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Chapter One

Our Own Flesh and Blood

Putting the Body at the Center of Violence and Dehumanization

Krista K. Thomason

Talk of dehumanization has become so commonplace in our current political climate that the term threatens to become banal. Unfortunately, we seem to see ever-increasing examples of it happening in our world. Police violence, inhumane prison conditions, anti-immigration rhetoric, and rising numbers of displaced persons reflect a pressing need to not take the term for granted and also to recommit to theorizing about it. Attempting to explain and understand how average people—people with no history of, or propensity to, violence—commit sometimes unspeakable acts of cruelty has long been the subject of discussions in a variety of academic fields including history, psychology, and philosophy. Dehumanization emerges from these discussions as one of the proximate causes of violence. Put simply: if one person can dehumanize another person, it will be easier to commit violence against them. I will refer to this claim as the *facilitative claim*—that dehumanization facilitates violence.

My aim in this chapter is to better understand precisely how dehumanization might facilitate violence. At first glance, the connection seems obvious: What else is there to know other than that the perpetrators no longer see their victims as human? How else would people be able to commit unspeakable violence against another person? Like many aspects of violence, however, what seems obvious at first glance starts to seem less obvious the closer we look. As philosopher Berel Lang has pointed out, although everyone agrees that genocide is morally wrong, we have no good account of its special moral wrongness—why is it worse than war or other kinds of mass killing?¹ My contention is that dehumanization needs a similar examination. Philosophers are particularly well-equipped to tackle this sort of problem because it is conceptual in nature. We are, in other words, looking for a good definition of

dehumanization. In order to construct such a definition, there are at least two things we need to try to understand. First, we need further analysis regarding what it means to “see” someone as less than human. Does the perpetrator of violence *literally* look at another person and see an object or an animal? Is the perpetrator’s attitude toward the victim best understood as a form of hatred, callous disregard, or cold indifference? Even if we accept the claim that to dehumanize another is to see that person as less than human, we must still work to understand the precise nature of this complex attitude.

Second, we need to better understand precisely how dehumanization facilitates violence. For the purposes of this chapter, I will focus largely on this second piece, though I will say some things about the first as well. Several scholars have written about dehumanization, but in philosophical accounts there is disagreement about the facilitative claim. While some philosophers accept the facilitative claim, recent work has called it into question.² Although this debate is rich and varied, one undertheorized element is the role that bodies themselves play in this story. This absence should be surprising; after all, the fact that victims of dehumanization are visibly human poses an obvious challenge to the perpetrator who must convince herself that her victim is not fully human. Putting bodies at the center of this analysis will, I propose, raise important questions about our current accounts of dehumanization. In order to do this sort of analysis, readers should be aware that I will discuss dehumanizing language and graphic depictions of violence in some detail. My purpose in doing so is certainly not to revel in the spectacle; rather, my intention is to show how the bodies and body parts of victims loom large in the minds and memories of their killers.

EMOTIONAL DISTANCE: DOGS OR DEVILS?

Accounts of dehumanization are varied and complex, and to properly reconstruct the arguments in the literature would be a book chapter unto itself. Instead of reconstructing any one account in full, I will use elements from several accounts to illustrate the main claims about how dehumanization facilitates violence. The first claim is that dehumanization either creates or inflates *emotional distance* between the dehumanized and the dehumanizer. This emotional distance arises from and is reinforced by the idea or belief that the victim is something other than human. Yet emotional distance can be described in at least two different ways: the victim is considered either *sub-human* (more like a nonhuman animal or an object) or *inhuman* (more like a monster or a demon). U.S. Army veteran and military theorist Lt. Col. David Grossman, philosopher and U.S. Army veteran J. Glenn Gray, and philoso-

pher David Livingstone Smith present key explanations of both subhuman and inhuman emotional distance, so I will briefly review their arguments.³

Regarding the subhuman description, Grossman argues that military training relies on creating "cultural distance" from the enemy in order to make it easier for soldiers to kill.⁴ Creating cultural distance involves emphasizing the differences between the soldiers' culture and the enemy culture. The enemy culture's practices and leaders are belittled, and the set of enemies is often assigned an offensive shorthand term (e.g., "Kraut" or "Jap").⁵ During the Vietnam War (1955–1975, also known as the Resistance War Against America), for example, soldiers were encouraged to think of the enemy in terms of numbers—as a "body count," which according to one veteran made killing them as easy as "stepping on ants."⁶

Likewise, Gray explains that one of the ways the military distinguishes murder from killing in war is to create images of the enemy that make it easier to kill. One of those images is the enemy as a "peculiarly noxious kind of animal toward whom one feels instinctive abhorrence."⁷ When we survey the kinds of animals that victims of mass atrocities are often compared to, we find support for Gray's claim: victims are referred to as rats, snakes, pigs, dogs, cockroaches, worms, lice, and leeches.⁸ Gray argues that such images were particularly prevalent in the minds of World War II soldiers who fought in the Pacific. Quoting Herman Wouk's *The Caine Mutiny*, it was common to see the Japanese forces as "an invasion of large armed ants" rather than soldiers or human beings.⁹ Seeing enemy troops in this way means they are "sought out to be exterminated, not subdued."¹⁰ As such, Gray argues that soldiers who hold this image of the enemy are often "subject to rapid brutalization."¹¹ If enemy forces are merely pests that must be exterminated, then, unlike killing a human enemy, violence against them carries no consequences, costs, or moral ambiguity.

Yet seeing someone as subhuman is only one way emotional distance might be created or reinforced. By contrast, dehumanization might involve seeing someone as *inhuman*. Gray argues that the inhuman image of the enemy is closely related to the subhuman, but instead of seeing the enemy as pests, soldiers see the enemy as "a devil or at least demon-possessed."¹² Devils and demons in this view are embodiments of a larger evil. The soldier clinging to this image of the enemy shows "utter disregard for the individuality of the foe."¹³ If an individual member of the enemy group somehow behaves differently from the image, the soldier will not revise her view, but instead be "driven to discover motives for their behavior other than the apparent ones."¹⁴ Smith similarly argues that to dehumanize people is to think of them as "counterfeit human beings—creatures that look like humans, but who are not endowed with a human essence."¹⁵ Smith illustrates this possibility by reference to

demonic possession and zombies. Both zombies and the possessed outwardly have human form, but have lost whatever inner feature makes them human.¹⁶ He writes: "To conceive of demonic possession you have to find it credible that a nonhuman spirit can inhabit a human body, and therefore that someone can be outwardly human, but inwardly demonic."¹⁷ The inhuman mode of dehumanization treats the enemy not as an individual, but as "a representative of a principle of evil, and he is only an embodiment of this principle."¹⁸ Similarly to the subhuman, killing the inhuman does not carry the same costs as killing humans. In fact, as Gray points out, this inhuman image of the enemy can lead the soldier to think that he is on a righteous mission against evil—"it instills in the soldier a conception of himself as an avenging angel."¹⁹ Every enemy killed is a win for the side of good against the side of evil.

Regarding both the subhuman and inhuman descriptions, the end result is supposed to be the same: seeing someone as subhuman or inhuman creates or strengthens the emotional distance needed to kill. Killing the subhuman enemy is no more terrible than killing rats, ants, or snakes. Killing the inhuman enemy is merely destroying the embodiment of a supernatural evil bent on human destruction. Both cases seem to support the facilitative claim: perpetrators of violence can use these images to sufficiently distance themselves from the humanity of the people they kill.

HUMANISM AND DEHUMANIZATION

The facilitative claim—that dehumanizing someone makes it easier to kill them—rests on the assumption that seeing someone as human makes it hard to kill them. Philosopher Kate Manne refers to this assumption as the "humanist" assumption, and has mounted an important critique of it.²⁰ Although the humanist assumption is a common and compelling one, it is far more difficult to explain precisely why seeing someone as human would make it hard to harm or kill that person. It is true that there is a great deal of psychological evidence to suggest that humans both naturally sympathize with other humans and tend to anthropomorphize animals and objects that look sufficiently human.²¹ But, as Manne points out, to see someone as human does not automatically entail that we will be positively disposed or sympathetic toward her:

For a fellow human being is not just an intelligible spouse, parent, child, sibling, friend, colleague, and so on, in relation to you and yours. She is also an intelligible rival, enemy, usurper, insubordinate, betrayer, and so on . . . she is also someone who could coerce, manipulate, humiliate, or undermine you.²²

Worse, as Manne argues, someone's humanity is often the *source* of violence against them rather than an obstacle to it. Manne demonstrates with the 2014 case of Elliot Rodger, the Isla Vista murderer, who shot university sorority sisters at the University of California, Santa Barbara, killing six and injuring fourteen others. His motivation was revenge for what he saw as a wrongful refusal of affection. Manne writes, "Rodger ascribes to these women subjectivity, preferences, and a capacity to form deep emotional attachments [. . .] he attributes to them agency, autonomy, and the capacity to be addressed by him."²³ Rodger holds women responsible for rebuffing his affections and the murders were ways of punishing them. These women were not dogs or devils to him; they were betrayers who were (in his mind) unjustifiably malicious toward him. Manne's point is that human beings are equally capable of being hostile and violent toward other humans *qua* humans. Manne's arguments suggest that we *do not* have to dehumanize someone to harm her. In fact, we can often explain violence in terms of humanity rather than in spite of it.

Manne's critique of the humanist assumption calls into question the facilitative claim. Indeed, contained within some accounts of dehumanization there are obvious counters to the facilitative claim. For instance, Grossman argues that soldiers are trained to gain "moral distance" from their enemies. Moral distance requires "the determination and condemnation of the enemy's guilt" as well as "an affirmation of the legality and legitimacy of one's own cause."²⁴ Put simply, it is easier to kill someone if you believe he is a bad guy and you are a good guy. As Grossman points out, however, moral distance is not dehumanizing after all: "But the enemy is still human, and killing him is an act of justice rather than an act of extermination."²⁵ Bad guys are fully human; they are just bad humans deserving of punishment.

Similarly, genocide and Holocaust scholar James Waller argues that perpetrators of mass atrocity convince themselves that victims deserve their suffering.²⁶ According to Waller, victim-blaming results from the common tendency for humans to believe in a just world: if the victims have done something to earn their suffering, then perpetrators will feel less hesitation about doling out just desserts.²⁷ One of the tenets of Nazi ideology, for example, was that Jews were part of some complex international conspiracy and thus deserved to be exposed and brought down.²⁸ According to Waller, blaming victims is part of "a process of detachment by which some individuals or groups are placed outside the boundary within which moral values, rules, and considerations of fairness apply."²⁹ Yet this claim is clearly false. To think of someone as deserving rightful punishment is to see that person as responsible for their actions, as possessing bad motives, and as capable of putting those bad motives into action. These are all traits that we attribute to human beings and not to cockroaches or otherworldly demons. To see your victim as a bad

person who deserves punishment is to precisely apply the rules of fairness to them. Like Elliot Rodger who believed women were being wrongly malicious toward him, perpetrators of violence who see their victims as enemies, criminals, or deserving of blame still see them as humans.

If humans actually do not need to dehumanize others in order to do violence against them, why is dehumanizing language so common among perpetrators? Manne argues that this sort of language could be easily attributed to an attempt to humiliate and assert dominance. She writes:

Given that human beings are widely held to be superior to nonhuman animals . . . denying someone's humanity can serve as a particularly humiliating kind of put-down. When a White police officer in Ferguson called a group of [B]lack political protestors "fucking animals" three days after Michael Brown's death, he was using this trope to demean and degrade [B]lack people, and to re-assert his own dominance.³⁰

Rather than thinking of this sort of language as literally communicating that the speaker sees his victim as subhuman, we might instead think of it as an insult. Insulting someone doesn't require that we don't see that person as human. It only requires that we want to hurt them, degrade them, or make them feel bad about themselves. Insulting someone also allows us to reify our sense of ourselves as better than them or superior to them. Further, one naturally wonders how much of dehumanizing language involves rationalization and self-deception rather than actually seeing victims as subhuman or inhuman. Gray anticipates this possibility:

I suspect that at some level of consciousness many of these soldiers recognize their image to be false and that their rationalization is a way of making things easier for themselves. The foreign, strange, and uncanny only partially victimize [the enemy]. They allow differences in language and customs and perhaps skin color to persuade them that internally the mind, emotions, and soul are also utterly unlike theirs.³¹

Appeals to the differences between yourself and your victims are, in other words, relatively flimsy attempts to deny the obvious: your victim *really* is a human being. Within this view, dehumanizing victims has less to do with how the killers see the victims, and more to do with how the killers see themselves. If the victims are dogs or devils, then the perpetrators get to see themselves as fully human in spite of the inhumane violence they commit.

Those who favor the more straightforward interpretation of the facilitative claim have responses to Manne's critique,³² but her work shows that the relationship between dehumanization and violence is not as clear as it might

have seemed. What does it really mean to see or not see someone as human? One undertheorized aspect of this question has been the human body itself. How is it that perpetrators can look at the face of another human being and see a dog or a devil? It seems they must find a way to deny what is right in front of them. Common interpretations of dehumanization will appeal to the complex process of rationalization that happens prior to the actual violence in order to answer this question. According to this explanation, perpetrators “Other” their victims by emphasizing physical or cultural differences or by repeatedly referring to them by nonhuman terms (e.g., nonhuman animals, vermin, or disease). Once this “Othering” occurs, perpetrators no longer see a human being standing in front of them.

Yet when we closely examine perpetrator testimony, we find accounts that do not support this story. Perpetrators of violence rarely see their victim’s bodies as mere matter, or as identical to the body of a nonhuman animal. In fact, in the moment of actual violence—the kill itself—perpetrators seem to be confronted forcefully with their victims’ humanity. It is the actual flesh and blood that disturbs perpetrators and that haunts them after the physical violence is over.

BLOOD, EYES, AND BRAINS: DEHUMANIZATION AND THE BODY

Even those who accept the facilitative claim acknowledge that perpetrators of violence almost never assert that their victims do not *look* human. Smith illustrates with quotes from Heinrich Himmler, leader of the SS under Nazi rule and one of the architects of the Holocaust, found in the 1942 German magazine entitled *Subhuman*:

The subhuman is a biological creature, crafted by nature, which has hands, legs, eyes, and mouth, even the semblance of a brain. Nevertheless, this terrible creature is only a partial human being [. . .] Not all of those who appear human are in fact so. Although it has features similar to a human, the subhuman is lower on the spiritual and psychological scale than any animal. Inside of this creature lie wild and unrestrained passions: an incessant need to destroy, filled with the most primitive desires, chaos and coldhearted villainy.³³

Here Himmler clearly states that the subhuman will appear outwardly to be human. He must work to convince the reader that appearances are deceiving: despite their human appearance, subhumans are not on the same “spiritual and psychological scale” and inside them lies “chaos and coldhearted villainy.” Himmler focuses on internal characteristics to differentiate the subhuman from the human, but he cannot and does not deny that they will look the same.

Himmler's arguments are often echoed in the accounts of perpetrators of violence. Perpetrators will often claim that victims no longer seemed or felt human to them. One of the Hutu *Interahamwe* (a Kinyarwanda term referring to a paramilitary organization, that also encompasses civilian actors) from the Rwandan Genocide of 1994, for example, explains: "We no longer saw a human being when we turned up a Tutsi in the swamps. I mean, a person like us, sharing similar thoughts and feelings."³⁴ Here we can see the same inner-outer distinction. The speaker claims that Tutsis were not human in the sense that they did not have similar thoughts and feelings. That is, despite the fact that they look human, they are not *really* human.

It thus appears that perpetrators somehow manage to ignore or look past the obvious fact that their victims look like humans, and convince themselves that they are not humans after all. Smith uses this phenomenon to support the claim that dehumanizers believe their victims are "counterfeit humans," which is why they are able to commit violence against them: "If human-looking creatures are not really people, then we don't have to treat them as people. They can be used instrumentally, with complete disregard for their human worth—they can be killed, tortured, raped, experimented upon, and even eaten."³⁵ But further examination of perpetrator testimony raises questions about this narrative. In particular, when we focus on how perpetrators respond to the bodies of their victims, we should begin to doubt the extent to which they are able to ignore the fact that their victims look like humans.

First, let us return to Grossman's combat soldiers. Grossman argues that long-range killing—using bombs, long-distance rifles, or grenades—lessens the negative responses that soldiers have to killing.³⁶ Killing at a distance can allow soldiers to emotionally distance themselves from the fact that they are killing people: For instance, they can think of bombing "targets" rather than people. The closer the perpetrator is to the victim, the more difficult it is for her to convince herself that she is not killing someone. Close-range combat—up-close shooting, stabbing, and hand-to-hand combat—does not allow for this rationalization. According to soldier testimony, killing in such cases usually involves a brief feeling of euphoria followed by an intense feeling of guilt, disgust, and horror.³⁷ After they kill, soldiers frequently vomit and cry; they are awestruck or horrified by the amount of blood, and they fixate on the eyes of their victims.³⁸ As Grossman puts it, "As men draw this near, it becomes extremely difficult to deny [the victims'] humanity. Looking in a man's face, seeing his eyes and his fear, eliminate denial."³⁹

We find similar reactions in interviews with the Hutu *Interahamwe* from the Rwandan Genocide. When asked about their first kills, three different perpetrators respond thus:

Me, I was not scared of death. In a way, I forgot I was killing live people. I no longer thought about either life or death. But the blood struck terror into me. It stank and dripped . . . Death did not alarm me, but that overflow of blood, that—yes, a lot.⁴⁰

At one point, I saw a gush of blood begin before my eyes, soaking the skin and clothes of a person about to fall . . . I sensed it came from my machete. I looked at the blade, and it was wet. I took fright and wormed my way along to get out, not looking at the person anymore. I found myself outside, anxious to go home.⁴¹

I do remember the first person who looked at me at the moment of the deadly blow . . . The eyes of someone you kill are immortal, if they face you at the fatal instant . . . They shake you more than streams of blood.⁴²

As with those of the combat soldiers, we see particular themes emerging in these accounts. Seeing the victim's flowing blood seems to be upsetting. Looking victims in the eyes is memorable and horrifying. These memories are notably visceral and physical. It is not, for example, memories of their victims as friends and neighbors or other personal connections that cause the perpetrators anxiety or guilt. Instead, it is victims' blood and their eyes—it is their outward, bodily characteristics that are the most bothersome.

Finally, we see similar themes emerge in two very different cases from the Holocaust. Historian Christopher Browning details the activities of the *Einsatzgruppen* (German for "task forces" or "operational groups") Reserve Battalion 101, which was the Nazi military unit tasked with the 1942 Józefów massacre in Poland.⁴³ They were tasked with shooting their victims in the back of the head at point-blank range.⁴⁴ In subsequent firsthand accounts, one disturbing image arises over and over: if the shooter did not aim properly, the victim's head would explode.⁴⁵ Soldiers attest that "brains and bones flew everywhere," that "blood, bone splinters, and brains sprayed everywhere and besmirched the shooters," and that "shooters were gruesomely besmirched with blood, brains, and bone splinters [which] hung on their clothing."⁴⁶ After these types of executions, more and more of the soldiers asked to be reassigned, busied themselves with other tasks to get out of the shooting, or started sneaking off just to be alone.⁴⁷ They drank heavily and had nightmares.⁴⁸ Although some soldiers had trouble with the fact that they had to shoot women and children, the goriness of the executions is the more vivid detail that recurs in their accounts.

At the other end of the chain of Nazi command, we find Franz Stangl, the notorious commandant at Treblinka, an extermination camp located in Poland. When journalist Gitta Sereny asks him whether he saw his victims as human beings, he says he thought of them as, "Cargo . . . I rarely saw them

as individuals. It was always a huge mass."⁴⁹ And yet further details emerge that bear similarities with the other firsthand accounts we have seen. Years later, after the war, Stangl tells the story of seeing cows out the window of a train. They come up to the fence to look at the train and Stangl thinks to himself, "Look at this; this reminds me of Poland; that's just how the people looked, trustingly, just before they went into the tins . . . Those big eyes . . . which looked at me . . . not knowing that in no time they'd all be dead."⁵⁰ Like the *Interahamwe* and the combat soldiers, Stangl remembers clearly the eyes of his victims: he sees them as trusting and innocent. Although Stangl seems to be drawing parallels between cattle and his human victims, he is clearly disturbed by the memory; Sereny writes that in retelling the story he looks "old and worn and real."⁵¹

THE DEHUMANIZED BODY AND THE FACILITATIVE CLAIM

According to one interpretation of the facilitative claim, perpetrators do not believe their victims are human—they only *look* human. If dehumanization relies on internal rather than external qualities to determine who is subhuman, why should close contact with the subhuman shake those judgments? It seems as though it should not: if I am assured, for example, that a particularly life-like wax figure is not in fact human, why should I doubt that once I get up close to it? If the dehumanizer accepts that what differentiates human from subhuman is an imperceptible internal difference, it should seem puzzling that perpetrators fixate on the physical characteristics of their victims. As Gray points out, if victims are devils, they will likely fake humanlike reactions: "Like all devils, the enemy is deceiving and deceitful. He can feign mercy or fairness [. . .] trust cannot be accorded to him."⁵² The dehumanized are only supposed to *appear* human; their physical appearance is supposed to be a charade, a clever trick, or an illusion. Why, then, are people who do violence to them haunted by their blood, eyes, and brains?

We might be tempted to explain this phenomenon simply by appeal to disgust. The gory aspects of killing are just that: gory. It is a common human response to be disgusted by bodily fluids and detached body parts. Why not simply think perpetrators' responses are disgust reactions? Although disgust might be a part of their responses, their reactions cannot be reduced to disgust. Suppose, for example, that people in an emergency waiting room see a very wounded patient covered in blood and with serious bodily injuries. We might expect those in the waiting room to be disgusted and horrified. They may even have trouble getting the images out of their heads as time

passes. But being disturbed by such a sight still does not seem to capture the responses of the perpetrators. The perpetrators are haunted by the memories and images of bodies, even years later. Their reaction is more similar to a traumatic response than a disgust response.⁵³

The soldiers of the *Einsatzgruppen*, for example, were psychologically undone by the point-blank executions. Both Eichmann and Himmler report that the soldiers were on the brink of madness.⁵⁴ What is more, the bodies of their victims seem to carry more meaning for them than disgust reactions would indicate. One of the Hutu *Interahamwe* remarks: "The eyes of the killed, for the killer, are his calamity if he looks into them. They are the blame of the person he kills."⁵⁵ Likewise, Stangl sees trust and innocence in the cows, which is what reminds him of Poland. The blood, eyes, and brains of the victims are not simply human tissue. For the perpetrators, these things seem to be both obvious indicators of the humanity of their victims and evidence of the horror of their own actions.

What should perhaps be most striking about the way that perpetrators respond to the bodies of their victims is that they never seem to think of their victims' bodies as mere bodies or mere physical matter. First, as Manne points out, rape is common in the vast majority of mass atrocities.⁵⁶ If perpetrators fully thought of their victims as dogs or devils, rape in this context would be as taboo and strange as raping a nonhuman animal or as raping a human-looking demon or zombie. Additionally, torture is likewise common, and yet if victims were merely pests to be exterminated, torture would also seem bizarre. Few people think to torture rats, cockroaches, or lice even as they exterminate them. Even when perpetrators are encouraged to think of their victims in terms of "cargo" or "body counts," the victims' physical appearance is often what disrupts this rationalization. For the Hutu aggressors, seeing the flowing blood of their victims destroys the illusion of the Tutsis as just a mass of creatures. As Grossman puts it, the physical and bodily aspects of killing are the things that "eliminate denial."⁵⁷

It would be a mistake, however, to expect that just because perpetrators see the bodies of their victims as human they therefore always experience sympathy for them. As Manne argues, human beings can see each other as hostile, hateful, and threatening while still seeing each other as fully human. Combat soldiers often desecrate the bodies of their victims. For example, as journalist Kevin Sites shares of his interview with a Marine who fought in the Vietnam War, experienced his men crucifying an enemy Viet Cong soldier: "They got bamboo that was lying around, made a cross . . . My men crucified the soldier after they stripped him naked."⁵⁸ Corpses were maimed, burned, and posed in macabre tableaux. Combat soldiers took souvenirs of teeth and skulls. It's tempting to see such desecration