

<http://somatosphere.net/2014/02/human.html>

## Human

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By Peter Redfield

One almost feels sorry for the human these days. After a heady flight toward near divinity, the figure has tumbled, Icarus-like, down from the intellectual firmament to a posthuman sea of forms, forces and flows large and small. Even anthropology (the very citadel of anthropos!) is now awash with multispecies mashups, circulating microbes and wandering genes, not to mention zombie attacks and planetary talk of global warming. Foucault's modest erasure on the beach in *The Order of Things* seems positively quaint by comparison. Alternately reduced to a vessel for other entities or stretched into an anthropocene, the human has been on one wild relational ride.

Of course, there are other stories. Having spent recent years following humanitarians — people for whom the human remains a live and morally charged concept — I cannot escape a degree of bemusement about recent talk of the human's deflation to a microbial host, or expansion to a geological epoch. My bemusement is not due to any loss of reverence for humanity, or the thinness of claiming it in practice; the aid world offers scathing testimony on that account. Rather, it is a more humble sense of the term I wonder about, the casual assumption of practical commensurability during encounters, of common accord of shared capacity and standing, if not specific values or agreement. Or put another way: how did species recognition become such a commonplace in the first place?

Historically, after all, not all languages named such an inclusive grouping, preferring to differentiate between categories of selves and others. Part of the early struggle of anthropology lay precisely over questions of common standing, the degree to which former primitives, heathens and barbarians might join a common circle with those seen as civilized. This thin equality rarely counts for much, absent the courtesies of host relations or the provisions of state citizenship. But it does play an active role in moral imagination, where questions of inclusion and exclusion loom large. Tensions over these questions occasionally bubble to the surface, in modest as well as dramatic ways.

Indulge me in an anecdote. About a decade ago I was interviewing an aid worker on the porch of his residence in Kampala. We had almost finished

when a representative of the electrical utility and his assistants showed up to fix the power line running to the house. Wearing blue overalls and equipped only with large rubber gloves, they slowly went to work. Given the lack of equipment the performance inspired more anxiety than confidence, particularly as they did not disconnect anything beforehand. After watching a few half-hearted attempts to reestablish his connection, the aid worker lost patience, telling the technician and his men to leave and return when they were able to do a proper job. The technician, however, seemed reluctant to go. He launched into a lengthy explanation about why things were at an impasse, a complicated story involving not only an absence of material parts but also the neighbor who drew power from the same line. In the background, I began to gather, lay some larger dispute about responsibility and ultimately payment. The aid worker stood firm: it was no use, and they should leave. This negotiation all took place in English, a language not native to either party, and both resorted to a good deal of exaggerated gesticulation. Finally the technician drew himself up and tried a new appeal. "You're a human being," the man said. "I'm a human being. As we are human beings it's a physical matter. I'm trying to explain to you in a humanitarian way." My host hardly missed a beat. "I am a humanitarian worker!" he cried, proceeding to list a set of countries that he had visited in his professional capacity. Then he repeated that they should see the neighbor, whom he implied would pay them cash. The exchange continued, but some of its tension appeared to have ebbed. In the end the two shook hands, and the electrician left to try his luck next door. Two hands, one shake: a human connection asserted and acknowledged even amid disagreement.

I was startled enough by this odd encounter to record it in my notebook, but never quite knew what to make of it afterward. The overtones of colonial and class distinction remained muted, the conclusion inconclusive. It appeared a non-event, really, distinguished only by the inflated appeals that appeared midway through an otherwise banal encounter. I recall this non-event now, however, in relation to the human as a commonplace. Its very oddity underscores how rarely people announce themselves as humans, or seek to establish standing so baldly on that basis. Doing so takes seriously the possibility that such recognition might not be given, or part of the realm of comfortable assumption.

Moments that openly violate species recognition, of course, stand as a stark exception, providing the most memorable ground for claiming humanity, as well as defining crimes against it. As numerous astute commentators have noted, the human takes sharpest form in moments of such violation. In classes I sometimes show a clip from an old PBS Frontline documentary about the Rwandan genocide, *The Triumph of Evil* (1999). It shows a chilling moment of selection in the early days of terror, when soldiers from powerful states arrive to evacuate their citizens, and

their citizens alone. Embassy pets make the cut; Rwandan staff do not.

The contrast between the dog saved and the human sacrificed reveals not only the full depth of political inequality, but also that liminal zone where inhumanity defines the less than human. In the face of an actual event, appeals to common humanity do little to stem a tide of political violence. As Hannah Arendt noted long ago in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, the “abstract nakedness” of being human rarely proves sacred or inviolable in practice. The overall shallowness of such claims, however, should not obscure the finer gradations observed in practice, the categories of humans who do not count, and nonhumans who sometimes do. When push comes to shove, even those recognizing common standing might give preference to a familiar animal over a human with the wrong appearance, lineage or passport.

Students tend to find the scene discomfiting. It disturbs the larger moral drama of genocide with an additional thread of connection and disconnection, that airlift that extends citizenship beyond humanity. It widens the chasm of potential guilt and bad feeling in an unexpected direction. No one, however, blames the dog.

The last point is not entirely facetious; earlier in European history some [animals stood trial](#) for [perceived crimes](#). The question of human recognition or non-recognition implies a different degree of culpability than murder, let alone political manipulation and wanton mass slaughter. But all these moments of evaluation and definition suggest moral agency, and with it a capacity to be accused or held accountable before normative judgment. In this sense the “posthuman” world still seems relatively firm about one species boundary, one preserve, perhaps, for a power of reason. When it comes to guilt, blame and the potential for inhumanity, we (the we who spend our time reading and writing academic blogs at least) rarely denounce microbes, rocks or dogs. In such cases the human may still claim a place of pride.

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