

# DISABILITY AND OTHER HUMAN QUESTIONS

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## Praise for *Disability and Other Human Questions*

This social theory text is quite a page-turner. In a skillful balancing act, it combines academic scholarship with vivid accounts of lived experience. Insightful, but also provocative, compassionate and witty in equal measure, Goodley's narrative engages productively with multiple interdisciplinary fields of critical theory, making for compelling reading as it goes. It positions disability as a process-oriented indicator of shared concerns and emergent trends in contemporary discussions about being human and becoming posthuman. Most of all, it argues for a relational ethics towards humans, nonhumans, animals and machines – a passionate call for community in these turbulent times.

*Rosi Braidotti, Distinguished University Professor,  
Utrecht University*

Dan Goodley is one of the most original, opinionated, thoughtful writers in all of disability studies. I can't think of anyone better to introduce you to disability, and to explain why thinking about disability makes us better at thinking about humanity.

*Tom Shakespeare, London School of Hygiene and  
Tropical Medicine*

# DISABILITY AND OTHER HUMAN QUESTIONS

DAN GOODLEY

*University of Sheffield, UK*



United Kingdom – North America – Japan – India  
Malaysia – China

Emerald Publishing Limited  
Howard House, Wagon Lane, Bingley BD16 1WA, UK

First edition 2021

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**British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data**

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-83982-707-5 (Print)

ISBN: 978-1-83982-704-4 (Online)

ISBN: 978-1-83982-706-8 (Epub)



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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

*To the beautiful soul that is Jonah Senior.  
May others wild and rewild in your inimitable style.*

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dan Goodley is Professor of Disability Studies in the School of Education and co-director of iHuman: the interdisciplinary research institute for the study of the human at the University of Sheffield. Dan has written numerous books on disability including *Dis/ability Studies* (2014: Routledge) and *Disability Studies* (2016, second edition: SAGE). He is a Nottingham Forest Football Club and Sleaford Mods fanatic.

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# PREFACE

This book draws on two decades of research and writing. I include personal stories, scholarly literature, social media and other cultural narratives. And I weave together these stories with concepts from the interdisciplinary field of disability studies. I pull in data from research studies, opinion pieces, official reports and ideas from psychology, sociology, education, psychoanalysis, philosophy and cultural studies. I assume that you, the reader, will have no prior engagement with disability studies nor any of these academic disciplines. I *do* presume that you will be interested in disability and other questions of the human. My thesis is simple: disability invites great insight into the wider project of understanding the human condition. I will make clear through my writing that you *should* engage with disability studies; not simply because the study of disability is of great importance in its own right (which it is) but because disability has much to offer us when we contemplate what it means to be human in the twenty-first century. Throughout the text I write into a number of themes that I consider to be timely. Six chapters address a singular human question:

- (1) What Brings Us to Disability and Other Human Questions?
- (2) Who's Allowed to Be Human?

- (3) What Is Human Desire?
- (4) Are Human Beings Dependent?
- (5) Are We Able to Be Human?
- (6) What Does It Mean to Be Human in a Digital Age?

I approached this book project with an overriding desire to write something readable. You might think that this is a rather trite statement of intent. After all, doesn't any would-be-writer seek to write something readable? The truth is that academics – a profession that I sometimes admit to being part of – are notoriously bad at putting the reader before the writer. By this I mean to say that academics tend to write for one another. And this circulatory practice means that academic writing is not really the kind of stuff one wants to be subjected to (unless one is engaging in the academic pursuit of theory and knowledge generation). Who would really want to be stuck in an elevator with an academic for an extended period of time? I am not suggesting that academia is a useless practice. Nor that academics are, by definition, prone to bore others to tears. That's for you to decide. The point is; there is nothing better, more liberating, insightful, therapeutic, generative and powerful than a good theory. Nevertheless, the academic production of theory has produced a community of writers and readers that are in danger of engaging only with one another. So, I have written this book with a different audience in mind; at least different from the usual academic audiences I envisage when I am usually tapping away on my computer writing the latest academic book or journal article. I have in mind someone who likes reading, is curious about the human condition and is sympathetic to a dull academic trying to do something a little different from what he normally does. If you are a reader and curious then that is enough for me. The sympathy vote would be a bonus. I have also written this book with a

different kind of writer in mind: someone with something to write in a style that people might want to read.

It is important to acknowledge that this book was written at a particular moment in global and national politics. I am writing this after the landslide election of the British Conservative party. Now, regardless of your politics (or mine for that matter), I think it is fair to say that many of us are grappling with questions of community, inclusion and social justice. Add to this the global pandemic of Covid-19 and we are living in troubled times. This text is my attempt to engage with a number of big human questions and to centralise disability in these discussions. I want to ask questions of desire, autonomy, ability, dependence and technology as they impact upon what it means to be a human being. And I want to respond to the questions in a way that is generative; that gets us thinking about how we might productively engage with, listen to and understand one another. Community is exactly what we need in these turbulent times.

The first chapter asks what might bring us to disability and other human questions? If disability studies is a theoretical, activist and artistic community – as many within the field would describe this space – then what brings us to this space? This question provides as much as it asks. It says something about the history, foundations and aspirations of disability studies. This question is one commonly asked in feminist, queer, black, working class, trans and other kinds of radical scholarship that exist as a consequence of oppression and are developed as response to this discrimination. One comes to disability studies for numerous reasons. No one account is the same. And one person's entrance into disability studies will have a particular hook to it. So, in this chapter I introduce the field of disability studies through writing some of my own familial stories of disability.

In Chapter 2 I ask who's allowed to be human? I ponder the meaning of the human category and consider who is invited to have access to this category. I seek to explore the ways in which normal, everyday and typical understandings of the human being are, in reality, incredibly exclusionary: including some and omitting others. And this potential for the human category to divide and rule – to let in some and force out others – is a category that is currently, worryingly and deplorably being rewritten in popular discourse. The consequences are potentially wide-reaching and terrifying. And so our responses have to be immediate and inclusive.

Chapter 3 explores the phenomenon of human desire. The dominant story of desire in our late capitalist societies is one aligned to the desire of those things we lack; power, recognition, status, money, consumables, property, vacations, Twitter likes, Botox, Apple's latest, BMWs, lip fillers, perfect partners, Gifted and talented kids, smooth pathways through life and an orderly death. I ponder, is this really what we want? Might there be another way of doing desire? I explore how human nature might actually be better understood as the desire for connection with other humans and non-human animals. I suggest that it is possible to have more altruistic forms of desire that are not muddled up with the materialism of everyday life. And, again, the chapter addresses these questions through reference to narratives of disability. A case is made for a more productive and positive conception of human desire: one which is at the heart of disability studies.

Are human beings dependent? This is the question framing Chapter 4. I kick off with a discussion of addiction; specifically a reliance upon alcohol. My own reliance on the booze. A story is told to comprehend the negative associations that are, understandably, associated with this all too familiar story of dependency. In order to get to the meaning of dependency then we need to also grapple with the meaning of



independence. Indeed, as the chapter explores, independence is en vogue in our contemporary times as we witness the claims for autonomy and self-sufficiency that have been propelled forward through the ideas associated with Brexit, Trump and Austerity. I reflect on stories of addiction, austerity and TrumpBrexit and separate these out from a more enlightening discussion of dependency. I write about the dangers of separation – giving up on a reliance upon others – and the problems of false attachments. I then explore how disability gets us to think differently about our dependencies. I consider how we might desire dependency. And I explore how we might organise ourselves around our shared precariousness and desire for interdependency.

In Chapter 5 I ask ‘are we able to be human?’ Studies of disability have, obviously, tended to emphasise disability. We live in a global world where disability is becoming more and more ubiquitous. Some disability labels have become increasingly widespread (e.g., autism) and we know from the World Report on Disability (written by the World Health Organisation and World Bank, 2011) that there are one billion disabled people (constituting the world’s biggest minority group). But what do we know disability’s antithesis: ability? This concept is what we might call the hidden referent of disability: the object that quietly and unassumingly exists in opposition to disability. But what is ability? What does it mean to be able? And what human abilities do we value? This chapter revisits the nebulous concept of ability – a phenomenon that we really subject to critical analysis – in order to consider the ways in which we all often uncritically deploy this term without realising its potentially negative impacts.

Chapter 6 contemplates the following; what does it mean to be human in the digital age? Three billion people are now connected to the internet. There are, undeniably, huge digital divides that still exist between rich and poor people. Having

said that, digital participation has grown exponentially across the globe. And many of us hold a view that we already know the digital world. It envelops every aspect of our daily lives. We are rarely far away from the flickering demands of a screen or the beckoning notification of a smart device. The digital world divides us into different technological classes: those that are fully plugged in and those that are not. And yet we continue to tap away, download, upload, click, open, close and reopen. And like any dominant cultural practice – that we think we already know – it is incumbent upon us to revisit our assumptions with a critical perspective. In response, then, this chapter considers some of the historical, applicable and consequential aspects of digital technologies by addressing three subjects: ‘digital subjects’, ‘digital activists’ and ‘digital victims’. Throughout I will return to my primary question: the question of disability.

The final chapter revisits some of the key themes of the book. I revisit these themes and do so with reference to a number of recent events, imaginations and reflections. My reflections move through Chapters 2–6 and consider the story of Bethany (Who’s Allowed to Be Human?), the ‘Living life to the fullest’ research project (What Is Human Desire?), the Brexit debacle (Are Human Beings Dependent?), school (Are We Able to Be Human?) and Twitter in a time of Covid-19 (What Does It Mean to Be Human in a Digital Age?). Throughout, as usual, I will be foregrounding disability as the phenomenon through which to think about our shared humanity.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am truly grateful to my mother Debbie Goodley who took the time to comment on every chapter. Ma; your insights have been incredibly helpful and insightful and I can't thank you enough. You have offered some incredibly thought-provoking critical feedback. I can't thank you enough. Much love. A big hug to Rod Michalko for encouraging me to write a book in a style outside of my comfort zone. So, here it is Rod, I do hope you like it. To Dorothy Corbett, Mary Doddmeade, Dorothy Davies, Adam Wallace and Horace Goodley and their conduits – good socialists Al and Deb – who helped shape the telling of their stories that appear in this text. To Huddersfield People First members past and present. Cheers to Tanya Titchkosky, Katherine Runswick-Cole, Kirsty Liddiard and Paul Martin for counsel and feedback. To Sleaford Mods for agreeing, via Twitter, to the use of lyrics in Chapter 5. Cheers Jason and Andrew. To Ros and David and all the Senior family for reminding me of the expansive nature of our human relationships. And to Rosa Cariad and Ruby Haf Lawthom Goodley who – along with their mother Professor Rebecca Lawthom – continue to be my harshest critics and most precious things.