A METAPHYSICS OF DEHUMANIZATION

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1. Introduction

There is a tendency in much work on dehumanization to focus on deliberate, brutal, targeted denigration of a despised minority (see, e.g., Hagan and Rymond-Richmond 2008; Kelman 1973; Savage 2013; Smith 2011; 2020; Viki, Osgood, and Phillips 2013). To take just one example, David Livingstone-Smith's recent book *On Inhumanity* uses as its central examples the Holocaust, the Rwandan genocide, slavery, and the lynching of African-Americans. The primary goal in such work is typically to understand what motivates horrific phenomena such as these, in order to better recognize their warning signs. Because of this goal, such accounts foreground the perpetrator's attitudes towards, and perceptions of, those they target: dehumanization, on such views, is a matter of *seeing* others as less than human (cf. Kronfeldner 2021, 14).

This is undoubtedly important and necessary work. However, it risks leaving us with an unnecessarily narrow understanding of what dehumanization is, and how it operates. While such accounts may be well equipped to explain the psychology of those engaged in deliberate brutalization, they fare less well in accommodating the possibility that dehumanization can result from indifference as easily as from hate (see, e.g. Brudholm and Lang 2021)*,* can involve neglect as commonly as it can involve violence, and can be structural and not just interpersonal.

There is another way of thinking about dehumanization that can better accommodate this broader focus. On this alternative approach, dehumanization is to be understood in terms of what is done to the victim, rather than what is going on in the perpetrator's head. Dehumanization so understood refers to certain kinds of acts or situations, rather than to certain kinds of attitudes or perceptions.[1] My goal in this paper is to offer a new way of conceptualizing dehumanization, following this second approach of construing dehumanization in terms of what is done to people, rather than the attitudes of the perpetrators. However, instead of demarcating the boundaries of dehumanization with reference to what we are owed *qua* either moral agent or biological creature, as is standard, I hope to show it is more productive to understand dehumanization as targeting our membership in a socially constructed category – the human. In other words, and as I will elucidate in Section 2, we can reconceptualize the human as a social rather than a natural kind. Doing so opens the door to conceiving dehumanization as a process of eroding the target's membership in that social kind, as I explain in Section 3.

The shift I am advocating is in many ways analogous to shifts we have already seen in philosophical discussions of racism and misogyny, where concern with interpersonal attitudes of disdain or hatred have broadened to address the way certain actions or practices intersect with the structural conditions within which race and gender, understood as social constructs, are oppressive (see, e.g., Manne 2017; Mills 1997). So an act is misogynistic, on this kind of view, not because the perpetrator hates women, but because the action functions to discipline women who fail to comply with patriarchal norms (Manne 2017, 63). Analogously, I am arguing, we

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[1] For conceptions of dehumanization that fall into this category, see, e.g., (MacKinnon 1987; Mikkola 2016)

should see dehumanization not primarily as a kind of attitude or belief, but rather as actions and practices that function to erode people's membership in the socially constructed category of the human. Importantly, though, while my account of dehumanization mirrors these kinds of accounts of racism and misogyny in shifting the focus from interpersonal attitudes to broader social structures, there is an important disanalogy: whereas racism and misogyny aim to hold individuals *within* oppressive kinds, dehumanization aims to *expel* individuals from an (relatively) emancipatory kind.

What I am offering here is an ameliorative rather than a conceptual analysis of dehumanization, to borrow a phrase from Sally Haslanger (2012, 367). I am seeking to develop a conception of dehumanization that fills in gaps missed by extant accounts, and that offers a framework through which the commonalities across a broad range of practices can be identified and understood. I will discuss the comparative benefits of my account in Section 4. Importantly, though, the metaphysics of dehumanization I develop here is intended as a supplement to, rather than a replacement of, existing accounts, including those I critique directly. Dehumanization is an immensely important phenomenon. The more tools we can develop to help us understand it, in all its guises, the better equipped we will be to counter it.[2]

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[2] I am thus not claiming that my own account is superior in all ways to rival accounts. To give just one example, my account was developed for the purpose of diagnosing instances of dehumanization in the world we currently live in; it is thus not well suited to analyzing dehumanization across counterfactual situations. In particular, my account takes as given that we have constructed a social kind, the human, and that it is broadly liberatory (unlike oppressive kinds such as race or gender). But we can easily imagine a world in which the human, as I will go on to define it, is never brought into existence; or in which an analogous kind is constructed, but only conferred on a small subset of *Homo sapiens*. In such circumstances an account of dehumanization that focuses on what we are owed *qua* moral agents, or *qua* biological human, will be much more illuminating. That said, given that we do in fact live in a world in which we have constructed the social kind human, and that we can wrong individuals by attempting to expel them from it, I think my account can offer an important new perspective on what dehumanization is and why it matters.

2. The Human as a Social Kind[3]

Interest in social kinds has burgeoned in recent years. But while there are increasingly sophisticated analyses of which things are social kinds and how they are constructed, surprisingly little attention has been paid to the possibility that the human itself can productively be thought of as a social kind.[4] Even Ian Hacking (1995; 1999; 2009) – who coined the term 'human kinds', and whose work has been instrumental in extending philosophical understanding of the ways in which categorizations are applied to human beings – does not extend his approach to the category of the human itself. My immediate goal in this section, then, is to sketch a picture of the human as a social kind. This will lay the groundwork for developing a metaphysics of dehumanization.

The first step in grasping the idea of the human as a social kind is to distinguish between *homo sapiens* as a species and human as a social status. This is not to assume that *homo sapiens* must be a natural kind: that is an open philosophical question, and it is not my goal to enter that debate here. Rather, I am positing a conceptually independent social kind that operates alongside the species kind, however the latter is understood.

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[3] This section builds on my work in (Killmister 2020, Ch 4-5; 2019; 2022)

[4] A key exception to this is David Livingstone Smith, who devotes a chapter of his recent book *On Inhumanity* (2020) to the idea that the human is a social construct. I'll say more about Smith's account, and how it differs from my own, in Section 4. There are also precedents for the idea that the human is a social kind in (Agamben 1998; Clark 1994; Diamond 1991; MacKinnon 1987; Weinert 2015)

An initial way to grasp this conceptual independence is in Searlean terms. According to Searle (1995; 2010), a social kind is grounded in collective recognition that objects meeting specified conditions have deontic powers exceeding what they possess simply *qua* object. For instance, the difference between a stone wall and a boundary is that the wall prevents people from crossing in virtue of its physical attributes, whereas a boundary prevents people from crossing because it is *forbidden* to cross - and this distinction holds even if one and the same object is both a wall and a boundary. Because it has a power over and above its physical properties, a boundary, but not a wall, is a social kind.

A Searlean approach to the construction and maintenance of social kinds centers collective acceptance of two kinds of rules: constitutive and deontological.[5] Constitutive rules tell us what conditions an object must meet to qualify as a member of the kind; deontological rules tell us what powers members of that kind possess. To see what this means in practice, consider money. Money is a social kind, and it exists because there is collective recognition that when a piece of paper is printed at a mint (the constitutive rules), it thereby has the power to be used in exchange (the deontological rules). Likewise, Prime Minister is a social kind: such individuals exist because there is collective recognition that the MP who is nominated by the victorious political party (the constitutive rules) is thereby granted a distinct set of political powers within the state (the deontological rules). In each case, the physical object/individual absent collective recognition lacks the powers of the social kind.

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[5] I borrow this terminology from (Rust 2021)

Applying this framework to the human, I am claiming that, at least in contemporary liberal societies, there is collective recognition that – with a minor caveat to be noted below – all and only members of the species *homo sapiens* are human (the constitutive rules), alongside collective recognition that being human entails, e.g., having human rights (one of the deontological rules).

While this Searlean framework is a useful entry-point to the idea of social kinds, it is most suited to kinds that are highly institutionalized, such as legal tender. To render it suitable for analyzing the *human* as a social kind, a number of clarifications and modifications need to be introduced.

Firstly, and as will become important in Section 3.2, the conceptual distinction between constitutive and deontological rules must not obscure their practical interdependence: part of how constitutive rules develop is through the application of deontological rules to some individuals and not others. So while it is possible to institute a change in constitutive rules directly (for instance, a constitutional amendment could alter the rules for how Prime Ministers are selected), constitutive rules are more commonly changed through alterations in patterns of who/what the deontological rules are applied to. For example, widespread acceptance of a new kind of token as having the power of exchange could suffice to alter the constitutional rules for legal tender.[6]

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[6] There is an alternative way of construing social kinds that makes the connection between possession of powers and membership in a kind much more direct. For Ásta (2018), what it is to be a member of a kind *just is* to have a particular set of constraints and enablements conferred on one. On Ásta's approach, then, not being able to enjoy the relevant powers (in a particular context) suffices for not being a member of the kind (in that context). For my purposes, such an approach makes the connection between powers and membership *too* tight: it would entail that someone ceased to be human in any context where, e.g., their human rights were denied.

Secondly, being a member of a social kind is not only a matter of possessing a set of deontic powers; it also entails being subject to broader norms of treatment. As Amie Thomasson explains,

> [S]ocial roles that form nodes in social structures are in part constituted by norms: part of what it is to be a police officer, a professor, a priest, or a waitress is to be someone to be regarded and behaved towards in specific ways (quite different from each other) (2016, 136).

Building from this idea, we can say that alongside the powers we possess as human (e.g. human rights), part of what it is to be human is to be someone who is to be regarded and behaved towards *as* human. Or as Stephen R. L. Clark (1994, 27) puts the point: "to identify a creature as human is to stipulate that it be judged and treated according to the standards appropriate, within our linguistic community, to that sort of entity." For instance, at least in most contemporary societies, to be human is to be given a name; to be human is to have one's death marked in some way; to be human is to be seen as non-expendable; and so on.[7]

Finally, social kinds are more than just a set of rules and norms applied to members. Social kinds also figure heavily in the narratives and symbols that constitute the social imaginary, which in turn shapes our self-understandings.[8] When we are thinking about the human as a social kind,

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[7] There is likely to be some overlap between the norms for how humans are to be treated, and the norms for how some other animals are to be treated – for instance, that neither be subjected to gratuitous pain. Indeed, for the most part, the norms for how humans are to be treated incorporate and expand upon the beneficent norms for the treatment of non-human animals. As such, the fact that we would say of a particular form of treatment 'you wouldn't treat an animal that way' is no indication that the treatment is not also dehumanizing – and is in fact strong evidence in its favor.

[8] On the social imaginary, see esp. (Taylor 2004). See also (Bottici 2014; Castoriadis 1994; Richardson-Self 2021). On the related idea of social meaning, see (Lessig 1995; 1996).

then, it is important to attend not just to our institutional roles (e.g. our status as bearers of human rights under international law), and the social norms that apply to us (e.g. that a human death ought to be marked in some way), but also to the importance of the stories that we tell about our shared humanity, and our self-understanding *as* human.

Before turning to the central issue of dehumanization, two final clarifications on the human as a social kind are needed. The first is that the human involves what Ron Mallon calls 'covert construction'. When a kind is covertly constructed "the existence, or persistence, or specific properties of the social role category are believed to be the product of natural facts, rather than human decision, culture, or social practices (Mallon 2016, 58)." Who counts as human, and what we are owed *qua* human, are typically taken to be the product of natural facts, rather than our social practices.[9] These assumptions reflect a widespread conflation between the biological category *homo sapiens* and the social status human. We can see *that* this is a conflation by looking to a context in which they come apart: specifically, the way fetuses are typically *not* counted as human for the purposes of determining who is owed what, but *are* considered *homo sapiens* on any biological account.[10]

The final clarification concerns the scope of the human. For simplicity's sake I have been speaking so far as if there is a single kind that has been constructed through a process of collective

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[9] It might be objected that the 'natural facts' in question relate to whatever makes us *persons*, rather than whatever makes us *humans*. However, if person is used in this way – as a philosophical term of art designating only those who possess particular cognitive capacities – it no longer accords with our actual practices of treating as human, which is what is at issue here (cf. Schechtman 2014; Lindemann 2016).
[10] Thanks to Kim Sterelny for discussion on this point.

recognition. This simple picture is, however, misleading: what one was entitled to *qua* human was very different in Ancient Greece than in Han Dynasty China, which was very different again from, say, contemporary Australia. Likewise, the norms concerning how humans ought to be treated, the institutional roles within which humans are placed, the broader social imaginaries of what it means to be human, and most importantly who counts as human, have differed throughout history and across cultures.[11] This means we need to think of the social kind human as relative to a particular community.[12]

Acknowledging this pluralism is particularly important in determining the kinds of actions that constitute dehumanization: what matters on this analysis is how the human is constructed within a particular community. Because I am most familiar with the social practices of contemporary Anglophone liberal democracies, those are the contexts from which I will primarily draw my examples. This does not mean, however, that the conceptual framework I am developing has no application outside those contexts. Rather, it means that identifying practices of dehumanization in any given time and place requires a close understanding of the norms and social practices that construct and maintain the human within that time and place. That said, it is also possible to identify a *global* community operating alongside local communities. While involving a much thinner set of rules and norms than local variants of the human, this global community – shaped to a significant extent by what Richard Rorty (1993) calls 'human rights culture' – nonetheless

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[11] For a comprehensive overview of the differing conceptions of the human throughout history, see (Stuurman 2017)

[12] Such contextualism is not uncommon in discussions of race and gender. See, e.g., (Ásta 2018; Dembroff 2018; Glasgow 2007; Saul 2012).

constructs a variant of the human to which we all belong. A key implication is that, irrespective of the local norms at play in a context, all *homo sapiens* also qualify as members of this human kind, and all violations of human rights also qualify as dehumanizing. What the acknowledgment of local variants brings to the account is the recognition that some acts that do not qualify as human rights violations nonetheless qualify as dehumanizing, because of the way the human is constructed in that context. Bearing these important caveats in mind, let's turn to the metaphysics of dehumanization.

3. A Metaphysics of Dehumanization

Once we learn to see the human as a social kind, dehumanization takes on a different cast. If to be human is to be a member of a social kind, to be dehumanized is to be removed from that social kind. In other words, once the human is seen as a social kind, literal dehumanization becomes a metaphysical possibility.[13] The boundaries of social kinds are contingent, depending on the emergence and maintenance of social norms concerning who is to be a member. As such, the boundaries of the human could conceivably be shifted so as to exclude some *homo sapiens*. Since history provides ample evidence for the ease with which people can conceptualize the human so as to exclude some categories of people, we need to stay vigilant towards the possibility of such literal dehumanization here and now. That said, dehumanization will be a more

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[13] Importantly, this literal dehumanization does not entail loss or damage of whatever features/capacities ground other moral claims. This sets it apart from other literal claims about dehumanization, which have the highly problematic implication that those who are dehumanized are no longer members of the moral community. See (Wackerhausen 2021, 19). This also means that if the social kind human were itself to cease to exist, individual *homo sapiens* would continue to have whatever moral rights they have in a state of nature.

useful concept if it is extended to include the *process* of exclusion, and not just its endpoint. As such, I will use the term dehumanization to refer to acts and practices that threaten some people's membership in the human, whether or not they ultimately result in excommunication.

There is a very wide range of practices that meet this description of dehumanization, and it would be foolhardy to attempt to survey them all here. To start to get a sense of how dehumanization operates, though, it will be useful to consider three general forms in which it can appear: what I will call constitutive dehumanization, corrosive dehumanization, and hermeneutic dehumanization. These are presented as ideal types, rather than strict categories, and they are not intended to be either exhaustive or mutually exclusive in practice.

Constitutive Dehumanization

Recall that social kinds are constructed and maintained in part through collective recognition of both constitutive and deontological rules. For the human, the constitutive rule in effect both globally and in many local societies is that all and only members of the species *homo sapiens* (bar fetuses) qualify as human. Constitutive dehumanization refers to acts and practices that aim to change this rule directly. This is typically done through public avowals that certain kinds of people aren't 'really' human. For instance, when Donald Trump said of asylum seekers "You wouldn't believe how bad these people are. These aren't people, these are animals (cited in Davis 2018)", this was a prime example of constitutive dehumanization.

A useful way to think about constitutive dehumanization is as a form of metalinguistic negotiation. When people are engaged in metalinguistic negotiation, terms are used so as to change what they mean:

> When a young man in the year 2000 said his biological father's life partner is his father, he is not to be seen as having uttered a literal falsehood (given what was then the current legal definition of 'parent'). Instead, he was pragmatically pressing for a change [in] our usage, by drawing attention to the commonalities between this relationship and those that are recognized with the title and given the relevant social, legal, and economic benefits (Thomasson 2017, 14).

Conversely, when Donald Trump said 'these people are not human, they are animals' he was arguably not making a statement that was intended to be taken literally, but was rather pragmatically pressing for a change in who the term human applies to.

While Thomasson is concerned here with negotiations over what terms mean, her point also has significant metaphysical implications. When it comes to social kinds, how we talk about them is a significant part of how we construct and maintain them. When we say 'he is not an animal', we are reinforcing norms concerning the boundaries of the human.[14] Conversely, then, when someone declares of a whole class of people 'They are not human', the point is not just to alter the meaning and usage of the term human, but also to challenge the standing of certain people *as* human – it is an attempt to change the constitutive rules for who counts as human.

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[14] Such statements are not unproblematic, since part of what we are doing in reinforcing the boundary between human and non-human animals it to simultaneously reinforce a hierarchy between species. I consider this problem, and ways to address it, in (Killmister manuscript).

Corrosive Dehumanization

While constitutive dehumanization is the most easily recognizable form of dehumanization, corrosive dehumanization is the more pervasive. Whereas constitutive dehumanization directly targets the constitutive rules maintaining the boundaries of the social kind human, corrosive dehumanization seeks to change the constitutive rules *indirectly*, by challenging who the deontological rules and norms of treatment apply to. This point echoes Searle's observation about the durability of institutions:

> Cars and shirts wear out as we use them but constant use renews and strengthens institutions such as marriage, property, and universities. [...] [E]ach use of the institution is a renewed expression of the commitment of the users to the institution. Individual dollar bills wear out. But the institution of paper currency is reinforced by its continual use (Searle 1995, 57).

Social kinds are maintained through use. Conversely, social kinds are eroded through failure to treat their members in the appropriate ways.

Crucially, though, social kinds may not stand or fall as a whole, but can instead splinter through failure to 'use' only certain elements of them. For instance, paper currency as a whole could survive and thrive in a particular community, even while widespread refusal to accept $1 bills leads to those losing their power as money. Analogously, widespread refusal to accept that certain human beings have human rights, or ought to have their death marked in some way, can

lead to those people losing their power *as* humans, and eventually their membership in the human kind.

Corrosive dehumanization can be more or less explicit; but either way it involves a denial that certain individuals possess the powers associated with membership in the human kind, and/or ought to be treated as humans. At the more explicit end of corrosive dehumanization, we can take the example of the Bush government's stance on detainees at Guantanamo Bay: one of their key arguments in court was that these individuals did not possess any human rights whatsoever.[15] Since one of the central deontological rules of the human, at least in liberal democratic societies, is that all humans possess human rights, such statements function to erode the membership of those accused of terrorism in the human kind.

Another example of explicit corrosive dehumanization lies closer to our philosophical home. Consider the norm that human life is grievable[16] – i.e. that part of what it is to be human is to be such that one's death is a significant event, one that ought to be marked in some way. Then consider the way that some philosophers talk about individuals with significant cognitive impairments:

> [O]ur traditional beliefs about the special sanctity of the lives of severely retarded
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> human beings will have to yield. […] [A]llowing severely retarded [sic] human

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[15] For an excellent discussion of the dehumanization of Guantanamo Bay, and the use of legal processes to resist this dehumanization, see (Ahmad 2009)

[16] I borrow the term 'grievable life' from (Butler 2006).

beings to die, and perhaps even killing them, are […] somewhat less serious

matters than we have believed (McMahan 2002, 230).

Such statements are explicit attempts to shift norms about how we respond to the deaths of

some people. In contemporary liberal democracies, where how we respond to death is part of

how we recognize someone as human, disputing these norms functions to remove certain

categories of people from the human kind.

Moving towards less explicit forms of corrosive dehumanization, we can look to forms of hate

speech. In her paper 'Genocidal Language Games', Lynne Tirrell (2012) examines the role of

dehumanizing language in inciting genocidal violence in Rwanda. As she explains, how we speak

about people licenses changes in how we treat them, due to the inferential role of speech acts.

To call someone an *inyenzi* (cockroach) carries with it a series of inferences about how that

person ought to be treated:

> What are some of the inferences we can make about calling A 'cockroach'?
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> Common inferences include that cockroaches are pests, dirty, ubiquitous, multiply
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> rapidly, are hard to kill, ought to be killed, show emergent tendencies when in
>
> groups, are resilient, carry diseases, can go long periods without food or water,
>
> tend to only emerge at night when they are hard to see (200).

Those using and hearing these terms need not interpret them literally – they need not believe

that Tutsi actually were, biologically speaking, cockroaches. Rather, the persistent and repeated

use of such terms leads people to believe that Tutsi ought to be *treated as* cockroaches.

Shifting from a linguistic to a metaphysical key, these kinds of inferential moves challenge the standing of Tutsi to be treated as human. This is because they construct a different, and conflicting, set of norms to apply to them. As these norms get uptake, they make it much more difficult to simultaneously maintain recognition that Tutsi are human. Constructing Tutsi as cockroaches involves deconstructing them as human.

While incitement to genocide makes vivid how dangerous corrosive dehumanization can be, the phenomenon can be much subtler. At its most implicit, corrosive dehumanization occurs simply through failure to treat someone in accordance with the 'rules' for how humans ought to be treated. Whether it's by violating an individual's human rights; enacting institutional systems that treat them as a number rather than a person; responding to their death as if it were insignificant; or caging them as if they were a non-human animal; such actions communicate that the person subject to them is not worthy of being treated as human, and hence is not really a member of the human kind. Especially when such treatment is regularly inflicted upon certain kinds of people, it chips away at their membership in the human, because they can gradually cease to be seen as a member of the group to whom such norms apply. As Andrea Dworkin puts it, "those who can be used as if they are not fully human are no longer fully human in social terms (Dworkin 1985, 15)."

It is important to reiterate that the phenomenon of corrosive dehumanization is orthogonal to the attitudes of the person or persons responsible for the action, because what makes an act or practice a case of corrosive dehumanization is the effect it has on the collective recognition of

the target as human. This focus on effects rather than attitudes helps draw attention to the possibility of dehumanization through neglect or indifference, rather than hate or fear. A case in point here is the treatment of the elderly, especially those in institutional care facilities. Consider this exchange about an elderly patient with advanced dementia at a hospital in South Carolina: "The intern's instructions to me were roughly this: 'Think of it this way. She's a plant; you're the gardener; your job is to make sure she is watered' (Elliott 2003, 18)". Such attitudes are far from isolated: for instance, a recent Royal Commission into Aged Care in Australia found, among other problems, that care homes are routinely resorting to the use of physical or chemical restraints in order to keep elderly residents – especially those with dementia – immobile and thus out of harm's way.

Residents in aged care homes, their families, and those who care for them commonly turn to the language of dehumanization to describe their experiences. One resident's submission to the Royal Commission explained how it felt to be left waiting for hours for the assistance necessary to perform basic tasks such as toileting:

> When neglected like that, I feel I have been dehumanised: left as a carcass in an aged care abattoir; ready to be processed like a slab of meat in a sausage processing factory at some future time (Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety 2021, 613, Vol 4b).

Likewise, a journalist reporting on aged care describes what she found as follows:

"The staff call them the Os and the Qs," says a seasoned nursing home visitor, describing residents with their mouths hanging open and those with their tongues hanging out.

The staff mean no disrespect, but reducing someone to a letter of the alphabet is just one example of the unconscious dehumanising that happens often in the treatment of the elderly.

What we see with aged care is a situation in which a particular subset of the community is regularly treated in ways that violate accepted norms for how humans ought to be treated. In the absence of vocal and sustained pushback, the broader community's recognition of the elderly as people who ought to be treated in certain ways – our recognition that the elderly *are human* – starts to erode.

We have seen that corrosive dehumanization covers a wide spectrum of acts and practices, all of which function to erode their target's membership in the human kind. At one end, we find explicit calls for certain kinds of people to be denied the powers attached to the human, and/or explicit denials that particular norms ought to be extended to certain kinds of people. Shifting to a slightly less explicit key, we find language games that describe people in ways that infer it is appropriate to treat them in certain ways – ways that are incompatible with the norms for how humans ought to be treated. Finally, we come to the most implicit, but most pervasive, form of dehumanization: the routine failure to treat certain people in accordance with the powers/norms appropriate to their membership in the human kind.

To be clear, this spectrum does not reflect the level of corrosiveness of different forms of dehumanization – I am certainly not suggesting that philosophical discussions of disability are more dehumanizing than incitements to genocide! How corrosive a particular act or practice will be depends not on how explicit it is, but rather on the vulnerability of the targeted group, the centrality of the right/norm being violated to our shared understanding of what it is to be human, and most importantly the power and influence of those engaged in the mistreatment. Not every member of the community is equally positioned to contest social norms; and not everyone's failure to extend the appropriate norms to some will affect how others see them. The actions of some members of the community can thus have a disproportionate effect on collective recognition (Bicchieri 2017 esp. Ch 5). Those acting in the name of the state, in particular, wield immense power to shape social norms.

Hermeneutical Dehumanization

The final form of dehumanization to consider is hermeneutical dehumanization. Unlike constitutive and corrosive dehumanization, hermeneutical dehumanization focuses not on the constitutive or deontological rules attached to the kind, but rather on the social imaginary that shapes people's explicit and implicit beliefs about the human. Hermeneutical dehumanization occurs when the social imaginary forecloses certain ways of being human. In other words, the social imaginary accommodates only a limited number of prototypes of the human, which are non-exhaustive of the identities people in fact hold.

Hermeneutical dehumanization offers a way to understand a particular kind of harm experienced by gender diverse people. If, in the social imaginary of a particular community, to be human one must be either a man or a woman, then those who are not easily read as exclusively either men or women – or who explicitly reject those categories – will not be seen as human. And, I posit, many of us do in fact live in communities with such a social imaginary. Consider, for instance, the question that is invariably asked upon the birth of a child: 'boy or girl?'. Such a question takes for granted that each and every child will be one or the other, and that the answer can be read off the child's body at birth. The options 'boy or girl' thus exhaust the imagined possibilities for a human child.

Such tendencies to conceive of the human in binary gender terms are sustained by the social environment. As Sally Haslanger (2012) points out, the social imaginary (or in her words, narratives and symbols), functions in feedback loops with other factors, such as institutional roles. We can see that in play here: there are a wide variety of institutions that construct and maintain the human, ranging from registries of births and deaths, through to national censuses, and on to schools, hospitals, welfare departments and licensing bodies. Until very recently – and in all too many places still – such institutions required those they interact with to be registered as either male or female. Our daily interactions with these institutions, and our experiences of their categorizations of us, function to sediment the gender binary in the social imaginary of the human, thus excluding gender diverse people.

When a society lacks the resources to straightforwardly imagine some of its members as human, it is unsurprising to find it engaging in additional forms of dehumanization towards them, and this pattern is tragically evident in the injustices and indignities faced by trans and gender diverse people in many societies. However, hermeneutical dehumanization shouldn't just be evaluated in terms of its propensity to trigger other, more visible, forms of dehumanization: how the social imaginary represents people has a profound effect on who they take themselves to be, and correspondingly their sense of self-worth. Hermeneutical dehumanization thus draws attention to the harms that are inflicted when the social imaginary fails to expand to make room for all ways of being human.

4. Evaluating the Approach

In his recent book *On Inhumanity*, David Livingstone Smith lays down the following challenge: "Anyone who aims to address the phenomenon of dehumanization seriously needs to do two things right from the start. First, they should be explicit about what they mean by 'dehumanization.' […] And second, they should make the case why this notion of dehumanization is preferable to the other options that are on the table (Smith 2020)". The previous two sections have hopefully made clear what I mean by dehumanization. In this final section, I aim to address the second part of Smith's challenge. I'll do this through contrasting it to two of the most comprehensive philosophical theories of dehumanization to date: Mari Mikkola's, which like mine construes dehumanization in terms of action; and Smith's own theory, which takes a psychological approach to dehumanization.

Mikkola's account of dehumanization is developed in the context of a broader theory of social justice. More precisely, dehumanization provides the normative framework for explaining the wrong of social injustice: as she puts it, "Dehumanization is not another form of injustice—rather, it is that which makes forms of social injustice unjust (Mikkola 2016, 2)." So in order to establish whether or not an act or treatment constitutes social injustice, we need to identify the wrong-making feature of it – and that wrong-making feature is what Mikkola calls dehumanization. An act or treatment qualifies as dehumanization, for Mikkola, "only if it is an indefensible setback to some of our legitimate human interests, where this setback constitutes a moral injury (p.8)".

The final piece of the dehumanization puzzle lies in what it means for a setback to be 'indefensible'. Here, the fact that Mikkola is aiming towards a theory of *social injustice* becomes crucial, as it leads her to build in a requirement that the act or treatment target a social identity, such as race or gender:

> Delimiting indefensible interest violations is not just a matter of focusing on harms experienced. Whether some interest violation is indefensible or not trades also on whether the violation involves some delineation or 'flavor' of injustice that is associated with social identity groupings (like racism) (p.224).

Putting the pieces of her account together, an act qualifies as dehumanization if and only if it sets back the target's welfare interest, and the act is to be explained by the target's social identity.

I take Mikkola to have provided a compelling theory of social injustice. Where we part ways, and where I think my account is preferable, lies specifically in what each of us picks out with the term 'dehumanization'. Because of its role in her larger theory of social injustice, Mikkola's account of dehumanization is both too broad and too narrow: it classifies as dehumanization phenomena that I think are better understood as non-dehumanizing forms of social injustice; and it fails to classify as dehumanization phenomena that I think ought to be understood as dehumanization in the absence of social injustice.

In terms of the former, Mikkola argues that prejudicial discrimination that sets back the targets' interests always counts as social injustice. Examples she gives include "social mechanisms like women being left out of professional networks or being ignored in meetings and thus stymied in careers in certain male- dominated fields (p.194)", or a decision not to hire a single-mother on prejudicial grounds (p.209). While I agree that these qualify as examples of social injustice, for Mikkola they must also qualify as dehumanization – that is what makes them wrongful, and hence instances of *injustice*. On my account, by contrast, there are myriad forms of social injustice that fall short of dehumanization, because the latter requires violation of powers or norms attached to us *qua* humans.

Conversely, though, my account allows for the possibility that an individual can be dehumanized even when the treatment is not motivated or explained by their social identity. This will admittedly be rare – I accept that most examples of dehumanization do in fact involve despised minorities – but it far from inconceivable. Consider, for example, the brutal murder and

dismemberment of the journalist Jamal Khasshogi by the Saudi government. Such action surely qualifies as dehumanization, especially given the treatment of the corpse; however, it would not be accommodated by Mikkola's account. On my account, by contrast, it would constitute an instance of corrosive dehumanization: a powerful agent is treating an individual in such a way as to publicly communicate that the norms appropriate to the human do not apply to them.

In allowing social injustice and dehumanization to cross-cut one another, my account makes room for the concept of dehumanization to do important diagnostic and normative work over and above what can be done by the concept of social injustice. This gives it distinct advantages over a theory such as Mikkola's, which takes dehumanization to be co-extensive with social injustice.

Smith's account of dehumanization

Let's turn now to Smith. The central idea in Smith's (2020) account is that dehumanization equates to taking another human being to have a sub-human essence: it is a matter of 'seeing as' other than human. As he puts it, "dehumanization [is] a *kind of attitude*—a *way of thinking* about others. To dehumanize another person is to *conceive of them* as a subhuman creature (2020, 19, emphasis added)."[17] More precisely, Smith appeals to the notion of 'psychological essentialism', which is the folk tendency to attribute some kind of mysterious essence to natural kinds that explains why they are the way they are, and which is "unchangeable and irrepressible" (2020,

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[17] Smith is here using the term 'person' in the colloquial sense.

68).[18] For those in the grip of psychological essentialism, "what makes a cat a cat is its possession of an inner cattiness—the cat essence (2020, 67)". Likewise, "Races are supposed to be natural human kinds with distinct racial essences (ibid)", such that even someone who displayed no outward indication of being a particular race could nonetheless be one. Applying this theory of folk essentialism to the human, Smith explains

> When we dehumanize people, we think of them as apparently human on the outside, but essentially subhuman on the inside. From the dehumanizer's perspective, dehumanized people are subhumans passing as humans, because their humanness is only skin deep. Furthermore, dehumanized people are thought to be irredeemably subhuman. It is their permanent condition. Although these subhumans may be very good at mimicking true human beings, this is merely a façade and they are always on the verge of reverting to type (2020, 69).

In sum, for Smith those who are dehumanized are perceived as lacking a 'human essence', and as possessing instead a 'subhuman essence'.

One of the important advantages of Smith's account over rival psychological approaches is its ability to deal with a common objection. Standardly, psychological approaches define dehumanization in terms of failing to perceive the target as being human, where this is understood in terms of them lacking particular cognitive capacities taken to define humanity. For instance, according to Nick Haslam, one of the most prominent psychologists working on

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[18] See also (Savage 2013, 143), who claims that "For dehumanization to occur, the identity of the members of the dehumanized group must be essentialized, that is, considered inherent to that group". Tirrell (2012) also points to essentialization as a central feature of dehumanizing language.

dehumanization, "Any understanding of dehumanization must proceed from a clear sense of what is being denied to the other, namely humanness (Haslam 2006, 255)." Haslam goes on to define humanness in terms of both 'uniquely human characteristics', which include features such as cognitive sophistication and culture, and also 'human nature characteristics', which include capacities such as agency and emotional responsiveness. As a number of critics (Smith 2014; Manne 2016; Appiah 2008) have pointed out, though, if we define dehumanization in terms of failing to see others as possessing these types of cognitive capacities, very many paradigmatic instances will fail to count as dehumanization. Appiah puts the point especially well:

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

Smith avoids this problem because the attribution of a sub-human essence is fully compatible with seeing the other as possessing any – or even all – of the cognitive capacities typically associated with human beings.

While Smith avoids the most common objection to psychological approaches, there are other limitations that is it important to acknowledge. The first of these mirrors an objection Kate Manne has raised against what she calls the 'naïve approach' to misogyny, which construes misogyny in terms of the hateful attitude individuals take towards women. As she points out:

> [W]hat lies behind an individual agent's attitudes, as a matter of deep or ultimate psychological explanation, is frequently inscrutable. So the naïve conception would threaten to make misogyny very difficult to diagnose, short of being the agent's therapist (and sometimes not even that would be sufficient). This would threaten to make misogyny epistemically inaccessible to women, in particular. That is, it would threaten to deprive women of the wherewithal to acquire knowledge and justified beliefs about the manifestations of misogyny that they may encounter, and to go on to make warranted assertions on that basis. So in effect, this notion of misogyny would be silencing for its victims (Manne 2017, 44).

The same is true, *mutatis mutandis*, for dehumanization. For the individual being subject to degrading torture, why should it matter whether the torturer sincerely believes her to have a subhuman essence, or is instead just callously pursuing his own political ends? And, more importantly, why should her claim to have been dehumanized be contingent on what was happening in her torturer's head?

Alongside these epistemic and contingency worries, Smith's commitment to defining dehumanization in terms of the attitudes of perpetrators also renders his account unsuitable for analyzing cases that are systemic rather than interpersonal. For Smith, the result of attributing a sub-human essence to individuals who have the outward trappings of humans is a sense of contamination:

> When people dehumanize others, they think of them as both human and subhuman at the same time, and as violating the categorical distinctions that

underpin the natural and social order. That's why dehumanized people are seen

as harbingers of disorder, pollution, and disease. And even though these people

are almost always marginalized and vulnerable, they're depicted and treated as

though they are profoundly threatening—thus justifying the violence against

them.

While such phenomena are undoubtedly central to cases such as lynching and genocide, it is far

less clear that they are relevant to other cases that we can have good reason for classifying as

dehumanizing.

In the previous section I suggested that the kind of neglect commonly seen in aged care facilities

constitutes dehumanization. However, such neglect is not due to those working with the elderly,

nor those in positions of power, attributing any particular kind of essence to them. Contra Smith

(2020), dehumanization is occurring here without propaganda encouraging us to see the elderly

as threatening or contaminating. Rather, their treatment is the predictable result of a series of

economic decisions – in particular, the privatization and deregulation of care homes, and the

increasing prevalence of casual and insecure work in the sector – coupled with indifference

and/or incompetence on the part of anyone in a position to remedy it.

The metaphysical account sketched above has the resources to not only deem such cases

dehumanization, but also explain what it is about these situations that sees people so often reach

for the language of dehumanization to describe them. To be human, on my account, is to a

member of a social kind; and to be a member of a social kind is, among other things, to be

collectively recognized as having certain powers, and to be owed certain kinds of treatment. While it is highly uncommon for people to consciously reflect on the social construction of the human, we are nonetheless typically highly attuned to the powers, norms, and scripts through which it is constituted. When we hear of an elderly person being described as a plant, or as an 'O or Q'; or if we see an elderly person rendered placid and immobile through the use of chemical restraints, in order to make her carer's job a little bit easier, there is a striking sense that *this is not how we treat a human being.* This sense explains the propensity to describe such actions as dehumanizing, and the metaphysical approach provides a theoretical framework to vindicate such descriptions.

I have argued that my metaphysical approach is better equipped than psychological approaches such as Smith's to identify the continuities between deliberate denigration and systemic neglect. A further advantage emerges when we look at the way Smith's account of dehumanization deals with issues like misogyny and transphobia. For Smith, dehumanization occurs via a process of racialization:

> When people racialize another group of people, they have to do two things. First, they've got to attribute a racial essence to every member of the group—one that's not shared by any other group. And second, this essence has to be seen as transmitted by descent, and when that group of people is dehumanized, their imagined racial essence becomes an imagined subhuman essence that's transmitted by descent from one generation to the next. The logic of

dehumanization is such that if your parents are subhuman, then you're subhuman

too.

Importantly, since gender is not seen as transmitted by descent, Smith denies that either misogyny or transphobia, no matter how egregious, count as dehumanization. My metaphysical account, by contrast, has the resources to identity the various ways in which both misogyny and transphobia can manifest as dehumanization. For reasons of space I'll focus here just on transphobia, and since the connection between hermeneutical dehumanization and transphobia was discussed above, just on corrosive and discursive dehumanization.

It is not difficult to find examples of transphobia that qualify as constitutive dehumanization. For instance, there is Janice Raymond's infamous claim that transsexualism ought to be "morally mandate[ed] out of existence (cited in Williams 2020, 721)". Moerover, one does not have to venture far into online spaces to see trans and gender diverse people described as 'Frankenstein' (e.g. Wolfe 2022) or 'it' (for discussion, see Richardson-Self 2019), or find trans women breastfeeding described as producing 'Zombie milk' (Anon 2019). Such descriptions clearly posit trans and gender diverse people as other than human.

As with most targets of dehumanization, though, trans people are more commonly subject to corrosive dehumanization. From the willingness to violate the most basic bodily rights (especially of trans women of color), to the scoffing reaction that transgender days of remembrance elicit in some circles, many of the rights and norms constitutive of being human are denied to trans and gender diverse people. These rights and norm violations are further compounded by the

indifference of the broader community in the face of them. Responding vocally and forcefully to violations can help maintain social norms in spite of their violation; failure to respond as if a violation has occurred, by contrast, signals to the community that these norms do not apply to these people. The strategies and imagery used to dehumanize trans and gender diverse people will undoubtedly be different than the strategies and imagery used to dehumanize those who have also been racialized in the ways Smith describes. Nonetheless, my metaphysical account allows us to the see the continuities between them in their respective attempts to reshape norms about who ought to be treated – and recognized – as fully human.

The metaphysical account of dehumanization I have sketched in this paper shifts attention away from the psychology of the perpetrator, and towards the social structures within which the human is both constructed and contested. The psychology of individuals will of course be relevant to these processes, especially when the contestation is a deliberate one. However, to define dehumanization in terms of psychology is to lose sight of the broader social patterns at play. When we see the human as a social kind, and hence see dehumanization as a range of practices that function to remove certain people from that kind, we are better positioned to identify the continuities between racism and transphobia; between hate and indifference; and between intentional actions and institutional inertia. There are myriad ways in which we are held in the human, and likewise myriad ways in which our membership can be threatened. As valuable as it is to explore the psychology behind the most violent of these, it is also valuable to have a framework that allows us to take a more birds-eye view of the broader phenomena of dehumanization.

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