Disability and The Inhuman

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❧ Introduction

When presented with the term 'inhuman', I was drawn to consider how certain ways of being become associated with the inhuman, how this association is involved in the constitution of what is taken as properly human, and the deleterious effects for those who become associated with the inhuman. I'm going to address these topics in three stages. First, I'll briefly sketch how common understandings of disability might be thought of as 'dehumanising'. Next, I'll outline why I think that appeals to the category of the human are inapt as a response to such dehumanization. Finally, I will point towards an alternative, positive sense of the inhuman.

❧ The Inhuman as Dehumanisation

Inhuman can denote that something dehumanises, or that it lies outside the human. In the first sense, inhuman could refer to the kind of objectifying gaze

posited by Merleau-Ponty, one that denudes another's meaningfulness, thereby to preclude the understanding necessary for an ethical human relation.[1] Initially, this seems to have some promise for conceptualisation of disability experience. Disability theorists note how a prevalent way of framing anomalous bodies and minds is a diagnostic medical gaze, that reduces an individual to their ostensible pathology.[2] Significantly, this modality operates well beyond its jurisdiction to inform folk conceptions, that 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: 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. 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.

1. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception,* trans. Donald Landes (London: Routledge, 2012).
2. Michael Oliver, *The Politics of Disablement* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1990).

❧ The Problem of the Human

That this is called inhuman—where inhuman means dehumanising—might imply that a corrective would recognise disabled people within a common humanity. Where disability is concerned, however, this concept warrants scepticism. Ideas about the human—what it is, what it does, what it *ought* to be and do—are ubiquitous: they saturate the intersubjective lifeworld to condition everyday perception and action.[3]

While this makes the human seem like simply part of the furniture of the world, it is not given but must be produced. Samatha Frost calls it an "implicitly comparative category".[4] 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: nonhuman organisms, the material world, its own 'mere' bodily

3. Roberto Esposito, *Persons and Things: From the Body's Point of View* (London: Polity, 2015).
4. Samantha Frost, *Biocultural Creatures: Toward a New Theory of the Human* (London: Duke University Press, 2016), 8.

aspects (including basic functions and desires).[5] It coheres through a "movement of differentiation" from, or repudiation of, those dimensions.[6]

❧ Humanism and Disability

Importantly, one never simply *is* human: to be human is to be validated as such. We need not mention the egregious failures of this designation to realise that what counts as human is not always self-evident, and that the concept can co-exist with instances of qualified humanity:[7] those said to lack some characteristic possessed by the fully and properly human, and in virtue of which the latter can transcend their mere biological nature. The category of the human, then, can be just as reductive and objectifying as dehumanisation.

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

5. The mobility of this category is demonstrated when some nonhuman animal demonstrates a capacity hitherto thought to be solely the province of humans, whereupon that same property is no longer said to be a definitive marker of human/animal difference.
6. Frost, *Biocultural Creatures*, 7.
7. It does bear mentioning that *humanitas* is a central organising category for twentieth century theorists of racial hygiene. Roberto Esposito, "Biopolitics and Philosophy," in *Terms of the Political: Community, Immunity, Biopolitics* (Rochester: Fordham University Press, 2012).

merely organismic dimensions, falling short of this ideal leaves one more or less "trapped in and by the body".[8] Whether or not this is philosophically persuasive, it 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.

❧ (In)humanisation

I said that the human isn't given but produced—as Merleau-Ponty suggests, "man is a historical idea and not a natural kind"[9]—and that this production has competing conceptions. The human, I instead suggest, is *not* defined by transcendence of supposedly inhuman dimensions. The human no more transcends the body than the body transcends the world. Taking this a step further, this body is embedded and constituted within

8. Frost, *Biocultural Creatures*, 7.
9. FIND

multi-dimensional ecologies or networks.[10] Furthermore, its action occurs within an assemblage having social, material, and technological features, that permit or preclude, expedite or delay, that activity.

Due to time limitations, I'm going mention one dimension: technology (a term I'm using very broadly). As Don Ihde suggests, routine interactions occur through technical objects and against a technological background.[11] Everyday activity is accompanied by a nigh-imperceptible skein of artifactuality that, while internal to, and transformative of, perception and action, rarely manifests as such. Much apparently spontaneous action is technologically-scaffolded: a function not simply of the body, but of relations with an available sympathetic milieu. In such cases, autonomy does not preexist, but emerges from these enabling relations with nonhuman interactants, which are part of its exercise.[12]

10. Indeed, contemporary genetics suggests that there is no distinctively human genetic marker, while the anthropological record increasingly indicates that rather than the human coming about thanks to a decisive break with nature, there was instead a mingling of species. In other words, there is no 'pure' modern human.
11. Don Ihde, *Technology and the Lifeworld: From Garden to Earth* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990).
12. This is not to ascribe human autonomy to objects, but to propose that other things besides a human must be present for that human to exert agency. Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

While this condition may be ubiquitous, that nondisabled bodies benefit from a panoply of 'assistive devices' goes under-acknowledged. This is because the historical elaboration of technological scaffolds for activity has been uneven and normatively-patterned: it has organised the world around a privileged human ideal. Spaces for action are grounded on an ontogenetic history of body-technology interactions and practices to harmonise relations between bodies and things. Non-normative bodies, however, have only recently been considered during the elaboration of such technologies, and even then, only haltingly. If technologies are a persistent dimension of the activity of moving bodies, for non-normative bodies, one aspect of their being—that contributes to self-constitution or ontogenesis—is consistently unsympathetic.

This contributes to the ongoing articulation the human. Because this deep artefactual background—that presupposes certain bodily competencies—*recedes* as it enables, typical bodies enjoy spontaneous activity. They look unambiguously human—that is, and able to transcend and appropriate their corporeality—even as their actions are technologically scaffolded. The humanness of non-normative bodies is 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.

❧ An Inhuman Gaze

I've suggested that where disability is concerned, the human is ambiguous: disabled people may warrant inclusion within its bounds, yet on its own terms, their disability diminishes characteristically human capacities. If this understanding structures encounters, it may be just as stifling as the dehumanisation with which I began.

Consequently, I'll say a few things about a positive sense of inhuman gaze. First, this would integrate and affirm those very dimensions that humanism must repudiate as inhuman: the biological, the animal, the technological. Furthermore, it would recognise the ubiquity of interdependency and the inadequacy of any sharp division between autonomy and dependency: if there is autonomy, it occurs at the level of systems. There is no originary, self-sufficient, complete human that fully transcends material exigencies.[13] Indeed, it might be that disability, with its attendant interdependency and technological involvement, is not a

13. Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time: The Fault of Epimetheus,* trans. Geoffrey Beardsworth (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

failure of the humanist ideal, but a more limpid manifestation of the condition of bodies in general.[14]

Second, once humanness is understood to be constituted relationally and across time through the accretion of norms, these categories lose their organisational normative force. Here, I submit a further notion of inhuman as outside or before the human. This sees, as it were, not through human eyes, but with an inhuman gaze that is not already orientated by—or that is, at least, disloyal to—the human. As such, it can better discern those processes by which humanness and disability acquire form, and the potential that exists for transformation of those categories, thereby making these available for re-articulation towards a future difference.

14. I do not mean that disability does not exist: rather, it is not a property of the body in itself, but instead is enacted in the relation of bodies and milieus.

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