



Disability, Dialogue, and the Posthuman

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Abstract

This article is the result of a mutual interest in the radical philosophical dialogue discussed by Martin Buber. The radical dialogue is rooted in western European values of humanism, values that are challenged because they exclude women, people with disabilities, non-western, indigenous people and sexual minorities. With our basis in radical dialogue we are discussing flaws within the very concept of dialogue, how dialogue is challenged in encounters between people with severe disabilities and their helpers, and we are proposing a new interpretation of dialogue in a posthuman area. To illuminate what might be at stake in relations where power is clearly imbalanced we use Pierre Bourdieu's theory of the gift when asking ourselves: "How can we understand dialogue when there apparently is one dominant giver and one receiver unable to return the gift?" Discussing this question, we draw on Rosi Braidotti and her Posthuman Critical Theory to see if we can find new grounds to build dialogue on.

Keywords Disability · Dialogue · Posthumanism

Can a person with a severe learning disability participate in true dialogue? The person might not be able to verbalize his or her thoughts and wishes in a language shared with others. This article examines the concept of dialogue at a time when anthropocentrism is being questioned. We want to push the theory of dialogue one step further by directly addressing the challenges presented by the case of persons with disabilities as dialogue participants. Overcoming these challenges may help the dialogical approach to take root in the mainstream of educational thought.

Individuals with learning disability all have very different possibilities and challenges, but are often talked about as a homogenous group, described by their diagnoses. Impairment and disability is often described using different models; the medical model, the social

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model and the relational model. In the current discourse, disability rights and identity politics are hotly debated, and the disability movement is central to advocating for the rights of people with disabilities. Controversies exist in how to deal with the consequences of having a disability, but also in how different people have different experiences with the same disability or impairment (Barnes and Mercer 2010). The World Health Organization (WHO) has introduced the concept of *level of participation* as a way of understanding disability, incorporating a social approach into the medical one. The more you have difficulties participating in activities, the more your environment is disabling. Such an understanding makes disability *a situation* defined by an interaction between individual characteristics and the environments' ability to adapt and remove barriers (Barnes and Mercer 2010; World Health Organization 2002).

In this article, we will move from how disability is understood and categorized towards the personal encounters—ones in which we can no longer rely on spoken language alone. Naturally, encounters between people with multi-disabilities, those who have difficulty expressing themselves to their caregivers, will be different from similar interactions between people with mild and moderate learning disabilities. The capacity for language is central to the humanistic tradition and to our conception of who is considered to be fully human. In this context, dialogue is something to strive to achieve, for it describes a higher quality of relationships, and ultimately, a higher quality of life. Yet there are at least two issues worth considering: (1) the flaws within the very concept of dialogue, and (2) a new interpretation of dialogue in the posthuman era.

Dialogue in Education

Several contemporary authors have articulated the importance of dialogue in education (Burbules 1993; Sidorkin 1999; Matusov 2009; Sinha 2011). Many of them trace their philosophical lineage to Nel Noddings' writings on care (e.g. 2013), or Mikhail Bakhtin (1984). Ultimately, both of these paths ascend to Martin Buber. While some of educational writings treat dialogue as a mode of communication, others elevate it to an ontological concept, interpreting dialogue as a mode of being. More broadly, they rely on the assumption of ontological primacy of relation, articulated by Buber (Buber and Smith 1958).

A summary of the ontological understanding of dialogue in education may be represented in the *Manifesto of Relational Pedagogy* published in a collective edited volume (Bingham and Sidorkin 2004). It includes such principles as “A relation is more real than the things it brings together,” “The self is a knot in the web of multiple intersecting relations,” “Relations are primary; actions are secondary,” “Educational relation exists to include the student in a wider web of relations beyond the limits of the educational relation.”

The hope was that the dialogical relations may overcome alienation that often afflicts mass schooling, to make educational experiences more authentic and less authoritarian. The hope had to do with failure of educational reforms and innovations to bring meaningful change to education. A focus on relations rather than on the fidelity of implementation of various interventions seemed a viable alternative.

From the start, many authors who worked on the notions of dialogical relationality were aware of the limitations and dangers (See chapters by Biesta, Mayo, Bingham, Stengel in Bingham and Sidorkin 2004). This paper further contributed to this discourse by

examining the limitations brought about by the implicit exclusivity a dialogue that involves persons with disability. We seek not to debunk the theory, but make it stronger.

The Exclusivity of Dialogue

A common failing among theorists is to omit certain groups from their theoretical generalizations. Much of what has been said about humanity over millennia omits women, non-Whites, non-Westerners, lower classes, sexual minorities, children, the mentally ill, the severely disabled, etc., etc. The comfortable clarity that the social theories offer us rests on such omissions. What we believe to be true about being human rarely applies to all human beings. Granted, any abstraction must always exclude something or someone. However, it is hard to dispute that the anthropocentric worldview has evolved with a strong tendency towards the White, the able-bodied, and the male-centric.

The branch of dialogue theory associated with Buber has been based on the assumption that dialogue is the most profound form of human relation. Buber's theory of dialogue gravitates towards this phenomenon as the ultimate value. Buber, for example, makes a sharp distinction between the dialogical world of *I-Thou* and the instrumental world of *I-It*. For Buber, only in an *I-Thou* relationship can we be truly human. In his words, "I become through my relation to the *Thou*; as I become, I say *Thou*. All real living is meeting" (Buber 1958:11).

Ontologically, the concept of dialogue places dialogical relation at the center of human existence. These authors view dialogue as more than a form of communication; it is a specific mode of human existence that is both unique and central to humans. Dialogue is thought to be a *primary relation*, which means that the fullness of human life occupies the space between individuals—in contrast to the idea of existence within an isolated self. To be human-like, therefore, is to engage in dialogue.

In the context of ordinary human life, Buber views dialogue as a rare occurrence. It requires an alternative type of time, space, and causality; in other words, dialogue is ontologically different from everyday life. Dialogue is a truer, deeper connection among people that requires mutuality and equal status. Does disability present a challenge to these postulates?

When thinking about these concepts in context of educational theory, we must deal with the fact that partners in educational dialogue may never be truly equal. By definition, there is always a power differential between students and teachers. Buber, for one, was skeptical about the possibility of true dialogue in a situation of power imbalance. He clearly stated so in his famous exchange with Carl Rogers. Rogers believed that dialogue between a therapist and a patient was possible, but Buber disagreed:

You have necessarily another attitude to the situation than he has. You are able to do something he is not able. You are not equals and cannot be. You have the great task, self-imposed – a great self-imposed task to supplement this need of his and to do rather more than in the normal situation. But, of course, there are limits, [...] the limits to simple humanity. To simple humanity meaning being I and my partner, so to speak alike to one another, on the same plane. I see you mean being on the same plane, but you cannot. There is not only you, your mode of thinking, your mode of doing, there is also a certain situation – we are so and so – which may sometimes be tragic [...]. You cannot change this (Buber 1988:162).

Coming from Buber himself, this is a serious claim. He says that the situation of power imbalance itself prevents dialogical relation from unfolding, because a therapist has an agenda beyond simply relating to another human being on the most fundamental level. Of course, it is easy for a philosopher of education to find a work-around. First, one may argue that in schools, education is not the only game, and that students and teachers switch between the imbalanced educational relationship and true dialogue. The second work-around is to show that while our interactions with children often look and feel like dialogue from a child's perspective, they are actually manipulative, because adults have educational objectives in mind. Finally, one can view dialogue not as an all or nothing proposition, but as something that can be gradually more or less present in educational relationships. In other words, dialogue can still happen in an imbalanced relation, as long as participants possess the ability for dialogue and the organizational culture allows it to happen. Actually, Buber himself left the latter possibility open when he tried to enrich this binary model by introducing the notion of *Zwischenmenschliche*, or the interhuman. The interhuman consists of elements of everyday life that may lead to a genuine dialogue, or, as Buber describes it, "I-Thou" relation. However, the interhuman is not an "I-Thou" yet; it just opens toward the I-Thou. Buber saw the tension between limiting fully human relations to the situation of dialogue and the actual diversity of real-life human relationships. It is not clear, however, if he ever offered a workable path towards addressing this tension.

We can start to address these questions by positing that the experience of those who do not have verbal language abilities and who relate to the world in an unpredictable way might make relational interaction different for them. Mark Rapley has described the patterns of communication between people with learning disabilities and their staff caregivers in his book *The Social Construction of Intellectual Disability*. Using conversation analysis, he categorizes the caregiver staff behavior into three broad classes: (1) babying/parenting, (2) instruction giving and (3) collaboration/pedagogy (Rapley 2004). Even though many of his examples are classified in (1) and (2), he also gives examples showing the possibility "for staff practices to involve house residents in decision-making, offer suggestions rather than instructions" to support resident competence. Rapley connects dominating and patronizing behavior by staff and the psychologists to a moralistic view on intellectual disability, describing intellectual disability as a social-moral category because it allows us to uphold imbalanced power relationships. What Rapley describes as collaboration might not be fully dialogic encounters, but they still may be in the realm of the interhuman. In other words, in real life we do encounter different kinds of relations within the same setting. Some may appear closer to dialogicality, but definitely not in the binary sense. This example shows that we need to amend the theory to account for such transitional, non-binary forms.

Disability, Power and Dialogue

The original ontological theory of dialogue has not withstood the challenge offered by those with learning disabilities. Dialogue in the Buberian sense, cannot be considered essential to being human, because it requires an ability to relate to others on equal terms. Not all humans possess such ability, since not all have developed the capacity for verbal dialogue. Either we have to deny people with learning disabilities their humanity, or we must not allow the capacity for the radical dialogue to define what is human. To be completely honest, we must now admit that only a small minority of the world's population can be admitted into the exclusive club of dialogue-seekers; some are excluded because they

have no ability to engage in what we consider the true dialogical relation as understood in the radical Dialogue theory.

We cannot simply give up on the problem. Understanding human existence remains a compelling task. When we try to figure out how to treat each other, the definition of the human being is always implicitly present. For example, when caregivers are trying to treat persons with disabilities with kindness and dignity, they in fact must understand what sort of kindness and dignity a human being deserves. The knowledge is implicit, but not trivial. How do we know what others want and need without projecting our own wants and needs onto them? In the following pages, we will try to tackle these questions through an analysis of the social exchange that occurs when disabled are involved with the rest of the society. We are making a theoretical step down, from normative to descriptive discourse about social relations. The intent is, of course, to come eventually back to the normative plane, but in such a way that no one is excluded.

Bourdieu and the Gift

Regardless of how one may wish to describe it, that the essence of being human is not locked up in our individual bodies, but rather exists in the context of social relations. The humanness is acquired and lived through interaction with others, and such interactions may have a variety of qualities. For one important category of social relations, we can turn to Pierre Bourdieu's theory of gift. The goal here is to shift attention from the nature of the self to the nature of the social relations in which people are engaged. In this view, we need to define social positions themselves rather than the kinds of persons who occupy those positions.

Pierre Bourdieu describes gift as an imposition of obligation. He states that, "[T]he initial act [of giving] is an attack on the freedom of the one who receives it. It is threatening: it obligates one to reciprocate and to reciprocate beyond the original gift..." (1998:94). The gift exists within the context of reciprocity. The gift is ambivalent: it appears as an act of grace, but implicitly contains a demand and challenge to reciprocate. The failure to reciprocate creates a relationship of dependency, of patronage. Marshall Sahlins (1972) contributes fascinating anthropological evidence that demonstrates how a gift, an epitome of reciprocity, can create inequality and is at the origins of class differentiation. For Bourdieu, the gift is not benign, and not altruistic, although it must always *appear* as such.

Humans often define themselves in terms of their abilities: the ability to speak, to act, to create, to think, to feel, to be self-aware, to exercise free will. The obvious fact that children gradually progress toward such abilities seems to be a natural movement toward becoming fully human. Through millennia, humans have been mightily impressed with their own abilities in comparison to those of animals, of "savages," of small children, and of the mentally disabled. We have developed a habit of understanding ourselves in terms of ability, and in contrast to these other groups. A whole list of abilities serves to motivate children to achieve a certain standard of humanity. However, any one of us may be severely limited in one of these abilities or be entirely without it.

Human growth and development does not just take diverse paths, but also can take a radically different turn or stop altogether. In such a humanist framework, those with missing abilities are then excluded from the human family and may be considered not fully human. Humanity has been down this conceptual path many times before, and we have seen the huge consequences of denying others their humanity. In the ultimate case,

“between 200,000 and 250,000 mentally and physically handicapped persons were murdered from 1939 to 1945 under the T-4 and other “euthanasia” programs (US Holocaust museum 2018).” While it is difficult to blame a logical fallacy for this atrocity, we must admit that the atrocity was based, among many other things, on an assumption about a certain ideal human essence. The contemporary disability researcher Tom Shakespeare has a warning for us about the current euthanasia and bioethics debates—especially about those involving questions of assisted suicide and prenatal diagnosis. When these issues are connected to Nazi actions and the “purification” of the human race, they are in danger of being blurred by strong emotions: “Decisions are always made in a social context” (2006:123), he writes. This means that individual choice cannot be compared to the Nazi ideology or other ideologies, but must be related to economy, poverty, welfare and individual situations. In this article, we do not discuss whether or how the bioethics debates influence interaction and care but take into account that these difficult debates are ongoing. Our concern is with the here-and-now of interaction, but we are aware that, as Shakespeare points out, that here-and-now interaction exists in a social context depending on economy and social class, amongst other factors.

Paradoxically, the concept of the gift shows us that the most humane treatment of individuals with disability is also based on implicitly exclusionary assumptions. While being the opposite of cruelty, boundless generosity is problematic, too. Those with severe disabilities are a class of recipients of boundless grace and as such are a dominated group. It is the most skewed and imbalanced relationship in which the able expect nothing in return. People with disabilities are deemed incapable of repaying their enormous debt to the people with abilities. The perpetual debt implies perpetual dependency.

The relationships of domination experienced by the enabled and the disabled do not have an aspect of economic exploitation that usually accompanies other unequal relationships. The only contribution of the disabled to the relationship is to provide an opportunity to give. The psyche of the giver needs the receiver to be there in order to fulfill the fantasy of an all-powerful and benign master. It is a variation of the domination drive (see Young-Buehl 1998). Giving has little to do with grace and has much to do with domination. Contemporary liberal democracies live out the fantasy of the benign master taking care of their weak. This fantasy has much to do with the collective self-awareness of a liberal polity, and its urge to take care of those appointed to be cared for. Magnanimous giving on a massive scale is essential for the identity of such societies, just like religion and cultural artifacts were essential for collective identities of previous societies. To be a liberal democracy is to care for the weak and the disabled, along with a few others groups needed to fulfill this role.

Interestingly, other groups of cared-for are either presumed temporary (children and the poor), or have already earned their right to be cared for (the elderly). In other words, all other groups are still a part of large relationships of reciprocity. Those with severe disabilities are a group often excluded from such relationships, and are an object of the pure gift. Many with learning disabilities are not incapable of reciprocity, but the reciprocity might sometimes be hard to interpret. It has been shown, however, that they can resist the domination brought about through the boundless gift. Rapley (2004) in his study revealed how people with intellectual disabilities conducted resistance in their encounters with the staff, often refusing to answer or acting as if they understood less than they actually did to avoid unpleasant situations. Imbalanced power relations and giving on a massive scale give the helper a sense of moral superiority, and the helper often acts indignantly if the helped does not act the right way in accepting the gift. According to Rapley, acting less competent than you are, withdrawing from the collective, is a common response when the gift offered

is not wanted. This reaction is not unlike that of the character Bartleby in Melville's short story *Bartleby the Scrivener: A Story Of Wall Street*. Bartleby answers, "I would prefer not to" when asked to conduct his work. (Melville 1853). The short story tells the story of Bartleby's withdrawal from the world. Bartleby's path is one of no return, as he gradually rejects more and more, always answering "I prefer not to" (Desmarais 2001). He ends up in jail for his resistance and finally dies. The story of Bartleby and the reason why he withdraws may be interpreted in different ways, but what it reminds us of, is that being isolated and not communicating with others is a valid choice.

It is worth noticing that the inability of those with disabilities to contribute to the reciprocal economy of the able is rooted in the level of skills deemed by the able to be minimal for participating in their economy. This arbitrary level would have been different hundreds of years ago, and it may change again in the future. At any rate, a person who is officially determined to be disabled beyond employability becomes a receiver of the ultimate generosity of the welfare state, which she or he is never able to repay. The sense of solidarity in the giver society relies on manifestations of its boundless generosity. The receivers are not really asked for their consent, and they might not be able to express such consent. Listening to user-led organizations representing people with disabilities will not always help either, because these organizations view do not necessarily represent the one person we are encountering (Shakespeare 2006). Of course, people want to be cared for, we assume. This assumption is a powerful attack on their freedom, for implicit in the arrangement is a recognition that all gifts must be repaid. The smallest thing they can do to at least partially repay the gift is to agree on the terms on which the gift is being granted. Therefore, the disabled must comply with whatever restriction of personal and political freedom we impose on them, with whatever living arrangements we have designed for them.

What of the caregivers? They are not exactly the same as the larger society of the givers. Caregivers closely interact with those who need help and can significantly affect the larger social context of giving. The helped need, to some extent, to be left alone and allowed to develop balanced reciprocity among themselves and with those able persons that genuinely and truly benefit from relationships with the disabled. Each caregiver, ideally, must ask himself or herself: what do I get from my relationship with the helped? Sometimes the answer will contain nothing but sentimental feelings of altruism. Altruism is suspect in the context of the gift economy, however because it denies the laws of reciprocity. It is only when the helper exposes her vulnerability or manifests her need to be helped that the relationship may take form of mutuality free of domination. We need to avoid the moralist dominating position a helper can place herself into. The helpers must find a way of receiving something through reciprocity, or stay away.

We rarely ask the caregivers to learn how to receive something back from the cared-for. Yet it is perhaps the most essential skill, the ability to bend the objective situation of one-way giving into something resembling two-way mutual giving.

These relationships between the helper and the helped cannot reach the status of dialogue Buber had in mind, mainly because of the social context of inequality and domination, but also because of the inability of many persons with disability to engage in a true verbal dialogue. However, the helpers can help foster relations *among* the disabled in whatever form those arise; the friendships, the connections, the loves among people you may not necessarily be a part of.

More fundamentally, caregivers must learn to practice the kind of augmented dialogue that is based on reciprocity. It is not the radical dialogue of equals, but it does contain the intentional infusion of dialogical relation through reciprocity. The caregivers must learn not to be the gift givers exclusively, but also cultivate the ability to receive gifts back.

Those gifts do not have to be through utilitarian or economic exchange, but rather exist in a more nuanced and rich relational economy. The caregivers must learn how to *receive* recognition, support, help, affection, and even gratitude from those cared-for. The theory of dialogue is very useful here, because it points to the ontological dimension of dialogue. The ability to accept reciprocity is not a communications strategy, but a way of being open to the relation with the other, not on your terms, but directly and immediately.

Opening up radical dialogue through Buber's own concept of *das Zwischenmenschliche*, the interhuman, might help us to go even a step further, toward a concept of *interrelations*. This phenomenon includes relations that go beyond those of radical dialogue, which we have seen exclude so many, and are not always helpful in developing an understanding of interrelations among people who fall outside this narrow definition of human experience. Posthuman theory can help us to make the next step.

A Posthuman Dialogue?

Posthuman theory is not singular, but has many branches and disputes between different approaches (Herrbrechter 2013). We are not trying to advocate for a narrow view of posthumanism, but are rather looking for thoughts to nurture and expand our work on how to understand dialogue and disability. We have chosen Rosi Braidotti as our main guide. Herrbrechter describes Braidotti as one who “manages to integrate all or most of these positions, while giving them a new and ‘affirmative’ spin” in her version of critical posthumanism. Braidotti seeks to go beyond a categorical distinction between the given (nature) and the constructed (culture) (Braidotti 2013). Braidotti is especially concerned about the exclusion of many from ‘the human,’ and that seem like a natural entry point for us.

Ontological theories of dialogue have a centric bias because the dialogical relation is at the center, while all others are at the margins. The question of who has been regarded as human in this centric position has been discussed within posthuman theory. Rosi Braidotti puts it like this:

Not all of us can say, with any degree of certainty, that we have always been human, or that we are only that. Some of us are not even considered fully human now, let alone at previous moments of Western social, political and scientific history (Braidotti 2013:1).

The question “what is a human being?” has always been answered in such a way as to exclude those on the margins. In fact, to define a center, an ideal, the essential human being, one truly needs a concept of the margins and of people who only marginally fit the definition of being human. Applying this insight, Goodley et al. (2014) use Braidotti to discuss the possibility of developing a Posthuman disability studies. In their text, Goodley et al. discuss posthuman and critical disability studies, drawing on Braidotti. They conclude that “Disability disavows the human: it desires and rejects it and in this dynamic, necessarily contradictory play with the human. Disability allows us to think again about our selves, our relations and our politics.” Unlike the Buberian theory of dialogue between two autonomous individuals, in posthuman theories “The self, subject, person, citizen, the human—each of these individual entities—is now firmly interconnected, plugged into and caught up in the ever growing whirlpool of capital, technology, communication that shift us through real and virtual places and spaces” (Goodley et al. 2014). We will now look to posthuman theories to help develop our thinking about dialogue and to widen our view

from one that is caught up in visions of singular individuals and rooted in western male thinking and language.

Both Braidotti (2013) and Goodley et al. write about a basic ambiguity within humanist values. On one hand there are good “liberal notions of autonomy, responsibility, self-determination, solidarity, community-bonding, social justice and principles of equality (Goodley et al. 2014:29). On the other hand, individualism also “breeds egotism and self-centredness; self-determination can turn to arrogance and domination” (2014:30). The bias of exclusion does not reside in logical errors; rather, it resides in the type of logic used. The truth of being human radiates from the center toward the margins, allowing for gradations in membership. The center place can be occupied by different ideas, but the relationship of center to margins remains the same. Let us call this the centric bias. One drastic way of addressing it is to eschew the notion of humanity altogether. This is not a panacea, as Braidotti is clear that the posthuman “is not an intrinsically liberatory or progressive category” and that it is necessary to “take into account enduring power differentials” (2016:17).

Overcoming the humanist notion of the self is also connected to technology’s place in future living, as well as our connections with non-humans: “For posthuman theory, the *zoe*-centred subject is a transversal entity, fully immersed in and immanent to a network of nonhuman (animal, vegetable, viral, technological) relations” (Braidotti 2016:26).

A posthuman way of thinking about dialogue or relations can offer an extended view that includes technology and regards the body and the senses as preceding language. Relations with technology include super-prosthetics (as in the Paralympics) or music technologies developed for children with disabilities that can also arouse interest from both able children and adults. People with autism often take special interest in non-human relationships. There are many famous stories about extraordinary people with autism. One of the most profiled has been Temple Grandin. Grandin’s story of being born with autism, not speaking before the age of four, and still receiving a doctorate in animal science, has been told in several books and films (www.templegrandin.com). Within posthuman thought, the story of Dr. Temple Grandin and her studies in animal behavior may be seen less as a story about avoiding human relations, and more about her expertise and ability to understand the relation between humans, animals and technology. Another prominent posthumanist story is the relation between guide dogs and blind people, in which the dog serves the blind person, but still often has some power in the situation. Lately there has been an increased interest in the relationships between animals and people with dementia, mental health issues and disabilities. These are relations that are highly valued, yet they are relations where spoken language has a minor place.

Michel Serres is a major contributor to posthuman theories. He makes a turn away from the centric position that language has always occupied by giving more attention to the body and senses. He points to the importance of the body and the senses, prior to language. “If we always talk we suffer: drugged, anaesthetized, addicted, under the edict of language. Drunk on words, as once one was said to be drunk on God. Unspeaking, I go towards silence, towards health, I open myself up to the world” (Serres 2016:93). Serres poetic descriptions of joy in play and movement, reminds us of an important part of life beyond words;

Nothing is more fun than jumping on a hard bouncy bed. All children have enjoyed doing this until the mattress collapsed – a bad memory. The double ecstasy of the muscular effort in the thighs and calves, a powerful, almost metallic leap, a pause in the air that seems eternal, during which the body assumes positions and performs (2016:318).

He goes on further, describing dance and swimming as bodily experiences with no need of language;

Dancing, the music of the body, reigns before language” and “Swimming involves the whole skin, every tiny part of it, and all at once. A baptism that takes us back to a time before we were born. Should we, conversely, rethink the feet as scale models of the whole body, providing it with floats when fluid becomes hard? Freed from any obligation, the whole skin will touch, differentially, not carrying any weight, complete in itself. Therefore tattooed (2016:323).

Posthuman thinking might offer us a way of opening up. We are all entangled with our surroundings in different ways, and maybe there is much to learn from looking beyond the two-person Dialogue as the most highly regarded criteria for the human. Simultaneously, we need to remember that people with severe disabilities are in need of others to get through their daily life, needing support to eat, get dressed and other basic needs. So far, most of this help has been given by other humans trying to communicate, interact and seek dialogue. Technology and non-humans can be of help, but many of us still need and want dialogue with humans. However, the two need not exclude each other.

Conclusion: Posthuman Dialogue

What does posthuman dialogue look and feel like? In crude terms, it could be described as a direct, immediate relation, without an expectation of equality or symmetry, and without any lingering definition of humanity as the ultimate ideal. Reading Braidotti:

The ethical imagination is still alive and well in posthuman subjects, in the form of ontological relationality, which stresses an enlarged sense of inter-connection between self and others, including the nonhuman or ‘earth’ others, by removing the obstacle of self-centered individualism on the one hand and the barriers of negativity on the other (Braidotti 2016:25).

Posthuman dialogue is not a leap from the world of I-It to the I-Thou, not an escape from pure instrumentality to pure humanity. Rather, to enter into dialogical relation we must learn to shed our humanity and become a part of a relational system with inanimate object, animals, other people, thoughts and ideas, machines and music.

The theory of dialogue that originates with Buber can survive if it learns from its failures. It has to shed the human-centric bias. Humanity does not have a center, and no one thing can come into focus to the exclusion of everything else; not ability, not a single virtue, and not even relation. The notion of being human as a special kind of being is perhaps deeply flawed. Yet dialogue as a relation survives the deconstruction of humanity; there is such a thing as posthuman dialogue.

What I may experience as dialogue, as the most profound connection, may not be so important to other people after all. Other people may prefer and value a different form of connection, or no connection at all. Their refusal or inability to enter a dialogue with me should be as respected as the choice of entering the dialogue. A true understanding of the human condition must include a profound mystery of the Others taken as a group. This is something neither Buber, nor his followers had seriously considered. In their worldviews, everything is focused on the Other as an individual, and a true relation arises from the Other who does not belong to any particular group and is readily available for a relation

with me. One has to break through group affiliations, social roles and external relationships in order to be immediately connected in a dialogical relation. There is a profoundly centric vision of humanity, which we can no longer share.

One would be wise to accept the relation of non-relation, where the other party is not present at all, or perhaps makes an entirely different sense of the same relation. One's interlocutor may say "I prefer not to." We cannot limit relation to the reciprocal, or see these types of relation as the most direct or especially authentic. We must learn the value of Others whom we might not understand, or who'd rather relate to each other than to us. This stance of relational agnosticism should also be extended onto everything else, if we are to avoid the centric bias. Simply put, treating someone with dignity cannot depend on empathy. It is OK to imagine a deep connection with the other; it is not OK to pretend the story you are seeing is true. The other may see this as a purely instrumental relation, as an unimportant relation, or no relation at all. She may not even know you are there at all. The social world may be a lot lonelier and fragmented than Buber had imagined; it may be full of misunderstandings, fantasies, misalliances, and projections. A person with a learning disability may perceive me as relationally disabled, because of my pretense of magnanimity, and my delusional belief in true dialogue. And who is to say I am right and she is wrong? Maybe we need to extend our concept of what can be understood as dialogic.

Dialogue can be reframed as the possibility to be engaged in the world on one's own terms, having the capacity to prefer whom to have interaction and also to be able to prefer not to. As we stated in the beginning of this article, we consider dialogue a relation more than an act or mode of communication. Preferring not to accept the gift of a helping hand might sometimes be an act of resistance, or simply just a need to be left alone for some time. The refusal to act or talk, as passive resistance movements have demonstrated many times, can sometimes be the most provocative gesture of all. We must accept that not everyone wants to be in radical dialogue with us. On the other hand, however, refusing all contact with "I prefer not to" as Bartleby did, may not end well. Bartleby died in isolation. Common grounds must be found, not dismissing someone because of his or her lack of ability of spoken language in the white, male, Western sense. We need to accept bodily language, technology, different kinds of activities and art spaces as places to make relations.

In this article, we try to connect the philosophical to the practical in encounters between people with disabilities, their helpers and the environment. The question of who is being regarded as human and what humanity means is present in the discussions pressed forward by technological advances, renewed discussions on euthanasia, assisted suicide and prenatal diagnosis. Not entering this discussion directly, we have looked at premises that might influence such debates. As Shakespeare states:

Society should assist people making good decisions, and support them with the consequences of their decisions. In particular, justice demands that the state should devote more resources to support families with disabled children, and to promoting the well-being of disabled adults, rather than acting as if prenatal diagnosis or other biomedical interventions will solve the problem of disability (Shakespeare 2006:131).

We have tried to elaborate our thoughts on dialogue and create a bridge between dialogue as seen in Buber and a new understanding of power-imbalanced relations between the helper and the helped, turning to posthuman theories to help us further. This is a difficult area indeed, but we must remember both Bakhtin's words, that "Two voices is the minimum for life, the minimum for existence" (1984), and Braidotti's, in which "we are in this world together." We need to continue discussing ethics and consequences of our relations

with others, human and animal, as well as with the material world. ‘We’ should not exclude anyone because of class, gender, race and sexual orientations, age and able-bodiedness. Braidotti uses the term ‘sustainability,’ not only in terms of facing the environmental crisis, but also in terms of the aim to create collective bonds. The relation between a helper and the helped should be a sustainable gift, not a gift exploiting the other or *that* other. Goodley et al. (2014) advocates that posthuman disability studies might allow us to “think again about our selves, our relations and our politics.” Such new thinking about dialogue is required if we want to end the centric bias in both disability studies and in education.

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