Perspective

The Humanity of Humans: Philosophy, Science, Health, or Rights?

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The term "humanity" can mean an attitude, a morality, or sentiment of good will toward fellow humans; it can also mean the collective existence of all humans. The first meaning—morality or sentiment—has long been associated with moral philosophy, becoming somewhat more concrete in the context of the first principle of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. Even then, however, the term refers only to the spirit in which certain acts are planned and committed.[1] In that sense, humanity refers to the humanity of humans. The second meaning—the collective existence of humans—refers to an evolved biological and social phenomenon that scientists from multiple disciplines have studied extensively. The distinction between the meanings of "humanity" is rarely made because of the instinctive feeling that the two are linked. But that link is not readily apparent. Furthermore, the fact that humans are capable of extraordinary acts of inhumanity makes it difficult to argue that all humans are equipped with humanity.

Humanity—no matter which meaning is used—frequently

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refers to a kind of public morality and is sometimes called on in desperation by the upholders of international humanitarian law and human rights law when recalling that humanity is a source of these laws.[2]

So what is the humanity of humans? Many people are reluctant to accept that any aspect of human nature is predetermined at birth. Yet most would hope that the notion of humanity is innate—that is, something derived from being human. Asking whether humans' humanity—or lack thereof—can be explained in scientific or evolutionary terms should not be so outrageous if one considers that science has done much to bring objective understanding to human capacity for other sentiments, such as anger and love. Therefore, asking whether the humanity of humans is part of human nature should not be so outrageous either. Any modern discussion about whether the humanity of humans is learned, an inherent part of human nature, or both should go beyond the domain of philosophy to include science as well.

Bringing Science to Humanity: Health and Human Rights Writ Large

A fundamental premise of science is that knowledge gained should, in some way, advance human existence. For this to happen, there must be a connection between the findings of science and public knowledge and, in turn, the powerful people whose decisions affect our daily lives. One could say that the successful coexistence of humans has been and continues to be the greatest multidisciplinary scientific research project. Translating knowledge from disciplines as diverse as medicine, mathematics, physics, economics, anthropology, and sociology has contributed to policies and laws that have advanced human existence. This process is the stuff of the second meaning of humanity: the collective existence of humans. Does the fact that part of the psychology of our interactions—the humanity of humans—is still largely caught up in the domain of philosophy indicate that it has not been the object of scientific research? Or is it that the knowledge of the research has simply not reached the general public and policymakers?

Regarding other aspects of human nature, we know

now that any aspect of our behavior is determined partly by genetics and partly by environment. The debate is no longer about whether nature or nurture determines our behavior; it is understood that our nature is nurtured in many and various ways.[3] This would explain the humanity and the inhumanity of humans. In other words, all of us are born with the capacity to do great, selfless things as well as the capacity to do terrible things to one another. Which capacity is unleashed depends on the people and experiences that influence our lives.

If we believe therefore that humanity is, in part, inherent and that we are an evolved social species, then it seems reasonable to propose that the humanity of humans is necessary for our successful coexistence. This proposal, together with the World Health Organization's definition of health as a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being, simply illustrates that humanity is health and human rights writ large.[4]

Dialogue about and application of the two bodies of international law—humanitarian law and human rights law—that put vulnerable individuals at center stage could change dramatically in the 21st century. But that change can happen only if it is widely recognized that the humanity of humans and their inhumanity are explicable in objective and scientific terms and are to a degree inherent. Evidence could be used to argue that upholding these bodies of law is not only a legal requirement but also a societal necessity. It would follow that an act of inhumanity in a given situation spreads to many more humans than those directly affected. Such acts would therefore be wrong not only from a moral or legal point of view but also because they are carried out by humans. The notion of humanity could then be objectively raised more easily in the dialogue of international relations, with the primary subject being humans and with more effective advocacy both for vulnerable people and against inhumanity.

At the beginning of the 20th century, international lawmakers submerged natural law because they deemed it an intangible notion. It might be possible to resurrect this notion today because it would become tangible. This would

give new meaning to the "laws of humanity and the dictates of public conscience" and would reinforce the aspirations set forth in the preamble to the Charter of the United Nations.[5,6] Attempts to promote international humanitarian law and human rights law could not be thwarted by the excuse that the violent nature of humans is uncontrollable because studies would show that violence is controllable and can in fact be matched equally by kindness and an abhorrence for cruelty, both of which are part of our nature as well. Leaders who rule by excessive use of force have claimed that their people do not wish to have imposed on them international law based on "Western" philosophical notions; such leaders would then have to acknowledge that their people are in fact not human. It could be argued forcefully that the humanity of humans must be the preeminent consideration in a world that is becoming increasingly crowded, polluted, technologically driven, depleted of resources, and split by an ever-widening "have and have-not" divide. Strategies could be devised to address age-old conflicts resulting from mutual hatreds among groups. Policymakers would need to clearly see that replacing a culture that fosters inhumanity with one that promotes humanity would involve long-term investment to change the environments in which children grow up.

Where Is the Scientific Proof of Humanity?

In relation to humanity, the good news is that scientific research has provided evidence for an objective and biological basis for the humanity of humans. Unfortunately, scientists have rarely, if ever, made reference to the implications of their research for the application and promotion of international humanitarian law or human rights law. Similarly, lawyers and diplomats concerned with these laws have approached science on an extremely selective basis. The two communities simply have not (yet) articulated their knowledge. The humanity of humans is not merely a hypothesis awaiting scientific discovery, such as proving that the Earth rotates around the sun, or that $e=mc^2$, or finding the structure of DNA. The evidence that we seek and need can be found in multiple disciplines.

Studies of animals have shown that altruism has a genetic component.[7] Computer models have proven that negotiations undertaken with a spirit of cooperation ultimately benefit all parties.[8] Studies of "primitive warfare" reveal that cruelty is by no means the norm, fatalities may be few, and the violence that does occur is accompanied by much ritual and, importantly, great restraint.[9] Children who are formally encouraged to think about others' misfortunes or cruelties are, later in life, more likely to resolve disputes nonviolently. Conversely, studies have also shown that ordinary people are capable of inflicting great pain and suffering on others previously unknown to them.[10] Certain weaponry separates users from victims in time and space; the emotional and moral distance felt by those who commit violent acts has been explained.[11] Ample evidence also shows that "dehumanization" of a perceived enemy is important, if not a prerequisite, to committing war crimes, genocide, or crimes against humanity.[12] Scientific knowledge must continue to inform politicians about human interactions, but this involves much more than looking at humanity through the lens of science. Scientific knowledge has been perverted for political ends; the grossest example was during the last century, when Darwinian natural selection in the nonhuman world was used to claim that certain humans were in some way superior or higher up on the evolutionary ladder than other humans. Is not countering propagation of such perversions of scientific knowledge the responsibility of scientists? And is this not also humanity?

All this is to say that both the humanity and the inhumanity of humans are explicable not only in scientific terms but also in terms of our evolved social biology. Only a few policymakers in the international arena or specialists in international law appear to have grasped this or requested translation of any knowledge about the humanity of humans despite a number of modern authors who write from multiple disciplines.[13] This knowledge sits at the nexus of policy, health, and international law.

A Multidisciplinary Call to Action

All of the above hinges on proving the existence and

nature of the humanity of humans. For proof, does one turn to behavioral psychology, neurosciences, social sciences, anthropology, genetics, computing, medicine, economics, political science, or all of these? A new wind blowing through the scientific world might provide an answer. There is growing recognition that the increasing specialization and compartmentalization of science has also increased the need for research that involves multiple disciplines; this comes with recognition that responsible translation of the outcome of research into knowledge usable by the public and by policymakers alike is neither easy nor automatic.[14]

As science has advanced, relying increasingly on deeper levels of inquiry, scientists in different branches and in the branches of branches have gravitated toward other scientists with similar interests and developed their own communities along with their specific coded languages. Sharing knowledge with other scientists is increasingly difficult, and scientists themselves might not be aware of the relevance of their research to that of others. More importantly, information has become increasingly difficult for the public and policymakers to access; genetic engineering and climatology are two such examples. Few scientists are adept at this translation, and policymakers may not request that this be done because they do not understand the science or the importance of its implications. Every human in his or her right mind and in keeping with other animals naturally makes choices that lead that individual in the direction of a better existence not only for the individual but also for his or her family. Evidence can be found daily that proves that, as social animals, we depend ultimately on the good will of others in this endeavor. So do we need to use science to prove that advancing collective human existence is dependent on the humanity of humans? The answer is that we do because many people, especially those controlling massive capacities for armed violence, see international relations as serving, if not personal self-interest, then economic or security leverage. Codified positive law is all too often used to these ends. Moral argument, which makes imperative a consideration of the victims of armed violence, seems to carry little weight in the international arena; this could be rein-

forced if the humanity of humans were cast in scientific terms. Importantly, it would speak to the true universality of international humanitarian law and human rights law and would maintain a focus on the object and purpose of these bodies of law.

Translating into public knowledge the science that pertains to the humanity and the inhumanity of humans could be a powerful way of achieving a collective public conscience that could, in turn, inform the decisions of leaders. Without a multidisciplinary scientific endeavor and translation of the findings, uninformed decisions about our collective existence will be made, and this can only be dangerous for us all. Importantly, the increasing interconnectedness of conflict, migration, globalization, overpopulation, infectious disease, the environment, and even climate change will make it difficult to determine what is and what is not in the overlap area of health, politics, and international law.

In the 21st century, the term "humanity" must be used to inform both the public in general and policymakers in particular, rather than simply imparting moral supremacy on the part of the user, and its meaning must no longer idle in the domain of moral philosophy. Health professionals and lawyers concerned with international humanitarian law and human rights law clearly have a role to play in promoting a notion of humanity that is modern, objective, comprehensible, consistent, shared, and communicable. These health professionals and lawyers therefore have a responsibility to bring multidisciplinary scientific knowledge to bear in the international arena. They cannot afford to believe that the pieces—many of which have to do with the causes and effects of armed violence—will fall into place by themselves; rather, the pieces have to be put into place.[15] Humanity depends on every discipline's dedication to exchanging part of its work with other disciplines and being aware that vital areas for research exist between disciplines.

References

1. J. Pictet, *Red Cross Principles* (Geneva: International Committee of the Red Cross, 1956), pp. 14–31. See also, J. Pictet, *Development and Principles of International Humanitarian Law* (Dordrecht: Henry Dunant Institute, 1983), p. 5. See H. Slim, "Sharing a Universal Ethic:

The Principle of Humanity in War," *International Journal of Human Rights* 2 (1998): 28–48. Slim argues that the principle is universal and should not be confined to the Red Cross.

2. I. Brownlie, *Principles of Public International Law* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), p. 28.

3. H. Plotkin, *Evolution in Mind: An Introduction to Evolutionary Psychology* (London: Penguin, 1997).

4. WHO defines health as "a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease."

5. This wording arises from the Martens Clause, included in the Preamble of the 1907 Hague Convention (IV) respecting the laws and customs of war on land, reprinted in A. Roberts and R. Guelf, *Documents on the Laws of War, 2nd ed.* (Clarendon Press, Oxford: 1989) p. 45; the four 1949 Geneva Conventions for the protection of war victims (GC I: Art. 63; GC II: Art. 62; GC III: Art. 142; GC IV: Art. 158), op. cit., pp. 169-337; 1977 Additional Protocol I, Art. 1(2), op. cit., p. 390, and 1977 Additional Protocol II, Preamble, op. cit., p. 449; 1980 Weapons Convention, Preamble, op. cit., p. 473.

6. Charter of the United Nations, Preamble, 26 June 1945.

7. E. Sober and D. S. Wilson, *Unto Others: The Evolution and Psychology of Unselfish Behavior* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

8. See note 3, pp. 116–119.

9. N. A. Chagnon, "Life Histories, Blood Revenge and Warfare in a Tribal Population," *Science* 239 (1988): 985–992. See also, J. Keegan, *A History of Warfare* (London: Hutchison, 1993), pp. 61–136 and 386–392.

10. D. Grossman, *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1995), pp. 141–148.

11. See note 10, pp. 99–134. See also, J. Glover, *Humanity: A Moral History of the Twentieth Century* (London: Pimlico 2001), pp. 64–113.

12. See note 10, Grossman, pp. 156–222. See also, G. Allport, *The Nature of Prejudice* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979), pp. 3–27.

13. Examples of those who have tackled different aspects of human behavior that also speak to an objective or even a biological basis to humanity include: J. Diamond, *Guns, Germs and Steel: A Short History of Everybody for the Last 13,000 Years* (London: Vintage, 1998); B. Ehrenreich, *Blood Rites* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1998); M. Ridley, *The Red Queen: Sex and the Evolution of Human Nature* (London: Penguin, 1994); M. Ridley, *Genome, The Autobiography of a Species in 23 Chapters* (New York: Harper Collins, 2000); S. Johnson, *Emergence: The Connected Lives of Ants, Cities, Brains and Software* (New York: Scribner, 2001); T. Zeldin, *An Intimate History of Humanity* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1996); note 3 Plotkin; note 7 Sober and Wilson; note 9, Keegan; note 10, Grossman; note 11, Glover; and note 12, Allport.

14. R. May, *Royal Society Anniversary Address.* Keynote address delivered by Lord Robert May, President of the Royal Society, on Anniversary Day, 30 Nov. 2002 (London: The Royal Society, 2002).

15. R. Coupland, "Armed Violence," *Medicine and Global Survival* 7 (2001): 33–37.