

## A Few Lines on Disability, Assistive Technology and Happiness

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### Abstract

This article provides an overview of the multiple relations between Disability and Assistive Technology. It falls within the category of Studies on Disability, young branch of this leafy tree called Humanities. History of Disabilities is, by definition, a history made of absences. Assistive Technology in turn is far from achieving all that is expected of it; likewise, much remains to be done regarding the inclusion and social integration of the disabled.

**Keywords:** Disability; Assistive Technology; Happiness

*"Technology is a useful servant but a dangerous master".*

*Christian Lous Lange*

*"The only Disability in life is a bad attitude".*

*Scott Hamilton*

*"Be happy for this moment. This moment is your life".*

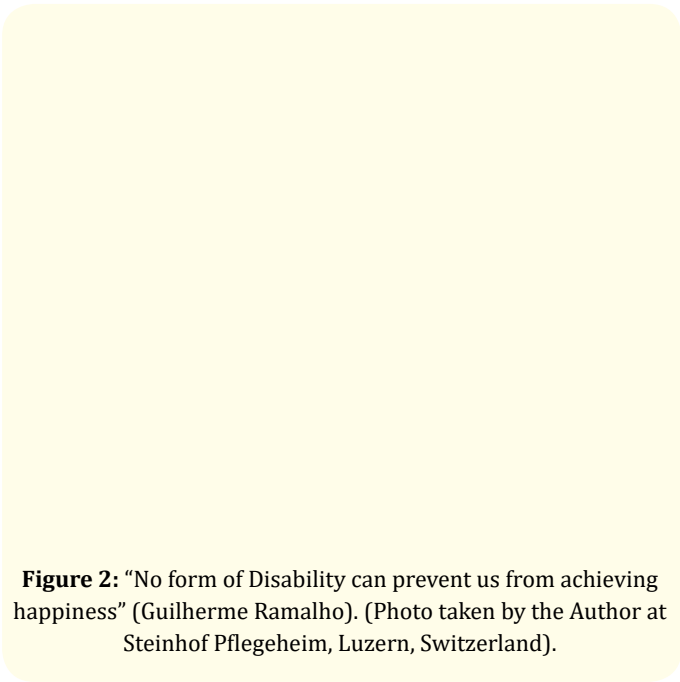
*Omar Khayyam*

### First things first

Before starting, I must express my gratitude to my dear friend, Brother Dominik Wick, Superior of the Convent of the Brothers of Mercy of Mary Help in Luzern, Switzerland. Thanks to him and his colleagues (many of them already citizens of Heaven), I had the honour of living as a guest among them; those were some of the happiest days of my life. In their Nursing Home, in close contact with disabled people, I came to understand a small part of what the Blessed Peter Friedhofen (1819 - 1860), founder of that Congregation, meant by saying "I am familiar with suffering just as birds are to flying" [1].

**Figure 1:** Brother Dominik and João Vicente Ganzarolli de Oliveira at Steinhof (Luzern, Switzerland). (Photo taken by Patricia Nordi in 2015).

The fact is that “No form of Disability can prevent us from achieving happiness”, as Guilherme Ramalho (deceased in 2017), founder and ex-president of ANDEF (Niterói Association of Disabled People [Niterói/RJ, Brazil]), used to say. Disability is as old as life itself, and can be included in the category of suffering [2-4]; it is also a challenge [5,6], which by the way is a synonym for life - always remembering that to overcome a challenge, two things are required: knowing as deeply as possible that who defies, and taking up the challenge. Disability lacks a specific and comprehensive history [7]. Few documentation exists about disabled people, simply because they rarely attract the attention of chroniclers and historians in general, notwithstanding their presence in all kind of human societies, and this from the most remote prehistory [8,9]. Historical knowledge helps us to know the past; and this facilitates our understanding of the present, in such a way that it allows for some anticipation of the future, often allowing to prevent past errors from occurring again [10].



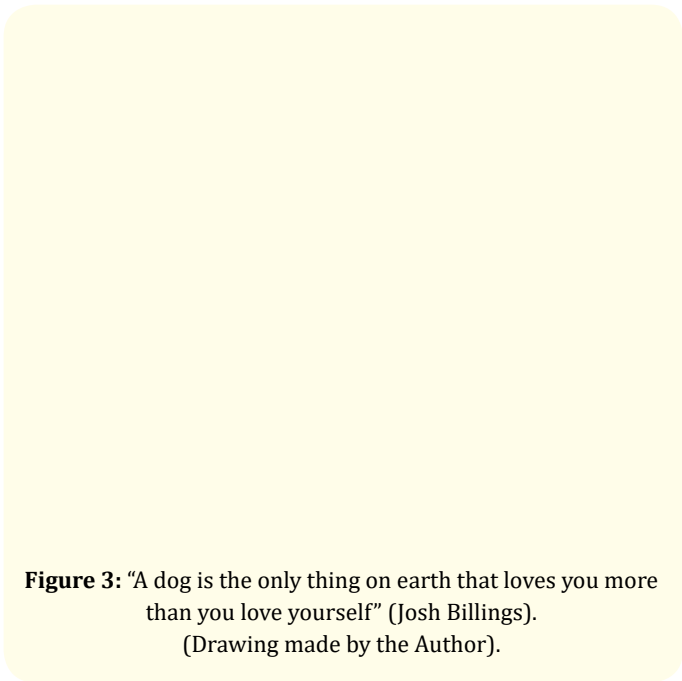
**Figure 2:** “No form of Disability can prevent us from achieving happiness” (Guilherme Ramalho). (Photo taken by the Author at Steinhof Pflegeheim, Luzern, Switzerland).

As for Assistive Technology...

What about “Assistive Technology”? It is a newly established expression that designates not only devices produced for disabled people, but also the procedures which allow for this production to be accomplished; its purpose is that of assisting disabled people, always aiming for their independence, social integration and inclusion, and consequent improvement in quality of life. Lato sensu, Assistive Technology must have already existed in the Palaeolithic, a period that covers more than 90% of our technological prehis-

tory, spanning the time from around 3.3 million years ago, when hominids seem to have started to produce stone tools - and, very possibly, walking sticks and other artefacts serving analogous purposes -, until the end of the Pleistocene, or Ice Age, c. 11.700 B.C. As for the first archaeological evidence of Assistive Technology, it is a rudimentary prosthesis found in Central Asia, and dates from c. 2300 B.C. Orthopaedic appliances have existed in Egypt during the last five millennia; Egyptian is the oldest known artificial hand (about 2000 BC) [11].

Given the fact that Disability consists in a “permanent injury, illness, or physical or mental condition that tends to restrict the way that someone can live his life” [12], being born or becoming disabled is always a possibility to be taken into account whenever it comes to living creatures - and this from the most primitive one-celled organisms to complex ones, such as trilobites, palm trees, butterflies, dinosaurs and us ourselves. As already mentioned here, Disability is as old as life itself; within the realm of creatures, only inanimate beings, such as rocks, are insulated against it. Important to be mentioned is the fact that Assistive Technology’s field of action spreads itself to irrational animals in two different ways: a) they can collaborate with us, e.g., guide dogs for the blind; b) we can collaborate with them, creating and providing them with the tools of Assistive Technology adequately adapted to their needs, e.g. wheel chairs for dogs [13]. As a matter of fact, plants can also be beneficial for disabled people, and vice-versa [14]. All this is related to cooperation and sociability in general, a characteristic that, far from being exclusively human, is present in several animals and plants as well [15,16].



**Figure 3:** “A dog is the only thing on earth that loves you more than you love yourself” (Josh Billings). (Drawing made by the Author).

### As for happiness

Thanks to Assistive Technology, several benefits for the disabled that were formerly “no way” or “perhaps” became reality, as time went on. Anyway, it is worthy remembering that the relationship between Assistive Technology and Disability works both ways: just as achievements in Assistive Technology lead to social integration and inclusion of the disabled, the more this phenomenon occurs, the more encouragement and fostering will be for new researches, inventions and achievements in the field of Assistive Technology.

As for happiness - main target in life of everyone of us, disabled or not, it is foolish to focus it on goals that do not depend essentially on us. Imagine someone who considers that being happy depends on achieving external (so to say) goals. Such a person is not so near to happiness as she may think. Once a goal is achieved, she will tend to look for another one to achieve, which in turn will probably lead to a third trying, and so on, perhaps, *ad infinitum*. Such a pursuit of happiness is nothing more than a vicious cycle, in which it is as easy to enter as it is difficult to escape from; some verses of David Gilmour’s song *There is no way out of here* apply here: “There’s no way out of here/When you come in/You’re in for good”. Last but not least, let me echo this passage from Baltasar Gracián: “Rich was Croesus, but not wise. Wise was Diogenes, but not rich. True happiness does not consist in having much, but in wanting little”.

**Figure 4:** “True happiness does not consist in having much, but in wanting little” (Gracián). (Photo taken by the Author in Kashgar, Central Asia, in 2001).

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