Dehumanisation and Moral Silencing.
A normative account with illustrations from the refugee crisis

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Abstract

What does it mean to fail to treat, perceive, or portray people as human? This is the central question of scholarship on dehumanisation. While empirical studies describe the process of dehumanisation in its practical facets, normative research analyses what renders dehumanisation morally wrong. The predominant approach in the normative field conceptualises dehumanisation as a severe violation or degradation of human dignity. In this thesis, I challenge the human dignity view of dehumanisation based on the idea that it depends on contentious claims about what it means to be human and fails to distinguish clearly between viewing people as less human and less than human.

As an alternative, I develop a normative account of dehumanisation that focuses on the difference between relating to people as fellow human beings and relating to them as animals or objects. I contend that this distinction is signalled by the question whether we view persons as being able to make moral claims on us. Human beings, I argue, share a discursive moral community through which they can make moral appeals on each other. Dehumanisation can therefore be conceived as a failure to recognise people as interlocutors who can make such claims. The moral wrongness of dehumanisation then lies in moral silencing, which entails that people lose their ability to effectively make moral claims within their interaction(s) with the perpetrator(s) of dehumanisation. Moral silencing constitutes a unique moral wrong because it undermines the foundations of human morality, which is fundamentally enabled and shaped by the possibility of people to make normative claims on one another.

The thesis illustrates this view through the personal stories of refugees and asylum seekers of their experiences with dehumanisation and related practices of exclusion and rejection, such as humiliation, marginalisation, stigmatisation, and inhumane treatment. Analysis of the interview material has served two roles: it supports the view that dehumanisation is unique along the spectrum of exclusionary practices and it helps to elucidate the relation between dehumanisation, fundamental rights violations, and the deprivation of basic needs in the refugee crisis.

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Bio
Adrienne de Ruiter is currently a teaching fellow in Global Justice and Human Rights
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