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Half-Lives

> Q. How do you behave around disabled individuals?
> A. Ideally, you behave just as you would around a person who has no visible handicap. Never stare, and never race in to seize someone's arm or grab a wheelchair. Instead, ask if and in what way, you can be of assistance. Never make personal remarks or ask personal questions. If the disabled person wishes to discuss his or her condition, he or she may introduce the subject – you may not. If he or she does bring it up, never, never pry into feelings or clinical symptoms – subjects that disabled people may be doing their best to forget.
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> E.L. Post in *Emily Post on Etiquette* (New York 1987, 54)

The majority of the disabled, even when they were lucky enough to be essentially self-reliant, must have led lives of extreme isolation, hardship and privation. That was due to the restrictions which in many cases their disabilities imposed upon their freedom of movement, the limited opportunities which they had for gainful employment, and the disdain in which they were generally held both by their families and by society at large. It follows that we are investigating the condition of a class of people who for the most part were not merely marginalised, but outcast in the fullest sense of the word.

Marginality by itself, however, is a very blunt analytic instrument by which to assess and evaluate the lives of such a diverse body of people over so extensive a period of time. A congenitally deformed slave, for instance, would have enjoyed a very different lifestyle from a blind septuagenarian citizen, in that the former's rarity made him a luxury item whereas the latter merely constituted a useless burden on society. It would not necessarily have been true, therefore, that 'the city's norms were respected on its margins too', as they were in the case of other marginalised groups such as children, where vital distinctions existed between boys and girls in the same way as they did between men and women (Golden 1990, 92). Though the evidence we have available barely helps us to determine important and vital distinctions between the status and condition of different types of deformities and disabilities, or between persons of different social strata, these distinctions surely

existed and would have had profound consequences for the lives of the people we are investigating.

Disdain for the disabled

In the *Odyssey* Homer puts the following despairing utterance into the mouth of Hephaistos after his wife, the incomparably beautiful Aphrodite, has been unfaithful to him: 'No one is responsible for the fact that I am defective (*êpedanos*) except my own parents, and I wish they had never given birth to me' (*Od.* 8.311f.). Hephaistos' outburst underscores the anguish of the disabled in a manner that is virtually unparalleled in classical literature, and it clearly has implications for his permanent status as a cripple that go way beyond his present predicament as a cuckold. Philoktetes' abandonment on the island of Lemnos by his fellow countrymen on account of his festering and malodorous wound seems to testify to the practice of rejecting those whose physical condition was deemed offensive to the rest of society, as it does to the venom that those who were compelled to live in virtual isolation must have felt towards their persecutors (Soph. *Phil.* 260ff., etc.). In similar fashion, the acrimonious exchange that takes place between Oedipus and the blind seer Teiresias in Sophokles' *Oedipus Tyrannos* is highly revealing of the veiled animosity that sometimes exists between the blind and the sighted. For it is precisely at the moment when Oedipus taunts his adversary with being a crafty charlatan 'who has vision only to look out for his own advantage but is blind in his art' (l. 388f.) that the latter loses his temper and reveals more than he intended about Oedipus' true parentage. In a society which by and large viewed its disabled as expendable and useless, such tensions must have frequently come to the surface. As we see from the predicament of the future Emperor Claudius (p. 40), even membership of the imperial family was no guarantee that a disabled child would receive love and affection. Many parents of disabled children may have later regretted their ill-considered decision to raise such a child and henceforth treated it with contempt if not downright abuse, assuming that they did not eject it from the home altogether.

Just as disdain for the disabled appears to have been a widespread phenomenon, so the disabled themselves were encouraged to feel a certain shame for their own physical condition. The Hippokratic author of the treatise entitled *On the Sacred Disease* paints a striking picture of what epileptics did when they sensed that an attack was coming on (15):

> In such circumstances they avoid company, going home if they are near enough, or to the loneliest spot they can find if they are not near enough, so that as few people as possible will see them fall, and they at once wrap

their heads up in their coats. This is the normal reaction to embarrassment and not, as most people suppose, from fear of the demon. Small children, from inexperience and being unaccustomed to the disease, at first fall down wherever they happen to be. Later, after a number of attacks, they run to their mothers or to someone whom they know well when they feel one coming on. This is through fear and fright at what they feel, for they have not yet learnt to feel ashamed (tr. G.E.R. Lloyd).

Though the intention of the author is to desacralise epilepsy and to treat it as an affliction no different from any other disease, it is noteworthy that he does not intimate that shame is an inappropriate emotion for an epileptic to feel. On the contrary, he clearly regards it as a necessary part of social conditioning. A 'mature' epileptic was evidently expected to be able to predict when a seizure was imminent and spare society the trauma of witnessing his or her convulsions. Indeed it would hardly be surprising if all categories of the congenitally disabled were encouraged from infancy onwards to feel some shame for their condition, along the lines that the author describes.

Caring for the disabled

Extremely wealthy invalids, like the Domitius Tullus to whom we referred earlier (p. 20), would, of course, have been able to demand round-the-clock medical attention. Indeed if their financial resources were limitless, their staff of nursing slaves might well have been comparable in numbers and expertise to that of an intensive care unit in a modern hospital. The vast majority of the disabled, however, were dependent upon the goodwill and charity of their families.

Acknowledgement of the physical and economic hardships facing the elderly and infirm is indicated by the fact that in many Greek communities parents enjoyed the protection of a law which required their offspring to provide them with food and shelter as long as they lived. In the Roman world, by contrast, no such law existed before the second century AD. Even so, the extent to which Greek states were successful in ensuring that their elderly and infirm were adequately taken care of is questionable. Even if the impact of such legislation was not entirely negligible, it is probably safe to assume that economic imperatives ensured that the lives of most disabled parents did not extend indefinitely. In households at the lower end of the socio-economic scale, particularly those whose incomes were barely sufficient to feed their hard-working and productive members, the disabled would probably have been the victims of silent recriminations at the very least.

The practice of adopting grown-up sons may well have owed its popularity to the fear of the childless that they would be bereft of all attention once they became old and incapacitated. Whether the majority of adoptive parents received the kind of attention for which they hoped, however, is another matter altogether. But even if many of them were disappointed in their expectations, the prospects facing those who lacked all familial ties were unrelievedly grim. For most unattached people, the end of life meant a rapid deterioration in health and mobility, followed by death in circumstances of extreme discomfort and privation. It is likely that the situation became even worse in later times. In the increasingly urbanised world of later antiquity, a vast proportion of the population must have lived alone in huge metropoleis like Rome, Antioch and Alexandria. Many, we may suspect, died in isolation shortly after becoming bedridden.

Finally, we know next-to-nothing about the fate of infirm and disabled slaves. Suetonius states that the Emperor Claudius issued an edict declaring that they were to be abandoned rather than killed, which suggests that many Roman slaves *were* put to death, rather like old horses which had outlived their usefulness (*Claud.* 25).

Exclusion from public office

It is unclear whether those whose disability prevented them from leading a fully active life enjoyed the same political rights as the rest of the citizen body and were entitled to stand for public office, or whether their rights would have been curtailed at least *de facto* if not *de jure*. It is often alleged axiomatically that in the Greek world the obligation to serve in a hoplite army was rewarded by the privilege of participation in its political and legal processes. What, then, of those whose depth of impairment was such that they were unable to perform military service? Would they have been permitted to share in the decision-making processes of the popular assembly, given that they were exempted from the consequences of its decisions? The only piece of evidence known to me which has bearing on the subject is provided by an Egyptian papyrus dated AD 220, which indicates that nineteen ephebes from the town of Memphis were exempted from active service because of either excessive height (*hypermegetheis*) or poor eyesight (*katadeôn tên opsin*) (Tod 1951, 95). What consequences followed from their exemption, however, are not specifically indicated.

Given the ideological importance of physical beauty and wholeness in Graeco-Roman culture, it would hardly be surprising if the deformed and disabled were to some extent stigmatised as second-class citizens and treated with less than full seriousness in political debates. There are, after all, other ways of depriving individuals of a full political identity besides limiting their rights statutorily. Certainly the feeble-minded and mentally deranged are likely to have had their political rights curtailed, though whether they were also treated as persons of diminished responsibility in the eyes of the law is unclear. The hunchbacked Thersites, who suffers pain and humiliation when he tries to articulate

his comrades' concerns in a debate of the Achaian army at Troy, is clearly regarded with contempt (see p. 80).

But the evidence from the Greek world regarding the political status of the disabled is not unambiguous. In Aristophanes' *Ekklêziasousai* the blind or partly sighted Neokleides is mocked by his fellow-citizens as he is groping his way to the speaker's platform (ll. 400-2):

> Isn't it a scandal that a fellow who hasn't managed to save his own eyesight should dare to give us a lecture on how to save the state?

The passage would seem to indicate that Neokleides was not deprived of his right of address, even though the Athenians grumbled whenever he came forward to speak. In the *Ploutos* the comic poet suggests that the latter was actually too vocal, for when Neokleides goes to Asklepios' sanctuary in the Piraeus seeking a cure for his blindness, the god seizes the opportunity to plaster up his eyes in order to prevent him from being abusive to other speakers (ll. 716-24; cf. *Ekklês.* 254). It goes without saying, however, that we should be wary of attaching too much weight to Aristophanes' comic fantasy as evidence of contemporary social practice.

Few persons of whom we have record are known to have been deformed or disabled and it is therefore virtually impossible to assess what consequences their ailments would have had for their hopes of preferment. The chances are, however, that in the majority of cases a physical defect constituted a serious and inhibiting handicap to political advancement, as it has done in recent times, though it seems, too, that an ambitious and gifted individual was able to surmount the obstacle which it posed.[1] Medon, for instance, the first archon of Athens, who was lame in one foot, faced considerable political opposition because of his deformity, which he overcame with the support of the Delphic Oracle (Paus. 7.2.1). So, too, did the Spartan king Agesilaos, whom we shall discuss below (p. 40).

Employment for the disabled

Though freeborn Greeks and Romans regarded waged labour with revulsion and contempt, no such delicate scruples can have conditioned the lives of the deformed and disabled. The world of entertainment probably provided the most lucrative form of employment for a talented minority. The popularity of statuettes and vase-paintings depicting deformed dwarfs, hunchbacks and obese women strongly suggests that

[1] The personal attack advertisements by the Progressive Conservatives aimed at Jean Chrétien in the 1993 Canadian election which included photographs of the crooked right side of Chrétien's mouth, the result of damage which he suffered in his youth, is the latest (failed) attempt to derail a disabled politician's bid for high office.

people of this sort were in high demand as singers, dancers, musicians, jugglers and clowns. The ungainly and obscene movements which accompanied their acts no doubt injected an extra element of merriment into the proceedings. The satirist Lukian provides a vivid account of the antics of a clown called Satyrion, whom he describes as an ugly, shaven little fellow (*amorphos ... anthrôpiskos*) with a few hairs sticking upright on his crown, who 'danced by bending himself up double and twisting about so as to appear more ridiculous, and beat time while delivering ribald verses in an Egyptian accent, and ended up by mocking the guests' (*Symp.* 18). Though Lukian is writing parody, we need hardly doubt that clowns were chosen in part for their ugly and misshapen appearance, as indeed was the case in later European tradition. The clown Launcelot Gobbo, Shylock's servant in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, for instance, is named after the Italian for 'hunchback'. With the advent of mime in the Late Hellenistic period, an art form which originated in Sicily and later spread to Greece and Rome, a new career path opened up for ugly and deformed entertainers, since some mimes appear to have relied exclusively on facial and other peculiarities, rather than on masks and makeup, for dramatic effect. One of the stock characters in Atellan farce, for instance, was the Dossenus, who was so-named because of his hunchback or *dorsum* (Hor. *Ep.* 2.1.173).

Not all deformities and disabilities lend themselves to ribald mockery, however. The few options available for the blind included becoming a bard, seer, poet or musician. Blindness, at least in the popular imagination, was an essential attribute of the poet, just as in the modern world blues singers and piano tuners tend to be blind.[2] A certain Kallistratos remarks to Dio Chrysostom (*Or.* 36.10-11), 'All these poets are blind and people do not think it possible for anyone to become a poet otherwise.' To which Dio himself replies, 'Their poets have contracted blindness from Homer, as though from ophthalmia.' Despite this claim, however, the only other Greek poet to my knowledge who is alleged to have been blind is the insignificant Xenokritos of Lokria (*FHG* II, p. 221 no. 30), though we are told that the Athenian poet Tyrtaios was both one-eyed and lame. It is said that Tyrtaios' countrymen, who considered the cripple to be rather stupid, so despised him that they packed him off to Sparta, where his poetic talents were recognised.

In the world of the *Odyssey* even blind bards appear to have enjoyed considerable respect. At the court of the Phaiakians the blind Demodokos is provided with a separate table of food and sits upon a silver-studded throne (8.65-70). Were their real-life equivalents equally respected or is this merely wish-fulfilment on the poet's part? Although we are not explicitly told whether Phemios, the bard at Odysseus' palace,

[2] The list of blind blues singers includes Blind Blake, Blind Boy Fuller, Blind Lemon Jefferson and the Rev. Gary Davis, as John Betts has pointed out to me.

is also blind, the fact that the herald places the lyre into his hands when he is about to begin singing makes it probable that he was (1.153f.).

Loss of sight is often compensated for by enhanced aural discrimination. This, of course, is the explanation in part for the prevalence of blind musicians and poets. Blindness may, however, bring about a more fundamental change in personality. Though knowledge and sight are semantically related in Greek through words like *idein*, *eidos* and *idea*, there is, of course, a higher kind of knowledge that is reserved for the elect alone. Evidently a seer's capacity to decipher the hidden meaning of an omen was thought to be enhanced by his blindness, which is why many of them, at least in myth, are blind, a famous example being the Theban seer Teiresias. Though all this is important for our understanding of the signification of blindness in the ancient world, it would be fanciful to assume that poetry, music and seercraft ever provided employment for more than a talented handful of blind and poorly sighted persons. Nor are we entitled to infer that the veneration in which some blind people were obviously held on account of their special powers would have extended to the majority. Most people in this category were probably dependent upon charity, as was the case in the UK as late as the 1920s when unemployment was highest among persons in this group (cf. Humphries and Gordon 1992, 126).

The lame, who probably constituted the largest number of disabled persons in the ancient world, probably fared better than the blind in economic terms since there were many more skilled and semi-skilled occupations of a sedentary nature that were available to them. These included pottery-making, vase-painting, leather-working and metal-working, as well as banking, retailing and teaching. The lame Hephaistos' role as a divine smith thus conforms to the social conditions of the day. Here again a compensatory principle is at work, for it often follows that the lame develop extremely strong arm and chest muscles in order to make up for their lack of mobility.

Though imbecilic slaves, known indiscriminately in the Roman world as *moriones*, *stulti*, *fatui* and *scurrae*, were popular in the late Republican and Imperial periods, we cannot assume that half-witted and idiotic citizens would have been tolerated quite so good-humouredly. The majority were probably left to fend for themselves and earned a pittance by begging. The village idiot may have been a familiar phenomenon in the ancient world but to my knowledge he is never mentioned in our sources. Many children, including the prelingually deaf and dumb, were probably identified as imbecilic early in life owing to the fact that their true condition could not be diagnosed. Through neglect, they would have grown up severely retarded, as has been the predicament of this group throughout history.[3]

We also hear of a few deformed people who exploited their marginal

[3] Sacks (1989, 14 n. 20) observes, 'Before 1750 for the generality, for 99.9% of those born deaf, there was no hope of literacy or education.' Even today in the USA and UK, a substantial proportion of the deaf are functionally illiterate (op. cit. 28 n. 37).

status as spies and informers. Aristophanes, for instance, alludes to a notorious one-eyed sycophant and swindler called Opountios (*Birds* 153, 1294). Particularly vilified in early Imperial Rome was the misshapen Vatinius, a cobbler by trade whom Tacitus numbers 'among the most dreadful monstrosities (*foedissima ... ostenta*) of Nero's court'. Vatinius was the author of scurrilous witticisms and began his career as an object of ridicule. He ultimately 'came to wield so much power by attacking decent people that he could outdo any scoundrel in the influence he wielded, the wealth he owned, and his capacity to do harm' (*Ann.* 15.34.2). Though we are not told precisely how Vatinius achieved his evil ascendancy, as a monstrous freak he would have been well-placed to spread lies and malicious gossip, and well-schooled, too, from bitter personal experience in the art of venom and ridicule. Vatinius' career may have been exceptional but it was not unique. In the reign of Domitian the blind Catullus Messalinus, who was also of humble origins, 'a monster mighty and notable even in our day' as Juvenal describes him, became a much-feared flatterer and informer (*Sat.* 4.113-22).

Finally, Plato indicates that in the Greek world the deaf and dumb were able to communicate by a form of sign language, though we have no means of knowing what level of sophistication it reached. He writes (*Krat.* 422e):

> Suppose we had neither voice nor tongue, yet wished to communicate with one another. Should we not, like the deaf and dumb, make signs with our hands, head and other parts of the body?

Athens' social security net

The only ancient community known to have made financial provision for its poor and disabled citizens was Athens. This it did by instructing the Council to conduct an annual inspection of those who were claiming welfare and then to make payments from the public purse to the successful applicants (cf. Aischin. 1.103f.). The author of the Aristotelian *Constitution of Athens* (49.4) provides us with the following details:

> The Council inspects those who are disabled. For there is a law which bids those who possess less than three minai and who are incapacitated and incapable of work to undergo inspection by the Council, which is to give them two obols per day each at public expense. There is a treasurer for this group who is elected by lot.

We are not told how many individuals were recipients of the award annually, but the total money allocated is likely to have been extremely modest by modern standards. Nor do we know how the Council 'inspected' welfare claimants or what criteria they used to determine incapacitation. Philochoros (*FGrH* 328 F 197b), in what is evidently a

reference to this law, defines 'disabled' and 'incapacitated' merely in general terms as 'persons who have been handicapped in some part of the body with the result that they are unable to do any work'. It is highly improbable that physicians were invited to attend the deliberations of the Council in order to give their professional opinion on the depth of a candidate's impairment.

Although there is no evidence as to when this charitable provision was first introduced, it seems that some kind of social security net was already in existence by the early sixth century BC. Herakleides of Pontos informs us that the tyrant Peisistratos introduced a law 'which provided that those maimed in war should be maintained at public expense' (ap. Plu. *Sol.* 31.2). Apparently this was not the first occasion when a disabled veteran became the recipient of public welfare in Athens, however. That distinction belonged to an otherwise unknown war hero named Thersippos, on whose behalf Solon had passed a special decree. Although we cannot be sure whether the provision attributed to Peisistratos and the law described by [Aristotle] are essentially identical, there are some grounds for concluding that both afforded protection primarily for injured veterans (see below).

Humane though Athenian practice was when judged by the standards of the ancient world, it should be noted that the state pension for the disabled was invariably less than the wage which an unskilled, able-bodied citizen could expect to earn (cf. Rhodes 1981, 570). When the pension is first mentioned at the end of the fifth century, the *per diem* amount was one obol per day, which compares very unfavourably with the three obols that a juryman earned in the same period (Lys. 24.13, 26). By the 330s, as [Aristotle] indicates, it had risen to two obols per day, and in the third century, as Philochoros (loc. cit.) tells us, it amounted to five. Since, therefore, the pension was at all times barely sufficient to support the disabled at the poverty line, it was perhaps assumed that responsibility for their well-being would have lain equally at the door of their relatives. In cases where assistance from the family was not forthcoming, the disabled would perhaps have been expected to supplement their pension by seeking employment.

In spite of the meagre sums of money involved, the Athenian state took active measures to ensure that its generosity was not exploited by unscrupulous malingerers who were too lazy to do an honest day's work or, worse, who used the pretence of disability for criminal ends.[4] It is said of the blind or purblind Neokleides, for instance, that he 'outshot the sighted in his thefts' (Ar. *Pl.* 666). In order to protect itself against

[4] On malingerers, Ambroise Paré (1573) gives an entertaining account of a beggar in Angers who cut off a hanged man's arm and pretended that it was his own in order to obtain alms. His ruse succeeded until 'finally it came loose and fell to the ground, where as he was quickly trying to pick it up, he was perceived by some to have two good arms, not counting that of the hanged man' (ch. 21.106-7). Likewise a beggar woman from Champigny pretended to be sick with St. Fiacre's Disease by attaching an ox's bowel to her rear end 'from which flowed a fluid similar to apostema matter, which had completely stained and besmeared her thighs ... so that it was very foul to look upon.' Her imposture was exposed when she was jumped upon by a suspicious doctor who kicked her several times in the crotch (ch. 24.112).

him and his like, the state legislated that 'anyone who wished' was free to challenge a claimant's entitlement to public support by prosecuting him in a court of law.

We gain a valuable insight into the workings of this law from Lysias' *Oration* 24. The speech was written shortly after the restoration of Athenian democracy in 403 BC on behalf of an unnamed invalid whose right to public support had been challenged on the grounds that he was neither poor nor disabled, and disreputable to boot. From this we learn that the prosecutor had claimed that the *soi-disant* invalid was perfectly capable of mounting a horse. In addition, he numbered among his friends 'people who were able to spend' (5). As further 'proof ' of his duplicity, we are told that he ran a shop which was the meeting place of 'a crowd of ne'er-do-wells who, having run through their own money, were plotting against those who wish to preserve theirs' (19). In response, the defendant contends that these allegations are inspired solely by spite and that he is, on the contrary, barely capable of making ends meet.[5]

There are some curious features to Lysias' speech which it is worth dwelling upon. In the first place, the defendant produces no witnesses to counter the allegations of the prosecution. This is perhaps a reflection of the fact that in the absence of medical reports it would have been a relatively easy matter in the ancient world to pose as a disabled person, since it was ultimately impossible to determine the precise depth of an invalid's incapacitation. Witnesses, therefore, could probably do little to substantiate the defendant's case. Secondly, it is noteworthy that the defendant does not provide the jury with any description of his affliction. Instead he confines himself to the assertion that he has been deprived of what he vaguely describes as 'the greatest things'. In a very dry, matter-of-fact tone he informs the jury that he has to use two sticks to get about, rides borrowed horses for the same reason, and is advanced in years (12,16). He makes virtually no appeal to pity throughout the entire speech, even though such appeals were a conventional, almost formulaic element of Athenian lawcourt speeches (e.g. Lys. 18.1, 19.53). The reasons for the speaker's diffidence are unclear. Would a tearful supplication not have prevailed with an Athenian jury, given the circumstances of the case? Or was it simply not in the defendant's character to stoop to such behaviour? Since the outcome of the trial is unknown, we cannot judge whether the defendant's tactics were successful.

[5] Doubts have been raised about the authenticity of Lys. 24 on the grounds that a claimant for the dole would not have been able to engage the services of a professional speech-writer. As Dover (1968, 189) suggests, however, the cripple may have been sponsored by his wealthy friends.

No other Greek state is known to have provided welfare for its disabled and it is therefore appropriate to inquire whether the Athenians were unique in their attitude towards individuals in this group. They themselves seem to have believed that they were uncommonly compassionate, or at least wanted to believe it of themselves, as we learn from a lawcourt speech written by Demosthenes in which the speaker claims that 'to pity the weak' was a national characteristic (24.171). Like many publicly espoused moral attributes, however, the claim has to be assessed in the context of the speaker's own objectives. To point the obvious contrast, while it might have been flattering for an Athenian jury to be told that it characteristically demonstrated compassion towards disabled veterans and widows of the war dead, the same body sitting in the Assembly would have found it insulting to be told that their decisions were habitually determined by pity towards the weak when foreign policy was being debated, as demagogues like Kleon recognised (cf. Thuk. 3.40, 48). Given, too, their economic priorities and goals, many would have thought twice before putting their money where they claimed their compassion lay, except in the case of war veterans.

Although we cannot know what instinct motivated the Athenians to be charitably disposed towards their disabled, I strongly suspect that it was veterans who had sustained injuries or loss of limb on the battlefield who had the primary claim upon the public exchequer. If this is correct, then it would seem that Athens' gesture of modest magnanimity was intended to send a strong signal to her fighting stock that even if they became unable to support themselves and their families as a result of injuries sustained in battle they would not be left wholly destitute, in the same way that the state undertook to raise their orphans if they perished. It is worth bearing in mind that the characteristic recipients of Athenian compassion in other contexts tended to be those individuals who had experienced a sudden reversal in fortune. The celebrated Altar of Pity, for instance, which was located in the Athenian Agora, appears to have been intended primarily as a place of refuge for those overcome by sudden calamity. There was no comparable altar or sanctuary to which those who were disadvantaged from birth or whose condition could not in other ways be alleviated might flee.

There is very little evidence to suggest that the disabled received any public welfare in the Roman world. In one of the imaginary debates which he wrote on controversial topics, Seneca alludes to a law which required the state to provide the blind with a one-off payment of a thousand *denarii* (*Con.* 3.1), but the context is hypothetical and there is no mention elsewhere of this type of welfare. It remains dubious, therefore, whether much store should be put by Seneca's further claim that the Roman state 'consoles a man for his disability'. Even if true, the consolation may not have amounted to anything much more than a sympathetic pat on the back.

Beggars

The deformed and disabled thus had few opportunities for earning their own living. In the UK according to recent government figures, it is estimated that the rate of unemployment among the disabled is three times as high as among the non-disabled and that over 60 per cent of them currently live below the poverty line (Humphries and Gordon 1992, 154). The percentage of disabled poor would almost certainly have been at least equally high in the Graeco-Roman world, of whom the vast majority led lives of grinding poverty in big cities, just as in modern times they have tended to gravitate towards the slums, eking out a meagre living by begging, petty crime and irregular part-time work. In London in the 1920s and 1930s there was often a concentration of the disabled, both men and women, in a particular neighbourhood. In Paris, too, in the eighteenth century there existed a *quartier* where deaf artisans lived and worked. Possibly in antiquity, too, the deformed and disabled chose to separate themselves from the rest of society by forming self-contained communities and ministering to one another's needs.

Although rarely referred to in literature, the deformed and disabled beggar must have been ubiquitous throughout the ancient world, where he was presumably treated with the same mixture of pity and contempt as his modern counterpart. Certainly this is the condition of the enfeebled yet loafish Iros in the *Odyssey* (18.3f.). Iros, 'who begged throughout the whole town of Ithaca', is highly protective of his turf. Until he is supplanted by Odysseus, who is himself in beggarly disguise, his status guaranteed him a reasonable livelihood. There is no reason to suppose that there was anything irregular about his circumstances. The contempt which such people aroused is epitomised in a miniature bronze depicting a black beggar with lowering countenance whose extended right hand has been restored holding a begging bowl (Plate 25). In view of the extremely large number of people dependent upon charity, however, a modicum of compassion must have extended to the majority, even if it was barely sufficient to keep body and soul together.

Child beggars elicited greater compassion than their adult counterparts, particularly if a horror story told by Seneca is to be believed. Seneca conjures up the nightmarish image of a vile racketeer who deliberately deformed children and then sent them out to beg in order that he could live off their earnings (*Con.* 10.4). The latter's technique included smashing legs, cutting off arms, tearing out tongues and eyes, and beating shoulder blades into a hump. Whether historical or not, Seneca's description provides not only a haunting image of the physical appearance of those who begged alms, but also an object-lesson in their vulnerability to extortion and exploitation by unprincipled 'patrons'.

The Spartan king Agesilaos

The Spartan king Agesilaos was not only very short by Spartan standards but also afflicted with congenital lameness. Plutarch tells us that this lameness acted as a spur to his ambition in that Agesilaos 'desired to be first in all things and was endowed with an impetuous and violent disposition which was invincible and ensured that he always got his own way' (*Agês.* 2). Agesilaos' character evidently stood him in good stead throughout his life, for his biographer goes on to say that 'his cheerfulness, high spiritedness and playfulness at moments of crisis, which invariably rendered him easy-going and sympathetic in word and look, had the consequence of making him more pleasant in old age than younger and more handsome men'.

As we might expect in light of the Spartan predilection for physiological wholeness, Agesilaos' lameness came perilously close to preventing him from succeeding to the throne. On the death of the Eurypontid king Agis II in 400 BC, there were two rival claimants to the throne: Agesilaos himself, who was Agis' younger half-brother, and a certain Latychidas, whom Agis had belatedly acknowledged as his legitimate son on his deathbed (*Agês.* 3). Though the Spartans observed primogeniture in the appointment of their kings, doubts about Latychidas' paternity were so strong – it was suspected that his true father was the hated Athenian Alkibiades – that a bitter contest developed between the rival claimants. Latychidas won the advocacy of a seer named Diopeithes, who conveniently produced an oracle of Apollo which urged 'boasting Sparta not to sprout a crippled monarchy', a form of words which seemed to point a menacing finger at Agesilaos (Paus. 3.8.9). Agesilaos in turn managed to enlist the support of the powerful navarch Lysander, who skilfully turned the oracle on its head by arguing for a figurative rather than literal interpretation of its meaning. According to Xenophon, Lysander's oracular exegesis went as follows (*Hell.* 3.3.3):

> Apollo was not bidding them beware in case someone who fell became lame but rather in case someone who did not belong to the family [i.e. of the royal Eurypontid house] should become king. For then the kingship really would be lame if someone who was not descended from Herakles should rule the city.

Lysander's interpretation won the day and the state duly elected Agesilaos as its king.

The Emperor Claudius

When a member of the Roman imperial family was himself disabled, like the future emperor Claudius, the question of his public role was uncommonly sensitive. Even as a child, Claudius was treated with contempt by his mother Antonia, who had no patience for his affliction and frequently referred to him as 'a monster of a man, not finished by nature but only half-done'. In similar vein his sister Livilla is said to have prayed out loud in the hope that the Roman people would never have to suffer such a cruel fate as having her brother as their emperor (Suet. *Claud.* 3.2). On the occasion when Claudius and his brother Germanicus presented gladiatorial games in honour of their dead father, Claudius appeared in the amphitheatre wrapped in a *pallium* or cloak so that he would be less conspicuous to curious onlookers. Likewise on the day that he put on the *toga virilis* or manly toga, which was properly an occasion for public rejoicing, he was transported secretly to the Capitol around midnight and concealed in a litter (2.2).

The only senior member of the imperial family who may have showed a modicum of compassion towards him is his great-uncle, the Emperor Augustus. According to Suetonius, Augustus wrote the following letter to his wife Livia, Claudius' grandmother, in which he expresses his anxieties both for the young man himself, who was twenty-two at the time, and for the public image of the imperial family. Accordingly he recommended that a consistent policy be worked out so as to take into account his physical condition and mental capacity (*Claud.* 4):

> My dear Livia,
> I have spoken with Tiberius, as you suggested, concerning what we should do about your grandson Claudius at the Games of Mars [in AD 12]. Both of us agreed that we must decide once and for all what strategy we should adopt. If the boy is sound and, so to speak, whole (*holoklêros*), why should we hesitate to put him through the same steps and grades which his brother has gone through? If, on the other hand, we judge him to be deficient and wanting in body and spirit, we should not present an opportunity for people who are in the habit of mocking and deriding such spectacles to ridicule both him and us. We'll always be in a fix if we have to debate each and every step, and do not work out in advance whether we believe him to be capable of holding public offices or not.

It may strike us as odd that the imperial household waited until Claudius became an adult before determining the extent of his disability and contemplating what strategy to adopt in light of it. There is no particular reason, however, to suspect the authenticity of the document, which demonstrates a consciousness of the propensity to deride the disabled on the part of the Roman people, though it remains unclear whether Augustus primarily has Claudius' own interests at heart or those of the imperial household and his own reputation.[6] Good intentions

[6] It was evidently with this latter object in view, viz. their public image, that Augustus excused disabled knights from having to ride their horses when holding a review (Suet. *Aug.* 38.3).

notwithstanding, if indeed we may concede them to Claudius' great-uncle, it transpired that the only public office which Claudius was destined to hold during the principate of Augustus was that of priest.

How to marry off ugly girls

In societies where marriage is the only career-option available for girls, good looks constitute a financial asset, whereas ugliness, let alone deformity, spells out financial ruin, especially for a family living at subsistence level. The most practical solution, of course, is to expose unwanted females at birth. But ugliness may not manifest itself until the girl begins to grow. One imaginative way to circumvent the adverse economic consequences of raising an ugly daughter is to put a price tag on all girls of marriageable age by auctioning the beautiful ones to the highest bidder and the ugly ones to those who were prepared to accept the least amount of money for marrying them. Herodotos informs us that this was the elegant system devised by the Babylonians, who used the money which was raised by auctioning the most beautiful girls in order to subsidise the sale of the ugliest ones (1.196.2-3). In this way 'the beautiful ones dowered the ugly and disabled'. Whether or not there is any substance to Herodotos' report, it not only reveals an interesting awareness on the part of the historian of the inherent problems faced by the parents of ugly and unmarriageable daughters, but also proposes a simple and neat solution by combining the dowry system, which prevails in societies where there is a superfluity of girls and a corresponding shortage of eligible bachelors, with the system of bride-price or 'gifts of wooing', which prevails where the opposite set of circumstances exist.[7]

Herodotos further informs us that the Babylonians, to their disgrace and shame, initiated a form of ritual prostitution which required all their daughters once in their life to sit in the temple of Aphrodite and have intercourse with a stranger. This practice, as he points out, in contrast to its predecessor, advantaged beautiful girls since they were able to earn their release more quickly by attracting the attentions of a male admirer, whereas their unprepossessing counterparts 'not being able to fulfil the requirements of the law, had to wait a long time, some indeed as much as three or four years' (1.199.5).

Worth quoting, too, is an anecdote by the same author concerning an ugly Spartan baby girl who grew up to be extremely beautiful (6.61.3-5). Every day the child's nurse took her to the shrine of Helen at Therapne, where she prayed to the goddess 'to take away the child's ugliness'. One

[7] As M.I. Finley, *The World of Odysseus* (London 1956) 89, points out in his discussion of the *Odyssey* where dowry and bride-price also co-exist (e.g. 15.16-18, 20.341-4), there is no reason for assuming that 'such "opposite" practices are impossible in "real life" '. What is novel about their alleged co-existence in Babylon is the fact that together they supposedly address not a demographic problem but rather a physiological obstacle.

day as she was about to leave the shrine she met a woman who asked to look at the baby. Though the nurse had been forbidden by its parents to show the child to anyone, presumably with the object of preventing both themselves and it from becoming an object of ridicule and malicious gossip, she yielded to the woman's entreaty. The stranger then proceeded to stroke the infant's head and promised that when it grew up it would surpass all Spartan women in beauty. From that day forth, the girl's looks began to improve. Whatever its basis in fact, this edifying story suggests that even in Sparta compassion for an ugly child occasionally prevailed, at least among the enslaved population. As an interesting precursor to the Ugly Duckling fairytale, it also presupposes a humane awareness of the fact that a child's appearance is no guarantee of what it will look like in later life. Such *ex post facto* intervention by a goddess of good looks was surely remarkable, however. Prudent parents-to-be would doubtless have done all they could in advance of the delivery to ensure that the birthing deities blessed their offspring with whole limbs and good looks.

If the prospects for a family with an unmarried and unmarriageable daughter were economically bleak, we can well appreciate that serial female ugliness represented a father's ultimate nightmare. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that ugly women are prominent in Greek myth, as in the case of such menacing figures as the snake-haired Gorgons, the toothless Graiai and the foul Harpies, the last of whom attempted to compensate for their barrenness by child-snatching.

Conclusions

The majority of the deformed and disabled existed on the margins of Greek and Roman society, although we should note that they certainly did not constitute a single reference category. Hence there are likely to have been appreciable differences in the quality of life enjoyed by the deaf, the blind and the dumb, for instance. Nor should we underestimate the ability of a few enterprising individuals to forge their own destiny and overcome the social stigma which attached to their condition. As we have seen, opportunities for enrichment and advancement existed for those who were prepared to submit to being ridiculed and humiliated with a good grace. Those who could convince others that their deformity invested them with special powers, and those, too, who possessed special talents, would have been largely liberated from the constraints which governed the lives of the rest. It goes without saying, however, that the degree to which such liberation was a possible option depended upon the expressive power of their deformity, as well as upon their inherent talent for self-promotion. Marginality, in brief, though applicable as a term of general reference, tends to obscure the differences between the varied lifestyles of the deformed and disabled.

Most of the chronically deformed and disabled had to support themselves either by begging or by claiming the indulgence of a well-to-do relative. Yet even those who had no regular source of income may not have lived lives of utter penury. Excluded though they were from many of the privileges and opportunities available to the unimpaired, by the same token they were also shielded from many duties and responsibilities. As Geertz (1983, 83) has observed concerning the status of intersexuals among the Kenyan Pokot, 'Economically they tend to be better off than the average Pokot because they have neither the ordinary kinship drains on their wealth nor the distractions of family life to hinder their accumulation of it.'

Finally, we do not know the extent to which the disabled would have been 'typically' treated with compassion by their relatives, any more than we know the extent to which domestic slaves would have continued to receive sustenance once they had outlived their years of usefulness. Though the majority lived isolated lives of hardship and privation, some few, as in any society, were probably treated with compassion. Any attempt to profer a sociology of the disabled in Graeco-Roman culture quickly becomes trite to the point of banality.

3

The Roman Emperor in his Monstrous World

> This is some monster of the isle with four legs, who hath got, as I take it, an ague .... If I can recover him and keep him tame and get to Naples with him, he's a present for any emperor that ever trod on neat's leather.
>
> William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, Act II Scene 2

The Roman Imperial period merits special attention for this study, both because of the proliferation of data on the plight of the deformed and because the emperors themselves constitute a fascinating phenomenon in terms of their impact upon the social history of deformity. There are many reasons for this impact. First, being essentially outside the social organism over which they presided, emperors alone were able to indulge their monstrous cravings to the full. Such at least is the image presented in the imperial biographies of writers such as Suetonius and Aelius Lampridius, and, despite the fact that their accounts are peppered with scurrilous hyperbole, it is unlikely to be wholly wide of the mark. Secondly, many emperors particularly favoured the company of the deformed, whose abnormal physiological condition was analogous to their own constitutional, social and amoral uniqueness.[1] Inevitably this penchant came to pervade the upper strata of Roman society as well, which likewise became enamoured of the deformed. The vogue for collecting human monstrosities may also have been prompted by the belief that such persons were endowed with supernatural powers and so able to function as goodluck charms, in much the same way that images of monstrosities were believed to be capable of averting evil from their owners. Lastly, it may also have been *ennui* on a massive scale, combined with a perverse and seemingly inexhaustible appetite for the exotic and bizarre, which induced the emperor and many wealthy Romans to pay exorbitant prices for human 'freaks'.

[1] The penchant, it appears, is still alive today. In 1987 it was reported that the entertainer Michael Jackson offered half a million dollars to purchase the skeleton of Joseph Merrick, popularly known as the Elephant Man, who suffered from a condition known as neurofibromatosis which produced bulbous overgrowths on the skin and bone surfaces (cf. Graham and Oehlschlaeger 1992,187-90).