

Review of Beyond Disability: A Matter of Listening by Anne-Lyse Chabert (2025)

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On 26 March 2013, Anne-Lyse Chabert sent me an email with a text titled “Là où la violence du réel disparaissait, où mon handicap me quittait le temps d’une immersion...” alongside a video of herself swimming gracefully in a pool. A revised version of that piece appears in Chapter 5, “Harsh Reality Attenuated,” of *Beyond Disability*. There, Chabert (2025, p. 39) reflects on how her *disability* leaves her when she enters the water, where gravity is no longer experienced as a risk:

To put it in the negative, I can hardly emphasize enough the well-being conferred on me by being in water, where gravity no longer rules. The well-being conferred as a result of no longer feeling one is fighting gravity, of being able now to forget oneself. Time spent in the water is of a different quality, for all life’s cares fall away. And then there is that immense freedom of movement, now no longer fraught with danger, no longer in thrall to safety precautions, to knowing how to move, or knowing how to be. Quite simply to swim, without that fear for oneself in one’s encounter with the outside world, a time allowing me to re-establish contact with my body, as long as I remain in the water—which is lost again on emerging from the water.

This personal account carries two significant implications. The first is that what we commonly call *disability* is with respect to controlling encounters with the environment, which can *only* be defined at the level of the person-plus-environment, not at the level of the individual considered in isolation. Chabert’s first-person narrative opens our eyes to

the fact that the control of action, in general, lies neither in the person nor in the environment alone, but in the meeting of the two. Even an habitual action such as walking illustrates this point: the sole means of generating propulsive force from a stationary stance is through terrestrial gravity, which pulls the body when balance is disturbed (Brenière et al., 1987).

One of the most thought-provoking arguments in *Beyond Disability* concerns identifying the appropriate grain size of analysis to which “disability” can be legitimately ascribed. Chabert (2025, p. 61) explores this issue directly in Chapter 9:

Physical disability is more the result of an incompatibility between what one’s environment offers and what the individual requires and is able to receive. Its origin is not just an organic impairment (of the optic nerve in the case of blindness, for instance), but a deficiency of the individual–environment complex, an environment that is in a way “unsatisfactory” from the outset: the world we have as a society created “expects” us to live in it with the sensorimotor capabilities available to most people.

To appreciate the force of this claim, consider a metaphor drawn from tidal phenomena—the temporal oscillation of sea level (Turvey, 2018). If attributed to the Earth-Water system alone, these oscillations would seem capricious. But once recognized as phenomena of a larger system—the Sun-Moon-Earth-Water system—the underlying laws become intelligible. Understanding any phenomenon of interest requires identifying the system at the right grain size that is actually giving rise to it. In Chabert’s case, that phenomenon is disability. To analyze the individual apart from the environment risks missing the system in which disability actually resides, for disability only arises at the larger grain size of the individual–environment complex.

Having established the proper level of analysis, Chabert (2025, p. 61) goes one step further to identify the crux of the matter:

So it is that the disabled person faces the challenge of adapting to this reality, a reality that has not been “humanized” for them. How can one describe these “uninhabitable” surroundings to start with? And then how can they make “their own” this space that has not been conceived to suit what their body can do? How to furnish this milieu hostile from the outset, that they must tame? What conceptual tool can be used to define the notion of physical disability in the most pertinent manner?

These questions point to the second major implication of Chabert’s aquatic experience: that the physical properties of water—pressure, buoyancy, and resistance—can translate into *value*. Physical things and events are, in themselves, neither good nor bad; there is no good physical law or bad physical law. But it does not follow that the value and meaning of a thing are *unreal* or *virtual*, as opposed to *real* (Nonaka, 2026).

There has been a great gulf in thought between the perception of things on the one hand and the perception of meaning on the other. But when things are described at the level of resolution relevant to the actions of a given individual, and when meaning is defined in terms of the *affordances* of those things, these two dimensions are seen to be linked (Gibson, 1982). To perceive the affordances of things is to perceive what encounters with them would afford. In doing so, agents are coordinated to a particular scale of the environment in which meanings and problems reside. It is precisely this concept of affordances that Chabert employs in her analysis of the conditions of disability.

The world can be described at different levels. At one level, water is packed molecules of H₂O—a chemical formula that does not distinguish between water, ice, and

vapor, and that tells us little about what our encounters with water, ice, and vapor would afford. At another level, water can be characterized in terms of its buoyancy, resistance, and viscosity. These properties are described in physical terms, yet they begin to become *meaningful* precisely because they speak to what water makes possible for a person immersed in it. What a thing affords depends on what it is—an invariant combination of properties—taken with reference to the beneficiary who takes advantage of those properties.

James Gibson, who coined the term *affordances*, once observed that “the natural environment offers many ways of life, and different animals have different ways of life” (Gibson, 1979/2015, p. 120)—implying that the possibilities the environment offers are indefinitely rich. Another person, as Chabert stresses, may quite well have a different perception of things. Although we may inhabit the same habitat, we may not share the same experience of it. A person with different sensory and motor functions from what is considered normal in a society does not perceive the meanings of a given place in the same way and does not act within it in the same way, even when occupying the same place. Chabert (2025, p. 60) articulates this with striking clarity:

With each change in my body and with each new apparatus I started to use, the world took on a different texture for me; I perceived and acted in it differently, and I had a different take on it. It was another world, filled with new relationships that I had to learn to live in. And yet here were the same places, the same house, the same people around me

The story of calligrapher Makino offers a compelling illustration of how open-ended these possibilities can be. In an earlier paper (Nonaka, 2013), I analyzed Makino’s motor

behavior, but his ingenuity is equally visible in his transformation of the environment itself. Conventional hand calligraphers place paper horizontally on the ground plane—perpendicular to the axis of gravity—so that wet ink settles on the surface before drying. Because Makino's tetraplegia prevents him from assuming a downward-looking posture, he uses a kind of easel to hold the paper vertically. In this configuration, wet ink threatens to drip. His solution: using very thick ink that resists running. A further challenge arose from the fact that, unlike hand calligraphers who can direct their gaze with the eye-head system while writing with the hand, Makino must perform both looking and writing with his head alone. To maintain sufficient visual distance from the paper, he extended the shaft of his mouth-held brush with a metal pipe. This increased the moment of inertia considerably, making the brush tip harder to stabilize. His response was to invent a technique of deliberately resting the brush tip against the paper's surface at every permitted moment in the writing process.

Makino's tetraplegia confronted him with problems that most calligraphers never encounter—and in grappling with those problems, he discovered possibilities in the world that ordinary practitioners would never have occasion to pay attention to.

This resonates deeply with Chabert's own experience. Chabert (2025, p. 76) writes:

My progressive disease and the great degree of disability it causes me today, while constantly imposing on me new constraints, which are like new frontiers, have never made me feel confined. Within this restricted space, I am always striving to find those improbable openings that only the future will tell us are likely to create a real breach in the wall.

Our experience of life always involves the possibility of further experience, whether or not that possibility is ever taken advantage of. The environment is indefinitely rich. No one sees, feels, and perceives more than a tiny fraction of what it offers, and no one has a monopoly on reality (Berque, 1990). As its title suggests, Chabert’s book reaches far beyond the subject of disability. Through the lens of first-person experience, it invites us to pause and “sense the wonder of the lengths to which life can go in its constant transformations and do it the honor of letting ourselves be carried along by that momentum of life itself” (Chabert, 2025, p. 95).

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