

What it Means to be Human: Reflections from 1791 to the Present

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And whenever we abuse that reason, and act beneath the character and dignity of a rational creature, we lose the divine image in that respect; we have nothing to denominate us men but outward shape; or, in other words, we become brutes in the shapes of men.⁽¹⁾

This passage from Humphrey Primatt's important ethical intervention of 1776 might be taken as emblematic of the argument of Joanna Bourke's latest book. What it means to be human is – has always been – tenuous, a dark reflection of imaginings of Others, both bestial and divine. In 2009 I began a book with the question 'What is an animal?', and proposed that the answer was historical. The answer, moreover, always 'says something about humans'. More recently, I have drawn attention to the erroneous 'givenness of the meaning of "human"' in studies that purport to distance themselves from anthropocentric and anthropomorphic world views'.⁽²⁾ A lack of critical awareness as to what 'we' mean when we say 'we' remains the principal stumbling block in the amorphous but rapidly growing field of human-animal studies. This critical awareness is the province of historians, and it is therefore with something like joy that I read this book.

Bourke opens with categorical uncertainty. Side-stepping tendentious claims that humans are animals, or animals people, she renders the living being unknown and unknowable, subject to endless constructions of distinction and status that never have inhered in the body itself. As a starting point this puts Bourke in an advantageous position compared with those scholars and activists who begin with a political agenda concerning who, or what, to include in their species politics. For Bourke the human is political and historical, and these contingencies lead her to ask, given the mutability of the meaning of the human, how we can proceed. One can imagine her agreeing enthusiastically with Sartre's critique of psychology, that 'a definitive concept of *man* [sic] ... is postponed to infinity'.⁽³⁾ She disrupts concepts where others have claimed categorical certainty – human, animal, non-human animal, human animal, male, female, black, white – and asks that we celebrate the enigma. In this she echoes Dominick LaCapra, whose seemingly obvious but remarkably little-heeded maxim is that one cannot study the (history of the) human if one claims, *a priori*, to know what human *means*.⁽⁴⁾ Bourke's history is deconstructive, not iconoclastic, but the result is much the same. She takes a Derridean wrench to the instruments of power that have given meaning

to, and stratified, the human, the animal, the man, the woman, and the racial Other, and in so doing she ploughs up a field of scholarship that has repeatedly, albeit unthinkingly, recapitulated these hierarchies.

Beginning a book with transformations, uncertainties, and turning things inside-out, Bourke proceeds with a contextual analysis of Kafka's 'Red Peter'. The first chapter therefore undergirds the enigmatic introduction, wherein absolutes are toppled and boundaries transgressed. Not uncharacteristically for Bourke, she ends the chapter with an explicit acknowledgement that hers will be a story of violence, and that the power dynamics which dispense violence have always patrolled the boundaries she hopes to disrupt. The key question is this: is full personhood, especially a personhood defined by the capacity to use language, an act of violence? The question is, of course, rhetorical.

What follows is an elegant historical critique of reason as a marker of distinction. Through speech, Bourke traces the history of the exaltation of reason and of knowledge of the divine. The fundamental bases of these indicators of (a certain kind of) human superiority are illuminated as a politics of exclusion, but tied to a concept of culture that renders unstable the linguistic power structure upon which this politics depends. If language – by which Bourke means certain forms of Western 'civilised' modes of speech – 'cannot be abstracted from culture' (p. 60), then the notion that language is what fundamentally defines the human is obliterated. Bourke would be in the front ranks of historians claiming that culture is mutable, and with it, the concept of the human.

One of the boundary lines between human and not-human that has proven historically most fluid is defined by the capacity to feel (emotional or physical) pain, or the capacity to suffer. Utilitarianism still largely provides the foundation for bioethics, and it is therefore highly significant that Bourke rejects 'a politics based around shared states of *feeling* ... for at least six reasons' (p. 114), the chief of which is her refusal to reduce ethics to 'a form of moral accountancy, an empirical calculation that could in fact lead to great suffering of humans and animals' (p. 120), the proof of which is carefully documented in recent Western justifications for the use of torture.

Yet if pain is not to be the basis for drawing boundaries, neither is the concept of rights, nor is it located in recourse to the law. At her most dazzlingly critical, Bourke cuts through the historical rhetoric of rights to show that an insistence on rights is no safeguard or ring fence for the human. Asking serially whether women, slaves, and animals are, have been, or should be 'persons', Bourke demonstrates the enduring mutability – the cultural, national and political contingencies – of being human *qua* personhood. And yet while the human remains inherently political – the *polis*, for Bourke, is immanent in what being human means – it is, and always has been, possible to de-humanize an individual or group through a process of exclusion from the *polis*. The human in a state of exception, Bourke notes, conjuring with Agamben, is bare life only. That possibility, that threat, stalks us all.

Given this theoretical standpoint, it is unsurprising that Bourke is highly critical of animal rights ethics, with its inherent retention of absolute categories and its unwitting recapitulation of anthropomorphic pleading. It is, she says, 'a modern humanist politics for a world that has already gone post-human' (p. 182). Rejecting the glib and rhetorically easy way in which analogies are drawn between the Holocaust and the slaughter house, Bourke shows her cards. Ultimately, she needs the human to mean something distinctive, however slippery the distinction may historically prove to be, for without distinction there is nothing at all. Othering is part of what makes the human the human. The Other may change, and the human with it, but the act of reflection – a dark reflection of a not-human and a reflexive process of self-recognition – remains. This activity, of recognizing what one is through a rejection of what one is not, lies at the heart of Bourke's book, and at the core of what it means to be a human being. The title of her book is no accidental pun: what it means to be human has always been defined by *reflections*.

The argument is exemplified by a discussion of the ethics of the face. Who, or what, has a face has proven to be enormously important in determining who or what to exclude from the category of personhood. Tracing the history of face ethics from highly racialised 18th- and 19th-century physiognomics, through the

important disagreements about the face as a bearer of the emotions (of which human emotions carried the cachet of distinction), to the contemporary plastic surgeon, Bourke demonstrates the violence in assigning faces to beings. The ‘face’, she says, ‘has no literal, corporeal existence. It is always constructed by the viewer, who is able to choose how to avoid ethical claims or, more correctly, deny that claims are even being made because they refuse to identify any real face’. In essence, this problem is ‘shared by all attempts to define “the human”’ (p. 262).

Thus, the argument works as well for the ethics of eating, or the question ‘what is meat?’. In juxtaposing various taboos of eating ‘animal’ flesh and eating ‘human’ flesh, Bourke shows that the boundaries drawn around what can, should, and should not be eaten are implicitly expressions of power, dominance, inclusion and exclusion. The markers of exclusion make clear not only what is food, but what are people, depending on whether individuals consume from within the culturally accepted diet or not. Exploring, with Jacques Derrida, the ‘carnivorous sacrifice’ at the centre of Western thought, Bourke argues compellingly that to be human is to kill, to own, to consume, and to dominate the non-human (a category that has historically always included many members of the species *homo sapiens*). Given the violence that inheres in this definition of the human, the highest stake of this book is the question of what, or who, is a non-human, when and why.

As we move to a future of increasing hybridity – a future of stem-cell harvesting, animal-human organ transplantation, and physical implantation of technology within the body – the question of what it means to be human will continue to shift ground, and the answers will continue to be defined by dynamics of power and exclusion. The hybrid, Bourke shows, is by no means a recent phenomenon, but 21st-century chimeras promise to further destabilize common understandings of what passes as ‘nature’. But the question, for Bourke, is only changed in degree, not in kind. For ‘What is conveniently set aside’, she says, ‘is the fact that all life is fundamentally chimeric’ (p. 373). The human being has never been a stable category, and Bourke is fiercely resistant to those who attempt to concretize it. Her rallying cry might be *vive la différence*, as she resists the ‘radical flattening out of the contours of the world’ by those who would denigrate humans by reference to ‘degraded animals’, or by those who ‘deny that there is any significant difference between human and animal flesh’ (p. 385).

What it means to be human ends on a characteristic note of tension, wherein Bourke signposts the political future of a quest for impossible certainties. Doubtless we shall witness the fortunes of a politics ‘committed to uniqueness of all life forms’ that remains at odds, deliciously, with the ‘exhilarating desire and struggle for community and communion, authenticity and certainty’ (p. 385). By putting the question of what it means to be human in historical context, Bourke safely disrupts prevailing assumptions, and puts us at a new starting point, where nothing is given, nothing is taken for granted. But her eyes are firmly on the present and the future when she points out the ever-present violence of ordering things. This book is, in essence, a blueprint for vigilance: a guide to seeing the contrivances of power in the ever changing constructions of ‘nature’.

If the human being remains at the heart of what historians write about, we should all do well to read this book. It is a common, perhaps an unconscious, assumption that we already know what it means to be human. It is a starting point. Yet Bourke’s laying bare of the categorical and historical uncertainties about what being human has meant in the past, in the context of endless attempts to declare ‘*here!*’ and not ‘*there!*’ is the place where the human starts and the animal ceases’ (p. 5), thrusts that assumption into the light and declares it our greatest conceit. Intellectually speaking, it might also be our greatest weakness.

Notes

1. Humphrey Primatt, *The Duty of Mercy and the Sin of Cruelty to Brute Animals* (1776, Fontwell, 1992), p. 52. [Back to \(1\)](#)

2. Rob Boddice, *A History of Attitudes and Behaviours Toward Animals in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Britain: Anthropocentrism and the Emergence of Animals* (Lewiston, NY, 2009), pp. 2–9; *Anthropocentrism: Humans, Animals, Environments*, ed. Rob Boddice (Leiden and Boston, 2011), p. 4. [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Sketch for a Theory of the Emotions* (1962, London, 2002), p. 3. [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Dominick LaCapra, *History and its Limits: Human, Animal, Violence* (Ithaca, NY, 2009), p. 2. [Back to \(4\)](#)

Other reviews:

Observer

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2011/oct/07/means-human-1791-joanna-burke-review> [2]

Telegraph

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/bookreviews/8881633/What-It-Means-to-Be-Human-Reflections-from-1791-to-the-Present-by-Joanna-Bourke.html> [3]

Times Higher Education

<http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp> [4]

Guardian

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2011/oct/26/what-it-means-human-review> [5]

PopMatters

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[4] <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?storyCode=417887&%3Bsectioncode=26>

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[6] <http://www.popmatters.com/pm/review/152863-what-it-means-to-be-human-reflections-from-1791-to-the-present>