

“Social Understandings of the Deaf and the Blind in Ancient Greece” explores how the Ancient Greeks viewed these two disabilities. It argues that the Greeks believed that the gods inflicted physical disabilities on those people who angered them. Whether a person had become disabled at birth, through an accident, or as the result of old age, the Greeks understood the person to have committed a transgression against the gods. The gods, however, imposed the two disabilities subjectively and used them to convey the level of anger they had to the inflicted. They would strike a person blind for minor transgressions against them, such as writing a poem that upset them. Conversely, they would inflict deafness on people who committed major transgressions against them, such as failing to show proper piety. The severity of the disability directly related to a person’s ability to function in society absent that sense. Blindness represented a hindrance but not a debilitating disability to a person. In fact, the Greeks believed that if a person accepted his fate, he could actually benefit from blindness. Poets, bards, and seers’ skills could improve when they became blind. Blindness improved a person’s inner eye which allowed them either to see into the future or gave them extraordinary artistic abilities. Furthermore, the gods often would restore a person’s sight if the person accepted and embraced his fate. A deaf person, however, had a debilitating disability according to the Greeks. The Greeks labeled the deaf as un-human and half-dead; the deaf literally lost their humanity. The way in which the Greeks’ understood these disabilities helps to illuminate their societal values. In a primarily oral society, the Greeks valued a person’s ability to speak. This represented the person’s primary means of communicating and, thus, their way of interacting with others in society. Deafness would have hindered a person’s ability to communicate orally. Since the Greeks did not use writing as a primary means of communication, the blind were not at such a disadvantage as the deaf. They could have normal interactions with others in the community and only required others to help them navigate through the world around them. Understanding the Greeks’ views on the deaf and the blind shows that their society valued interpersonal interactions above all else. Anything that interfered with the ability to have these interpersonal interactions proved devastating.