



# The Mirage of a 'Paradox' of Dehumanization: How to Affirm the Reality of Dehumanization

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## Abstract

This paper argues that the so-called 'paradox' of dehumanization is a mirage arising from misplaced abstraction. The alleged 'paradox' is taken as a challenge that arises from a skeptical stance. After reviewing the history of that skeptical stance, it is reconstructed as an argument with two premises. With the help of an epistemologically structured but pluralistic frame it is then shown how the two premises of the skeptic's argument can both be debunked. As part of that it emerges that there are a couple of ways how dehumanization can be realized, and one such realization can be sufficient for affirming the reality of dehumanization for a specific case.

## 1. Introduction

The so-called dehumanization thesis claims that some cases of social wrongdoing consist in, or are explained with reference to, dehumanization – the regarding, depicting, or treating of a human being as *not* or *less* human.<sup>1</sup>

Even though the dehumanization thesis has a long history and a broad set of evidence speaking for it, it has been questioned. There is a challenge that needs to be addressed. Take the following case: A woman is sold into forced prostitution, and one of those selling her exclaims "That zombie piece of flesh deserves it," and, as they walk away, spits in her face. The challenge that this paper addresses is this: does what happened fail to be dehumanizing (or diminish it) if we learn that the perpetrator, upon questioning, affirms that they certainly recognized that the woman is a member of the species *Homo sapiens*, with subjectivity, rights, etc.?

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<sup>1</sup> For a general introduction to this standard interpersonal conception of dehumanization and how dehumanization is studied from a variety of disciplinary perspectives, see Kronfeldner (2021a). It should be mentioned that this standard conception is clearly too individualistic. Structural dimensions of dehumanization and social wrongdoing (as occurring via institutions) are usually not dealt with in discussions about dehumanization. For an exception, see Weissmann (2015) and Leader Maynard and Luft (2023). I will ignore these structural dimensions here as well, not because they are irrelevant for the phenomenon as such, but because they are irrelevant for the issues dealt with in this paper. An answer to when we can affirm the reality of dehumanization in the interpersonal realm, does not narrow the options for dehumanization as a more structural phenomenon. Thanks to Charles Petersen for reminding me that I should clarify why I focus on the interpersonal level.

Skeptics of dehumanization think so. They argue that recognizing a victim's humanity *in some way* precludes the possibility of dehumanization *in other ways*. This paper argues against them. The aim is to show that the reality of dehumanization can be affirmed even if a perpetrator regards the respective target of dehumanization as human in some way. We need to distinguish the different ways in which dehumanization can be realized, and one such realization, the argument will be, can be sufficient for affirming the reality of dehumanization for a specific case.

The current discussions about the reality of dehumanization are anchored in Brudholm's (2010) and Lang's (2010) questioning of dehumanization, even though skepticism about dehumanization goes at least as far back as Kuper's (1989) contribution. Over the years, further authors have contributed their insights on the issue, but conclusions still differ.<sup>2</sup> Often, the argumentation of the skeptics is based on the claim that when people *seem* to be dehumanized, what *actually* happens is paradoxical: in order to dehumanize, the perpetrators (must) first acknowledge the humanity of the target of dehumanization. If so, the skeptics claim, people are *not really* dehumanized.

On the basis of an epistemologically structured but pluralistic frame developed in Section 2, I will go back to how the debate started in 1989, to reformulate in Section 3 Kuper's original points in the form of an argument with two premises. Section 4 shows how the different positions defended in the debates around the 'paradox of dehumanization' relate to the two premises and that the two premises can both be variously debunked. This setup not only allows to explain why there is so much disagreement in the debate, it also enables us to draw important conclusions with respect to the reality of *both* the paradox and dehumanization. The most important conclusion is that the alleged 'paradox' is a mirage arising from misplaced abstraction.

## 2. Three assumptions for an epistemologically structured but pluralist frame

To get started, we need to make a couple of assumptions that provide us with an epistemologically structured but pluralist frame, i.e., one that prevents talking past each other and that is not narrowing things by fiat. Whereas the first assumption has already been discussed elsewhere, the second and third have so far been ignored.

### Assumption 1: Diversity of forms, levels, and senses of being human involved

In the following, it is assumed that dehumanization can occur in categorical or graded *form*, at three different *levels* and with respect to at least three different *senses* of being human. Dehumanization in its categorical form means that somebody is regarded as not human; in its graded form it means that somebody is regarded as less human. Both can be realized at different levels, namely as: behavioral dehumanization (inhuman mistreatment happening in social reality),

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<sup>2</sup> In particular, Manne (2016, 2018), Mikkola (2016, 2021), Smith (2016, 2021), Steizinger (2018, 2021), Lang (2020), Enock et al (2021), Kronfeldner (2021b), de Ruiter (2021), and Phillips (2022, 2023). While some argue against dehumanization (e.g., Lang 2010; Manne 2016, 2018; Enock et al 2021) as *often* wrongly attributed to a case of wrongdoing, others mention the alleged 'paradox' to argue against it – to defend a *specific* kind of dehumanization (e.g., Mikkola 2016; Smith 2016, 2021; Steizinger 2018; Kronfeldner 2021b, de Ruiter 2021). In contrast to the latter, this contribution aims at a more global defense of the reality of dehumanization, so that a *broader set of cases* can be clear of the suspicion of the skeptics.

rhetorical dehumanization (depicting somebody as not or less human), or cognitive dehumanization (regarding somebody as not or less human).

What it means to be human, as part of dehumanization, can vary too. There are at least three senses of being human involved in the debate. There is, first, a group sense (bare being human) as part of which being human means being a member of a group (e.g., the species *Homo sapiens*, or some other social group for which we reserve the label “human”). There is, second, a property sense (human-ness): being human means exhibiting all or at least most of the typical and/or specific properties of being a member of the respective group identified as human. The relevant properties are usually capacities, such as agency, subjectivity, reason, morality, creativity, etc. Dehumanization then means that some of the relevant properties are differentially attributed to different people: some humans are taken as having none or less of these capacities than others. There is, third, a moral sense of being human (moral standing) since being human can simply mean having moral standing (e.g., having human rights). Dehumanization then amounts to granting none or less of these rights.

We will see later that the variety of forms, levels, and senses involved, and the diversity of properties within the property sense of being human, gives rise to the perceived tensions that others called ‘paradoxical,’ – tensions that are often, as this contribution aims to show, not necessarily *in the cases*, but *in or between the interpretations* given.

The pluralistic frame assumed here takes into account that psychological, anthropological, historical, and philosophical studies have shown that, first, not only the moral sense matters if we are interested in how dehumanization actually shows up in social reality, and that, second, the properties that are differentially attributed to human beings in different degrees can vary quite a bit, from context to context, depending on the historically or culturally embedded concept of being human operative. Sometimes subjectivity is key, sometimes agency, sometimes reason, sometimes secondary emotions, etc.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Mikkola (2016), de Ruiter (2021), and my Introduction to Kronfeldner (2021a) already mentioned the three different senses of being human and how they relate to each other. Mikkola and de Ruiter argue in a quite monistic manner. Both give exclusive philosophical relevance to the moral sense of being human, and de Ruiter gives exclusive philosophical relevance to subjectivity as the property that grounds the moral sense. My account defends a more pluralistic stance since, first, the different senses can point in different directions with respect to dehumanization’s reality, and since, second, there is no way to prioritize one of the senses *if* explaining the occurrence of social reality is at issue (rather than explaining why that reality is normatively evaluated as it is). For details regarding the diversity of relations that one can assume between the moral and the other senses, see Kronfeldner (2018). For here, it should suffice to mention that the connection between the moral sense and the property sense of being human has been questioned since it is unclear why we should base our concept of human rights (moral sense of being human) on properties that are taken to belong to human ‘nature’ (i.e., properties that most humans are believed to exhibit). Hull (1986) and Rorty (1998), for instance, have made such points. Moral standing, after all, might be grounded in relations only. Others, for instance, Nussbaum (1995) and Antony (2000), defend that we need reference to properties to ground ideas about morality and human rights, but they do not prioritize subjectivity. A full account of how the different senses of being human relate, has, however, to wait for another occasion. For broader evidence on the plurality of which properties matter across cultures and historical times, see the diversity of contributions in Kronfeldner (2021a). In addition, see Smith (2013), who stated that ‘being human’ in the property sense is more like an ‘indexical,’ or Kronfeldner (2017), where I concluded: what it means to be human is so context-dependent that we should not specify the concept via its contents but via its social functions. However, all the above, as mentioned, still allows to give priority to the moral sense of being human *if* the discussion is about moral matters (evaluating behavior morally; explaining why it is wrong) rather than social reality (explaining why it happened).

Assumption 2: Different epistemic roles

It also needs to be taken into account that dehumanization can play different epistemic roles. The skeptics usually involve dehumanization as an explanatory category that takes cognitive attitudes as the explanans, i.e., they do the explaining. Epistemologically, the issue is then: *which* cognitive attitudes explain certain cases of social wrongdoing? Is it attitudes that relate to the concept of the human? Is that concept salient in the cognition of the perpetrator, or is it something else, something cognitive that is not at all related to the concept of the human? At issue is then whether one can *infer* from the overt behavioral or rhetorical dehumanization that there was dehumanization at the cognitive level.

A core conundrum in the literature on dehumanization is that it is not explicitly acknowledged that, first, the three levels of dehumanization might not be in inferential or explanatory relations and that, second, other scholars use dehumanization in an epistemologically different manner, e.g., in a descriptive sense or in a non-cognitive explanatory sense. For instance, the reality of behavioral or rhetorical dehumanization can be affirmed, with a descriptive role in use, independently of what is going on in the mind of the perpetrator, and vice versa. If dehumanization is a matter of description, then we either have sufficient evidence that it occurred at one of the levels, or we do not. If it occurred at one level but not the other, then that is it. There is no paradox, just different levels. In addition, if at issue – as explanandum – is explaining a discourse, a shared practice, or why a specific kind of wrongdoing is wrong, then the explanatory role of dehumanization is non-cognitive.<sup>4</sup> Hence, the challenge that the skeptic presents does not even arise if such an alternative epistemological frame is used, because the *skeptic's challenge is premised on cognitive attitudes constituting the explanans*.

For the sake of explicating the skeptic's argument, this contribution will grant the skeptic the cognitive-explanatory role of dehumanization, even though, at the end, we have to come back to the alternative epistemic roles that dehumanization can play. Given the cognitive-explanatory role, the hard problem is, as mentioned, to answer when exactly cognitive dehumanization *is explanatorily relevant* (i.e., cognitively salient) for actual cases of social wrongdoing. At issue is: when is cognitive dehumanization *among the actual causes* of the wrongdoing.<sup>5</sup> As mentioned, an answer usually requires an inference from the overt behavior (actions, rhetorical depictions) to hidden cognitive antecedents of the overt behavior.

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<sup>4</sup> Cognitive attitudes are irrelevant for such explanatory questions. For instance, Mikkola (2016) uses dehumanization in a morally-explanatory role, while Tarasenko-Struc (2023) defends dehumanization to be a practice (cognition-in-action), as part of which dehumanization is not just a matter of cognition; it is cognitive-motivational *in one go*. As he mentions, such an approach can stem, philosophically, from a diversity of backgrounds, e.g., from a Kantian or a Wittgensteinian one. The latter is the background assumed by Martin Gustafsson (personal communication). In such approaches, the interpretation of the cognition cannot be separated from the interpretation of the action. There is no inference to the level of cognition, and hence no explanation of the behavioral dehumanization that can work without reference to dehumanization. Something similar would hold for a discourse or ideology analysis of dehumanization.

<sup>5</sup> Note that granting explanatory relevance does not exclude other cognitive mechanisms as complementary causes, as Kronfeldner (2021a: 14-17) and Leader Maynard (2022: 99, 114) have already argued. Monocausal models of explanations are quite generally inappropriate, and explaining social wrongdoing is no exception to that rule. Dehumanization is not necessarily in opposition to an explanation that also involves other mechanisms of social cognition. Thus, portraying dehumanization as if it needs to compete with other cognitive explanations is using a false contrast.

After all, we rarely have direct or reliable access to the motivation and cognition of the perpetrators.<sup>6</sup>

Assumption 3: Minimalist or maximalist desideratum

It is also important to note that one can use a minimalist or a maximalist desideratum for affirming the reality of dehumanization. A maximalist desideratum amounts to the following: for dehumanization to happen in a specific case of social wrongdoing, it is *necessary* that it happens *categorically*, at *all* levels, with respect to *all* senses. A minimalist desideratum takes it as *sufficient* for affirming the reality of dehumanization that, for the respective case at issue, it happened to *some degree*, at *one* level, with respect to *one* sense.

Unfortunately, there seems to be no agreement in the debate, not even an implicit one, on whether the maximalist or minimalist desideratum for affirming the reality of dehumanization is adequate, as this paper will show. Yet, without such an agreement, the debate will lead nowhere – except to talking past each other. If the cognitive-explanatory use of dehumanization is at issue, as we assumed for the sake of the argument, the minimalist desideratum means that the reality of dehumanization can be affirmed if sufficient evidence has been provided that it occurred at the cognitive level, to some degree, with respect to at least one sense of being human, and in a way that is explanatorily relevant for explaining actual social wrongdoing.

With this epistemologically structured but pluralistic frame in place, we can look again at the disagreements in the body of literature that discusses the dehumanization thesis, the alleged ‘paradox’, and with that, what I call the Skeptic’s Challenge. The aim of the rest is to show why one should be careful in asserting the reality of dehumanization for actual cases of social wrongdoing but also to show under which conditions the reality of dehumanization can be asserted.

### 3. The Skeptic’s Challenge

The case of the Aché people

Kuper (1989) referred to the following case in order to question what he called the “dehumanization thesis.” From the 1960s to the 1970s, the Aché people in Paraguay became victims of extreme violence, resulting in mass killings and forced prostitution (sex slavery) of Aché women. Kuper reported that perpetrators regarded themselves as “men of reason” and the Aché people as lacking in reason and animal-like. The animals to which Aché people were rhetorically likened had quite negative connotations: Aché people were depicted as “rabid rats” to be exterminated. A case of dehumanization, it seems, and of a type that is well known from other paradigmatic cases of dehumanization, e.g., the Holocaust, where such likening to animals has also been part of the stereotypes and the atrocities.

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<sup>6</sup> Note that this does not conflict with allowing that there is direct evidence of cognitive dehumanization happening at the cognitive level independent of actual social wrongdoing happening as part of social reality. Many experiments on dehumanizing attitudes measure simply cognitive attitudes (or proxies of those), without claiming that they are necessary or sufficient for explaining actual social wrongdoing. I take contemporary experimental social psychology to have robust evidence on cognitive dehumanization existing. Existence is only a precondition for explanatory relevance in cases of actual social wrongdoing. For major contributions from experimental approaches, see papers in Kronfeldner (2021a).

In his discussion of the brutalities against the Aché people, Kuper (1989) notes a particular problem with regards to the forced prostitution of Aché women. He states that “the selling of the young girls into prostitution was *hardly consistent* with the characterization of the Aché as rabid rodents” (Kuper 1989: 163; *emph. added*). He concluded from that inconsistency that it is wise “to guard against too ready an acceptance of the dehumanization thesis” (Ibid.).

The case itself is still contested in many senses (e.g., with respect to the question of whether it was a case of genocide or not).<sup>7</sup> Yet, it seems that the bits about the case that Kuper used are beyond doubt; at least, I will suppose so in the following. For the goals of this paper, it is all we need to get the Skeptic’s Challenge off the ground.

Kuper does not explain to his reader why there is an inconsistency, but it is not difficult to imagine what he must have had in mind. He seems to assume that only human beings can be sold into forced prostitution; rodents, evidently, cannot be subject to that specific form of wrongdoing. Even if a similar practice toward non-human animals were at issue, we would not call that practice ‘forced prostitution;’ we would call it something else. This line of thinking (presumably) also involves the claim that the kind of wrongdoing that is involved in the actions of the perpetrators is not just *called* something else but *is* something else if the targets involved are, as a matter of fact, non-human animals rather than human beings. In contemporary philosophical parlance, this means that it is ‘constitutive’ of the phenomenon of forced prostitution that the sex slaves are human beings and are perceived as such, giving rise to Kuper’s inconsistency. And this is, I think, what Lang (2010) assumed as well, when he questioned dehumanization, with reference to the alleged ‘paradox’ of dehumanization.

#### The alleged ‘paradox’ of dehumanization

Lang (2010: 236), who bases his account on Strawson’s (1962) account of reactive attitudes, states that “power as a relational phenomenon” is left out of the picture if it is ignored that the targets of mistreatment are in fact human beings and that they are recognized as such by the perpetrators. He writes, with respect to the case of rape, another standard type of case discussed in the literature, that:

“[t]he desire to humiliate, the desire to exercise power, and the desire to have sex all depend on the acknowledgement of a subjectivity – a thinking, feeling presence – in the other person. While the individual identity of the victim might be unimportant, his or her subjectivity is not. Rape becomes less explicable in terms of the non-human, since both sexual behavior and feelings of power are enhanced when the counter-part in the situation is human,”

and, as we should add, is perceived as such.

The *phenomenon* itself is here taken to exclude a certain cognitive explanation, namely, the one that goes by the name ‘dehumanization thesis.’ Therefore, constitutiveness claims directly lead to what I call the Skeptic’s Conclusion (that dehumanization cannot be affirmed for the case at issue). Such constitutiveness claims point to cognitive antecedents of the actions of the perpetrators (as explaining the actions) that do not fit (it seems) what the dehumanization thesis assumes about the cognition of the perpetrator. It would not be forced prostitution or rape,

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<sup>7</sup> See, for a review of discussions on the case, Hitchcock et al (2017). According to them, killings were direct as well as indirect since many died from disease, malnutrition, overwork, beatings, etc. See also Wolf (1976), referenced in Kuper.

if the perpetrator's cognition would fully leave out the status of the target as a human. It is thus more plausible, or so the argument goes, to infer that the cognition in these kinds of cases did not actually involve an attitude that takes the targets to be not human or less human (e.g., as lacking in reason, as lacking subjectivity, etc.). In a nutshell, the skeptic argues that the perpetrators, in cases such as those described above, did not *mean* it (even though they *said* it) when they *treated* their targets the way they did. They talked 'as if' only.

Other paradox examples in the literature use the same argumentative structure. Frequent are cases of humiliation, torture, misogyny, or other kinds of severe hatred, e.g., as part of genocides. De Ruiter (2021), for instance, points to Margalit's (1996) account of humiliation to discuss similar cases. The humiliation or power relation that is involved in the respective kind of case (usually formulated in the abstract, i.e., about rape in general) would be absent, or so the claim goes, if the perpetrators really thought that animals are at issue, that the targets have no reason, no subjectivity, etc. This means that the perpetrator is taken to not really think that the respective target is *not (or less) human* since that is *hardly consistent* (to use Kuper's wording) with the fact that the respective relation involves humiliation.

Such a line of reasoning takes the respective intentions of the perpetrators (to humiliate, to exercise power, etc.) to arise from reactive attitudes (hatred, guilt, domination, etc.) and defines the reactive attitudes narrowly, i.e., they are (and should be) used as applying only to humans and the relations between them. This is the standard line one finds repeated in the literature on the 'paradox.' A quite crucial assumption. Appiah (2008: 144), for instance, mentioned "humiliating, stigmatizing, reviling, and torturing" as "reserved for creatures we recognize to have intentions and desires and projects."<sup>8</sup> Manne (2016, 2018) uses the same basic strategy and assumptions with respect to misogyny in a specific context and with respect to a specific reactive attitude, namely the belief of the misogynist that women *deserve* the respective mistreatment – since (from the perspective of the misogynist) they stepped out of their assigned role *as* a human being, i.e., their role to give (rather than take) social goods such as care, love, service, etc.

Before we can reformulate the skeptic's points in the form of an argument with two premises, one further clarification is necessary. The assumption that reactive attitudes are part of the respective social phenomena is either about the perpetrators' cognitive states or about the relationship between the perpetrator and the target. In addition, it can be, as mentioned, mounted on the concept that captures the wrongdoing (e.g., rape, sex slavery, torture, misogyny). Yet, such claims about reactive attitudes as being necessarily involved (cognitively, phenomenologically, conceptually) in a certain social wrongdoing would be easy to refute if they entailed that human beings *never* have the respective reactive attitudes to other kinds of animals (e.g., that other animals are never humiliated or punished) since that is obviously wrong.<sup>9</sup> I thus take the respective claims about the alleged 'paradox' to only entail that the kind of reactive attitude (e.g., the kind of intended humiliation, punishment, or power relation) is *a decisively different one* if a human being rather than an animal is (knowingly) at issue. And that is plausible. Take Kuper's historical case of the forced prostitution of Aché women. I take it as uncontroversial that the reactive attitude towards the respective targets would be a

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<sup>8</sup> Gopnik (2006) and Appiah (2006: 151-153; 2008: 144) are frequently quoted as talking about the 'paradox', even though these authors were not working on, or against, a systematic account of dehumanization when they wrote the few lines that have been quoted so often by now.

<sup>9</sup> See Crary (2021) for a take on that issue.

different one if the perpetrators were *really thinking* that their targets are members of a non-human biological species. Yet, as Assumption 1 makes clear, dehumanization is not just about a yes or no regarding membership in the biological species. That would evidently be a too coarse-grained picture of dehumanization.<sup>10</sup> To get a more fine-grained picture, we need to look at the actual reasoning involved in the Skeptic's Challenge.

#### The skeptic's argument

A frequent inference from claims about the alleged 'paradox' is that dehumanization is, in the cases at issue, not real, i.e., only 'as if.' Above, I called this inference the Skeptic's Conclusion. What is the argument behind the conclusion? The discussion so far gives us Premise 1.

(Premise 1) Action X (necessarily) involves recognition of the target *as* a human being.<sup>11</sup>

For our case that means: selling Aché women into forced prostitution (necessarily) involves recognition of them as a human being. To arrive at the Skeptic's Conclusion, however, we also need Premise 2:

(Premise 2) A being recognized as a human being cannot simultaneously (at least not consistently) be equated with a non-or-less-human being.

(The Skeptic's Conclusion) When the perpetrators said that the targets are not human or less human, they did *not really mean* it. They talked 'as if' only. Dehumanization cannot be attributed to the case; it is not real in the case at issue. Scholars wrongly interpret the case as a case of dehumanization.

I take Kuper's caution to derive from that argument. The claim is that we should quite generally be careful with attributing dehumanization to *actual cases of wrongdoing* since *many* cases might be like the case of the forced prostitution of the Aché women.

In the following, I will show that the skeptics are overcautious (if not overgeneralizing their skeptical stance), even though they have a point: there *are* cases of social wrongdoing that are not best explained as being due to cognitive dehumanization. One should not overstretch the use of the notion of dehumanization. Seeing a 'nail' in everything just because one has a 'hammer' is not a good epistemic strategy, but that does not entail that dehumanization *rarely if ever occurs*.

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<sup>10</sup> I thus agree with Leader Maynard (2022: 113-14) that some skeptics might simply have ignored graded forms of dehumanization. Nevertheless, skeptics can easily admit a graded picture and still present a challenge, given that there *are* other "identity categories" (as Leader Maynard admits) that can be more salient for the perpetrator and thus override (in part or completely) the explanatory importance even of graded forms of dehumanization. So, to prevent addressing only a straw-men version of the Skeptics' Challenge, it is not enough, I think, to simply point at graded forms to defend the reality of dehumanization. The situation is epistemically more complex.

<sup>11</sup> The brackets around 'necessarily' are needed since some formulations of the 'paradox' point to a constitutive necessity (the phenomenon requires dehumanization to be absent) while others only involve an empirical generality about a contingent psychological 'necessity' (e.g., humans cannot help but visually recognize other humans as humans).



Any generalization, in the one or the other direction, is unwarranted – empirically and conceptually. In addition, accusations of the other side being not cautious enough prevent us from seeing the real disagreements at issue.<sup>12</sup>

Thus, progress in the debate can only be made if issues about *generalizations across cases or contexts* are prevented, i.e., if the different approaches are all reformulated with respect to one concrete case, and a clear argumentative structure. This is what the following will do.

#### **4. Different resolutions of the alleged ‘paradox’ with respect to one and the same case**

Given the argumentative structure of ‘paradox’-using arguments against dehumanization, as reconstructed in Section 3, there are two ways to counter the Sceptic’s Conclusion: one can debunk Premise 1 or Premise 2. In this Section 4, I will discuss these two options with respect to the one concrete case of the Aché women, using the frame established in Section 2, explicating how the different accounts mentioned could interpret this one and the same case.

##### Debunking Premise 1

Debunking Premise 1 shows, in one way or another, that by focusing on the relevant sense of being human, Premise 1 collapses. The ‘paradox’ does not arise in the first place. Recall that Premise 1 stated the following:

(Premise 1): Action X (selling a human being into forced prostitution) (necessarily) involves recognition of the target (the sex slave) *as a human being*.

*Strategy (1a): Showing that philosophically speaking only one sense of being human matters.* The most obvious way of questioning Premise 1 is to show that only one sense of being human matters, e.g., from a specific philosophical vantage point. One can point, for instance, to the fact that being human in the moral sense is the only relevant sense and that it does not involve such recognition. For example, if we agree that the case of the Aché women is a case of intentional wrongdoing by the perpetrators that impacted (in action and/or in cognition) the moral standing of the involved women (and be it in degrees), then it follows from that alone that those who sold Aché women into prostitution (or profited in other ways from the forced prostitution) have failed at the behavioral and/or cognitive level to attribute humanity in the moral sense to their targets.

Most in the literature on dehumanization would probably admit this, but by doing so they admit that Premise 1 is *false for that sense of being human and for the involved levels of dehumanization*. Premise 1 is false since it is *not* the case that “selling

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<sup>12</sup> With this, I nonetheless agree with Lang (2010: 226)’s “intent,” which “is not to argue that dehumanization is wholly absent in all processes of mass murder” (the phenomenon he focuses on), but rather “to show that the extent of the dehumanizing mindset in the perpetrators has been exaggerated and that the concept of dehumanization has been overused and misapplied in much theory on the psychology of genocide.” In genocide studies, such overuse seems to have been indeed an issue, which is why the genocide scholar Kuper (1989), referenced in Lang, but otherwise surprisingly often ignored, already asked for exactly that caution. But we cannot make an inference from that context of usage to other theoretical contexts. Dehumanization is not only discussed in genocide studies, as Kronfeldner (2021a) has illustrated.

a human being into forced prostitution (necessarily) involves recognition of the sex slave *as a human being,*" at least not if being human in the moral sense is all that is at issue. On the contrary, selling a human being into forced prostitution *necessarily involves mistreatment or at least misrecognition of the target as a human being in the moral sense,* fully or at least in degrees. That is entailed in what we mean by forced prostitution – a kind of wrongdoing that violates the moral standing of the human beings at issue, excluding them from the moral circle that is *meant* to protect human beings from such treatment, *whichever* reactive attitude involved. From the philosophical vantage point of what it means to sell a human being into forced prostitution, it follows that only the moral sense matters, and for that sense of being human Premise 1 collapses.

That means, in sum: if we disambiguate the sense of being human relevant and the relevant level of dehumanization and assume that the moral sense of being human is *the only relevant one* for the case, then *the 'paradox' does not even arise in the first place.* In addition, if the level is behavioral dehumanization (pointing to mistreatment, not just misrecognition), then it holds that whether Premise 1 is false or not is a matter of fact rather than cognition. If one, finally, adds the minimalist condition, then it follows that, even though the case seemed paradoxical at first glance, dehumanization happened and is not paradoxical at all.

I take Mikkola and De Ruiter to argue along such lines, and here is why. Mikkola (2016) takes dehumanization to consist not in the actual misrecognition of the victim's humanity (species sense or property sense) but in having one's legitimate human interests violated (moral sense), which is a concept of dehumanization that is exclusively premised on the actions of the perpetrators (behavioral level). Thus, according to Mikkola, being *treated* as not or less human in the moral sense is, as a descriptive matter, *sufficient* for dehumanization to be attributed to the case (minimalist desideratum used). Nevertheless, for her, dehumanization is also morally-explanatory: it explains why the wrongdoing is wrong, and if it does so, it is real. De Ruiter (2021) arrives at a similar conclusion but takes dehumanization to be merely cognitive-explanatory, and thus as premised on cognitive attitudes (cognitive level). According to de Ruiter, dehumanization nonetheless "loses its paradoxical character, given that persons can *consider* others as less than human in a *moral* sense without necessarily regarding them as falling outside the human species or lacking human subjectivity."<sup>13</sup> Applied to the case of the Aché women, that means that the behavioral dehumanization that *consists* in the fact of being sold into forced prostitution is taken as *evidence* of cognitive dehumanization being cognitive-explanatory for the behavioral level, but only with respect to the moral sense of being human. This, once again, is taken as sufficient to confirm the reality of dehumanization, for the case at issue (minimalist desideratum used). Mikkola and de Ruiter salvage dehumanization as behavioral or cognitive dehumanization in the moral sense. Mikkola has the methodological advantage of defending an account that is independent of the perpetrator's cognition: facts about actual perpetrators' cognition are, as mentioned, chronically hard to find out; after all, those accused to be perpetrators will rarely have the motivation to be open and honest about their cognition related to the wrong done. Yet, Mikkola does not meet the skeptics 'on their own turf.' The skeptic can still reply that dehumanization is *still not* cognitively-explanatory, albeit that is a question that is irrelevant from within Mikkola's account. An impasse is reached.

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<sup>13</sup> Emph. added.

For this contribution, this shows that deciding whether dehumanization can be attributed to a specific case requires precision: we need to be explicit not only about the *level(s)* and the *sense(s)* of being human at issue, but also about the *epistemic role(s)* of dehumanization and the *desideratum* used for affirming its reality. Keeping that in mind, let us move on to further ways of debunking Premise 1.

*Strategy (1b): Showing that the sense of being human that could give rise to the paradox was cognitively irrelevant.* It might well be that the sense of being human that seems to give rise to the ‘paradox’ was actually cognitively irrelevant (non-salient). Perpetrators can, for instance, *actively recognize inhumanity in the property sense*, while they cognitively ignore the species sense. In the case of the Aché women, it is indeed hard to imagine that the perpetrators in fact actively believed that the women belong to a rodent species. This is presumably what Kuper had in mind. Yet, things are different if the property sense of being human is what is at issue at the cognitive level. Recall that the perpetrators are on record for having depicted the Aché women as less human in the property sense, namely as lacking in reason. An interpretation of the case that takes that specific part of the overall story as cognitively salient would simply not be concerned with the question of whether the perpetrators literally regarded Aché women as female members of another animal species. That issue would simply not matter for the interpretation of the case since it is likely that it did not matter cognitively for the perpetrator either.

Thus, if we use an interpretation of the case that focuses on the property sense of being human (and the evidence available clearly allows doing so), then, once again, *Premise 1 breaks down*. It is *not* the case that “selling a human being into forced prostitution (necessarily) involves recognition of the sex slave *as* a human being,” at least not if being human in the property sense of “having reason” is at issue. Selling a member of the species *Homo sapiens* into forced prostitution is *consistent* with attributing less reason to the sex slave. Whether the case at issue does involve attribution of less reason or not depends on the details of the case and the little evidence for the example at issue that is assumed here allows for this interpretation and makes it likely that the perpetrators did indeed regard their targets as less human in the property sense. Adopting that interpretation of the perpetrator’s cognition does not conflict with taking the case as one of sex slavery.

As a result, given the property sense of being human, the alleged paradox turns out, once again, to not arise in the first place – at least for the respective case, under the interpretation suggested. If the property sense and the moral sense are combined, then the following interpretation of the case results: the Aché women had been regarded, depicted, and treated as less human in the property and the moral sense. If the given interpretation justifiably applies to the case, then, again, the reality of dehumanization can be defended: *dehumanization happened to some degree, at the cognitive, rhetorical, and behavioral level, with respect to at least one sense of being human, without any ‘paradox,’ using a minimalist desideratum* for affirming the reality of dehumanization.

With respect to different cases and historical contexts, Varga (2021), Steizinger (2018, 2021), and Kronfeldner (2021b) have shown that interpretations that involve literally attributing no or less humanity in the property or species sense make a lot of sense. Varga (2021) claims that dehumanization can be perceptual. We sometimes literally *see* other human beings as visibly less human in the property sense (e.g., with respect to attributing agency). And that can be the case irrespective of whether perceptual dehumanization is explanatorily relevant for

specific cases of social wrongdoing. The existence of perceptual dehumanization allows for cognitive attitudes and behaviors that grant humanity in the species and moral sense. It can stand on its own. If perceptual dehumanization combines with recognition of humanity in the species or moral sense, then that is a simultaneity that might well entail a certain cognitive dissonance (the cognitive dimension of the 'paradox'), but it does not have to. These other senses of being human might be cognitively fully irrelevant (non-salient), and thus also explanatorily irrelevant. Steizinger (2018, 2021) shows that some versions of Nazi ideology (far from one monolithic block) can be interpreted as involving the literal denial of membership in the human species, based on differences regarding properties typical for the 'true' humankind. Some of the Nazi perpetrators literally believed, he shows, that Jewish people are animals of a non-human kind – devoid of the proper human "soul." Steizinger takes that form of dehumanization to be "metaphysical" since, first, the property at issue (having or not having the respective kind of soul) is "metaphysical" in the sense of "unobservable" and since, second, the dehumanization was not based on a belief that Jewish people do not belong to the biological species *Homo sapiens*. "Metaphysical" is here contrasted with "biological." The dehumanization of Jewish people nonetheless involved a categorical denial of humanity, namely, in the property sense. Whether that ideological dimension was cognitively salient for a specific soldier on the field or whether it explains the specific cruelty in the mass killing at issue, is a different matter. Kronfeldner (2021b), by contrast, added that it was historically not always the case that all human beings had been regarded as members of the same biological species or as having the same observable properties. People have been behaviorally dehumanized on the basis of different genealogy (e.g., as part of so-called polygenist beliefs) and on the basis of seemingly observable differences (e.g., as part of craniology in the 19th century, or generally as part of ideologies that naturalize human differences, with sexism and racism still being the paradigm examples of that form of dehumanization). Yet, if such observable differences or differences in genealogy were not available to dehumanize others, reference to unobservable differences came in handy for the dehumanizers, as in the metaphysical dehumanization that Steizinger described.

All these contributions show that there are cases where dehumanization happens (at certain levels, to certain degrees) with respect to at least one sense of being human and irrespective of other senses of being human, which can simply be ignored in the case at issue. Let me further illustrate this with another case, infamous and often used and not irrelevant for the interpretation of the case of Aché women. Since Aristotle, the dehumanization of women has repeatedly been grounded on attributing less reason to them. For Aristotle (and those following him in that), it was simply irrelevant for that form of dehumanization that women were evidently members of the same species as Greek men and had *some* reason. There was no inconsistency and no cognitive dissonance in regarding them as members of the same species as Greek men *and* attributing less reason to them, a view that took Greek men to be the ideal type of humanity. Species membership (and recognition of them as human in that sense) was simply *irrelevant for justifying their lower social status* but attributing lesser reason to them was relevant.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, species membership might well have been cognitively fully irrelevant for those who enslaved Aché women. For instance, it might well be that the

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<sup>14</sup> For more details, and references, see Kronfeldner (2018: 19-21) and Kronfeldner (2021b: 366-368).

perpetrators (another local but dominant group of Paraguayan frontiersmen, speaking the same Guaraní language as the Aché people) did not have a concept of a biological species similar to the species concept that dominates contemporary sciences and the societies that teach and use these sciences. Yet, even if they had such a concept, it can still be that species membership was simply not at issue, a cognitively irrelevant fact, not interfering with the dehumanization happening, at least not in the mind of the perpetrators.

In sum, debunking Premise 1 establishes irrelevances, in two forms: either since only the moral sense of being human is taken to have philosophical relevance at the respective levels (as I interpreted De Ruiter and Mikkola), or since the senses of being human that were cognitively relevant (salient) to the perpetrator do not give rise to a 'paradox.' In cases of the latter, the other senses of being human, with respect to which the perpetrator would, if asked, *not* deny the humanity of the target, are taken as *not actively maintained* in the actual cognition related to the wrongdoing at issue, as I take Varga, Steizinger, and Kronfeldner to assume.

### Debunking Premise 2

Premise 2 states that there are different senses of being human, both of which being cognitively relevant (in the case at issue), and that they point in different directions. Debunking Premise 2 means to show that these different senses of being human can cognitively be simultaneously maintained. The 'paradox' is taken to be there in some way, but it is resolved as not resulting in a contradiction. After all, what is logically impossible does not have to be cognitively impossible. Recall Premise 2:

(Premise 2) A being recognized as a human being cannot simultaneously (at least not consistently) be equated with a non-or-less-human being.

To understand the possibilities of debunking Premise 2 in more detail, we need to look at interpretations of the case that involve *recognizing the targets as ambiguously human*. One could interpret the case of the Aché women as follows: the perpetrators indeed actively cognized the women to be physiologically and anatomically members of the species *Homo sapiens* and took that to be relevant, but they actively attributed at the same time less reason and/or less moral standing to them. They assumed that not all human beings are the same and it was that 'same same but different' (as an Asian idiom has it) that best characterizes their cognitive state: the ambiguity was cognitively salient.

Note that this interpretation differs, even though only slightly, from the interpretation that treats the case as an unambiguous failure to recognize full humanity in the property sense. The difference is in what is said about the perpetrators' cognition. Debunking Premise 2 involves a claim that conflicting cognitive tendencies were simultaneously and actively maintained. Debunking Premise 1 does not have to involve such a claim about cognitive dissonance. It can claim that certain senses of being human (e.g., the species sense) were cognitively irrelevant.

If one attributes conflicting cognitive attitudes to the perpetrator, then the inconsistency (which stands behind Premise 2 and enables the talk about a paradox) dissolves into a cognitive simultaneity, interpreted as an ambiguity (or: resolved dissonance). The simultaneity of 'on the one hand and on the other hand' is still there but it is psychologized. Dehumanization turns out, as a result, to be real in the case, while what does not really exist at the cognitive level is the alleged

inconsistency. The claim is: dehumanization happened at the cognitive level in a quasi-paradoxical manner with respect to a combination of the different cognitively relevant senses of being human. If one assumes that the perpetrator held such ambiguous attitudes toward somebody's 'humanity,' then the 'paradox' is resolved by *psychologizing it*.

I take Smith (2016, 2021) as defending such a resolution of the 'paradox.' According to Smith, there are two ways to cognize humanity in an ambiguous manner. There is one that follows the format of psychological essentialism: a non-contradictory belief in the other individual as human-looking but devoid of a human essence. The other way is one about the target being taken to 'cross ontological borders' and involves ideas about monsters, i.e., beings that are simultaneously both fully human and fully subhuman, or neither human nor not human. Smith adds that these forms of dehumanization explain the feeling of uncanniness that he claims to be part of what perpetrators feel when they confront their human targets. Hence, we would have to reconstruct the perpetrators' cognition about Aché women in one of these ways: they took Aché women to be human-looking but devoid of a human essence or they took Aché women to be monsters.

Evidence that the uncanniness that Smith assumes is part of the cognition of perpetrators would have to be added to back up that interpretation. This is relevant since Phillips (2022, 2023) offers a similar resolution of the 'paradox' but one that does not require evidence of uncanniness. Phillips presents empirical evidence that people use the concept of the human as a dual-character concept, i.e., as a concept that has simultaneously different criteria for application. This explains, Phillips argues, why dehumanizers do not end up in inconsistencies when they regard their target as human in one sense and not or less human in another sense. The two senses are not 'mixed,' as in Smith's resolution, but they are still both cognitively maintained. The form of dual application that Phillips discusses refers to the species sense (which he calls a "descriptive" application of the concept of the human) and a mix of the property and moral sense (which he calls a "normative" application of the concept of the human). The paradigmatic case of the form of dehumanization that he discusses occurs if the perpetrator regards the target as a morally deficient member of the species *Homo sapiens* (e.g., by taking the target to be evil or otherwise morally wicked). Expectedly, such cases come with the respective normative reactive attitudes and are usually taken to explain a specific kind of violence, namely moral violence, in which the targets are taken to deserve the violence.<sup>15</sup> And indeed, it might well be that those who sold Aché women into sex slavery regarded these women as morally deficient human beings, as women who deserve to be treated that way. After all, this would tap into a well-known form of victim blaming that many women will know from their own experience and that has quite a long intellectual history. It was, for instance, part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century imagination of women's specific mental capacities leading to specific moral deficiencies.<sup>16</sup> Yet, only the details of the case will tell whether uncanniness, wickedness, or something else was driving the respective cognitive attitudes that (partially) explain a specific wrongdoing.

Interestingly, Phillips ends up with the same paradigmatic cases of dehumanization as Manne (2016, 2018); yet, they draw opposite conclusions. From the same dual application of the concept of the human in the case of misogyny, Manne

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<sup>15</sup> See Rai et al (2017) on how moral violence can be distinguished from instrumental violence.

<sup>16</sup> See Kronfeldner (2018: 21).

concludes that there is no dehumanization happening in the case since there is *one* application of the concept of the human that does *not* involve regarding the target as not or less human (the species sense of being human is assumed to be attributed to the target by the perpetrator). Phillips, however, seems to conclude that there is dehumanization occurring since it occurs *at least with respect to one sense of being human*, namely, his mix of the property and moral sense of being human.

Two resolutions of the 'paradox' in opposite directions, but with respect to roughly the same two senses of being human, involving similar reactive attitudes. The level and senses of the human used are the same, but the conclusion differs. How come? The difference lies in different implicitly used desiderata, leading to an impasse: Manne seems committed to continue to deny the reality of dehumanization as long as it does not show up in full *categorical* form, in *all* senses, and at *all* levels (maximalist desideratum used), whereas Phillips seems to be willing to affirm the reality of dehumanization as long as there is sufficient evidence that it shows up in a *cognitive-explanatory* role at the *cognitive* level to *some* degree and with respect to *one* sense (minimalist desideratum used).

The following discussion of a possible defense of the Skeptic's argument, given the mentioned possibilities to debunk Premise 1 or Premise 2, will lead back to this issue about diverging desiderata, but before we can go there, we need to give the skeptic a chance to respond.

To wrap up what we have so far: the alleged 'paradox' has been shown to evaporate once the degree of dehumanization, the relevant levels, the relevant senses of being human, the epistemic roles, and the desideratum for affirming the reality of dehumanization are spelled out. With the details added, the 'paradox' does either not arise or, if it still arises, it simply means that somebody is regarded as human in some way (with respect to specific degrees, a specific sense, and at some level) and, simultaneously, as *not or less* human in another way (with respect to other senses or levels). That simultaneity gives rise to the impression that there is a 'paradox', which is nonetheless illusionary. There is nothing paradoxical in such a cognitive simultaneity.<sup>17</sup>

### The skeptic's reply

So far, we have discussed two ways of criticizing the argument on which the Skeptic's Conclusion is usually based. To be fair to Kuper and to others who are skeptical regarding the reality of dehumanization, one also needs to discuss how that argument could be upheld in face of the possibilities to debunk the two premises of the argument.

An interpretation of the Aché case that protects both premises and thus allows to defend the Skeptic's Conclusion requires one to show that there is *full recognition of humanity in all senses* (let us agree, for the sake of the argument: at the cognitive level only, i.e., with a cognitive-explanatory role of the concept of dehumanization in mind). Only then could it be shown that dehumanization did not occur at all in the mind of the perpetrator. Is that possible? It certainly is. Let us stretch our imagination once more with respect to the case of the Aché women.

We are looking for an interpretation that involves full recognition of humanity in all three senses. Is it possible to imagine that the perpetrators saw and

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<sup>17</sup> Tarasenko-Struc (2023) comes to a similar conclusion with respect to Premise 2, even though the way he sets things up is different. He discusses Premise 2 as a 'mutual exclusion' claim, which he shows to be unconvincing.

accepted that their targets (Aché women) are fully human beings in all three senses (the moral sense, the species sense, and the property sense) and that they acted as they did based on these attitudes? If so, then they inflicted the harm and wrong *despite* (or maybe even *because*) they could not help but fully recognize the humanity of their targets in the species sense, the property sense, and the moral sense. The difference between ‘despite’ and ‘because’ lies, in my view, in the emotion accompanying the cognition: the former is rather pointing to indifference, the latter to hatred or other reactive attitudes.<sup>18</sup> Given such an interpretation of the case, what happened could still be explained, namely as the result of certain negative cognitive attitudes towards the targets and full recognition of the humanity of the targets with respect to all three senses.

Now, the crucial point is that this interpretation needs to take the cognitive level to be fully disconnected from the rhetorical and behavioral levels. Neither the overt dehumanization at the behavioral nor the overt dehumanization at the rhetorical level is then evidence for the cognitive level. This means that the interpretation also needs to reconstruct the rhetorical level as ephemeral: both aspects of the rhetorical dehumanization (that Aché women were depicted as having less reason and as animal-like) need to be interpreted as happening exclusively at the rhetorical level.

I take Manne (2016, 2018) and Enock et al (2021) to point in that direction: they check for alternative interpretations of perpetrator cognition in cases that *look* cognitively dehumanizing since they *are* dehumanizing at the behavioral and rhetorical level, given that we take the social wrong involved as violating human rights and given that there are reports of relevant rhetorical dehumanization. That is, skeptics rightfully check whether there could be alternative cognitive explanations of the actions and the rhetoric: negative cognitive attitudes that do not involve any connection to the concept of being human (in the mind of the perpetrator). The perpetrators’ rhetoric about Aché women being animals and lacking in reason would then indeed have been ‘as if’ only.

I take such an interpretation of the case at issue to be very interesting and certainly possible. To do otherwise would be seeing the concept of the human operating everywhere just because one is already convinced that it is sometimes relevant. To counter such a tendency, we need to imagine that further details on the case (e.g., on the institutional and ideological background of the case) shift the balance in the overall body of evidence toward an interpretation that speaks against cognitive dehumanization being explanatorily relevant for the dehumanizing actions and rhetoric.

It follows that to really decide which of the kinds of interpretations offered in this paper is adequate for a case, one needs to study further evidence, something that is itself evidently not the aim of this article. I mentioned here and there the kinds of evidence that would be necessary to argue for the one or the other interpretation of a case. Yet, the aim of this article is to point to the fact that without these details a case cannot be decided. Without detailed evidence, one cannot decide *for a specific case*, whether dehumanizing attitudes are *part of the best explanation* available for the behavior of the perpetrator or not. After all, not all negative attitudes are dehumanizing.

Yet, even if the involved negative attitudes were not dehumanizing at all, the ‘paradox’ still disappears, namely by denying the reality of dehumanization at

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<sup>18</sup> On hatred and dehumanization falling apart, see Brudholm and Lang (2021).



the cognitive level, just as Kuper's argument has it for the case of the Aché women. What is left is the rhetorical 'as if' level and the sheer reality of the behavioral dehumanization, both *disconnected from the cognitive level*. The 'paradox' disappears since the contradiction does not manifest in cognition. It *exists in an abstract way only*. The three different senses of being human cognitively align, hence no 'inconsistency,' at least not *within* the cognitive level. The inconsistency has moved to *an abstract space between the levels of dehumanization*, i.e., the case is interpreted as involving an inconsistency between rhetoric, behavior, and cognition. It is not resolved into ambiguous attitudes (as Smith and Phillips have it); it is resolved into non-dehumanizing negative attitudes explaining an overtly dehumanizing depiction and/or act. The obviously dehumanizing actions and dehumanizing rhetoric are – at the cognitive level – only seemingly dehumanizing. The acts and rhetoric can be explained differently, i.e., with negative attitudes that have nothing to do with a notion of being human in any of the three senses.

Note, however, how demanding such an interpretation of a case is. To convincingly deny that *any* cognitive dehumanization was involved in the case, it needs to be shown that all three senses of being human were in fact explanatorily fully irrelevant in the case. The burden of proof is quite heavy. Facing this burden, the skeptic can certainly shift the burden of proof and state that it is not they who have to show that cognitive dehumanization was *not* involved; it is, rather, their reply would go, the case that those claiming that cognitive dehumanization was involved need to provide sufficient evidence that it in fact occurred in the case at issue at the cognitive level. That is correct. Both sides have a duty to provide concrete and convincing evidence for a specific interpretation of a case. Yet, there is an important asymmetry in weight of evidential burden.

#### *The force of the minimalist desideratum*

It is crucial for the position defended in this contribution that it does not follow from the just admitted symmetry of burden of proof that one can affirm the reality of dehumanization only if one shows that it occurs in *full* categorical form, at *all* levels (cognitive, behavioral and rhetoric) and with respect to *all* senses of being human. That would be adopting a maximalist desideratum. By fully bringing to application what I called the minimalist desideratum, I want to show, as my last point, that there is a crucial asymmetry in weight of evidential burden between the dehumanization skeptic and the realist.

I do not assume that there is an ultimate justification for either the minimalist or maximalist desideratum. It is a choice. They relate to pragmatic aspects of the epistemology involved in talking about the inhumanity that humans show to each other. Yet, I would argue that most in the debate about challenging dehumanization's reality would, if pressured, be willing to grant the minimalist desideratum. That is why I think it can be assumed as an adequate desideratum. Yet, once assumed, the weight of evidential burden of those defending the unreality of dehumanization is simply much heavier, it becomes as maximalist as the desideratum: a skeptic needs to provide sufficient evidence that dehumanization did *not* show up – to *no* degree, in *neither* of the three senses of being human, nor *at any* relevant level (or at least not at the cognitive level, if only the explanatory role is at issue). This is quite demanding. Unless that has been shown, dehumanization is

potentially real in quite a diversity of cases, in short: a pernicious part of our cognitive and social reality.<sup>19</sup>

## 5. Conclusion

This paper has shown the various ways how the reality of dehumanization can be affirmed despite worries that led some in the contemporary literature on dehumanization to take a skeptical stance regarding it. Since the skeptics have often based their argumentation on an alleged 'paradox,' the paper argued that the alleged 'paradox' is a mirage, either in the sense that it does not arise in the first place (if Premise 1 is shown to be false), or in the sense that it is resolvable (if Premise 2 is shown to be false), or in the sense that it dissolves into the abstract space between the levels of dehumanization (if the skeptics find a fully non-dehumanizing narrative regarding the cognition of the perpetrator explaining the overt dehumanization at the other levels).

In sum, the so-called 'paradox' exists only in the abstract, i.e., if important information is left out of the picture. Applied to our case in focus, this means that in *full concrete social reality*, the Aché women's humanity in the property sense and/or moral sense was not taken into account (at least to a certain degree), whereas it is unclear what the perpetrators really thought about them and whether the cognition involved anything related to the concept of being human. But whichever details are added with respect to the cognition, the 'paradox' evaporates the moment in which these details about the cognitive reality of dehumanization are added. Statements about dehumanization as involving a 'paradox' are thus guilty of misplaced abstraction.

The correct interpretation of a case depends on the epistemic role of dehumanization that interpreters have in mind, the degree of dehumanization, the levels at issue, and the senses of being human relevant. Specifying these details (and the evidence used) for the respective cases at issue would prevent much talking past each other and would enable the field to progress in understanding social wrongdoing, dehumanization, and much else.

Adopting a minimalist criterion for asserting the reality of dehumanization means accepting that there is an asymmetry in the weight of evidential burden between skeptics and realists of dehumanization. For affirming the reality of dehumanization, it suffices to show, for a specific case (or a set of cases), that it exists to some degree, at one level, and in one sense of being human (whichever). This means that the reality of dehumanization can be affirmed, even if there is evidence that the perpetrator cognized the victim as human in some way (to some degree, in certain senses).

With respect to the epistemological role of dehumanization, we granted (for most parts of the argumentation) a cognitive-explanatory role of dehumanization, to meet the skeptics 'on their turf.' Yet, taking other epistemic roles as equally legitimate would greatly enrich the possibilities for a deep and rich understanding of dehumanization. Continuing to point at the alleged 'paradox' as a paradox, presupposing without mentioning a maximalist desideratum, or continuing to narrow things to a cognitive-explanatory role (or to any other role as the only relevant

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<sup>19</sup> I should add that it certainly holds that if dehumanization occurs at more than one level, to a higher degree, with respect to more than one sense, and if it connects the different levels, then that might well be taken as a more *interesting* case of dehumanization, but that does not diminish the reality of a case that is shown to be less 'interesting' in that specific sense.

one), can only lead to further talking past each other, which impoverishes our collective understanding of the relevant phenomena. By contrast, making things explicit – the epistemic role, the degree, the levels, and the relevant senses of being human in an interpretation of a case, as well as the desideratum used for affirming dehumanization’s reality – furthers fruitful dialogue, clarity, and structure, and is a pluralism that enriches our systematic understanding of the similarities and differences of the ways in which inhumanity between human beings occurs as part of our social reality.

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