**Foreshadowing Fit: Wheelchairs, Screens, and Care-Taking Conversations**

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*Introduction*

A good deal of data (and lore, for that matter) exist in response to ways the screen has become a, if not *the* most important actor or agent in the room during a patient’s clinical encounter. Just for today, though, I’d like to offer a counter-narrative, not just as a cautionary tale to medical humanists about the risk of casting aspersions wholesale toward one technology or modality, in particular, but also to encourage discussion today about how the presence of screens affects care-in-practice, specifically, and our enactment of human dignity, in general. Recall that, like screens, pencils, paper, and stethoscopes are also technologies; in the past, they, too, were similarly cast as an interrupting, if not hegemonic mediational medical device. Over time, though, we’ve found a way to partner *with* rather than work against pencils, paper, and stethoscopes—medical practitioners have found a way to meet these materials halfway (a la Barad) by working *with* them to facilitate care-taking conversations.

The example I describe today is taken from a much larger and ongoing ethnographic study of OSU’s Assistive Technology Center—in particular, their wheelchair fitting clinic. Tentatively, I’ve titled the study the “posthuman dignity project” because I ascribe to Indigenous scholars’ and more recently, feminist materialists’, assertion that we have never been fully human; rather, we have always been enmeshed with more-than-human worlds (cf. Alaimo; Barad; Bennett; Braidotti; Haraway; Kimmerer; TallBear). Our charge now is to figure out what it means to honor those enmeshments.

Some humanists and bioethicists argue that technologies pose a threat to human dignity. But the screens aren’t going away. So, how might we meet them halfway? Asked another way: **What does human dignity look like in a posthuman world, of which various technologies, (including screens) are necessarily a part? What does our posthuman predicament mean for “care-in-practice?”** **How might screens actually *help* to enable care-taking conversations, especially when words won’t, or don’t work?**

*Example*

“But what does your butt say?” This question—posed by a physical therapist to a semi-nonverbal, 70-year old patient in OSU’s Assistive Technology Center, whose pseudonym is Jessi—signals the care-taking labor involved in fitting patients for a wheelchair. Ultimately, the physical therapist’s question is rhetorical in that no human is expected to reply. Rather, it’s answered by a sensor-filled seat cushion placed beneath Jessi’s sit bones and connected to a nearby laptop’s pressure-mapping software. Standing alongside Jessi, the physical therapist observes the laptop’s screen to observe how making adjustments to how Jessi’s seat, spine, shoulders, and feet interact with the technological apparatus of which he is now a part—such an apparatus includes the wheelchair, the sensor filled seat cushion, the laptop, and the clinic space, writ large.

To find the right(-enough) fit, the emerging and evolving arrangement between Jessi’s body and hiswheelchair is visualized along the way: Bright red hotspots portend the potential for sores; cool greens and blues foreshadow fit. In this assemblage of humans, things, and screens, bodies talk. And medical practitioners learn to listen, watch, tinker, and adjust. A toolbox sits close by, always ready to hand so that pieces and parts can be removed, added, slid to the side, taped down, bulked up with foam, and so on. This process of finding a good fit is just one example of the care-taking labor involved in contemporary posthuman dignity practices.

In her ethnography of contemporary nurses’ footwashing practices, Jeannette Pols argues that “care practices are...material parables for moral questions that may emerge in societies where people give and receive care and negotiate about matters of dignity” (p. 188). This wheelchair clinic study extends such investigative work by analyzing how practicing posthuman dignity is fundamentally a matter of fit.

Here, “fit” is a “temporary result in the process of caring” and “the goodness of the intervention, be it medical or spiritual, is contingent on the relation” (Pols p. 39).

Along with this one example that illustrates the role of technologies, especially screens, in the posthuman clinical care moment, I’ve also performed textual analyses of key documents that address human dignity’s definition. Integrating those analyses with how important the screen and various other clinical technologies are in the Wheelchair Fitting Clinic, I’ve made a few tentative hypotheses about how human and posthuman dignity might differ (show table).

* Whereas human dignity is framed, at least by Hobbes, as intrinsic to human being, I’m starting to wonder if posthuman dignity isn’t a matter of contingency.
* For the stoics, human dignity was immaterial, but for posthumanists, you cannot escape the way enactments of dignity are, indeed, contingent on material conditions.
* While human dignity from a Judeo-Christian tradition seems to suggest dignity is bestowed upon us from on high or from some divine, heavenly being, posthuman dignity is grounded and earthy.
* Whereas Kant and Locke might suggest that human dignity hinges on an individual person’s autonomy, posthuman dignity eschews individual notions of choice and in its place, emphasizes relationality.
* Whereas Kant and Aquinas might frame human dignity as indicating an individual’s capacity for rationality and reason, posthuman dignity focuses more so on affective, ambient relations.
* Whereas human dignity is concerned with ends and means, posthuman dignity focuses on effects and consequences.
* And whereas dignity, at least for transhumanists such as Nick Bostrom, embodies an anticipatory if not hopeful focus on potential futures, posthuman dignity embodies a radical hyperfocus on present predicaments.

I know that there isn’t time today to debate each of these hypotheses (although I’d love your feedback), but at the very least I’ll pose one final marinating question: **Q: How might we help to redefine (post)human dignity in a way that accounts for humans’ enmeshment with nonhuman, more-than-human, not-quite-human things?**

Table 1. Tentative hypotheses about differences between human and posthuman dignity

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| **Whereas Human Dignity Is…** | **Posthuman Dignity Is…** |
| Intrinsic (Hobbes) | Contingent |
| Immaterial (Stoics) | Material |
| Divine (Judeo-Christian; Kraynak’s soul) | Earthy |
| Autonomous and individual (Kant; Locke) | Relational and collective |
| Rational and reasonable (Kant; Aquinas) | Affective and ambient |
| Concerned with ends/means | Concerned with effects and consequences |
| Anticipatory focus on potential futures (Bostrom) | Radical hyperfocus on present predicaments |