Disability and The Inhuman

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Introduction

When presented with the term 'inhuman', I was drawn to consider how certain ways of existing come to be considered as not fully human, and associated with something inhuman; how such associations are in fact involved in the constitution of what is taken to be fully or properly human; and finally, the deleterious effects for those who, because they move or think in unconventional ways, become associated with the inhuman.

I address these topics in three stages. First, I briefly sketch how common understandings of disability might be thought of as 'dehumanising' for those who are apprehended in this way. Next, I outline why I think that appeals to the category of 'the human', and calls to be recognised as fully and equally human, are inapt as a response to such dehumanisation: this category is ill-suited to the apprehension and valuation of the existing heterogeneity of bodies and minds, precisely because it attains its consistency by forcibly excluding those anomalies it deems to be inhuman or ambiguously human. Finally, I point towards an alternative, affirmative sense of inhuman, and a disposition towards an inhuman future: an orientation that attempts to imagine and move towards a future that is not already circumscribed by existing humanist ideals.

Becoming Inhuman as Dehumanisation

'Inhuman' can denote that something dehumanises, or that it lies outside of the category 'human'. In the first sense, inhuman could refer to the kind of objectifying gaze posited by Maurice Merleau-Ponty (2012): a gaze that denudes the meaningfulness

of another, thereby to preclude the understanding necessary for an ethical human relation. Initially, this sense of inhuman as dehumanising appears to have some promise for a conceptualisation of disability experience. Disability theorists have consistently argued that much of what disables people with merely atypical minds or bodies are not facts about those minds or bodies. Instead, they are disabled by lack of accommodations, discriminatory or condescending attitudes, unavailability of rewarding work, and so on. This marginal status of disabled people is perpetuated because the preeminent way of framing disability is a diagnostic medical gaze (Oliver and Barnes 2012). When apprehended in this register, atypical embodiment is viewed in terms of its deviation from a putative human norm, and reduced to its ostensible pathology. Significantly, this medical modality operates well beyond its jurisdiction to inform folk conceptions of disability, so that these also operate through a prism of objectification. This produces what we might call anticipatory perceptual norms about what is a complete or correct human embodiment: in everyday experience, to encounter bodily anomaly is to see divergence from a purportedly objective species normality. Disabled experience is reduced to abnormal bodily properties and their supposedly harmful entailments, while the socio-political dimensions that disable people are effaced. We might say this renders disabled people doubly inhuman: first, by over-identification with their purported divergence from the human; second, by how the attendant reduction to bodily properties hampers an ethical encounter.

The Problem of 'The Human'

Calling such treatment inhuman—where this means dehumanising—might imply that a corrective would recognise disabled people within a common humanity. Where disability is concerned, however, the notion of humanity warrants some scepticism. Ideas about the human—what it is, what it does, what it ought to be and do—are ubiquitous. While specifics vary with cultural context, human societies are permeated with ideas about what is normal or natural for humans. More often than not, these ideas form part of a background that, while itself unexpressed, nonetheless conditions everyday expression, perception, and action (Esposito 2015). So robust, ubiquitous, and implicit are these ideas about the human, that it seems to be part of the furniture of the world.

However, the human is, as Merleau-Ponty suggests, "a historical idea and not a natural kind" (2012: 174). It is not simply given, and must be produced. This production involves human practices that mark off human from non-human. Roberto Esposito (2012, 2015) suggests that the human is produced via practices, knowledges, technologies, and so on, that, in their respective domains, inaugurate a line that separates out human and non-human. Samantha Frost calls the human an "implicitly comparative category" (2016: 8). While candidate ideas for what distinguishes humanness vary—intellection, autonomy, capacity for moral deliberation—these have a common thread. In each, some distinctively human characteristic separates it from other living beings. To be understood as self-sovereign, or as a moral agent, the human must be differentiated from inhuman dimensions: from nonhuman organisms, from the material world, and especially from its own 'mere' bodily aspects (including basic functions and desires). In particular, to be autonomous is to be capable of transcending the impositions of the body.

Humanism and Disability

Importantly, then, one never simply *is* human: to be human is to be validated as such (Frost 2016). We need not mention the egregious failures of this designation to realise that what counts as human is not always self-evident, and can lead to instances of qualified humanity (Esposito 2012): those said to lack or be compromised in some characteristic that is possessed by the fully and properly human, and in virtue of which the latter can transcend their mere biological nature. My initial point is that part of how the human acquires its coherence is through an internal division: by identifying with the inhuman aspects of individuals who otherwise would be considered human, and in virtue of which they are deficient in some properly human capacity or characteristic. This need not work only in a totalising register: the same individual may be recognised as human in some respects and not in others. The human, then, can reduce and objectify just as much as the aforementioned dehumanising frame. Indeed, appeals to humanity may betray a logic similar to that of dehumanisation: both turn on a hypostatised idea of what the human ought to be like.

This brings us to disability. I'm going to talk about autonomy, one important marker of humanness. If autonomy involves transcendence and appropriation of

merely organismic dimensions, falling short of this ideal leaves one more or less "trapped in and by the body" (Frost 2016: 7). Whether or not it is philosophically persuasive, this does line up with a common story about disability. While a disabled person may be human in principle, to be disabled is to be subject to some biological condition that diminishes the purported human power to transcend mere bodily demands and engage in free activity. If the human is defined by transcendence of the biological, disability inclines in equal measure towards the brute body and away from the properly human. In this account, the disabled body drags the human away from freedom and back towards material objectivity. This is one reason that the concept of disability is so illuminating. It is one of the constituents of the human-inhuman gap, where that gap is enacted on one and the same body. The atypical body, understood through a humanist frame, both is human, but in some aspect fails to be fully human. It embodies the tension between the human, and a movement away from the human.

Inhumanisation

This compels me to relinquish appeals to the human in favour of a positive sense of inhuman. In so doing, I will proceed from this tension within disability between human and inhuman. When applied in the ways I have already discussed, the inhuman has an oppositional role. It is something to be repudiated: the human is what it is because it is not inhuman. We can begin by asking why there is this anxiety about the inhuman, such that the line separating human and nonhuman is repeatedly re-articulated in different forms and domains. This illuminates a deeply rooted metaphysical chauvinism running through Western thought, that valorises the self-identical and self-certain, and evinces unease at 'contamination' from outside (this is also why the inhuman is viewed in oppositional terms) (Esposito 2008; Shildrick 2012). Recall how body and world have traditionally been viewed as impediments to the exercise of rational self-sovereignty. Hence the impetus to insulate the human from inhuman contaminants, and the disdain for vulnerability and dependency.

A first positive sense of inhuman would attempt to relinquish the oppositional and comparative stance by attending to ways that the purported gap between human and nonhuman is continually traversed, and integrating and affirming within it those very dimensions that humanism must repudiate as inhuman: the biological, the animal, the

technological. The human is not characterised by transcendence of supposedly inhuman dimensions. It no more transcends the body than the body transcends the world. The body is embedded and constituted within multi-dimensional ecologies or networks (Latour 1999); its activity occurs within assemblages that have social, material, and technological features. I'll mention just one such dimension: technology (I'm using this term very broadly for anything whatsoever that is fabricated: fire is a technology). As Don Ihde (1990) suggests, routine interactions occur through technical objects and against a technological background. Everyday activity is accompanied by a nigh-imperceptible skein of artefactuality that, while internal to, and transformative of, perception and action, rarely manifests as such. Much apparently spontaneous activity, then, is technologically-scaffolded: a function not simply of the body, but of relations with an available sympathetic milieu. In such cases, autonomy does not pre-exist, but emerges from these enabling relations with nonhuman interactants, which are part of its exercise (Latour 2005). A revised sense of the inhuman would recognise the inadequacy of any sharp division between autonomy and dependency. There is no originary, self-sufficient, complete human that fully transcends material exigencies (Stiegler 1998). Where there is autonomy, this involves a kind of interdependency predicated upon participation from nonhuman artefacts. The autonomous human is already inhuman. All technologies are prosthetics that permit activities that would otherwise be available. For this reason, it might be that disability, with its attendant interdependency and technological involvement, is not a failure of the humanist ideal, but a more limpid manifestation of the condition of bodies in general.

A second positive sense of inhuman would relinquish an oppositional structure by attending to how the acquires its form. I already said that the latter is not a natural kind, but that must be brought into being relationally and across time through the articulation of certain norms. For instance, despite the ubiquity of the aforementioned 'technological condition', the fact that nondisabled bodies benefit from a panoply of 'assistive devices' goes under-acknowledged. The historical elaboration of technological scaffolds for activity has been uneven and normatively-patterned: practices to harmonise relations between bodies and things has organised the world around a privileged human ideal. Atypical modes of embodiment have only recently been considered during the elaboration of such technologies, and even then, only

haltingly. While technologies are a persistent dimension of the activity of all bodies, these afford spontaneous activity only to typical bodies. Such individuals look unambiguously human—that is, and able to transcend and appropriate their corporeality—even as their actions avail of technological scaffolds (Moser 2006). For the atypically embodied, such scaffolds are consistently inapt. Their humanness looks compromised: unable to spontaneously act within the world, they seem anchored to bodily exigency, and thus uniquely affected by nonhuman aspects of themselves, and dependent upon nonhuman artefacts. Furthermore, technology use is framed differently for typical and atypical users. For the former, technologies are thought to complement or extend existing, characteristically human, abilities; for the latter, technologies are thought to compensate for missing—again, characteristically human—abilities. That is, the human-nonhuman line is articulated once again.

Returning to the second sense of inhuman: this involves a more basic re-conceptualisation. Rather than viewing the inhuman as something opposed to the human, it thinks of this as what precedes and exceeds the human, is 'not-yet-human', and as such, can become something other than human. Since the human emerges across time, it carries the potential to be otherwise. By seeing, as it were, not through human eyes, but with an inhuman gaze that is not already orientated by the human, it can better discern these processes by which humanness—and also disability—acquire form. This not only denies them their normative organising force. It opens up potential that exists for transformation of those categories, thereby making these available for re-articulation towards a future difference.

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