

Consider If This Is a Man – Primo Levi's Conception of the Human

What is a human being?

In his classic description of the conditions of the camp in Auschwitz, *If This Is a Man* (1987 [1947, 1958]), Primo Levi seems to claim that the devastated prisoners who end up in the gas chambers die twice: They die as human beings before they die as biological creatures. He describes the demolished prisoners as “non-men” (Levi 1987, p. 96). Whether they live or die is no longer of any ethical significance, i.e. it can be decided “with no sense of human affinity” (Levi 1987, p. 33). Levi seems to go a long way in the direction of accepting the Nazis’ description of them as subhuman, or even stronger, as non-men, not as a reason for treating them as they were treated, but as an effect of the way they were treated. How are we to understand these passages? Is he not running the risk of buying into a line of thought that in fact has a lot in common with Nazi thinking?

The following is a way of formulating what the two lines of thought have in common: They both assume that our status as human beings is contingent on certain traits or capacities that human beings characteristically exhibit: we qualify as humans by having these traits or capacities, and they in turn become criteria for our humanity. It is by virtue of these capacities that we are considered individuals. Our individuality is marked by the fact that we are given our own personal names, as individuals who are to be respected, to be treated in this or that way, etc. According to this line of thought, we can establish the ontology first by answering the question: “What is a man?”, and then draw the ethical consequences. This is perhaps the standard philosophical approach to this issue, and it is, I think, the intuition underlying Levi’s description of the prisoners as non-men. Actually, the passage in which he explicitly calls them non-men shows an impressive awareness of the standard philosophical criteria for regarding others as human beings:

Their life is short, but their number is endless; they, the Muselmänner, the drowned, form the backbone of the camp, an anonymous mass, continually renewed and always identical, of non-men who march and labour in silence, the divine spark dead within them, already too empty to really suffer. One hesitates to call them living; one hesitates to call their death death, in the face of which they have no fear, as they are too tired to understand. [Levi 1987, p. 96]

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In effect, what we have here is a short catalogue of the various criteria that different philosophers and philosophies have identified as what marks us out as human beings, and upon which our being human are dependent: rationality, capacity for thought and understanding, affinity with divinity, capacity for goodness, consciousness of death. The prisoners start out being judged subhuman *by the standards of the perpetrators*; they end up being subhuman *by widespread philosophical standards*.

What is wrong with the “standards” conception?

This ‘standards’ conception of the human being is shared by the Nazis and many philosophers. The difference lies in the standards by which we are measured. The Nazis were concerned with eye colour, nose shape, sexual orientation and skin colour. These were the criteria by which you were measured. If you failed to meet their standards, you did not qualify for treatment as a human being, but were regarded as a commodity and appreciated solely for your utility value.

I believe most of us consider the standards that encourage us to perceive the prisoners as non-humans as *an effect* of their treatment far more acceptable than the Nazis’ standards, and they are. In Kantian philosophy, what distinguishes a human being as a human being is rationality. It is as rational beings that we fall within the moral concern of each other and it is as rational beings we earn each other’s respect. But this is a dangerous line of thought in that it seems to make our status as objects of moral concern fragile indeed: It is only insofar as we can display this rationality that we are regarded as subject to moral concern. In a sense, Kant is not advocating respect for human beings, but rather respect for the rationality of man.

The problem with the “standards” conception as applied to human beings is not that we never give standards this place in our thinking about each other. The problem is rather that *if* we were to relate to each other in the ways indicated by this line of thinking, something has gone seriously wrong. We are not actually relating to the other as a human being, but rather as a holder of this or that capacity. In practice, it may be that we do not relate e.g. to a severely retarded person as a human being in the full sense of the term, or to a close relative who, due to illness or age, no longer has the personality we once knew. However, I suspect that all of us, or at least most of us, acknowledge that as *a failing* on our part, and my recognition of e.g. the retarded person as a human being is expressed in this acknowledgement.¹

I think we can be brought to realize that there is something deeply wrong with the ‘standards’ conception of the human being by returning to the idea that the prisoners die twice and to the thought that this explains the double sense in which the camp is an extermination centre. The idea that accompanies this in Levi’s account, i.e. that they are no longer the objects of moral concern (he claims that “their life and death

1: I have drawn attention to the common denominators between the Nazis’ and the Kantians’ conception of the human being but also emphasized that the standards they measure the human being by differ. It must be said, however, that this difference makes a difference that cannot be overestimated: The Nazis’ standards opened the door to and gave an ideological underpinning for genocide on an unprecedented scale, while the Kantian standards would have revealed it as just that.

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can be decided lightly without a sense of human affinity”), seems to imply that it does not really matter to us how the prisoners die, and the fact that they die in a gas chamber is not a significant part of their tragedy. On the contrary, this assumption seems to take for granted that, under normal circumstances, all considerations connected with someone being a human being stops at the point of death. In our normal responses, however, this does not seem to be the case. We do not stop considering people as human beings when their hearts stop beating. Quite to the contrary, it matters a great deal to us that a corpse is the (dead) body of a human being. Its being so still imposes limits or strictures on how we treat it. We do not regard a dead body as a piece of meat that can be turned into dog food, for instance. We perform some sort of burial ritual, i.e. we do not simply shovel a body into a dump. The relevance of the concept of the human being in our dealings with each other extends beyond the moment of death. At least as long as there is a corpse to relate to, we relate to the other as a human being. In other words, we still relate to the other with a sense of human affinity.

Representation and response

In order to do justice to Primo Levi, this short discussion of his conception of the human being in *If This Is a Man* should be read within the context of the work as a communicative act. I would argue that the act responds to the prisoners robbed of their individuality even if they are represented as non-human beings. Seen in this light, Primo Levi avoids the moral trap with which this kind of philosophical confusion is often connected. More importantly, however, it seems to be part of the structure of Levi's seminal work to bring *the reader* to respond to the question whether the ravaged prisoners are still to be regarded as human beings. The unfinished hypothetical clause in the title of the work is transformed into an explicit challenge to the reader in the title of the poem that precedes the narrative: *Consider if this is a man*. The philosophical reflections articulated in this short piece should be seen as an attempt to meet that challenge and thus as being grounded in rather than departing from Levi's seminal work.

References

Primo Levi: *If This Is a Man / The Truce*, translated by Stuart Woolf. With an introduction by Paul Bailey and an Afterword by the author; 1987 [1947, 1958], Abacus, Sphere Books, London.