M/C Journal, Vol. 11, No. 3 (2008) - 'able'
Is There an End to Out-Able? Is There an End to the Rat Race for Abilities?
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Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to explore discourses of 'ability' and 'ableism'. Terms such as abled, dis-abled, en-abled, dis-enabled, diff-abled, transable, assume different meanings as we e 'species-typical' as the norm and make beyond 'species-typical' the norm. This paper contends that there is a pressing need for society to deal with ableism in all of its forms and its consequences.

The discourses around 'able' and 'ableism' fall into two main categories. The discourse arou species-typical versus sub-species-typical as identified by certain powerful members of the species is one category. This discourse has a long history and is linked to the discourse around health, disease and medicine. This discourse is about people (Harris, "One Principle"; Watson; Duke) who portray disab people within a medical model of disability (Finkelstein; Penney; Malhotra; British Film Institute; Oliver), a model that classifies disabled people as having an intrinsic defect, an impairment that leads f 'subnormal' functioning. Disability Studies is an academic field that questions the medical model and the issue of 'who defines whom' as sub-species typical (Taylor, Shoultz, and Walker; Centre for Disabi Studies; Disability and Human Development Department; *Disabilitystudies.net*; Society for Disability Studies; Campbell). The other category is the discourse around the claim that one has, as a species or a social group, superior abilities compared to other species or other segments in ones species whereby this superiority is seen as species-typical. Science and technology research and development and different forms of ableism have always been and will continue to be inter-related. The desire ar expectation for certain abilities has led to science and technology research and development that promise the fulfillment of these desires and expectations. And science and technology research development led to products that enabled new abilities and new expectations and desires for new forms of abilities and ableism. Emerging forms of science and technology, in particular the conver nanotechnology, biotechnology, information technology, cognitive sciences and synthetic biology (NBICS), increasingly enable the modification of appearance and functioning of biological structur including the human body and the bodies of other species beyond existing norms and inter a species-typical boundaries. This leads to a changed understanding of the self, the body, relationships with others of the species, and with other species and the environment. There are also accompany changes in anticipated, desired and rejected abilities and the transhumanisation of the two able categories.

A transhumanised form of ableism is a network of beliefs, processes and practices that perceiv improvement of biological structures including the human body and functioning beyond species boundaries as the norm, as essential. It judges an unenhanced biological structure including the hum body as a diminished state of existence (Wolbring, "Triangle"; Wolbring, "Why"; Wolbring, "Glossary"). A by-product of this emerging form of ableism is the appearance of the 'Techno Poor impaired and disabled people' (Wolbring, "Glossary"); people who don't want or who can't afford beyond-species-typical body ability enhancements and who are, in accordance with the transhumanis form of ableism, perceived as people in a diminished state of being human and experience negat treatment as 'disabled' accordingly (Miller).

Ableism Today: The First Category

Ableism (Campbell; Carlson; Overboe) privileges 'species typical abilities' while labellin 'sub-species-typical abilities' as deficient, as impaired and undesirable often with the accompanyi disablism (Miller) the discriminatory, oppressive, or abusive behaviour arising from the b sub-species-typical people are inferior to others.

To quote the UK bioethicist John Harris

> I do define disability as "a physical or mental condition we have a

strong [rational] preference not to be in" and that it is more importantly a condition which is in some sense a "'harmed condition'". So for me the essential elements are that a disabling condition is harmful to the person in that condition and that consequently that person has a strong rational preference not to be in such a condition. (Harris, "Is There")

Harris's quote highlights the non acceptance of sub-species-typical abilities as variations. Indeed the term "disabled" is mostly used to describe a person who is perceived as having an intrinsic defe impairment, disease, or chronic illness that leads to 'subnormal' functioning. A low quality of life and other negative consequences are often seen as the inevitable, unavoidable consequence of such 'disability'. However many disabled people do not perceive themselves as suffering entities with a p quality of life, in need of cure and fixing.

As troubling as it is, that there is a difference in perception between the 'afflicted' and the 'non-afflicted' (Wolbring, "Triangle"; also see references in Wolbring, "Science") even more troubling is the fact that the 'non-afflicted' for the most part do not accept the self-perception of the 'afflicted' if the self-perception does not fit the agenda of the 'non-afflicted' (Wolbring, "Triangle"; Wolbring, "Science" The views of disabled people who do not see themselves within the patient/medical model are rarely heard (see for example the positive non medical description of Down Syndrome — Canadian Do Syndrome Society), blatantly ignored — a fact that was recognised in the final documents of the UNESCO World Conference on Sciences (UNESCO, "Declaration on Science"; UNESCO, "Science Agenda") or rejected as shown by the Harris quote (Wolbring, "Science").

The non acceptance of 'sub-species-typical functioning' as a variation as evident in the Harris quote, also plays itself out in the case that a species-typical person wants to become sub-species-typica behaviour is classified as a disorder, the sentiment being that no one with sound mind would seek become sub-species-typical.

Furthermore many of the so called sub-species-typical who accept their body structure and its functioning, use the ability language and measure employed by species-typical people to gain s acceptance and environmental accommodations. One can often hear 'sub-species-typical people' statin that "they can be as 'able' as the species-typical people if they receive the right accommodations".

Ableism Today: The Second Category

The first category of ableism is only part of the ableism story. Ableism is much broader and more pervasive and not limited to the species-typical, sub-species dichotomy. The second category of ableism is a set of beliefs, processes and practices that produce a particular understanding of the self, relationships with others of the species, and with other species and the environment, based on abilitie that are exhibited or cherished (Wolbring, "Why"; Wolbring, "NBICS"). This form of ableism has been used historically and still is used by various social groups to justify their elevated level of rights and status in relation to other social groups, other species and to the environment they live in (Wolbrin "Why"; Wolbring, "NBICS"). In these cases the claim is not about species-typical versu sub-species-typical, but that one has - as a species or a social group- superior abilities compared to other species or other segments in ones species. Ableism reflects the sentiment of certain social group and social structures to cherish and promote certain abilities such as productivity and competitiveness over others such as empathy, compassion and kindness (favouritism of abilities). This favouritism f certain abilities over others leads to the labelling of those who exhibit real or perceived differences from these 'essential' abilities, as deficient, and can lead to or justify other isms such as racism (it is often stated that the favoured race has superior cognitive abilities over other races), sexism (at the end of the 19th Century women were viewed as biologically fragile, lacking strength), emotional (exhibiting undesirable ability), and thus incapable of bearing the responsibility of voting, owning property, a retaining custody of their own children (Wolbring, "Science"; Silvers), cast-ism, ageism (missing the ability one has as a youth), speciesism (the elevated status of the species homo sapiens is often justified by stating that the homo sapiens has superior cognitive abilities), anti-environmentalism GDP-ism and consumerism (Wolbring, "Why"; Wolbring, "NBICS") and this superiority is see species-typical. This flavour of ableism is rarely questioned. Even as the less able classified group tries to show that they are as able as the other group. It is not questioned that ability is used as a measure

of worthiness and judgement to start with (Wolbring, "Why").

Science and Technology and Ableism

The direction and governance of science and technology and ableism are becoming increasing interrelated. How we judge and deal with abilities and what abilities we cherish influences the direction and governance of science and technology processes, products and research and development. increasing ability, demand for, and acceptance of changing, improving, modifying, enhancing the human body and other biological organisms including animals and microbes in terms of their structure, function or capabilities beyond their species-typical boundaries and the starting capability to synthesis, to generate, to design new genomes, new species from scratch (synthetic biology) leads to a c understanding of oneself, one's body, and one's relationship with others of the species, other species and the environment and new forms of ableism and disablism. I have outlined so far the dyn characteristics of the existing ableism discourses. The story does not stop here. Advances in science and technology enable transhumanised forms of the two categories of ableism exhibiting similar dynamics and characteristics as seen with the non transhumanised forms of ableism.

Transhumanisation of the First Category of Ableism

The transhumanised form of the first category of ableism is a network of beliefs, processes and practices that perceives the constant improvement of biological structures including the human body and functioning beyond species typical boundaries as the norm, as essential and judges an unenl biological structure — species-typical *and* sub-species-typical — including the human body as limited, defective, as a diminished state of existence (Wolbring, "Triangle"; Wolbring, "Why"; Wolbring "Glossary"). It follows the same ideas and dynamics as its non transhumanised counterpart. It just moves the level of expected abilities from species-typical to beyond-species-typical. It follows transhumanist model of health (43) where "health" is no longer the endpoint of biological syste functioning within species-typical, normative frameworks. In this model, all Homo sapiens — no matte how conventionally "medically healthy" — are defined as limited, defective, and in need of co improvement made possible by new technologies (a little bit like the constant software upgrades we do on our computers). "Health" in this model means having obtained at any given time, maximu enhancement (improvement) of abilities, functioning and body structure. The transhumanist model health sees enhancement beyond species-typical body structures and functioning as therapeu interventions (transhumanisation of medicalisation; 2, 43). The transhumanisation of health and ableism could lead to a move in priorities away from curing sub-species-typical people towa species-typical functioning — that might be seen increasingly as futile and a waste of healthcare a medical resources – towards using health care dollars first to enhance species-typical beyond-species-typical functioning and then later to shift the priorities to further enhance the huma bodies of beyond species-typical body structures and functioning (enhancement medicine). Similar to the discourse of its non transhumanised counterpart there might not be a choice in the future to reject the enhancements. An earlier quote by Harris (Harris, "Is There") highlighted the non acceptance of sub- species-typical as a state one can be in. Harris makes in his 2007 book *Enhancing Evolution: The Ethical Case for Making Better People* the case that its moral to do enhancement if not immoral not to do it (Harris, "One Principle"). Keeping in mind the disablement people face who are labelled subnormative it is reasonable to expect that those who cannot afford or do not want certain enhancements will be perceived as impaired (techno poor impaired) and will experience disableme (techno poor disabled) in tune with how the 'impaired labelled people' are treated today.

Transhumanisation of the Second Category of Ableism

The second category of Ableism is less about species-typical but about arbitrary flagging certain abilities as indicators of rights. The hierarchy of worthiness and superiority is also transhumanised.

Cognition: Moving from Human to Sentient Rights

Cognition is one ability used to justify many hierarchies within and between species. If it comes to whether through artificial intelligence advances or through cognitive enhancement of non human biological entities that other cognitive able sentient species appear one can expect that rights w eventually shift towards cognition as the measure of rights entitlement (sentient rights) and away

belonging to a given species like homo sapiens as a prerequisite of rights. If species-typical abilities are not important anymore but certain abilities are, abilities that can be added to all kind of species, one can expect that species as a concept might become obsolete or we will see a reinterpretation of species as one that exhibits certain abilities (given or natural).

The Climate Change Link: Ableism and Transhumanism

The disregard for nature reflects another form of ableism: humans are here to use nature as they see fit as they see themselves as superior to nature because of their abilities. We might see a climate change-driven appeal for a transhuman version of ableism, where the transhumanisation of humans is seen as a solution for coping with climate change. This could become especially popular if we reach a 'point of no return', where severe climate change consequences can no longer be prevented.

Other Developments One Can Anticipate under a Transhumanised Form of Ableism

The Olympics would see only beyond-species-typical enhanced athletes compete (it doesn't matter whether they were species-typical before or seen as sub-species-typical) and the transhumanised version of the Paralympics would host species and sub-species-typical athletes (Wolbring, "Oscar Pistorius").

Transhumanised versions of Abled, dis-abled, en-abled, dis-enabled, diff-abled, transable, and out-able will appear where the goal is to have the newest upgrades (abled), that one tries to out-able others having better enhancements, that access to enhancements is seen as en-ablement and the lack of access as disenablement, that differently abled will not be used for just about sub-species-typical but for species-typical and species-sub-typical, that transable will not be about the species-typical who want to be sub-species-typical but about the beyond-species-typical who want to be species-typical.

A Final Word

To answer the questions posed in the title. With the fall of the species-typical barrier it is unlikely that there will be an endpoint to the race for abilities and the sentiment of out-able-ing others (on an individual or collective level). The question remaining is who will have access to which abilities and which abilities are thought after for which purpose.

I leave the reader with an exchange of two characters in the videogame *Deus Ex: Invisible War*, a PC and X-Box videogame released in 2003. It is another indicator for the embeddiness of ableism in societies fabric that the below is the only hit in Google for the term 'commodification of ability' despite the widespread societal commodification of abilities as this paper has hopefully shown.

Conversation between Alex D and Paul Denton

Paul Denton: If you want to even out the social order, you have to change the nature of power itself. Right? And what creates power? Wealth, physical strength, legislation — maybe — but none of those is the root principle of power.

Alex D: I'm listening.

Paul Denton: Ability is the ideal that drives the modern state. It's a synonym for one's worth, one's social reach, one's "election," in the Biblical sense, and it's the ideal that needs to be changed if people are to begin living as equals.

Alex D: And you think you can equalise humanity with biomodification?

Paul Denton: The commodification of ability — tuition, of course, but, increasingly, genetic treatments, cybernetic protocols, now biomods — has had the side effect of creating a self-perpetuating aristocracy in all advanced societies. When ability becomes a public

resource, what will distinguish people will be what they do with it. Intention. Dedication. Integrity. The qualities we would choose as the bedrock of the social order. (*Deus Ex: Invisible War*)

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