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The politics of the human

To think of oneself primarily as a human being is to discount, in some way, the significance of the divisions we otherwise maintain between people. It will be an important part of my argument, however, that it does not mean setting all those divisions aside. I argue that the politics of the human requires us precisely to address the divisions. It is not that one is human *instead* of being male or female, boss or worker, Ashanti or Fante, Christian, Muslim, or Jew, and that we can therefore ignore the salience of those more specific identifiers in order to focus on our shared humanity. The point, rather, is that none of the distinctions and divisions should prevent us from claiming our equality and being accepted as full equals. Where they do – where the other identifiers get in the way of equality – this points to urgent political tasks. Being human is not a matter of imaginatively discounting the significance of the barriers that have been erected between us, but then leaving those barriers in place. It is not the warm feeling one might get when discovering that people unlike us in every conceivable way nonetheless do things in a characteristically human manner. If those people still have power over us or we over them, we are not yet engaging fully with what it means for us both to be human beings. I do not mean by this that it is meaningless or dishonest to talk of us all being human so long as societies fall short of equality in power. If that were my argument, I would have to postpone the use of

the term indefinitely, and probably for ever. My concern is with the tricky way in which notions of the human do indeed call on us to discount the significance of the divisions we maintain between us, and the danger that in doing so they encourage us to set those divisions entirely to one side.

'Humanity,' says Costas Douzinas, 'is an invention of modernity.'[1] Depending on where one places the dawn of modernity, this might be regarded as an exaggeration, but certainly when Cicero used the term *humanitas* in the first century BC, he meant a particular course of studies rather than any claims about our shared humanity.[2] The humanism of Renaissance Europe was also associated with a movement of scholars, in this case seeking to broaden the narrow instruction that had become typical of medieval education, rather than with universalistic ideals of human equality. Samuel Moyn notes that 'neither the cosmopolitanism of the Stoics nor the original concept of humanity were remotely similar in their implications to current versions'.[3] For the Greek and Roman philosophers and their later Renaissance admirers, humanity 'typically connoted an ideal of personal educational distinction, not global moral reform, and only in modern times would coinages

[1] Costas Douzinas, *Human Rights and Empire: The Political Philosophy of Cosmopolitanism* (New York and London: Routledge, 2007), 51.

[2] Studies promoting 'the kind of cultural values that one would derive from what used to be called a liberal education'. Nicholas Mann, 'The origins of humanism', in Jill Kraye (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Renaissance Humanism* (Cambridge University Press, 1996), 1.

[3] Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* (Cambridge MA and London: Belknap Press of Harvard, 2010), 15.

like "humane" and "humanitarian" become thinkable'.[4] And while both Christianity and Islam offered a vision of the world in which birth and status were of secondary importance to whether one embraced their religious teachings – which then edges in a roughly egalitarian direction – these operated such profound gender differentiations that one would hesitate to call them universalistic. The modern notion of the human, intrinsically constituted by ideas of equality and claims about rights, is indeed of recent invention.

The human figures today as an important marker in three discourses. It is the central reference point for human rights, which are explicitly attached to us as humans rather than by virtue of our other identifiers, and are often elaborated in terms of what is necessary for a decent human existence. When justified in this way, they depend on some claim about what is distinctively human. Human rights are sometimes dated to the American Declaration of Independence in 1776 and the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen in 1789, though as the wording of the latter indicates, 'human' was not yet the operative term.[5] It was not until 1948, in the aftermath of the Second World War, that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights put the language of specifically *human* rights at the centre. In Moyn's analysis, it was not until the 1970s

[4] Moyn, *The Last Utopia*, 15.

[5] Lynn Hunt argues that 'The equality, universality, and naturalness of rights gained direct political expression for the first time in the American Declaration of Independence of 1776 and the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen of 1789.' *Inventing Human Rights: A History* (New York and London: WW Norton and Company, 2007), 21.

and 1980s, in the collapse of dreams about communism and the disillusionment with anti-colonial nationalism, that human rights emerged as our *Last Utopia*.[6]

The human also provides the inspiration for humanitarianism, a politics that calls on us to support, defend, and sustain more vulnerable others because of our shared humanity. Like human rights, this gestures towards what we have in common, though in humanitarian discourse, the emphasis is on what we (presumed to be the relatively privileged members of relatively wealthy societies) might owe to less favoured humans, with the less favoured then represented as needy recipients rather than actors in their own right. Cosmopolitan projects of global justice – one of the most rapidly expanding fields of contemporary political theory – are in some ways an amalgam of humanitarianism and human rights, and again take the human as their basis and inspiration. In the global justice literature, the rights and agency of vulnerable others are more firmly asserted than is usually the case with humanitarianism, but the argument is still addressed primarily to the relatively privileged. The key questions are where do *our* responsibilities begin and end, and who owes what to whom?

The above already highlights one persistent worry about the part played by the human in political thinking and life. Human is, in one sense, interchangeable with equality. When we invoke the language of the human, we are refusing the distinctions and hierarchies that otherwise divide us. We are asserting our equality, insisting that we are human too.

[6] For his critique of Hunt's alternative dating, see Samuel Moyn, 'On the genealogy of morals', *The Nation*, April 16, 2007.

But the message conveyed becomes subtly different when that common humanity is being asserted on our behalf. The task is then framed more as a matter of justice than equality: the justice that those who have and can owe to those who have not and cannot. In both cases, of course, the language is that of our (human) equality. But in the first instance, those who have been denied their equality and rights are employing it to challenge their subordination and exclusion; they are enacting their equality in the very moment of claiming it. In the second, those already securely established in the enjoyment of their equality and rights are reaching out to vulnerable others in the name of a shared humanity. Though this is not the intention, they enact their own power and privilege in the moment of officially denying it.

In all three cases – humanitarianism, human rights, and global justice – what appears as an assertion of our fundamental human equality can shade off into charity or compassion, and what is meant to challenge inequalities of power can end up confirming them. As regards humanitarianism, this is widely recognised and discussed. In the humanitarian world, all human life is said to be of equal value; indeed, it is part of the self-understanding of humanitarianism that it has instituted what Didier Fassin calls 'the equivalence of lives and the equivalence of suffering'.[7] Yet the very practice depends on and reproduces a non-equivalence in power. At a minimum, those untouched by war, poverty, or tragedy are being called upon to transfer some of their relative wealth to those less fortunate,

[7] Didier Fassin, *Humanitarian Reason: A Moral History of the Present* (University of California Press, 2012), 233.

and may need to be cajoled into this by actual or vicarious satisfactions.[8] When humanitarianism is ratcheted up to involve military intervention, the willingness of more powerful states to engage in costly initiatives is almost invariably linked to (though not exclusively propelled by) the opportunities they see of promoting their own economic and political interests. This is not so much about making the world more equal or relations more just, but a process that involves sustaining, sometimes increasing, existing inequalities. Even in the best-case scenarios of the humanitarian mission, where people put their commitment to equality on the line with their lives, the inequalities persist. Despite that assertion of the equivalence of human life, humanitarian missions still (and perhaps inevitably) engage in a hierarchy of humanity when they face decisions about whether the danger to their workers has reached a level where they need to close a mission. At that point, they attribute differential weight to their 'own' expatriate volunteers, to the local staff of the missions, and to the populations whose lives they are seeking to save.[9] It is precisely when conditions have become most dangerous, and the local population is even more at risk, that the mission may feel obliged to close.

It is not so surprising that there should be an ambiguous relationship between the human and equality in the world of humanitarianism, which has always been about appealing to those more favoured by fortune to act on behalf of those

[8] What Lilie Chouliaraki calls the 'minor gratifications to the self – the new emotionality of the quiz, the confession of our favourite celebrity, the thrill of the rock concert . . . ' Chouliaraki, *The Ironic Spectator: Solidarity in the Age of Post-Humanitarianism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), 4.

[9] As discussed in Fassin, *Humanitarian Reason*, especially ch. 9.

less privileged. In the emblematic medallion created by Josiah Wedgwood for the Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade in 1787, the slave appeals to us in the language of human equality – 'Am I Not a Man and a Brother?' – but he does so as a supplicant, from a kneeling position.[10] In human rights and global justice, the emphasis on rights suggests something more straightforwardly egalitarian, allowing us to see the less fortunate as active participants rather than passive recipients, as people claiming what is owed to them rather than waiting on us to help them. Yet here too the addressees are mainly those higher up the hierarchy, and ideas about the human are framed by a justice rather than equality paradigm. Readers may see this as a strange distinction, for justice is clearly related to equality, and in the decades since the publication of John Rawls' *Theory of Justice* the two terms have sometimes seemed interchangeable. Beyond, however, the commitment to impartiality that must be implicit in any notion of justice, the contemporary linking of justice with equality is largely contingent. Rawls argued that justice requires us to distribute all primary goods equally. The point about this is not just that the equality he argued for was then subject to qualifications that undid much of the radicalism: the objection that many critics have made.[11] The point is that equality is here

[10] In her gloss on this medal, Joanna Bourke comments that 'The humanitarian is "naturally" superior to the oppressed person or animal on whose behalf she is petitioning . . . sympathy for the sufferer is infused with symbolic violence.' I think this is too critical, but the ambiguity certainly remains. Joanne Bourke, *What It Means to be Human: Reflections from 1791 to the Present* (London, Virago, 2011), 120.

[11] See G.A. Cohen's critique of Rawls on incentives in 'Incentives, inequality and community' in Stephen Darwall (ed.) *Equal Freedom* (Ann Arbor:

proposed as a second stage, as a requirement of the more primary justice, as something required of us *because* of certain facts or arguments, and that failing these facts or arguments would not, presumably, be required. This primary/secondary relationship becomes especially clear in current debates about global justice. All involved agree on the importance of justice; their disagreements centre on what kind of equality justice might require of us, and whether it requires us to extend our understanding and practices of equality to include all humans, or allows us to restrict these more narrowly to fellow citizens. As this indicates, justice may require equality but is not, of itself, about equality.

Why this matters should become clear in the course of this book, but let me anticipate. I argue here for an understanding of human equality as a claim and commitment: not as the outcome of an argument, nor as the effect of sentimental education, nor as something to be established by reference to certain facts about human beings. There is, in my view, little to be gained through disquisitions about the 'essentials' of human nature. The kinds of things humans are and do covers a vast (and often disturbing) range, and our judgements about which of these is essential to our humanity reflect, as much as anything, our preferences about how we like to see ourselves. Theses about human nature therefore play no role in my argument, and I take issue with essentialist accounts. What I mainly object to, however, and most want to argue against, is the idea

University of Michigan Press, 1995), 331–98; and 'Where the action is: on the site of distributive justice', *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 26/1 (1997) 3–30.

that our status as equals might depend on establishing that we share some common essence. People assert, rather than prove, their claims to be regarded as human. They most often assert this, moreover, from a position where their human equality has been denied.

I do not mean, by this, that we only demonstrate our status as equals when we stand up and claim our rights. Most people, most of the time, do not go around insisting that they are human or asserting their equality, and some people – babies in arms, people in a coma – are in no position to say or assert anything. Since I want to contest, moreover, the notion that we might have to 'qualify' for equality by demonstrating that we are human, it would be absurd simply to substitute making a claim as the alternative qualification. The emphasis I place on the human as claim and commitment is not intended as yet another hurdle we must jump in order to get the appropriate recognition. My point, rather, is that being human and equal is a political rather than cognitive matter; and that there is a crucial difference between the assertion of equality by those previously denied it and the implementation of justice by those with the power and authority to do so. How we understand the politics of the human is very much implicated in this. If we think of the human in terms of what those who have and can owe to those who currently have not and cannot, we miss much of what I take to be most radical in the notion. This is the claim, *by those not yet recognised as such*, that they are of fully equal standing. The human, in my argument, is about claiming our equality, and we do not sufficiently recognise this when we talk only in the language of justice. One of my hopes in writing this book is

that I can wrest the figure of the human away from the justice paradigm that has so much dominated recent political theory and restate equality as its central concern.

Difference

My other major objective is to challenge the notion of the human as what we have in common when all our contingent characteristics have been stripped away. Historically, the human has been conceptualised in culturally loaded, gender-coded, and strongly normative terms that have then served as a basis for denying significant groups of humans the name. From the debates about whether the South American Indians had souls or pygmies[12] were human to the so-obvious-that-it-hardly-needed-to-be-justified exclusion of women from the rights of man, 'human' has operated to exclude as much as to include. The characteristics deemed essentially human have turned out, again and again, to be modelled on particular groups of humans, and the history of the term has been more marked by hierarchy than equality. The legacy of that history is by no means spent, but there is now enough recognition of the problematic course of pronouncements on the human to produce what looks like its opposite. When the human is invoked today, it is most commonly in order to deny the significance of difference. What matters, we are told, are not contingent and

[12] 'Pygmy' is the term used by colonial and pre-colonial explorers, and refers to a number of distinct peoples, including the Twa, Aka, Baka, and Mbuti, living in parts of Central Africa. I have retained the original term for the purposes of this argument.