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Blindsight and Echopraxia – Dual Disabilities

What is the definition of disability? From the title of Peter Watt's novel, Blindsight, it might be a phenomenon where the unconscious brainstem can see when the conscious cannot (Watts, Blindsight 170 or 170). Another disability is Echopraxia, title of the sequel, manifesting in an unconscious mimicking of behavior (Watts, Echopraxia 315 or Echo 315). The implication is that disability is the involuntary manifestation of something that doesn't follow our standards of normal human behavior or appearance. This human benchmark is tested following first contact with an alien civilization through Firefall, a cryptic appearance of thousands of probes, piquing our curiosity of why something is outside the norm (40). When we meet Rorsarch, the extraterrestrial organic space vessel with a communication interface, talking to it shows a pattern of non-sentience, or lack of self-awareness, which lead us to characterize it as dyslexic (105), sociopathic (107), and finally a Chinese Room, due to its communication simply following a set of rules but lacking comprehension of what is being said (117). Due to no longer meeting human criteria of sentience, the crew of the Thesus ignores its warnings (124) and drills into Rorsarch (138) without its permission in an attempt to find something that we share consciousness with.

Although non-sentience can be thought as a disability, it appears evolutionary advantageous, starting with the emotional disconnection in sociopathy in upper echelons of human society (311) to phenomenon where smarter more successful animals evolve to be less aware as with chimpanzees (310). The implications of this are what if our definition of disability is wrong? Our humanity and more broadly consciousness may be nothing but a parasite (351), the evolutionary fluke or disability if the results are all that matter. The thought of not having to think but instantly knowing the right answers to every question in the universe makes us wonder if we should be more like scramblers, Rorsarch's octopoid inhabitants who traded away their sentience for far superior processing ability (263). Jukka Sarasiti a vampire, cannibalistic offshoots of humanity with superior intellect, explains that humans are like flightless birds, consciousness evolving because it was adequate enough without any evolutionary competition of a superior species lacking this disability (306). It is implied that had it not been for the crucifix glitch, a fatal visual disability towards right angles, that the less sentient vampires would have inherited the earth, hinting a war with humans to reclaim their birthright (362). In Blindsight, we see this skirmish between consciousness and unconsciousness in a final confrontation between Theseus and Rorsarch.

Imagine you are aboard the space ship Theseus one of the crew on the bleeding edge of humanity augmented to give you the impression that you may have the edge in dealing with Rorschach. Two prisoner scramblers Stretch and Clench, don't even acknowledge each other existence or their own (261) giving the Susan James, Theseus' specialist in communication, the misinterpretation of an alien race of disabled cells-with-Waldoes (226). This lack of understanding is also felt by the aliens as viewing your communication as a misinterpretation the deliberate wasting of their resources of an evolutionary disabled civilization and therefore an act of war (324). Rorsarch then attacks by exploiting these disabilities. It continues its pattern of killing essential medical personnel with Issac Szpindel (195), finishing off Robert Cunningham and further disabling you by cutting off Theseus' escape (330). Susan James multi-core augmentation is supplanted by a new panicking personality (341) followed by exploiting Jukka Sarasti’s crucifix glitch disability and possibly manipulating Susan to spike his anti-Euclidian drugs that treat the seizures (345). When all hope appears to be lost, it is Amanda Bates's act noble self-sacrifice that allows the Theseus crew to defeat Rorsarch by mutually assured destruction, actions of a disabled mind the unconscious beings cannot comprehend due to following a set of rules to maximize their survival (350). You are Siri Keeton, the survivor of the skirmish between consciousness and unconsciousness, having spent your life fighting this battle yourself, only having left your Chinese Room by regaining your empathy (362).

Is your disability also your identity? The ship of Theseus is a thought experiment where parts of are replaced forcing the question whether something is the sum of its parts. Siri Keeton asks us to imagine radical-hemispherectomy an operation where "half the brain is thrown out with yesterday's krill" (20). Throughout most of the novel the answer appears to be yes, that you cannot hope to regain what is lost and can only dream being someone else or who you once were (234). When becomes over-reliant on his Chinese Room similar to the unconsciousness of vampires or Scramblers that makes Siri the best in his field of Synthesis or the decoding incomprehensible patterns (254). Tragically, this disability is shown as a metaphorical room Siri hides to avoid intense emotions, a bathroom to hide from his mother Helen (230) or when his ex-girlfriend Chelsea is dying, "I really wanted to talk to her. I just couldn't find an algorithm that fit." (293). It is only through another physical disability that we might be able to explain that the answer is no, that a person is more than the sum of their parts and can be reborn as someone else. We see this through the equivalent to biblical crucifixion by Jukka Sarasti allowing Siri to transcend his emotional disability and finally empathize, "Get out of your room, Keeton [...] For once in your goddamned life, understand something"(300). However, for Siri Keeton, the timing of regaining his humanity is unfortunate with the possibility of leaving him disabled and alone if the humanity loses their consciousness after the events of Echopraxia.

Daniel Brüks is a baseline, or normal, non-augmented human who struggles to stay by post-human, vampire standards, a roach or "so primitive you're unkillable" (Echo 141). Unlike Siri who dreams being non-disabled, Daniel takes prejudices and humiliations in stride with pride in his disability of baseline-ness, never opting for body augmentations and instead wearing gimp hood to access ConSensus and pills, the implication being that this is a self-imposed disability when brain implants (Echo 169) and pumps (Echo 52) exist. As noted by his wife Rhona, Daniel's overcompensation for his disabilities (Echo 321) are what make him endearing and he is portrayed as not being a wannabe post-human (Echo 68). Whereas Siri's disability is expressed as imposter syndrome when he is actually part of the bleeding edge of the Theseus crew (252), Daniel like a Luddite clings to his humanity and empiricism, disabilities in a universe where consciousness is implied to be parasite (Echo 351) and "God's a virus" (Echo 224). If Siri's disability is following a system of rules and reporting to his masters without comprehension (250), Daniel's disability is rebelling against rules if he cannot consciously comprehend them, "Even in sleep, Dan Brüks didn’t take anything on faith" (Echo 69). Daniel is "cured" from this disability by being used by the Bicamerals and vampires to uplift humanity and achieve interspecies peace by infecting him with Portia, a cure or patch for consciousness created by Rorsarch which it sent back towards Earth through the Icarus stream during the events of Blindsight. Realizing that he lives in a prejudiced society that has forcibly cured him, Daniel embraces his disability being expressed as the free will to take his own life (Echo 352).

Unlike Daniel, we see the majority of humanity succumbing to anxieties of being obsolete for perceived disabilities and being forced to augment. Some humans escape into heaven, a virtual reality simulation, while others are forced to become augmented. It is ironic when Daniel’s wife Rhona hides from the guilt of a cloud-killer (Echo 91), someone who is kills sentient AI, by becoming one herself. When she laments, appearing like a shriveled pickled fetus that, “Heaven isn’t the future. It’s a refuge for gutless wonders who want to hide from the future […] wish fulfillment for passenger pigeons” (Echo 322), she is implying that these “ascended”, augmented humans like herself are the truly disabled, running away from reality not baselines like Daniel. When we re-examine Siri’s mother Helen and find out that his father Jim Moore’s fault for Siri’s disability (Echo 195), we no longer see the ableist mother who can’t accept her son that Siri portrays her as but someone who is disabled herself and clings to the hope that her son is still alive (The Colonel). Meanwhile on Theseus and Earth, we see post-augmented humans, acquiring physical and mental disabilities to escape perceived societal disability. As expressed by Robert Cunnigham, "We can be utterly useless, or we can try and compete against the vampires and the constructs and the AIs" (251). Spindzel and Cunnigham themselves are implied lose aspects of their sensation of touch (91) or conceptualize identity through the use of gender pronouns (247) in order to interface with machines like they were parts of the body (278). However, we see that these augments have turned these humans into specialists whose existential purpose in life is tied to a function they provide, a Kafkaesque lifestyle where a person is defined by what their biological or societal function is. When it is revealed the majority of life is non-sentient and communication is only necessary for kin selection or biological value, Susan James whose entire purpose and augmentation is for that function experiences a nervous breakdown and unable to function (324). We see the same situation play out when these augmentations are removed through Cunningham, “Here was a system with its eyes and ears and tongue cut out, forced to stumble and feel its way around things it had once inhabited” (278) and temporarily to Siri, “[…] you took strip me down to some raw half-brained defenseless animal” (305). Other augmented humans include Lianna Lutterodt, self-proclaimed “koala bear compared to a rat” due to being a synthesist but whose sole purpose is to transcribe thoughts of Bicammerals, hive-minded super monks with biological radios allowing telepathy (Echo 29), and Rakshi Sengupta with a hyperactive brain and processing ability manifesting itself in a speech pattern consisting of run on sentences. We see augmentation causing even more pronounced disabilities in these two characters where Rakshi is unable to even look at Daniel in the eyes or recognize him as causing the disabled state of her girlfriend, even asking Daniel for assistance (Echo 298). Lianna’s augmented disability is a diminished sense of mortality shrugging of having her spine snapped (Echo 188), and faith that becomes fatal (Echo 263). The Biccamerals only gain abilities due to the self-infliction of disabilities in the form of induced brain cancer with synaptic pruning and sacrifice aspects of their humanity the operating causing themselves to be reborn with a new brain (Echo 179), one which has almost lost the ability to verbally communicate with the rest of humanity (147). As stated by Jim Moore, baselines are less disabled, more reliable because they have been field tested for millions of years removing evolutionary glitches (Echo 141).

Blindsight and Echopraxia, provide the experience of disability being inflicted, self-inflicted or felt through being obsolete, through detailed visual descriptions to describe sensations so foreign and incomprehensible summarized by Michelle as Susan James, "[...] you can't turn a sunset into a string of grunts without losing something." (89). We are forced to experience Siri's narrative through disjointed yet logical jumps following or preceding intense emotions. As the crew of the Thesus ventures into Rorschach's radiation causes various disabilities: blindsight, unconscious processing through the brainstem, in Issac Spindzel, self-harm in Cruncher as Susan James, (161, 162, 171). During the disability inflicting chaos, we experience a flashback of Chelsea trying to fix Siri's disability causing a less pleasant violent flashback of Siri's mother Helen being strangled by his father Jim Moore after attempting to fix Siri's emotional disability through the illicit use of Bondfast a maternal bonding drug for children (167). Later we experience consciousness as a disability with the first sighting of scramblers, with one appearing invisible in front of Siri (219) only to realize that the scramblers were introduced unconsciously in the form of visual schizophrenic hallucinations of segmented creatures chapters before (130, 191). We the reader experience the unconscious algorithms found in headquotes which may be from real people or are fake as Siri's hallucinations long before our "disabled" conscious minds finish the chapters. As Robert Cunnigham describes it, "So one part of the brain tries to tell another any way it can. Passes notes under the table...Blindsight" (318). While headquotes influence our unconscious understanding, it is through trigger phrases starting with “imagine” that we are asked to supplant our conscious identities, "Imagine you're...Siri Keeton, a machine, crown of thorns, prisoner of war, Amanda Bates, a scrambler..." (25, 43, 124, 181, 241, 332, 362). We experience the disabilities and lack thereof through occupying different forms, as summarized by Daniel Brüks "A literary affectation [...] putting yourself in the character's head" (Echo 294).

As we hear the phrase "Imagine Christ on the Cross" the image is of rebirth through suffering and an eventual escape, the crucifix symbolizing suffering, inflicted disability and transcendence (Echo 18, 258, 323). In Echopraxia, it acts as a trigger phase by Valerie the vampire, causing a fatal cascade of short-circuiting nerves karmatically causing humans to experience the crucifix glitch, a disability used to enslave vampires. In a flashback of Valerie's past in a vampire testing facility, her disability is exploited for scientific research as we are shown a horror sequence of a background morphing slowly into a right angle causing her to seize, the equivalent of intentionally flashing lights in front of a photosensitive epileptic to induce a seizure (Echo 240). Vampires through their disabilities symbolize the biblical dichotomy with two sides of a crucifix symbolizing saints and devils "[…] intellect coexisting with so much instinctive aggression. Making sure the right part wins" (133). Their evolutionary wiring for hunting is a disability that is misinterpreted for sadism seen where Jukka Sarasiti watches a series of tortured human faces like a statistical bar chart (337) or when Daniel attempts to heal Valerie's broken forearm only for her to traumatize him by snapping her own bones after each attempt, a medical necessity for her to vasodilate (Echo 103). Vampires also act as saints where their self-sacrifices help the protagonists overcome their disabilities. Jukka is Jesus where he "died for our sins", unlocking the door of Chinese Room and freeing Siri to experience empathy (362). Meanwhile Valerie acts as Moses freeing vampires from their disabilities of the crucifix glitch and territorial homicide. Before doing so she saves Daniel's life from dying of the crucifix glitch through uttering a biblical trigger phrase "The tomb at Aramathea" (Echo 327) and starting his journey of rebirth as she leads him into the desert, curing Daniel of his consciousness and nurturing the unconscious Portia within Brüks before being murdered by a Daniel free of his disability. Valarie's last words, "Wouldn't it be nice if we could all just get along" shows us her vision of a promise land were vampires and humans are free of disabilities, living in unconscious bliss (Echo 351).

Works Cited

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