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## *Is it Possible to be Human in an Inhuman World?*

### **Josie Gregory**

The title implies that the world is inhuman, which it is in terms of the natural world, and not when speaking of human beings. It depends on how you interpret the word inhuman. For the purpose of this debate I am choosing to relate the term to an attribute of being human: language and speaking out. Experiencing inhuman behaviour is often linked to the ability to use this attribute.

Watching a programme last week on palaeontology, I was fascinated to hear of the discovery of a humanoid (half-man, half-ape-boy). If he was considered human it would indicate that the human species had been in the world in an evolved form for up to twice as long as presently calculated. The criterion used to hypothesise that the skeleton was human was the discovery of a bony concave area in the skull, which in modern man houses the brain tissue of the speech centre. So the proposition was: if the ape-boy had a bony space for the speech centre, he must have developed the brain tissue forming that speech centre. If he could speak he was human. Continuing to study the skeletal remains, the archaeologists focussed on the spine where they discovered that the hollow column of the cervical spine through which the spinal cord travels was much narrower than modern man's was, by about a third. After discussions with experts the conclusion was that not enough neural pathways would have developed for cerebral functions to

reach parts of the body such as the voice box. Therefore, the subject under study could not speak, therefore, he would not have developed a language, therefore, it was not human after all. I was quite shocked by this logical deductivism. So, if the species does not have a language, as we know it in modern man, it is not human, but something else such as an unintelligent animal, or sub-human.

Later, reading on ethics and some works by Teilhard De Chardin, I made some personal connections, which I want to share:

Ethics as a theoretical study is the study of ethical theories where questions posed take the form: 'How ought man to behave?' and 'What is the good life for man?', 'How should one live?' These were Socrates' questions as he sought to discover the nature of virtue and justice, as a way of mapping out the moral domain. Platonic ethics argues that the uneducated man cannot act ethically, for, 'if one did have knowledge, one

would lead the good life` (Popkin et al 1969). With the absence of knowledge, the uneducated person needs to imitate and be guided by those who have knowledge of the good life, by which he meant moral living.

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Extrapolating in an unscientific way from the conclusions of the archaeological find, it occurred to me that if language is what makes us human, the ability to vocalise is the criterion used to decide how human we are. This reminded me that virtually the first strategy of oppressive regimes, dictators, oppressive education, cultures and groups is to silence the most articulate; kill the leaders, close the communication systems to the outside world and so on. To turn individual voices into an amorphous babble where incoherence can be viewed as uneducated, and for the uneducated, therefore, to imitate and be guided by those who have knowledge. The knowledge in this case is decided by the oppressors.

It may be stretching the argument a little to say this, but I think to be human in an inhuman world, from an evolutionary point of view, means that people must have a language, have the

means of speech and the freedom to speak out. Here we move through physiology, human psychology to social and political science and I think to divinity. Those who have been educated to speak out without speech have a sign language to help them have their rightful place in the world. Those who cannot speak out, such as small children, the oppressed groups around the world, the very ill, do need to imitate those who can (as children do imitate) or be guided or supported or represented in the case of the very old, ill and oppressed. In my life-time, in the 50s in Ireland, uneducated people, particularly women, who were accused of immoral behaviour, or who had the misfortune of being without a 'moral family to claim them as theirs'

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by those who could articulate such terms, were labelled feeble-minded. They were incarcerated, either in religious institutions as slaves, sometimes doing the whole town's laundry without getting paid, or in mental health institutions, possibly for the rest of their lives. I say this because at age 16 years this was

potentially my fate. The fact it did not happen was because I shouted out and got myself 'claimed' by family. My main reason for telling you this is to illustrate that such oppression happened within one hour's flying time from this building. Recent inquiries of child abuse in children's homes in this country show that those who are too vulnerable, uneducated in the ways of worldly discourse are still treated as inhuman objects rather than as respected human beings. Those who cannot speak up for their human rights will often not get them. The Centre for Counselling and Psychotherapy Education offers the original definition of the term 'human' as hu, meaning divine and mana, meaning mind. So human means divine mind. To treat people as objects or means to satisfy our own end without taking account of their ends is to be less than human, that is, less than divine mind-in-action. Those who can speak out are often silenced. Those who will not speak out even when able, are stuck in the quandary of the ethical question: 'How ought man to behave' and 'What is the good life for man' and the presupposition, 'if one did have knowledge, one would lead the good life'.

Teilhard De Chardin writing on origin of personality states: 'If human particles are to grow themselves *centrically* they must ultimately, in unison and simultaneously, love one another; for there is no true love in an atmosphere of collectivity, that is to say, that is impersonal. Love cannot be born, and take permanent root, unless it finds a heart, a face.'

De Chardin speaks of the personality of God and the survival of the soul in one breath, as interdependent. This relationship makes us human. This is the divine mind-in-action. He goes on to say:

'Love dies in contact with the impersonal and the anonymous, it becomes impoverished with remoteness in space and with distance in time. For love to be possible there must be co-existence', (Abridged from Demoulin). De Chardin was here speaking of the unity and attraction between God and humans. I am taking this same injunction to operate between humans. We make this world inhuman by forgetting our soul connection, both the divine sparks of energy making up individual souls, and the great divine energy that unites us with our source.

When we wish to hurt another human being, we depersonalise them, we silence them. So we do not hear the human voice crying out, we put distance between us and remain remote. Love is well dead; we no longer have Knowledge and therefore no longer lead 'the good life'.

*Further reading:*

J. Demoulin. *Let Me Explain: Teilhard De Chardin*. Collins, Fontana Books. 1966

R.H.Popkin. and A.Stroll. *Philosophy Made Easy*. W. H. Allen & Co, 1969.

Centre for Counselling and Psychotherapy Education, Diploma/MS Programme Brochure.