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Can it be a good thing to be deaf?

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Abstract

Increasingly, Deaf activists claim that it can be good to be Deaf. Still, much of the hearing world remains unconvinced, and continues to think of deafness in negative terms. I examine this debate and argue that to determine whether it can be good to be deaf it is necessary to examine each claimed advantage or disadvantage of being deaf, and then to make an overall judgement regarding the net cost or benefit. On the basis of such a survey I conclude that being deaf may plausibly be a good thing for some deaf people but not for others.

Can it be a good thing to be deaf?

It is becoming increasingly common for Deaf activists to claim that it can be a good thing to be Deaf.¹ By this they mean not only that deafness might so happen to be a blessing in some cases (as, for example, in the case of a draftee who's deafness excuses him from service), nor that one might have a good life despite being deaf, but rather that deafness in and of itself can be a good thing. Deafness is not pathological, but merely another way of being normal, or possibly even a way of being better than normal, they claim. Despite such assertions, however, much of the hearing world remains unconvinced, and continues to think of deafness in negative terms.

In this paper I examine this debate and seek to discover whether it can be a good thing to be deaf. Whether it can be good to be deaf is an important question, as it has a number of practical consequences for deaf people. Many philosophers who have written on the concept of the pathological hold that a condition should only be considered pathological if it is a bad thing (Cooper 2002, Englehardt 1974, King 1954, Reznek 1987).² Assuming they are right, if and when deafness is a good thing it is not pathological. This would imply that it does not need "fixing" by medical experts. Following this line of thought, some Deaf parents have refused cochlear implants for their children, and others have refused genetic testing designed to enable the detection and abortion of deaf fetuses.³ There have also been cases where Deaf couples have purposefully conceived deaf babies, in the belief that it is good to be deaf.⁴ Whether such actions should be encouraged or permitted depends

at least in part on whether it can be good to be deaf. If deafness is not actually a good then such actions should not be encouraged. On the other hand, if it is not bad to be deaf there is nothing peculiarly perverse with choosing to have a deaf baby or child (ethical problems linked to aborting foetuses, or “designing” babies, at all would remain a worry of course).

The remainder of the paper falls into four sections. Some Deaf people will consider it unacceptable for a hearing philosopher to seek to evaluate whether it can be a good thing to be deaf. The first section examines their reasons for thinking this, and argues that the idea that only Deaf people should evaluate deafness is wrong-headed. The second section considers what it means to say that a condition is a good thing. The third section discusses why it cannot easily be determined whether it can be good to be deaf. Here, I argue that we cannot just solve the issue by asking deaf people for their opinion. Neither can we simply show that it is bad to be deaf via showing that it is unnatural. The fourth, and longest, section seeks to determine whether it can be good to be deaf via the long route – I examine each claimed advantage or disadvantage to being deaf, and then seek to make an overall judgement regarding the net cost or benefit.

Before the philosophical work begins a note regarding terminology is necessary. It has become commonplace for writers to distinguish between Deaf people, with a capital “D”, and deaf people, with a little “d”. Capital-D Deaf people self-ascribe to Deaf culture, they think of themselves as being part of the Deaf-community and typically communicate using a sign language. The use of “deaf” with a little “d” is less standardised. I will take it that little-d deaf people are all those who are physically

deaf but who may or may not consider themselves to be part of the Deaf-community. Some writers have used “deaf” with a little “d” only for people who do not identify with the Deaf-community (Ladd 2003). I have rejected this usage because it leaves no term to refer to people who are physically deaf but whose cultural affiliation is unclear.

1. Is it acceptable for hearing people to ask whether it can be a good thing to be deaf?

Many people are reticent to judge what kinds of lives are good lives. Judging humans and deeming some to have less good lives than others is often considered ethically dubious. However, there are multiple areas in which such questions cannot be avoided. To list just a few examples, when considering whether to have children ourselves, or to help others to have children, we are frequently forced to question what kinds of people should be brought into existence. When deciding whether to undergo medical treatments or other alterations we have to consider what kinds of people we wish to become. At a society level, decisions have to be made as to which people deserve compensation or help because, through no fault of their own, their lives are not as good as others.

Still, even if it is necessary to determine whether it can be good to be deaf, some Deaf activists have claimed that such questions can only be appropriately considered by Deaf people. For example, Paddy Ladd, Mike Gulliver and Sarah Batterbury have claimed that:

Research affecting Deaf people and their lives must be Deaf-led; originating with Deaf people, coordinated by Deaf people and disseminated by Deaf people for the empowerment of the Deaf community. Any other level of involvement, especially within an academy whose stated aim is the attainment of “full knowledge” simply renders the research invalid. (Ladd, Gulliver & Batterbury 2003).

The idea that minority groups should only be studied by members of those groups is also commonplace in other areas. For example, in women’s studies there is a literature that considers the “men problem” – the problem being that some men wish to do research in women’s studies (Klein 1983, Philips & Westland 1992). Similarly, in disability studies (which has developed separately from Deaf studies because many Deaf people do not consider themselves to be disabled), the “emancipatory” research paradigm proposed by Mike Oliver and others suggests that all research on disabilities should be controlled by disabled people, and that disability research should be “part of the struggle by disabled people to challenge the oppression they currently experience in their daily lives” (Oliver 1992, p.102). The idea that minority groups should only be studied by members of those groups can potentially be supported in two ways. First, there is the thought that members of the minority group are in an epistemically privileged position – they have first-hand knowledge of what it is like to be a member of the group. Second, some theorists are inspired by the idea that knowledge is power, and so see claiming the right for minorities to study themselves as a political statement.

Whatever the motivation, the claim that only the members of a minority group should study it becomes problematic. Claiming that only the members of a particular group should study it because they are in an epistemically privileged position runs into difficulties because such a stance rules out the possibility of making many comparative judgements. And, often, when we want to evaluate a way of being, what we are really after is a comparative judgement. Suppose, for example, we're trying to decide whether fetuses with Down Syndrome should be aborted. We ask whether people with Down Syndrome have a poor life (of course many other questions, such as whether abortion is ever justified, will also be relevant to deciding whether Down Syndrome fetuses should be aborted). Here, when we ask whether Down Syndrome people have a poor life, what we really need to know is whether Down Syndrome people have a poor life compared to non-Down Syndrome people. We want to know whether one way of being is better or worse than another. However, if only those who are a certain way can judge it then many comparative judgments are ruled out.

The idea that for political reasons only the members of minority groups should study such groups also runs into difficulties. Such a stance leads to an endless fragmentation of areas of study. Neither women, nor disabled people, nor Deaf people, form homogeneous classes. Thus, if one thinks that it is unjustifiable for men to write about women, one should also think it unjustifiable for White women to write about Black women, and so on. However claiming that only Black bisexual women should study Black bisexual women, and only pre-lingually Deaf people should study pre-lingually Deaf people, is problematic, as in many cases one will be left with very

few people who are “qualified” to study a way of being. And, when few people work on a problem, the chances of any of them being able to solve it are reduced.

For these reasons I reject the suggestion that only the members of minority groups should study such groups. In saying this, however, I do not mean to imply that the viewpoints of deaf people can be ignored when asking whether it can be good to be deaf. Of course what deaf people have to say about the advantages or disadvantages of being deaf is important. Through being deaf, deaf people are likely to notice consequences of deafness that others would not. Still, once deaf people have said why they like or dislike being deaf there is much work to be done in evaluating their claims that can be done by the hearing as easily as it can be done by the deaf. To take an example, a deaf person may suspect that deaf people have enhanced visual awareness, but it still takes a psychologist to find out whether deaf people really do see things differently, and a philosopher to work out whether any such enhanced vision is necessarily a good thing – and while the psychologist and philosopher may be Deaf, I see no reason why they need to be.

2. What does it mean to say that a condition is a good thing for an individual?

Here I aim to assess whether it can be a good thing for a person to be deaf, but what does it mean to say that a condition is a good thing for an individual?⁵ This turns out to be a very difficult question, and I will not be able to answer it fully here. In this failure I will at least have the comfort of good company. Various accounts of the good

for an individual have been proposed, but all are problematic (for an overview see Griffin 1986). The problems can best be understood via thinking of the possible ways of determining what is good for an individual as varying along a scale. At one end of the scale, one might rely on asking actual people what they want (the “subjective”, or “desire-satisfaction”, approach). At the other end of the scale, one might claim that something is good for an individual if it helps that individual meet some ideal standard of human flourishing (the “objective”, or “Aristotelian”, approach). Between these extremes lie methods that claim that something is good for an individual if that individual would judge it to be good in ideal circumstances, for example, if he or she were calmer, and wiser, and better informed, than in reality.

Relying on asking actual people runs into problems - people often do not know what is in their own best interest. They may make mistakes because they lack essential information. Thus, I may take great delight in my win of a free holiday to some exotic-sounding city, but only because I’ve failed to realise that it’s in the middle of a war-zone. Actual people are also notoriously prone to self-deception. Surveys repeatedly find that the vast majority of people believe they are brighter and more attractive than average (for a review see Alicke, Vredenburg, Hiatt & Govorun 2001). Self-deception is perhaps particularly likely to arise when people are faced with making judgements regarding their bodily states, as within our culture how we evaluate our bodies is closely linked to how we evaluate ourselves.

Given such difficulties, it is tempting to move to the opposite end of the scale and claim that something is good for someone if it helps that person to meet some ideal standard of human flourishing. Here too, however, there are problems. Relying on

the judgements of actual people to determine what is good is satisfyingly down to earth. On such a view we have only to ask actual people in order to find out whether a condition is good. In contrast appeals to “ideal standards of human flourishing” seem disturbingly abstract. It is not clear how the ideal standards are fixed, nor is it clear how we can find out about them.

To a greater or lesser extent all other methods on the scale are beset by the problems of the extreme methods. Methods that require idealisation run into epistemic problems. As I am non-ideal, it’s hard for me to find out what an idealised version of myself would value.⁶ Methods that make use of the judgements of actual people risk giving the wrong answers; after all actual people make mistakes.

Here, in seeking to determine what is good for an individual I will adopt the following strategy: I will go through potential alleged benefits and disadvantages of being deaf one by one, and see if they survive scrutiny.⁷ In doing this I will make use of our commonplace intuitions as to what kinds of thing are good and what bad. Thus, I will take it that goods include having a language, having friends, and experiencing pleasant sensations, and that things like being in pain, and being lonely are bad. While such a method may seem crude, I take it that no one seriously doubts such commonplace intuitions, and so it is worth seeing how far we can get in assessing whether it can be good to be deaf using them alone.

3. Can it be a good thing to be deaf? Attempted easy answers that will not work

It is tempting to think that the question of whether it can be good to be deaf can be settled rather easily. Many people will suggest that the issue can simply be resolved by asking deaf people whether it is a good thing to be like them. Others will claim that it cannot be a good thing to be deaf because deafness is unnatural. In this section I argue that the question of whether it can be a good thing to be deaf cannot be answered so easily.

a. Asking deaf people.

When hearing people become deaf they typically experience this as a loss. A deafened person becomes unable to participate in activities that they used to take for granted. They can no longer chat to their friends on the phone, or listen to music. The ways in which they have learnt to deal with the world no longer work. All things being equal it is a bad thing to become deaf.

It is tempting to think that because it is a bad thing to become deaf it must also be a bad thing to be deaf from birth. This, however, does not necessarily follow. The temptation comes from thinking of congenitally deaf people merely in terms of deficiency, as people who cannot do various things, while forgetting that they develop skills and abilities that other people don't have. Thus we tend to think of congenitally deaf people as being like hearing people, just unable to hear. But of course this is a

mistake. People who are born deaf learn to deal with the world in a radically different way to the way in which hearing people deal with it. As such, being deaf from birth will be very unlike becoming deaf later. Those who claim that it can be a good thing to be deaf normally have congenitally deaf people in mind. In asking whether deafness can be a good thing, I too will mainly be concerned with congenitally deaf people. From now on, when talking about Deaf or deaf people I should be taken to be talking about people who have been deaf from birth.

One might think that one can determine whether it is a good thing to be born deaf by asking someone who has been deaf all their life. Indeed, based on their experience of what it is like to be deaf, some deaf people will claim that being deaf is a good thing.⁸ Unfortunately, however, the matter is not so simple. When we ask whether being deaf from birth is a good thing, we really want to know whether it is better, or at least as good, as being hearing from birth. But no one can possibly be in a position to answer this question. No one can both be born hearing and born deaf.

Admittedly some deaf people try using cochlear implants and then choose to abandon them because they like being deaf better. However, it should be remembered that such individuals have tried hearing with a brain that will have become adapted to deafness. As a consequence, the experience of being deaf and using a cochlear implant may be unlike the experience of having been hearing from birth.

Other deaf people find cochlear implants useful, and report that being able to hear is better than being deaf. However, plausibly those deaf people who seek implants are

disproportionately likely to be unhappy about being deaf (as it is more rational to accept the risks and costs of operation if one is unhappy with one's present state). As the sample of such individuals is likely to be biased, we cannot conclude that it is generally better to be hearing based on their reports.

b. The appeal to the natural.

Often people assume that it must be a bad thing to be deaf because they consider being deaf to be a biological dysfunction, and therefore "unnatural". However, even if being deaf is a biological dysfunction, to think that this implies that it is a bad thing is simply to make a mistake. The natural can be assumed to be good only in children's hymns. In actuality "Mother" nature doesn't care about her offspring, and there is no necessary connection between a condition's being biologically natural (that is conferring a selective advantage) and its being good for the individual organism. In some cases conditions that are bad for the individual organism are selected for because they increase an organism's inclusive fitness. To take some concrete examples, evolutionary psychologists have been struck by the fact that there are a number of mental disorders that seem to have a genetic cause, but that occur at rates too high to be the result of random mutations. Examples include manic-depression, obsessive-compulsive disorder, sociopathy, and some anxiety disorders (Wilson 1993). Such disorders can only occur at the rates that they do because they are evolutionarily advantageous in some way. Maybe sufferers take better care of their children, or their disorder benefits other close kin. Whatever the exact mechanism, in evolutionary terms these conditions are not dysfunctions, but still they

are bad conditions to suffer from. There may also be states that are biological dysfunctions but not harmful. Here homosexuality is a possible example (Ruse 1981). There is no necessary link between an organism functioning properly in a biological sense and being in a good state. As such, asking whether deafness is a biological dysfunction will not help determine whether it is a bad thing to be deaf. We must find a different way of assessing whether it is a bad, or good, thing to be deaf.

4. Finding out whether it can be a good thing to be deaf – The hard way

Whether it can be good to be deaf cannot easily be determined. Thus, there is nothing for it but to explore the question the hard way – we must examine each claimed advantage or disadvantage to being deaf, and then seek to make an overall judgement regarding the net cost or benefit. The most striking differences between deaf and hearing people are that they experience different qualia, and that they generally make use of different language modalities (oral language in the case of hearing people versus sign language in the case of deaf people). Here I shall consider the benefits and costs that can be expected to flow from each of these differences in turn.

a. Differences in qualia

Deaf people necessarily miss out on certain qualia that others find intensely pleasurable. A deaf person will never get to hear symphonies or bird-song. Surely this is at least one aspect of being deaf that must be admitted to be a bad thing? Unfortunately, things are not so simple. It is not the case that having more qualia is necessarily better. Of course, to have no qualia in any sensory modalities at all would be awful, such a person would be entirely cut off from interacting with the world. However, there must become a point where having more sense data coming in ceases to be an advantage. Plausibly there is a limit to the volume of sensations that our brains can process. As such we will only be able to appreciate so much. There must be a point where having an additional sense would not be a blessing but merely produce confusion.

Some might suggest that this cannot be the case with being able to hear. After all natural selection has fitted us with five senses, and so our brain must be able to make use of that amount of data. It should be remembered, however, that the environment in which we evolved was very different from the environment in which we live now. Maybe our present environment contains many more sources of stimulation, and as a consequence most of us are now be living in a state of sensory overload; a state in which there is so much to see, hear and smell, that we can't possibly appreciate all the qualia that are available to us.

Leading on from this thought, I suggest that there are no senses that are necessarily a blessing. If we are lucky we will live in an environment where many of our

sensations are pleasant, but this need not be so. This point is most easily made in the case of smell. If pollution increases then come, say 2050, people who lack a sense of smell may come to be considered unusually fortunate. When the only smells are nasty, lacking smell qualia is not be a bad thing.⁹ Similarly, there are environments in which deaf people miss out on few pleasant qualia. If one lives in a flat between a railway and a school, with neighbours who play novelty pop records at full volume over and over again, then it may well be the case that not hearing noise qualia is a benefit.

Not only is it possible that sounds might on balance be unpleasant, but it should be borne in mind that people who are deaf from birth experience qualia that hearing people do not. Deaf people may become more sensitive to vibrations, and to visual stimuli, than are hearing people (Bavelier, Tomann, Hutton et al. 2000). Such qualia will bring their own pleasures, which might make up for those lost through being unable to hear.¹⁰ I conclude that the fact that deaf people miss out on auditory qualia that many enjoy does not show that deafness is a bad thing.

Of course auditory qualia may have other benefits than producing pleasure – they can give us information about our environment. Thus, a fire alarm may warn hearing people of danger, for example. However, as deaf people may become more sensitive in other sense modalities, it is not clear that hearing people will always have the edge when it comes to finding out about the environment.

b. Differences in language

It is extremely difficult for congenitally deaf people to learn to speak. Even after years of voice tuition many never manage to speak intelligibly (Lane, Hoffmeister & Bahan 1996, p.361). As a consequence deaf people are often cut off from the hearing population. In addition, many deaf people fail to learn to read and write well.¹¹

Theorists are divided as to whether this is because the amount of time some deaf children spend trying to learn to speak leaves little time for other activities, or whether it is because the structure of sign language is so different from that of English that learning to read is difficult, or whether there is some other explanation.

Some Deaf activists claim that this does not matter.¹² Deaf people have their own languages in which they can become fluent. Sign languages enable Deaf people to communicate with other Deaf people, and form the basis for vibrant Deaf-cultures. These Deaf cultures are at least as good as any other cultures. There are Sign-poems, Sign-jokes, and Sign-plays. The problems experienced by those who use sign languages when seeking to communicate with the hearing population, are in any case no different in kind from those experienced by members of other linguistic minorities (Lane 1992; Lane, Hoffmeister & Bahan 1996; Ladd 2003). Or, those at least are the claims.

In assessing such claims, we must ask two questions. First, is the situation of a Deaf person analogous to that of the members of other linguistic minorities? Second, is it true that sign languages are languages as good as any other languages, and that Deaf culture is as good as any other culture?

First, is the situation of a Deaf person analogous to that of a member of another linguistic minority? There are some similarities. Many members of other linguistic minorities may be unable to speak the majority language, and experience difficulties communicating with the rest of the population. However, there are also important differences. Members of other linguistic communities can learn to speak the majority language. In contrast, for congenitally deaf people learning to speak may be so difficult as not to be a viable possibility. This difference is important, and, I suggest, means that deaf people are disadvantaged relative to the members of other linguistic communities in this respect.

Second, are sign languages as good as other languages? Often it is claimed that all languages, and all cultures, are as good as each other. To take a typical example, Oliver Sacks, in his book *Seeing Voices*, claims that,

...all languages, whether signed or spoken, no matter how new, or how limited their geographical distribution, have the same potential, the same range of possibility – none can be dismissed as “primitive” or “defective”. Thus British Sign Language (BSL) is fully the equal of ASL; Irish Sign Language is fully the equal of both; and so too is Icelandic Sign Language (even though there are only seventy deaf people in Iceland)(Sacks 1991, p.165).

Sacks, like many others, makes these claims without supporting them. In some cases, such claims seem to be motivated by a beneficent liberalism. The thought seems to be that one must claim that all languages are equal, or else one will soon

be led to claim that some peoples are better than others, and that from that point fascism is but a small step away. In other cases, the claim that all languages are equal is made by linguists who mean to assert that all languages are equally languages and as such are equally worthy of linguistic study (see, for example, Evans 1998). This may be true, but it should be remembered that here “equal” is being used in a technical sense. When linguists say that all languages are equal in the sense of all being equally languages, they are moving away from the question of whether all languages are equal as a layperson might pose it. All languages might be equally languages, but the question of whether they are equally good for expressing ideas remains – and this question, I take it, is the key question of interest here. When one asks whether sign languages are as good as other languages one wants to know whether one can communicate as many ideas, as easily, as precisely, as elegantly, and so on, as one can in a spoken language.¹³ I will argue that, at least in this vernacular sense, plausibly some languages are better than others. There is thus no a priori reason for thinking that sign languages and spoken languages will be equal.

My starting point is that some languages have resources that others do not. Some languages have a written form, others don't. Some have tenses that others lack. In some one can build up complex words easily, in others one cannot. It might be thought that benefits might balance out. One language might be better for poetry, another one might be better for describing spatial configurations, a third might facilitate the easy construction of new words. Over all though, benefits may even out and all languages might be equal. A moment's reflection, however, suggests that such optimism is misplaced. There is no reason to expect things to even out in such a way. Indeed plausibly one might expect those languages that have been used for

the longest time, or by the most people, or in the greatest variety of settings, to end up being better all round at enabling humans to formulate and communicate ideas.

On occasion linguists say that all languages are equal because they all have the same potential (see, for example, Harlow 1998). Here the idea seems to be that a group of language users who find themselves with a need that their language cannot currently fulfil will simply add new resources to their language so that it becomes adequate to the task. To take a simple case, suppose a group of language users only have words for the numbers up to ten, but are faced with the necessity of counting fifteen cows. Here, the language users may simply invent new words and so expand their language so that it meets their needs. However, although languages clearly can sometimes be expanded, to think that this implies that they are all potentially equal, betrays a rather odd view of language use. It suggests that all people are capable of having the same ideas irrespective of their language. The picture is one of people having ideas in some non-linguistic medium, and then searching about for a way to convey these ideas in words. This is plausibly a mistaken view of things, however. More likely the thoughts that we have are at least shaped, if not determined, by our language.¹⁴ Thus, once one learns to make use of possible world talk, for example, one is able to have different thoughts about modality, not just able to express more clearly the very same thoughts that one always had. As our language plausibly shapes our thoughts, I suggest that it is not true that all languages are even potentially equal. Language users whose language lacks the resources needed to express a particular range of thoughts are less likely to have those thoughts. Thus, they cannot be relied on to simply expand their language once the thoughts occur to them.

If it is accepted that one language may be better than another in a certain respect, and it is accepted that there is no reason to expect things to even out so that all languages are equally good, then there is no a priori reason to claim that sign languages will be as good as other languages. Rather, working out how the resources of a sign language compare to those of a spoken language will be a matter for empirical research.

There is some research that suggests that sign languages are superior to spoken languages in a variety of ways. It is possible that sign languages are intrinsically easier to use than oral languages. Less muscle control is required to make signs than to form the right mouth movements to make phonemes. As a consequence, deaf infants who have been exposed to Sign from birth can often form the sign for “milk” at 4 months (Sacks 1991 p.30; Lane, Hoffmeister & Bahan 1996 p.46), while their hearing contemporaries can only cry. Harlan Lane claims that sign languages are intrinsically better than oral languages for providing information regarding spatial relations – in a sign language one can sign so as to show where objects are placed relative to each other (Lane 1992 pp.124-5; Lane, Hoffmeister & Bahan 1996 pp.104-11). Some have claimed that the 4D nature of sign languages makes them more expressive than oral languages (Sacks 1991 pp.89-90). Others suggest that the iconographic nature of sign languages enables users to think more concretely, and thus in many cases more clearly (although there is also resistance to this idea, as some see it as stemming from the notion that sign languages are systems of mime rather than proper languages) (Sacks 1991pp.122-124) .

Investigating the net importance of these various factors would take empirical research. I do not know whether sign languages can be expected to be poorer, richer, or the equal to oral languages. The key point that I wish to argue for here is there is no a priori justification for the claim that sign languages are equal to other languages. Sign languages may be relatively impoverished, in which case signers will be restricted in their ability to communicate. On the other hand, sign languages may be richer than oral languages, in which case signers will be at an advantage in these respects.

It is worth emphasising that having a rich or poor language plausibly affects more than one's ability to communicate. Regardless of whether all thought is propositional, it is surely the case that having a rich language can enhance one's ability to think. As such, those with an impoverished language will have problems forming certain thoughts, in addition to having problems with communication. This means that whether sign languages are rich or poor compared to oral languages will play a huge role in determining whether it can be a good thing to be deaf.

If sign languages turn out to be poorer than oral languages this will be a disadvantage to being deaf. However, the converse does not follow. If sign languages are richer than oral languages this is not an advantage to being deaf. This is because sign language use is not restricted to deaf people. Hearing people can learn sign languages. If sign languages are rich compared to oral languages this would be a reason for all infants to be taught sign, not a reason for people to remain or become deaf. On the other hand, as oral languages are only problematically

accessible to deaf people, if sign languages are impoverished relative to oral languages, this will result in there being disadvantages to being deaf.

i. Problems regarding communication

Even if sign languages turn out to be as good as other languages, deaf people may face other problems. In addition to needing a language, humans also need to have others to talk to. Here deaf people face particular difficulties. If only a small number of people use a language, then the chances of finding other language users interested in discussing the subjects one is interested in are reduced. There are few hearing people, and even fewer sign-users, interested in, say, the habits of the Great Crested Newt, or collecting Cornish Ware crockery.

Deaf activists may claim that the small size of the Deaf community results in other benefits that outweigh this difficulty. The Deaf community, they will say, is unusually close-knit, warm and supportive.¹⁵ As opposed to the hearing community, it offers the benefits of the village over the city. Of course, some people like living in villages. A deaf person, however, if they cannot communicate with the hearing, has no choice. And, many people hate village life. In a village everyone knows what one gets up to, and it's comparatively easy to find oneself an outcast from a small community.¹⁶

For those deaf people who would rather belong to a large community, being limited in their ability to communicate with the hearing population is a major disadvantage. But is it a disadvantage for those who are quite happy mainly communicating with other deaf people? I suggest that it is a disadvantage to *have* to belong to a small

community even if one likes small communities, although the disadvantage is only slight. This is because in general it is a good thing to have worthwhile opportunities, even if one doesn't presently want to take advantage of them. Thus, I benefit, slightly, from there being a sports centre at my university even if I do not presently foresee ever wishing to go there. People generally value "leaving their options open", mainly because they might want to make use of an opportunity in the future. In addition, even if someone never actually does decide to make use of an opportunity, that the opportunity is there allows them to dream of making use of it in the future, an activity that, in itself, is often of value. Thus, I can enjoy talking and thinking about holidays that I may one day take, even if I never actually do go away. For a deaf person to be limited to the Deaf community is a slight disadvantage, even if they would choose to belong that community.

At this point it might be suggested that deaf people often have problems communicating with hearing people because there is a lack of interpreters, or because hearing people cannot sign, rather than because they are deaf per se. If there were the facilities, deaf people could communicate with hearing people, if they wanted, and avoid the problems associated with belonging to a small community.

It is certainly true that the extent to which deafness restricts someone's ability to function socially depends on the kind of environment within which a deaf person lives. There have been communities in which everyone, hearing and deaf, could use sign language, and in such societies deaf people experience no problems with communication.¹⁷ Changes in the material environment, as well as in the social environment, can also make a difference. In the late 18th century it was claimed that

one of the major disadvantages of sign language compared to oral language is that sign language cannot be used to communicate in the dark.¹⁸ Today, widespread lighting means that there is almost always enough light to see signs. As such, a disadvantage that may have existed in the past no longer exists.

Conditions can be a bad thing in some environments but not in others. This strikes me as being the right thing to say about dyslexia, for example. Dyslexia may have some kind of biological root, and there may well have been people with dyslexic brains throughout history. Still, it is only a bad thing to be dyslexic in societies that use writing. As a consequence, stone-age dyslexics didn't suffer from a bad condition whereas present day dyslexics do. Similarly, deafness only limits a deaf person's ability to function socially in certain societies. If communication difficulties were the only negative consequences of being deaf, then being deaf would only be a bad thing in certain societies.

On occasion this point has been taken to show that deaf people only have problems with communication from a certain "point of view", and that from another point of view the problem lies with the hearing population. Thus, Wendell (1996) writes,

From a medical and rehabilitative point of view (which is also the point of view of most hearing people), a deaf child is disabled by her inability to hear, and so the child becomes the focus of efforts to "normalize" her as far as possible within the hearing community. But from another, equally valid point of view, the same child is handicapped by hearing people's (often including her parents') ignorance of Sign. (Wendell 1996 p.29)

I suggest that this way of describing things is unhelpful. Rather than the communication problems stemming from the child's inability to hear, or from her parents' inability to sign, the communication problems suffered by deaf people are relational problems - the problem stems from the fact that the child cannot hear coupled with the fact that her parents cannot sign. As such, the communication difficulties of deaf people can be solved either by hearing people learning sign language, or, potentially, through altering the deaf person (e.g. through cochlear implantation).

For the problems faced by the physically or mentally different to be relational problems is not uncommon. Consider the following cases:

- a. Black people suffer discrimination.
- b. A gay man regrets having no children.
- c. An ugly person cannot find a partner.

In all these cases the problems are relational, in that they can potentially be solved either by changing the individual or by making changes to society. Black people could have their skin bleached, or society could stop being racist. The gay man could have sex with a woman, or children could be obtained via artificial insemination, or changes in adoption law could permit his becoming a parent. The ugly person can have plastic surgery, or social notions of the beautiful or of qualities requisite in a partner could shift.

Despite all these problems being relational, in the sense that they can be solved either by altering the individual or by making social changes, we tend to think about them very differently. Least controversially, the problems faced by Black people, we say, should be solved via changing society, not through altering Black people's skin colour. In contrast, many people will think that the problems faced by the ugly person can best be alleviated by making the ugly person more attractive. In the case of the gay man, I guess, people will split when locating the "source" of the problem. Some will say that childlessness is a "natural" consequence of being gay, others that those who are childless for whatever reason should be helped to have children.

These examples help illustrate that whether a problem is thought of as being caused by the individual's condition, or by society, depends on the politics of the situation. All the difficulties are relational – in the sense that they could be solved either by changing society or by changing the individual. However, when we think that the individual *should* change (if he or she can) we tend to locate the problem as being "in" the individual. Thus, we see ugliness as being an intrinsic problem, and say that it is bad to be ugly. In contrast, when we think that society should change, we locate the problem elsewhere. Thus, we see being Black as only being a problem because of racist prejudice. We say that it is bad that society is racist, not that it is bad to be Black.

Homosexuality is an especially interesting case in this respect. In the 1970s it was usual to consider homosexuals who were unhappy about being gay to suffer from a disease, ego-dystonic homosexuality, and this disease could be treated by

psychiatrists either through counselling to help the patient accept his sexual orientation, or through therapy aimed at changing it. More recently it has become socially unacceptable for therapists to aim to change their clients' sexual orientation even at their clients' request.¹⁹ At the same time homosexuality is increasingly seen as a condition that is not in itself a bad thing. The problems faced by gay people are instead considered to be caused by a homophobic society. Here we have an example of a condition that ceased to be considered as itself being a bad thing as people came to think that the problems faced by homosexuals should be solved by changing society rather than by changing the homosexuals.

Providing a descriptive account of how, in general, we decide whether problems faced by an individual should be changed by altering the individual or by altering society, is too large a task for this paper. Providing a normative account of how such decisions should be made is even more problematic. As a very brief sketch, whether society or the individual should change will depend on the following kinds of factor, amongst others: a) what changes are practically possible, b) whether it is easier for society or the individual to change, c) the history that resulted in the problem in the first place (if, for example, I have intentionally messed up your life, it only seems fair that I should bear the burden of fixing the problem. If on the other hand self-destructive behaviour on your part has produced your difficulties, it seems right that you should bear more responsibility for resolving them).

Those who adopt social models of disability claim that the source of disabilities lies in society rather than in the individual, and that society should change to fix the resulting problems.²⁰ To take an example, those who adopt a social model of

disability commonly claim that people in wheel-chairs are disabled not by their inability to walk, but by a society that builds stairs. I suggest that this claim should not be understood as a purported description of fact, but rather as a political claim. In themselves, the problems faced by wheelchair users are relational. They can be fixed either by enabling the wheelchair user to walk or by changing the material environment. When the social model of disability claims that society causes disabilities this should be understood as a political claim, asserting that society, and not disabled individuals, should change in order to solve the problems faced by disabled people.

I suggest that while these political claims are frequently plausible, this will not always be the case. Whether society or the disabled individuals should change depends on highly contingent factors. In a population with a large percentage of deaf people, it may be reasonable for hearing people to learn to sign. However, it is not the case that the problems faced by disabled people should always and necessarily be solved by changing society. This can be seen by considering an extreme and hypothetical example. Suppose in the future cochlear implant technology improves greatly. It comes to be the case that deafness can be cured completely, and the operation itself advances to the stage where it is almost completely safe and painless. Suppose furthermore that most deaf people have been implanted. Sign languages cease to be living languages, as no-one learns them, and those who can sign die. Eventually, only one non-oral, signing, deaf person remains in the world. I suggest that it is not at all clear that the hearing community would have a duty to learn Sign in order to communicate with this person.

Conclusion

Finally we are in a position to conclude the discussion of whether it can be a good thing to be deaf. We have gone through the potential costs and benefits associated with being deaf and are now in a position to try to sum these together. First, it is certainly the case that deaf people miss out on sound qualia. However, this is not necessarily a bad thing, as deaf people may have more qualia in other sensory modalities, and in any case having more qualia is not necessarily better. Second, deaf people may well be unable to speak and so limited to sign language. Whether sign languages are as rich as other languages cannot be established a priori, but instead depends on empirical facts. However, even if sign languages are richer than other languages this would not be something good about being deaf per se. Rather it would be an advantage to be a signer, and hearing people can also learn sign language. Third, depending on the society within which they live, deaf people may be limited to a fairly small Deaf community. Some will claim that this limitation should be thought of as being caused by a society that will not sign, rather than by being caused by deafness itself. I claim that in themselves communication problems are relational. Whether they are said to be located in society or the individual depends on whether we think society or the individual should change. I suggest that the solution to this normative question is not straightforward and depends on numerous contingent factors.

I conclude that whether it is a good or bad thing to be deaf is hard to determine. Plausibly being deaf may be a bad thing for some deaf people but not for others. Deaf people who would like to communicate with hearing people but cannot are more greatly disadvantaged than those who are happy sticking to the Deaf community. In addition, deaf people have different qualia than hearing people. Whether deaf-qualia are better than hearing-qualia will likely be largely a matter of taste.

It has been put to me that on my view whether it is good to be deaf is a subjective matter. This is not quite what I think. Rather on my view whether it is good for an individual to be deaf depends on whether in their case the advantages outweigh the disadvantages. Some advantages to being deaf will be objective – so if it is true that sign languages can be used to communicate spatial information more accurately than oral languages this will be an objective fact. Other advantages will be subjective, and will depend, for example, on whether one finds deaf-qualia more pleasurable than hearing-qualia. I have also been pushed to say whether in those cases where it is good to be deaf, deafness is an intrinsic or a relational good. This question is similarly difficult to answer. Some of the advantages or disadvantages to being deaf are relational – they vary with the social and material context. Other advantages and disadvantages will be intrinsic to being deaf – for example, being unable to experience sound qualia.

If I am right, and being deaf is good for some people, but not for others, this would not be a surprising conclusion. Commonly it is the case that the same biological condition can affect people differently because different people have different aims, different abilities, and different preferences. The case is no different for deafness.

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Notes

¹ Lane, Hoffmeister & Bahan (1996) pp.410-11, “members [of the Deaf-World] think it is a good thing to be Deaf and would like to see more of it [i.e. they would like there to be more Deaf children born]” Also ASL-Info (2003) p.1 “ It is an asset in Deaf Culture to be deaf in behaviour, values, knowledge, and fluency in ASL [American Sign Language]. Deafness is not a disability but rather a different way of being.” Steinbeck (2000) discusses (and rejects) the “forms of variation” view of disabilities, including deafness.

² Though their accounts of what makes something a “bad” thing differ.

³ Tucker (1998) Reports that many of the Deaf families seen by the genetic counselling service offered at Gallaudet University (A U.S. University for the Deaf) want deaf rather than hearing babies. For a study of attitudes in the U.K. see Middleton, Hewison & Mueller (2001)

⁴ Mundy (2002) Discussing this case, Sparrow 2002 argues that it might be justifiable for Deaf parents to choose to have deaf babies even if deafness isn’t generally a good because a Deaf parent may be able to be a better parent to a deaf child.

⁵ In this paper I consider whether it might be good for a deaf individual to be deaf. This leave open the question of whether deafness might be good not for the deaf individual but for others (other deaf people, or society as a whole). This is a distinct question, and not one I deal with here.

⁶ Some may argue that it’s not just “hard” for me to know what an idealised version of myself would value, but impossible. I’m not sure whether they are right. Here I just wish to flag up that appealing to what an idealised agent would value leads to epistemic problems.

⁷ My list of potential advantages to being deaf is taken from a survey of the literature. Almost certainly it is not an exhaustive list. A potential worry is that my list of goods in itself builds in “hearing” biases. Deaf people

might value different goods, and if so judging deafness against a list of goods compiled from commonplace hearing intuitions would be unfair. I accept that it is possible that deaf people value goods that hearing people overlook. However in the absence of a competing list of “deaf-goods” being proposed, these hypothetical goods cannot be factored into the discussion here. If in the future, someone proposes such a list then I would be happy to add them to the potential goods considered in this paper.

A related concern is that we as a group may be radically misguided about what things are good for us, in the same of way that individuals can be wrong about what is good for them as individuals. I accept this is possible, but consider it unlikely. No-one seriously doubts that having friends or having a language are goods. In contrast, individuals often do seem to make mistakes about what is good for them – e.g. because they lack relevant information, or are self-deceived.

⁸ Lane, Hoffmeister & Bahan (1996) p.405 claim that Deaf people are not impaired because “Deaf people themselves, who surely must know whether they have a grave impairment, say they do not.”

⁹ It is said that our sense of smell is related to our sense of taste – so the loss of one sense would affect the other. This, however, does not undermine the point I am trying to make here, namely that the value of a particular sense (or senses) depends on circumstances.

¹⁰ This possibility is nicely explored in Michael Dowse’s film *It’s All Gone Pete Tong* (2004) – about a DJ who becomes deaf, and gradually comes to a greater appreciation of visual qualia and vibrations.

¹¹ In 1996 U.S. 17 and 18 year old deaf and hard of hearing students could only read as well as an average 4th grade student. Gallaudet Research Institute (1999)

¹² Crouch (1997) Crouch claims that “considered in the proper light, the decision to forgo cochlear implantation for one’s child, far from condemning a child to a world of meaningless silence, opens the child up to membership in the Deaf community, a unique community with a rich history, a rich language, and a value system of its own.” The richness of Deaf culture is discussed in Lane, Hoffmeister & Bahan (1996) Especially ch. 5.

¹³ There may be other desiderata for a language, this list is only illustrative.

¹⁴ For a useful introduction on the ways in which language shapes thought see Devitt and Sterelny (1999) ch 10.

¹⁵ Ladd (2003) pp.360-61 brings out how frequently his Deaf interviewees spoke of Deaf club members constituting an extended “family”, or “village”.

¹⁶ See Nyman 1991 for a discussion of the problems faced by gay members of the Deaf community, for example.

¹⁷ Groce (1985) Describes how the deaf lived at Martha’s Vineyard, an island off the coast of New England, which had a high incidence of hereditary deafness into the early part of the 20th century.

¹⁸ Desloges (1984) Desloges is discussing objections to sign language made by Deschamps. As Desloges explains, sign languages can in fact used in the dark, although the method of using them is cumbersome. To use sign language in the dark the person who wishes to communicate takes the hands of the other and places that person’s fingers in the position for the signs that he wishes to communicate.

¹⁹ For discussion of the changing conceptions of homosexuality see Bayer (1981). For statements by professional organisations condemning “reparative therapy”, that is therapy that attempts to change the sexual orientation of homosexuals, see Robinson (2000).

²⁰ Classic formulations of the social model are given by Oliver (1990) Finkelstein (1980).