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THE ENTANGLEMENT OF DISABILITY, ANIMALITY AND
HUMANNES IN INDRA SINHA'S *ANIMAL'S PEOPLE*
IN THE LIGHT OF SUNAURA TAYLOR'S
ETHICAL THEORIES

INTRODUCTION

Increasingly intersectional approaches are required to adequately describe the various entanglements between animals, environment, objects or machines. One of the most recent developments in the field is the intersection between disability studies and animal studies, which Cary Wolfe names “two of the most philosophically ambitious and ethically challenging” fields of interdisciplinary cultural studies (127). Wolfe distinguishes a small subfield of authors whose condition allows them to have a unique insight into nonhuman animals (e.g. Monty Roberts, Dawn Prince-Hughes, Temple Grandin). Wolfe does not mention Sunaura Taylor, an American artist, writer, and disability activist, but she seems to be another author of the kind. It is in particular Taylor's nonnormative embodiment that has led her to reconceptualize human-nonhuman categories and interactions in the context of disability, and made her underline entanglements between various species and their environment. This essay checks the applicability of Taylor's ideas to the reading of Indra Sinha's *Animal's People* (2007). The goal is to investigate Sinha's representation of human—nonhuman relations, most importantly the portrayal of a new type of consciousness which emerges as a result of a certain redefinition of one's connection to the world.

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TAYLOR'S IDEAS

In her works Sunaura Taylor shows great awareness of the various entanglements of the human with the nonhuman. In her most recent articles she underlines our materiality, how it is interconnected with the environment, and how it constitutes us. She draws attention to the damaging human influence on animals, ecosystems and the whole planet, which results in “ecological disablement” or “impaired landscapes”, and in effect leads to “webs of disability”. In other words, Taylor points out that the long-term consequences of the human intervention in the natural world make humans in turn “increasingly experience the disabling impacts of the climate crisis, mass extinction, and the chronic effects of decades-old contamination” (“Age of Disability”). She envisions a bleak future for the entire planet: “What we live with in the present and will for decades to come, even under the best-case scenarios, is mass ecological disablement of the more than human world, a disablement that is utterly entangled with the disablement of human beings” (“Age of Disability”). Taylor’s greater awareness of environmental problems has been shaped by her experience of illness—arthrogryposis, which has given her body nonnormative shape and made it therefore impossible to be used in typical ways (for instance, Taylor paints with her mouth). The illness is a result of the contaminated environment, a consequence of a long harmful exposure of her family to the toxic industrial military waste, which has convinced Taylor that it is impossible to ignore the relation between one’s body and its environment. This makes the American artist interrogate the naturalness of her body and the stability of its boundaries:

Where or what is my natural body? At what point—if ever—did I have one? My disability was caused by U.S. military pollution in the town where I was born.... My body was formed with the help of toxic chemicals, heavy metals, airplane degreasers—the mundane detritus of militarization.... Because my mother unknowingly drank toxic waste from the faucet in our kitchen, as a fetus I was already being altered by society, by culture, by “man-made” products. Does this make me altogether unnatural? (*Beasts* 120)

The interrogation of the permeability of the human/nonhuman boundary is one of the crucial questions in Taylor’s writing. The body altered by toxicity is a conspicuous instance of the interdependence of the living with the nonliving matter, and as such it raises concerns about the problematic status of the “original” or natural human body as well as all other living creatures’

bodies. In fact, human intervention may be extensive but invisible, so one should realize that it is impossible to maintain the sharp distinction between the human/nonhuman categories.

The central issue in Taylor's works has for a long time been a reflection on the kinship between humans and animals, and also in this sphere she aims to disclose how blurry the boundary is. The artist attends to the variety of human embodiment, simultaneously looking for inter-species similarities and connections. In her paintings, many of which are self-portraits, she portrays humans with nonnormative bodies in a striking visual correspondence with animals. For instance, her painting *Lobster Girl* presents a girl with a hand disability. The disability is first subjected to the medical gaze—the hand drawing is paired with its medical image—an x-ray, and then followed by an image of a girl whose hands are replaced with lobster claws, which is a way of establishing a visual connection between the impairment and the particular animal. Ultimately, the image presents the “humanimal”, that is, species intermingling through hybridity. Furthermore, a considerable number of Taylor's other works (e.g., *A Self-Portrait as Manatee*, *Self-Portrait with Chicken Looking Up*, *Self-Portrait Marching with Chickens*, *Musk Ox Together*) aim at rendering the “humanimal” in the form of “the animal as myself and my kin” (Mitchell xiii).¹ In those paintings the human is represented with no clothes on, thus building an analogy between the animals' skin, fur, or feathers, and human skin and hair. Human and nonhuman animals look more like a cohort, members of the same species, albeit with different embodiment. The human often looks in the same direction as other animals, or confronts the animals' gaze, and is subject to the gaze of the viewers in the same way as other creatures in the painting, there is no power-asymmetry between them. The correspondence between the human and animal gaze is important, nevertheless, it is no less important how the spectator may find it difficult to discriminate between human and nonhuman animals in the picture, and how therefore these compositions evoke a sense of instability of human/animal categories. The proper understanding of the “power of gaze”² is crucial in visual art, for “the gaze and the ability to return it, or lack thereof, has served as an essential delineator of human-animal relationships and other manifestations of power's asymmetries” (Aloi and McHugh 11).

¹ Some of her paintings are reprinted in her essays or articles about her, e.g., Taylor, “Animals, Ableism, Activism”; Fowler.

² “The power of gaze” is important for studying human–animal relations, cf. the essay by Jacques Derrida “The Animal that Therefore I Am”, and John Berger's “Why Look at Animals?”.

Artists working in the posthuman sphere can therefore help us rethink the relational webs that surround us, which Taylor's art demonstrates well through its capacity to highlight resemblance and connectedness as a baseline condition (cf. Orning's discussion of the possibility of the posthuman artist's ethical engagement), and she herself comments on her ideas in her writing:

Animals and animality are central themes in this work. By bringing animals or the suggestion of animals directly into this imagery I hope to raise questions about our relationship to their bodies as well. What does it mean to be compared to an animal? How and where do the oppressions of animals and the oppressions of disabled people intersect? As a freak, as a patient, I do not deny that I'm like an animal. Instead I want to be aware of the mistreatment that those labeled animal (human and non) experience. I am an animal. (Taylor, "Witnessing" 72)

Taylor is thoroughly aware of the denigrating discourse that in the past bestialized people with disabilities (and other populations as well, such as people of color, or immigrants) and which, as a result, contributed to their oppression or abuse (*Beasts* 83–94). The dominant paradigms of liberal humanism enabled the conceptualization of the human as oppressing nonhuman animals, while "the figure of the animal" (*Beasts* 19) has often been used to dehumanize others. As Taylor explains, many people in the West have not felt obliged to accept responsibility for their treatment of animals since the animals are envisioned as lacking subjective and emotional lives: "Animals are a category of beings that in the Western tradition we have decided that we rarely, if ever, have duties toward—we can buy them, sell them, and discard them like objects. To call someone an animal is to render them a being to whom one does not have responsibilities, a being that can be shamelessly objectified" (*Beasts* 108). She criticizes liberal humanism's divisive discourse, which categorized beings based on their abilities and pronounces ableism as the most damaging oppression, both for human and nonhuman animals because it "helps construct the systems that render the lives and experiences of both nonhuman animals and disabled humans as less valuable and as discardable" (*Beasts* 59). Consequently, one of her objectives is to expose the harmful effects of ableism, and another to acknowledge animals, more specifically, to see all animals as kin.

Taylor develops her idea of kinship with animals in the context of disability in her book *Beasts of Burden: Animal and Disability Liberation* (2017). Her general concern is building bridges between disability and animal rights movements; animal welfare is a crucial issue, while one of the conspicuous

statements is that in their struggle against ableism disabled people should claim animality. She envisions this as a way of escaping oppressions both for disabled humans and nonhuman animals, because, as she indicates, oppressions are shared: “Oppressions are not mutually exclusive: they are entangled and interlocking” (*Beasts* 201). Taylor prefers to put forward her ideas in the form of provocative questions rather than detailed answers: “What if instead of demeaning us, claiming animality could be a way of challenging the violence of animalization and of speciesism—of recognizing that animal liberation is entangled with our own?” (*Beasts* 110); “What would it take to claim the word ‘animal’? If ... animals can be crips, then can crips be animals?” (*Beasts* 115); “Will examining animals in relationship to disability remain demeaning, or can we make it enriching, productive, and insightful?” (*Beasts* 114).

In order to give some answers to these questions Taylor shares her own experience and perspective, trying to convince her readers that being compared to animals, and ultimately claiming animality, does not have to be offensive but is liberating. Certainly, she is aware of the bold nature of her project, considering the burdensome past of not only comparing but also treating disabled people like animals in, for instance, nineteenth- and early twentieth century side shows popular in the US and Europe (*Beasts* 104–05), and so she asks with anxiety: “Is it possible to reconcile my own identification with animals with the brutal reality of human animalization?” (*Beasts* 107). Taylor does not force any definite answer on the readers, acknowledging the great sensitivity of the issue and the absence of simple answers; nevertheless, she is suggestive of her position when she describes her private experience: “Recognizing my animality has in fact been a way of claiming the dignity in the way my body and other non-normative and vulnerable bodies move, look, and experience the world around them. It is a claiming of my animalized parts and movements, an assertion that my animality is integral to *humanity*” (*Beasts* 115). What is important for Taylor is the acceptance of difference, which does not imply hierarchy; difference, and yet similarity with other species, which helps to see nonhuman animals as kin. This perspective helps Taylor argue that comparing disabled people to animals does not have to be negative (*Beasts* 103–04); describing herself in animal terms with an emphasis on inter-species connection is offered as an example of a new consciousness (*Beasts* 114–16).

To a large extent Taylor works on the ideas introduced earlier by posthumanist thinkers. In a way she continues Peter Singer’s thought on animal

rights (cf. his book *Animal Liberation: A New Ethics for Our Treatment of Animals* [1975]) but she explicitly distances from him on the issues of disability. Her reflection resembles also Wolfe's sensitivity to the presence of animals in our life, culture and history; the ideas of interdependence and making kin echo the theories of Wolfe and Derrida among others. Taylor's most original contribution is highlighting the harmful effects of ableism, and connecting disability liberation with animal liberation.

ANIMAL'S PEOPLE (2007)

Published considerably earlier than Taylor's works, Indra Sinha's novel *Animal's People* seems to anticipate many concerns which are reflected upon by the American thinker. Firstly, the environmental catastrophe and the subsequent chemical pollution that penetrates and disables both living creatures and the environment is a striking connection between Sinha's fictional hero and Taylor's theory. In addition, the novel tackles the issue of animalization of people with disabilities, the hegemony of ableist ideology, the character's struggle against it, and his final embrace of animality. Through his protagonist Sinha explores the various interdependencies between the human and the nonhuman, attending to the formation of both the body and consciousness.

Animal's People foregrounds the posthuman body, its participation in "webs of disability" and, consequently, interrogates the increasingly blurring human/nonhuman distinction. On the surface Sinha's novel may seem rather distant from Taylor's narrative of long-term unseen industrial contamination, which penetrated the environment and disabled it, harming and disabling also humans. The novel is a fictional reworking of one of the most tragic industrial catastrophes of the 20th century—the 1984 tragedy in Bhopal, India, which over a night killed and injured thousands of people. However, it has been revealed that the toxicity devastated the environment and led to partial as well as permanent injuries, disorders and ailments of the population for many subsequent years (Johnston; Mukherjee), which has been called "slow violence" (Nixon) to indicate the extensive temporal reach of the catastrophe. Sinha's protagonist, named Animal, is the embodiment of the tragedy; not only does he become an orphan on the night of the catastrophe but he also suffers a deformation of his spine after several years, and never again can he stand in the upright position. What happens to the protagonist Catherine Parry calls "displacement from full humanity to an unstable borderline sta-

tus” (49). Quoting Wolfe, Parry names Animal explicitly “a decentred posthumanist body, one which exemplifies that ‘there can be no talk of purity’ (Wolfe xxv); his body and identity are in a constant state of exchange with physical and social surroundings through permeable boundaries, and involved in a network of bodies, events and discourses which exceed his specific geographical location” (50). The interaction of the human and non-human world, the intimate connection of the human body and environment becomes nowhere as evident as in the case of environmental pollution. The nonhuman element is seen as endowed with agency (Cao; Bartosch), leading to trans-corporeal exchanges which may be lethal, or at least pathological: “environmental illness offers a particularly potent example of trans-corporeal space, in which the body can never be disentangled from the material world, a world composed of emergent, entangled biological creatures as well as a multitude of xenobiotic, humanly made substances” (Grosz, qtd. in Cao 69). Sinha’s protagonist is an exemplification of the inseparability of the human and nonhuman spheres, the multiple entanglements between the body and environment, the visible and invisible influences and interdependencies, which may have mutual disabling effects.

Furthermore, Sinha’s novel tackles specifically the human and animal categories showing the oppressiveness of ableism. According to Taylor, “ableism gives shape to what and who we think of as human versus animal” (*Beasts* 59) and it is precisely this perspective that is examined in Sinha’s novel. Ableism is represented as a major oppression—it devalues, dehumanizes, and restricts human development. At the beginning of the novel, the figure of the animal is meant to dehumanize, to belittle the human. The protagonist receives the disparaging name “Animal” due to his lesser abilities, that is, supposedly, nonhuman posture—he has a bent spine and walks on all fours.³ His point of view is a “whole nother world... below the waist” (Sinha 2), while his best friend is Jara, the dog with whom he shares certain affinities, such as the physical appearance (posture and emaciation: “She was thin as me, her hide shrunken over her ribs” [Sinha 17]) and the habit of roaming the streets in search for food. Thus, the protagonist’s animality is highlighted in various ways: his gaze is brought to the level of the dog’s sight, he shares physical and behavioral aspects with his canine companion, and their relation seems to be quite satisfying. There is a certain similarity between Taylor’s paintings and this description, and in fact the image brings to mind the idea

³ Taylor investigates in detail how the upright posture and bipedalism used to be a marker of humanness for many centuries (*Beasts* 83–94).

of interspecies kinship suggested by Taylor's art. However, at this point in the novel it is clear that their bond is meant to show the hegemony of ableist ideology, how it deprecates disability, just as it devalues animals, in other words, how it shames the disabled protagonist into the inferior status of the animal. Naming the protagonist in an insulting way, most people around him (with several exceptions, that is, Zafar and Nisha) view his life as less valuable and limit the prospects of his self-fulfillment. The disciplinary gaze, or rather stare⁴ of society formulates him not even as a curiosity but as a danger; additionally, it deprives him of human rights to a relationship and sexual contact: "I'd see the warnings in the faces of old women who caught me looking at her. *Animal mating with human female*, it's unnatural, but I've no choice but to be unnatural" (78; italics mine).⁵ Consequently, Animal dreams of a surgery which could restore his upright posture because he believes it would make him human again, which evidences his attachment to the old, anthropocentric concept of humanness based on the normative body, that is, vertical posture and bipedalism. It is clear that the protagonist suffers from internalized ableism; initially, his insistence on being Animal and refusal to be considered a human being expresses his internal conviction of being an inferior creature. Julietta Singh speaks of Animal's rejection of "the world of humans" and interprets it as a wish to cultivate "other forms of solidarity" (123), which she calls "dehumanist solidarities" and defines as "social bonds that are mobilized and sustained through a refusal of the sovereign human subject and that enact agential forms of inhuman relationality" (123), their examples being the transspecies alliance with Jara, and the relation with Anjali, who is objectified as a prostitute. However, it is difficult to read Animal's behavior as his free choice in this respect because it is "the world of humans" that rejected him first by naming him Animal as a way of dehumanization.

Ultimately, the novel insists on the awareness of porous boundaries, entanglements rather than stable and distinct categories. The introductory sentence "I used to be human once" (Sinha 1) is a deliberate statement of the instability of various categories, which may be to some extent imagined, imposed by society (for instance, human/animal distinction), or interdependent

⁴ The distinction between "gaze" and "stare" was made by Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, who claims that people with disabilities are less often objects of human gaze and more often of stare, arousing curiosity rather than erotic attraction: "We may gaze at what we desire, but we stare at what astonishes us" (13).

⁵ On the entanglement of sex, disability and humanness, see Filipczak, "The Desiring Subject vs. the Object of Desire in Indra Sinha's *Animal's People* (2007)."

(living creatures and their environment; animate/inanimate), temporary and subjective (able/disabled), entangled (disability vs. animality). Sinha interrogates this fluidity when he presents his protagonist's motives when refusing to undergo the surgery. Animal becomes afraid that he might be disabled after the surgery, explaining that his spine could be straightened, yet he might lose the ability to swiftly move around in a poor Indian village. Additionally, Animal realizes the potential of his nonnormative body—he acknowledges its abilities and therefore, his uniqueness: “Right now I can run and hop and carry kids on my back, I can climb hard trees, I’ve gone up mountains, roamed in jungles. Is life so bad? If I’m an upright human, I would be one of millions, not even a healthy one at that. Stay four-foot, I’m the one and only Animal” (366). At last, the protagonist accepts his embodiment and no longer feels a devalued or pitiable human (probably because he feels accepted and wanted, as he builds a relationship with Anjali), which allows him to embrace his animality as an inherent, and positive, part of his human status. Taylor explains that it is crucial to find ways to “assert our value as human beings without either implying human superiority or denying our very own animality” (*Beasts* 110), so that the outcome could be the feeling of connection and “not shame” (115). The acknowledgement of Sinha's protagonist's new consciousness makes Kari Weil speak of “a post-human ending” (123), while Singh explains that Animal “claims his animality and comes to mobilize a dehumanist, humanimal ethics by the end of the novel” (26). Indeed, the rejection of the corrective surgery is an important point in the novel where disability and animal rights intersect. With this decision the protagonist rejects the tyranny of ableism, asserts his humanness, at the same time embracing his animality, and starts to appreciate his way of interacting with the world. His refusal to participate in the damaging ideology enables him to build his self-worth, yet not at the expense of animals but rather with respect towards animality. Thus, the novel abandons the “search for a cure” plot and foregrounds self-approval as a theme. This is consonant with Taylor's reflection—even though she has been subjected to several surgeries, which enable her to stand and take a few steps, she emphasizes the value of disability. In a conversation with Peter Singer she stated that she would not like to be cured of it, as it helps her develop a new sensitivity and artistic vision: “Being disabled gives you a completely new way of having to interact with the world”, in other words, it “gives a different perspective on the world” (*Beasts* 135). Her position is compatible with the objectives of disability studies, which treats disability as a social rather than medical problem.

It is rather clear that neither Taylor's idea of animal liberation nor even the more general question of animal's rights are a primary concern in *Animal's People*. Nevertheless, the novel's attention to the discourse of dehumanization and exploration of the concept of humanness enters naturally the long-standing tradition of pitting the human against the animal and so it allows one to rethink both these categories. Sinha's attempt to rehabilitate the status of the human being with disabilities, whose animality is thereby brought to the foreground entails the conceptual change of the status of the animal, which may be considered a step towards animal revaluation. In general, the liberatory potential of blurring the distinction between humans and animals has been noted in the postcolonial readings of the novel, for instance, Singh indicates how important it is for postcolonial writers to affirm the animality of humans—she calls it “a hopeful politics of postcolonial becoming” (122) explaining that “[t]o mobilize one's animality is to dispossess oneself from the sovereignty of man, to refuse the anticolonial reach of becoming masterful human subjects” (122). All in all, showing the porousness of categories previously considered as opposites (master/slave, colonizer/colonized, human/animal) is a strategy of liberation for the previously diminished subjects.

CONCLUSIONS

Becoming posthuman is a process of redefining one's sense of connection to the world and to other species with which we share this world. Sunaura Taylor explores the multiple ways of belonging, blurring the boundaries between the human and the nonhuman, and entangling them with the questions of disability and illness. The intersection of the different discourses in her work allows her to develop a new view of human subjectivity, more capacious, because capable of recognizing the porousness of the categories established in the past. Taylor thus calls for a more-than-human perspective. Her recurring questions draw attention to the fact that humanity is in need of redefinition:

What happens if we acknowledge that humans are animals? What happens if we remember that bigotry toward humans has been shaped in part by legacies of speciesism and hierarchical taxonomies that mark humans as above and distinct from animals? If we pay attention to who these diverse creatures are that have for

so long been entangled in our categories of difference and our insatiable drive for order, perhaps then we will find more accurate names for all of us. (*Beasts* 94)

Taylor anticipates a new sensibility that will create more “accurate” names. This can be interpreted as an attempt to position the human more aptly in the world, trying to deconstruct the whole concept of the great chain of being, which construes life as a linear and progressive process, with humans as the culmination of earthly creation. This redefinition of the human position will hopefully entail a greater understanding of human interdependence with nonhuman creatures and matter, and rethinking the human role as that of a carer rather than master over the world.

In a similar vein, the act of naming is a trigger to explore the limits of humanness in Sinha’s *Animal’s People*. The ambivalence of categories is signaled right at the start when the protagonist receives the name Animal, and his entanglement in the nonhuman world is consequently revealed in the narrative—the materiality of his body suggests that living creatures do not live outside of ecological relations, while his name raises questions about the dependence of the definition of the human on the concept of the animal. Sinha shows the impossibility of maintaining essentializing categories and simultaneously foregrounds the liberatory potential of the blurred human/animal binary. Although the novel shows explicitly human, not animal liberation, it is significant that the affirmation of humanness is built upon the rejection of ableism and claiming animality. While Sinha’s perspective is not thoroughly convergent with Taylor’s, it may implicitly suggest sharing the same intuitions, namely attention to animals and their rights.

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OF SUNAURA TAYLOR'S ETHICAL THEORIES

Summary

One recent development in the field of disability studies is its intersection with animal studies, as represented in the work of American artist, writer, disability and animal rights activist Sunaura Taylor. In her art and scholarly works, primarily in her book *Beasts of Burden* (2017), Taylor examines the porousness of human/nonhuman categories in the context of disability studies. Although Taylor is aware of how various discourses animalized certain populations in the past (the colonized, ethnic minorities, or people with disabilities), she insists on showing resem-

blance and kinship between disabled people and animals. Taylor's ideas seem to be reflected in Indra Sinha's *Animal's People* (2007), which deals with the problem of environmental catastrophe, consequent health issues of the local population, and animalization of people with disabilities. The paper investigates Sinha's portrayal of entanglements of the human with the nonhuman in the material sphere, and the emergence of a new type of consciousness, based on a redefinition of one's connection to the world, which involves reclaiming one's animality.

Keywords: posthumanism; disability; animality, ableism, toxicity

O ZWIĄZKACH MIĘDZY NIEPEŁNOSPRAWNOŚCIĄ, ZWIERZĘCOŚCIĄ
I CZŁOWIECZEŃSTWEM W POWIEŚCI INDRY SINHA
ANIMAL'S PEOPLE W ŚWIETLE TEORII ETYCZNYCH SUNAURY TAYLOR

Streszczenie

Połączenie studiów nad zwierzętami ze studiami nad niepełnosprawnością obecne jest w pracach amerykańskiej artystki, pisarki, aktywistki na rzecz osób z niepełnosprawnością i praw zwierząt, Sunaury Taylor. W swoim malarstwie i pracach naukowych, a w szczególności w książce *Bydłęce brzemię: Wyzwolenie ludzi z niepełnosprawnością i zwierząt* (2017), Taylor analizuje, jak granica między tym co ludzkie i nie-ludzkie ulega rozmyciu w kontekście studiów nad niepełnosprawnością. Taylor ma świadomość tego, w jaki sposób różne opresyjne dyskursy animalizowały pewne grupy ludzi w przeszłości (ludy kolonizowane, mniejszości etniczne, ludzi z niepełnosprawnościami), stoi jednak na stanowisku, że podkreślanie podobieństw między ludźmi z niepełnosprawnością i zwierzętami może doprowadzić do wyzwolenia obu grup. Wydaje się, że idee Taylor są obecne w powieści Indry Sinha *Animal's People* (2007), która podejmuje temat ekologicznej katastrofy, wynikających z niej chorób lokalnej społeczności oraz animalizacji osób z niepełnosprawnością. Artykuł analizuje przedstawione przez Sinhę uwikłanie tego co ludzkie z nie-ludzkim w sferze cielesnej oraz pokazuje narodziny nowego rodzaju świadomości, wynikającej z ponownego zdefiniowania związku człowieka z otaczającym go światem, który zakłada uznanie zwierzęcości jako integralnego elementu człowieczeństwa.

Słowa kluczowe: posthumanizm; niepełnosprawność; zwierzęcość; ableizm; toksyczność