

# **The Problem of Humanity and the Problem of Monstrosity**

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## **Introduction**

After many decades of neglect, the study of dehumanization is beginning to receive the philosophical attention that it deserves. In this chapter, I will explain and address two important objections to the theory of dehumanization, understood as the attitude of regarding others as subhuman creatures (Smith, 2011). The first of these concerns the fact that when people dehumanize others, they also implicitly or explicitly acknowledge the dehumanized person's humanity. The second concerns the fact that dehumanized people are very often conceived of not merely as subhuman animals like rats or lice, but as monstrous beings.

## **Essentialism and Humanness**

My first task is to explain how it is possible for human beings to think that other human beings are not really human. We usually classify things on the basis of their manifest properties. If a thing has sufficiently many of the observable properties that we regard as typical of a kind, or if it possesses at least one property that we regard as unique to a kind, then we are prone to assign it to that kind. Normally, we classify an entity as a human being if that being appears human—that is, if our senses tell us that the entity has traits that we associate with humanness. But this is not what happens when we dehumanize others. Dehumanizers grant that those whom they dehumanize appear to be human. But they deny that these human-seeming beings are really human beings.

To understand how this occurs, we must turn to what is known as “psychological essentialism” (Gelman 2005). Psychological essentialism is the disposition to divide the natural world into natural kinds and to suppose that there is a “deep,” unobservable property that all and only members of each of these kinds possess, which makes them members of that kind. These essences are supposed to be responsible for the observable characteristics that are typically possessed by members of the kind.

Psychological essentialism leaves room for the possibility that an individual’s appearance can mislead about its essence, thus allowing that a being that is indistinguishable from a human in all observable respects might not have a subhuman essence. This explains how it is psychologically possible for human beings to conceive of other human beings as non-human (for a different perspective, see Kronfeldner in this volume).

### **The Function of Dehumanization**

*Homo sapiens* are by far the most social of mammals, and we are consequently endowed with immensely powerful inhibitions against acts of violence against our own kind. Consequently, despite fictional representations of homicide, it is psychologically difficult for most of us to perform acts of extreme violence against other human beings (Collins 2009, Smith and Panaitiu 2016). But we are also able to recognize that it is often advantageous for “us” to do violence to “them”—to secure *lebensraum*, to steal their resources, or to exploit their labor, and so on. So, over the millennia, human beings found ways to selectively disable these inhibitions. Dehumanization is one of them.

### **The Problem of Humanity**

This account of dehumanization ignores two important explanatory problems. The *problem of humanity* concerns the fact that those who dehumanize others also acknowledge their humanity. This can be explicit or implicit. As Appiah (2008) points out, dehumanizers generally say that their victims *deserve* punishment, but the notion that one deserves punishment applies only to human beings. And he observes that:

The persecutors may liken the objects of their enmity to cockroaches or germs, but they acknowledge their victims' humanity in the very act of humiliating, stigmatizing, reviling, and torturing them. Such treatments—and the voluble justifications the persecutors invariably offer for such treatment—is reserved for creatures we recognize to have intentions, and desires, and projects (Appiah 2008: 144).

In a similar spirit, Manne refers to “a resentful and punitive mentality behind the aggression, which are classic examples of what the English philosopher P. F. Strawson famously called the interpersonal ‘reactive attitudes.’”<sup>i</sup> She continues:

These attitudes are held to be both distinctive and central to our dealings with other human beings — that is, with people who we recognize as such, or as fully paid-up members in this club we call humanity. When it comes to animals and children and people we regard as (temporarily or permanently) not in control of their actions, we may try to correct, manage, deter or restrain their behavior. But, ordinarily and ideally, we do not resent it. They are not moral agents. We can't really blame them.

Members of dehumanized groups to be considered as evil, especially in genocidal contexts. Evil is the extreme of moral badness, and applies to human beings but not to

nonhuman animals. And although some people enjoy torturing animals, this is rarely motivated by a desire to punish them for their moral failings.

### **The Problem of Monstrosity**

The *problem of monstrosity* is posed by the fact that dehumanized people are often represented as monsters. To think of others as monsters is quite different from thinking of them as animals. An animal may be frightening or repugnant, but monsters are far more frightening and repugnant, and they are frightening and repugnant in a different way than animals are. Monsters are uncanny, and they're felt to be *extremely* dangerous because they have superhuman powers. When groups of people are dehumanized, it is often the case that they are thought of as monstrous or demonic—for example, Black superpredators and diabolical Jews. And the notion of monsters is closely associated with that of evil, thereby linking the problem of monstrosity with the problem of humanity.

### **Example**

Sam Hose, a twenty-one-year-old Georgia man, who was accused of murder and rape. He was dragged to the lynching site by a crowd that at first numbered in the hundreds, and eventually swelled to over a thousand as excursion trains arrived packed with eager spectators fresh out of church services that Sunday morning. According to one newspaper report:

The torture of the victim lasted almost half an hour. It began when a man stepped forward and very matter-of-factly sliced off Hose's ears. Then several men grabbed Hose's arms and held them forward so his fingers could be severed one by one and shown to the crowd. Finally, a blade was passed between his thighs, Hose cried out in agony, and a moment later his genitals were held aloft.

After he was mutilated, and his penis, fingers, and toes were carried away, Hose was burned to death. And once the flames subsided, the relic seekers moved in for more trophies such as small pieces of bone and charred bits of his liver.

Hose was certainly thought of as a human being. The categories “murderer” and “rapist” are reserved for members of our own species, and are inapplicable to nonhuman animals. Non-human animals are not punished for criminal offenses. Only human beings are.

There is no record of what the men who dismembered Sam Hose’s body thought about him, and no record of what went on in the spectators’ minds as they watched him suffer and die. But we do have records of how Hose was described in the southern press. He was called was called a “fiend incarnate,” a “monster in human form,” a “black brute whose carnival of blood and lust has brought death and desolation,” and a “fiendish beast.” And there is no doubt that the removal of Black men’s body parts as trophies, and the practice of referring to their ceremonial burning as “barbecues” (Patterson 1999) comports with an image of them as subhuman animals. As these facts attest, the Black male image in the White mind oscillated between the human, the animal, and the monstrous.

### **Skepticism**

The two problems that I have noted might seem fatal to the theory of dehumanization. Ostensible dehumanizers describe those whom they (seemingly) dehumanize as subhuman creatures and they also refer to them as, or view them as, human beings. But it is impossible (so the story goes) for an entity to be both human and subhuman, so it must be that dehumanizers regard their victims either as human or as subhuman, but not both. It is more plausible that ostensible dehumanizers regard their targets as human than it is to think that they regard them

as subhuman, because there are good, alternative explanations for the use of animalistic slurs. Given that no entity can be wholly human and wholly subhuman, and given that there are other explanations—ones that are closer to commonsense views—for derogatory characterizations of others as animals, we should conclude that those who characterize others in this manner do not really regard them as less than human. And the fact so-called dehumanized people are often described as monsters does not fit into theory of dehumanization that I have described, but it is consistent with the alternative view that the rhetoric of subhumanity is nothing more than the attempt to derogate and marginalize people who are recognized as human beings.

The flaw in this argument lies in the claim that no single entity can be both human and subhuman. It is not that the premise is false. It expresses a logical truth, but we are concerned with psychology rather than logic. It's a psychological fact that we are all able to entertain contradictory beliefs. So, the claim that dehumanizers regard those whom they dehumanize as either human or subhuman, but not both, does not follow.

Additionally, the skeptical conclusion of the argument is hard to reconcile with other evidence. There are many examples—for example, in 19<sup>th</sup> century race science literature—of people who have claimed that others are really subhumans and who clearly intending their words to be taken literally. And there are examples of perpetrators of atrocity who have stated that they did not conceive of their victims as human beings when they were performing these hideous acts. I don't see why we should not take these people at their word.

The problem of humanity need not lead to skepticism about dehumanization. Rather, it helps to deepen the analysis of dehumanization by suggesting that when people dehumanize others, they are in an incoherent state of mind. Dehumanizers do not simply think of those

whom they dehumanize as *really* subhuman. Instead, they think of them as human and subhuman simultaneously.

### **Epistemic Deference**

To see how this happens, it helps to reflect upon how we normally come to categorize things. We most often place things in categories on the basis of what our senses tell us about them. But we grant these judgments can be overridden by the testimony of those whom we regard as experts. There is no *necessary* connection between having the status of expert and having or disseminating genuine knowledge. Often, those occupying the role do not have a grasp of what is true, or conceal what they know to be true to achieve nefarious political ends. But what matters is the fact that they are granted the authority to overturn our naïve categorizations.

Scientists, academics, clergy, and public figures such as celebrities, politicians, religious leaders, self-help gurus, and radio talk-show hosts, may all be accorded the status of expert. Sometimes, this reality-defining authority is lodged in pervasive, taken-for-granted ideological beliefs—in these cases, the experts are those who originated the ideology in a mythical past or those appointed representatives of tradition who transmit the ideology from one generation to the next.

We are especially prone to trust expert testimony in circumstances where we are led to believe that relying on our own untutored perceptions might be dangerous or even catastrophic. That is why when politicians and other powerful elites seek to get us to believe that some group of people is less than human, they often produce propaganda to frighten us into believing that these people present a serious physical threat to ourselves and all that we

hold dear—that they are diseased, violent, destructive, or depraved. Once we have come to fear the marginalized group, we are likely to be more receptive to the seemingly authoritative claim that these people are not really people at all. Under such circumstances, it is tempting to reject what our senses tell us and to trust the experts' claim that these others are dangerous, subhuman beings that need to be repelled, incarcerated, or exterminated.

But there is a complication. Expert testimony does not always cause us to abandon our prior beliefs. Sometimes we are unable to abandon them. In such cases, we adopt the picture of reality offered by the expert without being able to let go of the earlier beliefs that contradict it. We defer to the authority of the expert—the one who is supposed to know—but are unable to reject the evidence provided by our senses. There are plenty of innocuous examples of this. Physicists tell us that solid objects mainly consist of empty space, and we take this on board, even though we can't help seeing solid objects as gapless.

I believe that this kind of tension drives dehumanization and is responsible for its distinctive phenomenology. When we encounter other human beings, it is very hard not to perceive them as human beings. Seeing others as human is automatic and mostly inescapable. It is not something that we can switch off when it suits us to do so. So, when experts tell us that some others are less than human, and we accept this on their epistemic authority, the perception of their humanness does not thereby dissipate. Consequently, when people dehumanize others, they are saddled with two contradictory mental representations of them. And because these are starkly contradictory, they cannot both be salient simultaneously. The mind of the dehumanizer foregrounds the humanity of the other and backgrounds their



subhumanity at some moments, and foregrounds their subhumanity and backgrounds their humanity at others.

Here is an example. In 1993 in the village of Hadereni, Romania, there was a pogrom against the Roma people living there. Thirteen homes were burned, two men were burned to death, and two more were clubbed to death while trying to flee. A reporter interviewed a woman named Maria, who confessed being proud of having participated in the violence. She said:

On reflection...it would have been better if we had burnt more of the people, not just the houses.... We did not commit murder - how could you call killing Gypsies murder? Gypsies are not really people, you see. They are always killing each other. They are criminals, sub-human, vermin. And they are certainly not wanted here (Bridge 1993).

Notice how Maria alternates between characterizing Roma as human and characterizing them as subhuman. She regrets not having killed more of the *people*, but then says that Roma are *not people*. She asserts that they are *criminals*, which are by definition human beings, and then states that they are subhuman *vermin*. Recognizing that a representation of the dehumanized other *as human* persists in the mind of the dehumanizer in parallel with a representation of them *as subhuman* provides a solution the problem of humanity.

### **Solving the Problem of Monstrosity**

The solution to the problem of humanity is also a solution to the problem of monstrosity, for it is the act of seeing others as both human and subhuman that transforms them into monsters. To explain this, I will need to provide some theoretical background. The story begins with an essay written by Ernst Jentsch entitled "On the psychology of the

uncanny” (Jentsch 1906/1997). Jentsch argues that the feeling of uncanniness occurs in response to things that seem to belong to two mutually exclusive categories. For example, figures in a wax museum are disturbing because we respond to them as human beings but know that they are sculpted lumps of wax. Automata that simulate the appearance and behavior of human beings are especially *Unheimlich*.

Sixty years later, the anthropologist Mary Douglas published an influential book entitled *Purity and Danger* (Douglas 1966). The gist of Douglas’ argument is that every culture has a conception of the natural order of things, consisting of a set of conceptual categories and the relations that obtain between them. But inevitably, when people attempt to impose a categorical grid upon nature, there will be anomalous things that do not fit into the framework. These are experienced as an affront to the natural order. They are felt to be abominable, a locus of danger, and require special handling. They are, so to speak, metaphysically radioactive.

The philosopher Noël Carroll uses Douglas’ theory of category transgression to offer a compelling analysis of monstrosity. (Carroll 1990). He argues that to be a monster (or what he calls a “horrific monster”), an entity must satisfy two conditions. One is that it must be physically threatening—dangerous in the ordinary sense of the word. But what differentiates monster from other dangerous beings is that they also pose what he calls a “cognitive” threat—which I prefer to call *metaphysical threat*. To be metaphysically threatening, a being must violate what are thought to be natural categorical boundaries. As Carroll puts it, a monster is metaphysically threatening in virtue of being “a composite that unites attributes held to be

categorically distinct and/or at odds with the cultural scheme of things in unambiguously one, spatio-temporally discrete entity” (Carroll, 1990: 51).

Dehumanization breeds monsters if the dehumanizers represent the dehumanized as physically threatening—as murderous, as destructive, or as sexually predatory. If the dehumanized group is seen as physically threatening, then the compresence of contradictory human/subhuman representations of them in the minds of their dehumanizers transforms them into monsters. This is why although dehumanized groups are typically among the most vulnerable members of a population, they are often regarded as overwhelmingly dangerous.

### **Future Challenges**

The study of dehumanization is still in its infancy and there are major methodological and conceptual challenges that have yet to be consistently addressed, much less overcome. Of these, I will flag three. The first concerns the conceptual disarray of the field of dehumanization studies, where the term “dehumanization” is given various logically independent meanings. This semantic confusion substantially impedes theoretical progress, and needs to be rectified. A second challenge concerns the ground for inferences about dehumanizing states of mind. Those who, like myself, conceive of dehumanization as a kind of mental state need some way of reliably inferring it on the basis human behavior. This is normally done by making inferences from the person’s use of animalistic slurs. However, the use of such language does not invariably indicate dehumanizing attitudes. Animalistic slurs are mostly used to hurt or humiliate others, and are not the result of dehumanizing beliefs, and we need find ways to reliably differentiate the two. Conversely, we need ways to detect dehumanizing beliefs that are *not* expressed in animalistic language—presumably, through indirect psychological means.

Finally, the phenomenon of dehumanization lies at the interface between the psychological, cultural, and political realms, and viable theory of dehumanization must address all three. For example, it would be absurd to pretend to give a satisfactory account of the dehumanization of Jews during the Third Reich ignoring the long history of German anti-Semitism or the particular economic and political forces at work in the Weimar republic. It would be equally unsatisfactory to neglect the psychological dimension, as we need the science of psychology to explain how ideological forces of Nazism (see Steizinger, this volume) impacted on the beliefs and behavior of German citizens. However, most existing accounts emphasize only one of these explanatory dimensions and either minimize or entirely ignore the others, giving only an impoverished explanation of what dehumanization is and how it works.

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