resented being in that state and desired change, in particular desired wealth, such desire, even if for just a modicum of possessions and money, endangered the spiritual health of the poor. According to Thomas Aquinas »spiritual danger comes from poverty when it is not voluntary, because a man falls into many sins through the desire to get rich, which torments those who are involuntarily poor.«[13] Hence it was argued that it was better to give alms to the voluntary poor, since they did not fall into the sin of cupidity by desiring wealth, whereas the involuntary poor were consumed by desire.

Being poor was therefore a most problematic state to be in during the high and later Middle Ages, since one's moral condition does not sit well with one's entitlement to charity. And in economic terms, the crises of the early- to mid-fourteenth century, coupled with rising numbers of the poor and beggars, narrows the amount of charity the rest of society was willing to provide; fear of ›fraudulent‹ beggars became common, and miracle cures of sick or *disabled* people became subsumed into the discourse of fraud. Stories surrounding fake cures were starting to circulate and invalidate the ›real‹ healing miracles. What worried later medieval people was the fake body, the body that pretends to be one thing but is in fact quite another – the theatrical delusion of the fraudulent beggar's artificially *disabled* body.[14]

The right panel of the outer shutter of the triptych by Hieronymus Bosch, *The Last Judgment*, painted after 1482 and now shown in the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna, depicts the patron saint of Flanders, St Bavo, in the act of distributing alms to the poor. With a hawk on his wrist, symbolising his lofty status and wealth, St Bavo reaches into his purse with his other hand, ready to donate to the poor. He has turned towards a group of paupers, represented by an old woman and two small children, perhaps to indicate the stereotypical ›deserving‹ poor of the widow and the orphans. But the really interesting figure crouches in the shadow behind St Bavo: we can just make out the head and torso of a man, holding a begging bowl in one hand while proffering up his contracted and twisted other arm to the viewer. In front of him a white cloth is spread on the ground, on which is placed a detached and mummified foot. This disturbing and unsettling image raises a series of questions, notably the crucial one of whether this man is a fraud. What is the meaning of the amputated and mummified foot? Is it real, in that it is a genuine body-part and not a fake, a cunningly manufactured model (as some anti-begging literature accused beggars of doing)? Is it in fact his own foot, and if so, how did he come to have his foot amputated? If amputated as the

pauper Controversy, Philadelphia 1989. Also Hervaeus Natalis, The Poverty of Christ and the Apostles, trans. by John D. Jones, Toronto 1999.

13 Thomas Aquinas, Summa theologiae, 2a 2ae, quaest. 186, art. 3, respp. ad 2, ed. and trans. Blackfriars, Oxford 1973, vol. 47, pp. 108–111, cited by Sharon Farmer, Manual Labor, Begging, and Conflicting Gender Expectations in Thirteenth-Century Paris, in: Sharon Farmer/Carol Braun Pasternack (eds), Gender and Difference in the Middle Ages, Minneapolis 2003, pp. 261–287, at p. 273.

14 This is why hermaphrodites are regarded as possessing worrying bodies, because they are positioned outside of the established concepts of male/female, and a male body can turn out to have female characteristics and vice versa. See Irina Metzler, Hermaphroditism in the Western Middle Ages: Physicians, Lawyers and the Intersexed Person, in: Sally Crawford/Christina Lee (eds), Bodies of Knowledge: Cultural Interpretations of Illness and Medicine in Medieval Europe, Oxford 2010, pp. 27–39.

Abb. 2: Hieronymus Bosch: St Bavo, bet. 1504–1508. Vienna, Academy of Fine Arts.

result of a judicial mutilation, in punishment for some criminal misdemeanour, this immediately forms aspersions with regard to the character of the beggar, in contrast to which a medically-induced amputation (say as a result of a disease like ergotism or St Anthony's fire) exonerates his character. Could this even be someone else's body-part, detached from a corpse or ›borrowed‹ from another amputee? In its very ambiguity and disturbing narrative possibilities, this image already casts moral doubt on the figure of the crouching beggar. One may note how St Bavo, like St Martin in the Budapest painting, turns toward the deserving poor instead!

We need not have to return to the Middle Ages to find popular anxieties about frauds. By way of an example one may cite a contemporary news story concerning a ›*disabled*‹ man who over the course of a decade allegedly cheated the taxpayer out of nearly four hundred thousand pounds sterling of fraudulent benefit payments, by claiming he was bed-ridden and in need of round the clock care due to his *disabilities*.[15] This news item subscribed to so many contemporary stereotypes (›*disabled*‹, benefit fraudster, foreigner, asylum seeker, from an Islamic country) that it becomes almost a caricature in the extremity of its case. But there are resonances in the modern benefit fraud with the medieval ›fake‹ beggar which are worth taking a closer look at. Many

15 Guy Smith, ›Disabled‹ wedding dance man jailed for benefit fraud, 25.11.2011, http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-london-15887286 (accessed 21.4.2014).

depictions of the poor in fifteenth-century art therefore show the ›type‹ of the *disabled*, mainly the orthopedically impaired, beggar, especially in connection with St Martin.[16] Thus, as alluded to in the Budapest painting discussed at the beginning of this essay, where two beggars, a true, deserving one and a fraudulent, undeserving one vie for Martin's favours, even saints must make moral choices.

Therefore one may argue that even charity is not egalitarian. By the high Middle Ages the notion of indiscriminate charity was becoming refined. High medieval canonical theory tried to make ethical differences: only the ›just‹, the ›honest‹ and the ›shameful‹ poor were to receive charity. In such a way the giving of alms came to be connected more closely with exhortations to make oneself useful[17]– the notion of *utilitas* became more important, as expressed in the New Testament verse »who does not work shall not eat«.[18] The categorisation of persons according to their ability to work (if they were able to do so then begging was forbidden) or inability (whence begging was allowed) constituted a paradigmatic underpinning of the discourse pertaining to concepts of deserving and undeserving poor.[19] In short, to that degree by which the value of work increased, the status of beggars decreased.[20]

III. Work and status

One crucial aspect of *disability*, especially in the contemporary modern world, revolves around the issue of work. An interesting observation can be made on the relationship between an individual's impairment and the degree to which that individual is deemed incapable of earning their living as an indicator of *›disability‹* in our society. In some ways this relationship forms *the* main definition of *›disabled‹* in modern western society. As Claudine Herzlich and Janine Pierret have pointed out in the context of illness and social attitudes:

> *»In a society in which we define ourselves as producers, illness and inactivity have become equivalents. That is why today we have come to perceive the sick body essentially through its incapacity to 'perform', rather than through the alteration of its appearance.«*[21]

With regard to work, then, one's ability or in/dis-ability to perform work of all kinds has become the measuring stick by which charity, in the later Middle Ages and early modern period, or welfare state benefits in contemporary society, have been allocated. Being able to

16 Robert Jütte, too, observed this trend. He added that for the sixteenth century the pauper »was no longer characterized by physical deformities but was designated by begging gesture and a pathetic condition. This change reflects a new attitude to the poor. It was no longer a physical handicap that denoted a beggar, but something less concrete, less tangible: a gesture, a way of behaving, in short the physical and moral condition.« Robert Jütte, Poverty and Deviance in Early Modern Europe, Cambridge 1994, p. 14.

17 Arnold Angenendt, Geschichte der Religiosität im Mittelalter, Darmstadt 1997, p. 595.

18 2 Thess. 3:10.

19 On poverty and the increased value placed on work cf. Karl Bosl, Armut, Arbeit, Emanzipation, in: Knut Schulz (ed.), Beiträge zur Wirtschafts- und Sozialgeschichte des Mittelalters. Festschrift für Herbert Helbig, Cologne, Vienna 1976, p. 128 ff.

20 »In dem Maße, wie der Wert der Arbeit stieg, sank das Ansehen der Bettler.« Frank Meier, Gaukler, Dirnen, Rattenfänger. Außenseiter im Mittelalter, Ostfildern 2005, p. 39.

21 Herzlich and Pierret, Illness and Self in Society, p. 85.

›perform‹ in society has become crucial. Returning to the topic of work in the Middle Ages, a few case-studies will highlight the assertion that notions of ›performance‹ and the ability to perform labour are not exclusively modern phenomena.

In a narrative associated with the miracles of St Louis, the cure of a crippled girl is described, brought to the shrine of Louis IX by her mother; her mother, however, believed that »God would be more favorable to them« if her and her daughter could sustain themselves through work while they waited at the tomb for a cure; for this reason the mother refused alms to be given to her daughter.[22] This occurred in the 1270s. Around the same time Jean de Meun, author of the *Romance of the Rose* reiterated the kinds of thinking on work and charity that was coming out of the theology faculty in Paris. With regard to the begging of mendicant, that is Franciscan friars, he wrote:

> *»But, by the letter of the law, I think that one who eats the alms which ought to go to people spent and feeble, naked, poor, covered with sores and old, unfit to earn their bread because they are too weak to work, his own damnation eats.«*[23]

Hence secular members of urban society had subsumed the elite intellectual (clerical) discourse on the intrinsic value of labour that was coming to be propounded from the latter part of the thirteenth century onwards. Being able to perform physical, manual work was valued long before the so-called Protestant work ethic.

In the case of one relatively minor, localised saint, St Walstan, the point about the »suggestive construction of a polarized, laboring body«[24] is clearly made. What is of interest in St Walstan's vita is the emphasis of miracles on the cure of impairments as a means to re-enable work. As ›specialist‹ for agricultural workers, whom he healed of any infirmity or bodily *disability* that prevented their labour, St Walstan exemplified the importance of being capable to earn one's livelihood.[25] In the saint's fifteenth-century cult the most poignant miracle narrated in the collection includes a carter who was crushed by a laden cart and was so eager to return to work that once cured he did not even tarry at the saint's shrine but rushed back to his village.[26] »The usual charisma associated with saintly bodies here gets a contemporary coloring, allowing the injured worker to return to […] productive work as soon as possible«.[27]

In 1406 William Taylor, a Wycliffite reformer, preached a sermon on the themes of poverty, charity and work. In this text Taylor proposed an extreme work ethic that contained

22 »Nolebant quod daretur ei elemosina, pro eo quod, sibi videbatur quod, si de suo labore hic [Louis's tomb] viveret cum filia sua predicta, magis esset propitius sibi Deus«, H.-François Delaborde (ed.), Fragments de l'enquête faite à Saint-Denis en 1282 en vue de la canonisation de Saint Louis, 1896, p. 49, cited by Farmer, Manual Labor, p. 277 and note 55 p. 287.

23 Romance of the Rose, ll. p. 101–106, quoted by Kenneth Baxter Wolf, The Poverty of Riches: St. Francis of Assisi Reconsidered, Oxford 2003, pp. 152–153 note 86.

24 Kellie Robertson, The Laborer's Two Bodies: Literary and Legal Productions in Britain, 1350–1500, Basingstoke 2006, p. 32.

25 Ibid. Also cf. Carl Horstmann (ed.), Nova Legenda Anglie: as collected by John Tynemouth, John Capgrave and others, and first printed, with New Lives, by Wynkyn de Worde, Oxford 1901, vol. 2, pp. 412–415.

26 For an account of this and other miracles in the English Life of the saint, cf. M. R. James, Lives of St Walstan, 1917, p. 264.

27 Robertson, The Laborer's Two Bodies, p. 36.

elements of the sort of thinking behind the notions of a rapid return to work also found in St Walstan's miracles. Taylor alluded to the gospel healing miracles of Christ[28] and proposed that the miracles were not just about healing for the sake of it (or even to enable greater faith), but expressly so that these impaired »clamorous beggars« who »would sit at gates and beside ways, and cry and beg«[29] should no longer be reliant on alms. Christ was allegedly motivated by a loathing of begging as much as by spiritual reasons, and performed these miracles to enable the *disabled* to earn their living through work: »And in token that Christ loathed such begging, he healed such men not only in soul but also in body, that they might get what they need by their bodily labour«.[30] William Taylor valorised and elevated work as a virtue in itself, and even as a ›cure‹ for *disability*, generating the astonishing argument that Christ healed the sick first and foremost so that they could be put to work.

One may therefore observe that, contrary to received historiographical tropes, the importance of work, of working ability in the individual, and of the moral value of work, are not just early-modern phenomena that arise with the Protestant Reformation, but have antecedents much longer ago. While individual voices criticising indiscriminate charitable giving are occasionally heard in late antiquity or the early Middle Ages, such as those of the lawmakers in the city of Constantinople in 382 AD who wanted to be rid of beggars, whereby checks were carried out to sort the sick (that is the rightful) from the healthy (meaning idle) beggars, it is from the thirteenth century onwards that such sentiments grew much more vociferous.[31] A number of notable historians have observed this development of a more discriminating attitude by donors towards ›the poor‹ from the thirteenth century onwards.[32] Thus by the later Middle Ages, physical, visible, and believable (unfakeable) *disability* had come to take on the meaning of a legitimising force that labelled the poor person as ›deserving‹, and hence provided legitimation to beg.

IV. Which model of *disability*?

Until the emergence of the social model of *disability* from the 1970s, the dominant model for many years had been the medical model, of which enough has been said already. Since then, a number of competing theoretical approaches to *disability* have arisen. A new addition to the variegated growth in *disability* models has been Edward Wheatley's *religious model* of *disability*.[33] At first glance this constitutes an attractive proposition for the medievalist

28 Namely thaumaturgic miracles at Mark 10:46, Luke 18:35 and John 9:8.

29 »weren nedid to sitte at 3atis and biside weies, and crye and begge«, Anne Hudson (ed.), The Sermon of William Taylor, Two Wycliffite Texts, Early English Text Society, o.s. 301, Oxford 1993, p. 19, cited by: Kate Crassons, »The Workman is Worth his Mede«: Poverty, Labor, and Charity in the Sermon of William Taylor, in: Kellie Robertson/Michael Uebel (eds), The Middle Ages at Work, Basingstoke 2004, p. 67–90, at p. 79.

30 »And in tokenynge þat Crist loþide sich begging, he heelide siche men not only in soule but also in body, þat þei my3ten gete þat hem nedide bi her bodily labour«, The Sermon of William Taylor, lines 589–592, cited by Crassons, »The Workman is Worth his Mede«, p. 79.

31 Michel Mollat, Die Armen im Mittelalter, trans U. Irsigler, München, 1987, p. 22.

32 For instance, Miri Rubin, Charity and Community in Medieval Cambridge, Cambridge, 1987, p. 291; B. Pullan, Rich and Poor in Renaissance Venice, Oxford, 1971, pp 197–204; and Mollat, Die Armen, pp. 82–96, 142–61.

33 Edward Wheatley, Stumbling Blocks Before the Blind: Medieval Constructions of a Disability, Ann Arbor 2010.

looking at medieval *disability*, since religion obviously plays a massive role in medieval culture, to the extent that not for nothing was that period popularly called the Age of Faith. But herein lies the problem: if religion in the Middle Ages was so all-encompassing as to constitute *the* most influential cultural force, how then does one account for the regional differences that Wheatley very convincingly points out to us in his book? He does not resolve the contradiction between his interpretation of blindness as defined by human negotiation, presumably meaning culture, and religion as something ›outside‹ of culture, which is evidently nonsense: religion is a sub-set of culture, as any ethnologist, archaeologist or historian could have pointed out.[34] All this makes one wonder if Edward Wheatley has actually realised that when referring to the social model, scholars from *Disability Studies* do not in fact mean that *disabled* people were treated ›socially‹, but that the social model is a theory that explains how societal factors influence, shape and construct definitions and notions of *disability*. As a theory, the social model has its roots in the prevailing thought-processes and analytical tools of the 1970s, which would have preferred the term ›social‹ to the term ›culture‹, mainly for reasons connected with the assumption that ›culture‹ is exclusive and tends to mean ›high culture‹. Here is a case in point that words, descriptors and semantics in general are very much children of their time The ›social‹ in the social model of *disability* relates to religious factors as much as to legal, political, literary, and economic – in other words ›culture‹.

The postmodern critique of history has focused the historians' gaze on the world of language and texts, and allowed historians to develop more complex analyses, as well as to take a heightened interest in previously disregarded topics (of which *disability* is one example). There is a danger, though, that the *linguistic turn*[35] in the discipline of history may make us ignore the very real facts of illness, poverty, death, and so on, which are not simply reducible to textuality alone. Criticism has come from some historians against the »postmodernist concentration on words [which] diverts attention away from real suffering and oppression and towards the kinds of secondary intellectual issues that matter in the physically comfortable world of academia.«[36] The recent trend in medieval studies to look primarily at literary texts, with very little focus on the wider culture, has unfortunately narrowed the emerging field of Medieval Disability Studies.

But materialist interpretations of *disability* in western society, as advocated by Brendan Gleeson and others, are not sufficient as an explanation either. Materialist theory has been criticised as »an aid to understanding rather than an accurate historical statement«[37] which is therefore ›simplistic‹ in that it assumes simple relationships between the mode of production and the perceptions or experiences of *disability*; the impact of ideology or culture is just

34 Bruce Lincoln, professor of religious studies, famously pointed out that what he was researching was unreligious studies, stating that religion »is not different in essence from other ideological form. That is to say, it is in itself a neutral tool or weapon which may be appropriated by any contesting class or faction within socio-political struggles, up to and including the extreme form of such struggles – revolution.« Bruce Lincoln (ed.), Religion, Rebellion, Revolution: An Interdisciplinary and Cross-Cultural Collection of Essays, New York 1985, p. 8.

35 This concept and the critique of it are discussed by Richard J. Evans, In Defence of History, London 1997, pp. 184–185.

36 Ibid., p. 185.

37 Colin Barnes, Theories of Disability and the Origins of the Oppression of Disabled People in Western Society, in: Len Barton (ed.), Disability and Society: Emerging Issues and Insights, London, New York 1996, p. 47.

as great as (if not greater than) the materialist situation. The adoption of a cultural angle aids an analysis far more. ›Culture‹ is here used in the sense Mary Douglas[38] described it, as a »communally held set of values and beliefs«.[39] It is cultural ideas that create the myth of bodily perfection, or the discourse of the able-bodied ideal, if one so prefers, whereas the materialist approach completely ignores such notions. Therefore we need both textual and materialist approaches to the historical study of *disability*.

In summary, *disability* is not a constant. One may observe this in the changing definitions of ›*disability*‹ over time. To repeat what has been argued at the beginning of this essay: the social model of *disability* allows the distinction between impairment and *disability*. Why is that so important? Because it points out that *disability* is culturally-constructed, changes over time and according to social, political, religious and economic circumstances. The beauty of the socio-cultural model of *disability* is that it is eminently transferable not just across cultures, but also across time and space.

38 Cf. Mary Douglas, Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo, New York 1966.

39 Barnes, Theories of Disability, p. 43.