Dehumanisation through slurs

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Abstract

A claim sometimes made in the literature on slurs is that slurs dehumanise their targets. Here I look at several different versions of this claim. I begin by examining and ultimately rejecting the idea that dehumanisation is a form of disrespect, and that to use a slur is to treat the target, or think of her, with disrespect, hence to dehumanise her. Then I look at the idea that some select slurs are aligned, in thought and in action, with a dehumanising treatment in genocide. I argue that the theoretical justification of this claim is confusing, while the empirical evidence is sketchy at best. I conclude by arguing that, in general, the prospects for aligning slurs and dehumanisation are dim.

Keywords: Dehumanisation, slurs, respect, genocide, perception.

1. Introduction.—A claim sometimes made in the literature on slurs is that slurs dehumanise their targets. Here I look at several versions of this claim that were defended at any significant length. In §2 I examine and ultimately reject the idea that dehumanisation is a form of disrespect, and that to use a slur is to treat the target, or think of her, with disrespect, hence to dehumanise her. In §3 I examine the idea that some select slurs are aligned, in thought and in action, with a demonstrably dehumanising treatment in genocide. I argue that the theoretical justification of this claim is confusing, while the empirical evidence is sketchy at best. I conclude in §4 by arguing that, in general, the prospects for aligning slurs and dehumanisation are dim.

2. Dehumanisation and respect.—In this section I address Robin Jeshion's attempt to link dehumanisation to a denial of respect. I argue that it is unsuccessful, whether or not we think of respect along broadly Kantian lines.

To explain how slurs dehumanise, Jeshion (2018) distinguishes between dehumanising thought and dehumanising action, and then also between strong and weak senses of dehumanisation. Paraphrasing only slightly, here are the four notions:[1]

(1) a. *x* thinks of *y* in a dehumanising way in the *weak* sense iff *x* thinks of *y* as a human, but an inferior one, and unworthy of full respect.

b. *x* treats *y* in a dehumanising way in the *weak* sense iff *x* treats *y* as an inferior human unworthy of full respect.

c. *x* thinks of *y* in a dehumanising way in the *strong* sense iff *x* thinks of *y* as someone who is not fully human (less than human), and who completely lacks the moral status of a person.

[1] See Jeshion (2018:79). Although Jeshion repeatedly refers to David Livingstone Smith's work on dehumanisation, his conception of it is based on essentialism, rather than denial of respect: see Smith (2011:95ff) and also Smith (2020:63ff). A view more in line with Jeshion's explications is in Mikkola (2016:164). That dehumanisation based on stereotypes (and possibly some form of essentialism) comes in degrees is argued, in a different setting, in Fiske (2021), Fiske (2011:1–27). I return to Smith's and Fiske's ideas in §4.

d. *x* treats *y* in a dehumanising way in the *strong* sense iff *x* treats *y* as someone who is not fully human, and who completely lacks the moral status of a person.

Jeshion defends the weak versions (1a) and (1b). To call individuals with a slur is to think of them, and treat them, as inferior humans unworthy of full respect (103). Another component of her idea of dehumanisation is the characteristic emotion of contempt. Users of slurs express contempt toward their targets, and in so doing they regard them as 'low in worth' (92, 94).

There are several reasons why this is a dubious view. Jeshion says that to be an 'inferior human' is to have a 'lower status along the dimension of *personhood* or *humanity in the moral sense*' (80, her italics). Now suppose we learn that *A* was a ruthless murderer on a major scale who displayed few moral virtues in his public or private life. And suppose that *B* is a leading scientist, a committed parent, and a humanitarian. Aren't we entitled to think of *B* as a morally superior human? We are indeed. We can rank people according to their moral qualities, just as we rank them according to their other qualities. If the notion of humanity is associated with certain behaviours and capacities, and if manifesting these behaviours and possessing these capacities are scalable, then being human in the moral sense is scalable too. The same goes for Jeshion's own example (derived from Michelle Mason's work) of a woman who comes to despise her husband (91). The woman now thinks less of her husband as a person. Compared to other humans, he is inferior: it turns out that he has several bad moral qualities.[2]

This sort of idiom is plausible, but is it at all related to dehumanisation? When we despise someone, do we thereby 'dehumanise' him? I think the clear answer is no. That is not how we think or speak. By the same token, we could regard the murderer as a morally inferior human being. The woman could regard her husband as a morally inferior being. These facts aren't sufficient for us to conclude that the individuals in question are being dehumanised. Therefore, while we may agree that to use a slur toward *x* is to despise *x* and to regard him as having low worth, these attitudes won't amount to dehumanisation. The use of a slur may share some features with dehumanisation, but is not itself dehumanising.

One might object that, in the examples above, we have wilfully blurred the line between the justified moral inferiority of an individual and the unjustified inferiority of a whole group.[3] We can rightly rank individuals based on their moral character. But by assumption, we can't rightly rank whole groups based on some prejudice of ours, like a prejudice against gender, ethnicity, or religion. Slurs are designed to express inferiority of the latter kind. Since the two kinds of inferiority are distinct, whether we can align dehumanisation with one of them shouldn't count as evidence for the possibility of aligning it with the other.

I reply that we are not trying to assimilate the ranking associated with, or introduced by, slurs to the moral ranking. The problem is strictly with the explication of weak dehumanisation in (1). The two kinds of ranking are indisputably different. But they are similar in that they both involve thinking of the target as inferior and unworthy of full respect. Of course, the reasons for thinking

[2] To clarify, we do not here take a stance on how the putative ranking should be determined. We are rather saying that, however you think of moral value, it is at least plausible that you attribute it to character and actions to varying degrees. Whether you are a consequentialist or a deontologist, you are bound to think of an avaricious miser, say, as morally inferior, other things equal, compared to a generous benefactor. See, e.g., Kagan (1998:78ff) for some discussion. It doesn't follow though, at least according to the deontologist, that a person may have no moral status whatsoever. I return to this crucial issue shortly.

[3] Slurs defined as a special kind of group pejoratives: Diaz-Legaspe (2020:1412–1413).

so are different in the two cases. Conceivably, that's precisely why we may accept one kind of ranking, but not the other.

The objector might now follow two lines of argument. Both of them lead to the question of respect. (I) On the one hand, it is tempting to tweak Jeshion's formula (1a) just a bit:

(2) *x* thinks of *y* in a dehumanising way in the weak sense iff:
   i. *x* thinks of *y* as a human, but an inferior one, and unworthy of full respect, and
   ii. *x* doesn't have good reasons for thinking so.

Analogously for (1b). To stick to (1a), since there are good reasons to think of *A* the murderer as an inferior human, so thinking of him doesn't amount to dehumanisation. But this move begs the question: *is* it ever justified to think of any one as unworthy of full respect? For suppose it isn't. Then the condition (2ii) is vacuously true, and we are back to the same problem as earlier. The answer, therefore, must depend on the concept of respect used in Jeshion's explications.

(II) Alternatively, one might object that, though contempt and holding in low regard are not sufficient for Jeshion's 'strong dehumanisation', they are sufficient for weak dehumanisation. Weak and strong dehumanisation, says Jeshion, 'align in a continuum': there is no 'hard demarcation' between the two notions (2018:80). At the extreme we find rare, perfectly illegitimate dehumanisation. But you can dehumanise people to a certain degree when your act is not that rare and is perhaps legitimate. This is reflected in the situations where we say that contempt is 'fitting', as may be the case with the ruthless killer and the despicable husband. And this is precisely what the concept of weak dehumanisation is intended to capture.

But is there really continuity between strong and weak dehumanisation? There is one conceptual side issue that bears mentioning. Weak dehumanisation is scalar: when you are dehumanised to this or another degree, we say that you are 'weakly' dehumanised to that degree, and that you are regarded or treated as only partly human. On the other hand, strong dehumanisation is Boolean: to be strongly dehumanised is to completely lack the status of human. So to be strongly dehumanised is to be completely dehumanised. Putting the two together, we have a problem. You may be lightly or gravely injured, but you can't be 'completely' injured. You may be a little dangerous or very dangerous, but not completely so. In the other direction, you may be dead, but not a little dead or very dead. We can't, that is, have it both ways: a concept can't be both scalar and Boolean. Thus we can't speak of people dehumanised to a degree, but also of (other) people to be completely dehumanised.

It would be unwise to pin the critique on this observation alone. Jeshion might drop the talk of the 'continuum' and treat weak and strong dehumanisation as two different concepts, one Boolean and the other scalar.

Hence the main question is the same as before: what is the concept of respect used in the explications (1)? Textual evidence is inconclusive—indeed, Jeshion says nothing about her understanding of respect. One possibility is that she interprets respect in a broadly Kantian way. 'Humanity in the moral sense' is meant to refer not to diverse moral qualities possessed by some humans and not by others, but rather to an intrinsic human quality *F* that separates humans from mere things. Kant's own candidate for *F* is the capacity to set goals for oneself (he also insists that this capacity, when exercised autonomously, converges on the capacity for moral action; but we needn't follow him there). Can you be an inferior or superior human in this sense? You are either able to set goals, or not. Even if you don't set them very well, or even if your goals aren't

very good, you are still an end-setter. The concept of humanity so understood is not scalar, and it's not meant to be.

Further, as we see in (1a), Jeshion couples the idea of inferior humanity with 'unworthiness of full respect'. But if we think of moral respect along Kantian lines, then the contrast between 'full' respect and 'limited' or 'partial' respect is impossible to draw. Under a standard interpretation, moral respect is intended to be a normative threshold we shouldn't cross in our treatment of a person, good or bad.[4] Suppose you believe that torture is incompatible with moral respect. This means that no human, no end-setter good or bad, should be tortured. And if you propose to torture a person just a little, or very seldom, you don't show some imperfect moral respect. You rather fail to show moral respect altogether.

To put it another way: There are intelligible idioms of ranking people *qua* moral agents and of sorting them into 'superior' and 'inferior'. You may have harsh words to say about a person's moral character, his standing as a moral being. You may, in so doing, also express a lot of contempt toward the person's actions and his character. But neither the idioms of ranking, nor the attitude of contempt so expressed, should have anything to do with moral respect. Vice versa, when we ask whether a certain person (or more precisely, a certain object that may in fact be a person) should be treated with moral respect, we don't mean to enquire *how much* respect is due to him, and how superior or inferior this person is.

To return quickly to (2), the rationale behind it is to look at *A* the murderer, say, as unworthy of full respect, as a human, but an inferior one. But we now see that the attitude of respect does not scale, and that even a murderer deserves full respect. That is, the condition (2ii) is indeed vacuous, and the previous objection holds.

To prevent a misunderstanding: I'm not arguing, absurdly, that because all persons deserve respect, you can't in practice, *de facto* deny them respect partially or wholly. I am arguing that, because of how the concept of moral respect is understood, it is conceptually impossible to deny people respect *to a certain degree*. It is impossible to say, in this broadly Kantian sense, that *A* treats *B* as worthy of some respect, but not of 'full' respect. Because of the original Kantian contrast between respect and honour, respect is a matter of all or nothing.

This last claim isn't rigidly aligned with the standard interpretation of Kantian texts mentioned earlier. The same contrast between scalar and Boolean concepts is available in the accounts intended to deviate from Kant. According to Stephen Darwall, appraisal respect (meant to model 'honour') may be given to a smaller or greater degree. Recognition respect (meant to model 'moral respect') is 'acknowledgment' of the person's dignity, the disposition to give at least some weight to the person's preferences in your practical deliberation. Self-described non-Kantians like Sarah Buss and Joseph Raz defend the notions of respect broadly in line with this formulation.[5]

It might be retorted, and I encountered this idea in discussions, that Jeshion's account is meant to describe bigoted thought, and that if such thought is shown to be incoherent, so be it. Hence, slur-users *do* dehumanise their targets, though they do that incoherently. But this response goes against some very basic demands of charity. It is not as though slur-users freely admit to dehumanising their targets. Nor does the idiom of dehumanisation belong in their

[4] The 'standard' interpretation: e.g., Hill (1991:11), Wood (1999:135).

[5] Semi-Kantian respect: Darwall (2006:122–123), Darwall (2013:18–19, 264–270), Buss (1999:536), Raz (2001:159).

vocabulary. *We* impute the concept of dehumanisation to them. By doing so we are supposed to make intelligible certain moral qualities of their linguistic use. Therefore, if the concept of dehumanisation is shown to be incoherent, this is a failure on our part as interpreters of bigoted speech and thought. It is a sign of our failure to impute, coherently, a dehumanising thought to slur-users.

Another line of defence of Jeshion's account might run as follows. We should read the preceding argument as a *modus tollens*. Since Jeshion's account entails that respect is scalar, the notion of respect she is using is not remotely Kantian. It is some other notion of respect. Unlike Kantian respect, it is not a matter of all or nothing: it *is* scalar. Thus consider an idea, floated by several authors, that respect is a form of care and considerateness for a particular person, sensitivity to his needs and preferences.[6] Call this 'c-respect'. Let l be an interval within which it is acceptable to treat you with care. Appropriate care falls within l. There is, however, a certain threshold I shouldn't cross. If I give you too little care, let alone positively disregard your preferences, that would be unacceptable. According c-respect within l is strictly normative, and a failure is a moral violation. By the same token, there are degrees of violation: we can recognise mild c-disrespect and gross c-disrespect. To put this all together, when you use a slur you weakly dehumanise me, and when you do so, you also show me some measure of c-disrespect. We associate slur-use with weak dehumanisation, and we explicate the latter through c-disrespect.

The notion of c-respect, I agree, is a coherent one capturing some intuitions we have about 'respect'. But how can the use of slurs be a show of c-disrespect? How can we fail to care for people by using a slur? The only plausible answer, I think, is that slurs are offensive and insulting. Thus, according to Dillon (1992:109), one way to show respect to people is by 'praising and honoring' them. Correspondingly, we fail to show respect when we 'scorn' or 'contemn' them, or when we act 'arrogantly' towards them. Furthermore, also plausibly, insult and offence come in degrees. They allow for a differential moral valuation, depending on their severity: slurs offend, and different slurs offend differently. This feeds into the proposal that, just like weak dehumanisation, c-respect is scalar.

On this reading, then, Jeshion merely wishes to point out that, since each use of a slur is mildly or grossly offensive, it is for this reason also mildly or grossly dehumanising (in the weak sense of it). There are two obvious problems with this interpretation. First, it conflicts with Jeshion's own claim, noted above, that dehumanisation is in a different league from 'derogation' and 'debasement' that presumably characterise insult and offence (2018:80).[7] Secondly, I take it that the rationale of linking dehumanisation to slur-use is in marking out a uniquely problematic moral aspect of slurs. Thus ordinary offences are not supposed to dehumanise. If they were, there would be nothing special about slurs.

If dehumanisation is spelled out in terms of c-respect, however, then every offence or insult would also dehumanise, at least to some degree. Hence slurs should lose their (im)moral uniqueness. This result would clash with the whole dialectic of Jeshion's argument. And therefore, it is not plausible to link the explications in (1) to the notion of c-respect.

I conclude that the notion of weak dehumanisation is either incoherent outright (if linked to Kantian respect), or does not serve Jeshion's purposes (if linked to c-respect). There is perhaps

[6] See, e.g., Dillon (1992), Ullmann-Margalit (2011), Maclagan (1960).

[7] The same idea underlies Jeshion's appeal to the distinction between 'appraisal respect' and 'recognition respect' (2018:84).

some other notion of respect that can be used to avoid both pitfalls. Since I can't think of any, and since Jeshion's discussion provides no clues, I won't pursue this possibility.

Can't we, finally, jettison 'weak dehumanisation' altogether and stay only with the 'strong dehumanisation' explicated in (1c)–(1d)? To strongly dehumanise a person in thought is to think of him as a subhuman, and to strongly dehumanise him in action is to treat him as a subhuman deserving no moral respect whatsoever. Yet this is just too strong for slurs. A speaker may use a slur and at the same time predicate a quality of the victim compatible with the affirmation of moral respect.[8] The generics in (3), prejudiced and misleading as they are, are intended to attribute some bad traits to the targeted groups:

(3) a. Wops are sleazy, but they have a great artistic taste.

b. Chinks have no taste, but they are highly intelligent.

If these slurs dehumanise strongly, then the bigoted speakers in (3) mean to deny to the slurred groups a *minimally* respectful treatment accorded to humans. That's highly implausible. It's hard to believe that those speakers are prepared to accord to typical Chinese or Italians the kind of treatment we see in concentration camps, for instance. It is similarly unlikely that the speakers in (3) even think of these groups as separate categories of non-humans or subhumans. Indeed, the members of these groups are attributed the qualities, such as taste or high intelligence, that are often thought to be uniquely human. And since the speakers profess a dislike of 'wops' and 'chinks' in some regards and admiration in others, it is not even clear that they mean to deny honour to the members of these groups. (3) may be read as little more than expressions of a grudging admiration mixed with hostility or envy.

At this point one might argue that the speakers in (3) could still be 'quintessentialists' in the sense of Leslie (2013; 2017). They might essentialise their targets by attributing to 'wops', say, a hidden, not necessarily biological substance ('quintessence') causally responsible for their sleaziness, i.e. 'their most important, stable, and enduring' property (Leslie, 2013:110). This tendency to quintessentialise is sustained by their use of nouns and generics (Leslie, 2017:418). And it is also plausible that their quintessentialist tendency is part of the explanation why those speakers continue to entertain prejudices toward Chinese or Italians, and why they are amenable to the introduction of slurs for these groups (we don't have to assume though that the extension of 'wop' and 'Italian' must be the same). By contrast, they don't derogate or discriminate against accountants, to use Leslie's own example. One reason for that is that they don't think there is any accountant-quintessence.

Well, conceivably the bigots in (3) do quintessentialise Italians and Chinese. But we can hardly infer from that any fact of strong dehumanisation. For chances are that these bigots, in fact along with us, quintessentialise many other groups identified through the same mechanism of noun use. Thus we hear them say, 'He is just a lawyer!' So we expect them to entertain some negative attitudes, likely prejudices, toward lawyers *qua* lawyers. Unlike accountants, lawyers have quintessences, or so our bigots think. Other times, the same bigots declare, 'He is a human, not a chatbot!' They mean to say that something uniquely human, the human quintessence, explains the humans' emotional responses, say. Our bigots may well believe that. But of course, it doesn't follow that they are in any way committed to denying minimal respect to lawyers or

[8] The argument here echoes the one in Camp (2013) and Anderson and Lepore (2013) against the association of slurs with contempt. It is addressed in Jeshion (2018:85–86, 96).

humans. Psychological essentialism does not constitute strong dehumanisation, though it may certainly be a small step towards it, along with many other factors.[9]

3. Dehumanisation and genocide.—In this section I examine another sophisticated attempt to tie slurs to dehumanisation that, however, is markedly different from Jeshion's.[10] At the end of §2 I appealed to the observation that Jeshion's view fails to do justice to the use of ordinary slurs like 'wop' or 'chink'. That was fair: according to Jeshion, all uses of slurs, certainly uses of racial slurs, are supposed to dehumanise. But what if only a few select slurs dehumanise, while others don't?

A version of this view is defended at great length in Tirrell (2012). Taking the Rwandan genocide as her case study, she argues that certain slurs dehumanise when they are 'deeply derogatory' (call such slurs 'deep slurs'). Compared to ordinary slurs, deep slurs have five unique characteristics (190–193). Let me mention two. Deep slurs impute certain essences to the individuals designated by the term (i.e. the targets of the slurs). As observed earlier, it is questionable whether the users of 'wop' or 'papist' would seriously contemplate an essence common to all Italians or all Catholics. But, we now speculate, to use a slur like '*inyenzi*' ('cockroach') or '*inzoka*' ('snake') is precisely to attribute an essence, presumably a biological one, to the individual. Secondly, a slur like 'wop', at least in categorical subject-predicate sentences, may reliably be used to express some negative attitude toward Italians. Deep slurs, on the other hand, are not primarily vehicles for attitude expression. The presumptive deep slur like '*inzoka*' is 'action-engendering' in the way in which 'wop' is not (176, 195). Multiple social functions are central to the use of deep slurs: 'they are used to dominate, demean, or dehumanize people' (192). To use a deep slur is to specify what treatment is appropriate for the person designated. Moreover, sometimes the slur is used to 'assign' a particular social role to the target (193).[11]

Let's try to unpack these claims. To stick to our main concern here, how exactly can we use deep slurs to dehumanise others? The answer is unusually complex and demands an extraordinary exegetical effort. Sometimes Tirrell explains the link to dehumanisation by playing down the distinction between language and behaviour (206). As Tirrell says repeatedly, to use a slur is to 'engender' action. It is a form of 'linguistic violence' (176). All the same, there are two different ways for the slurs to engender action. At an early, 'preparatory phase' of the genocide, the use of deep slurs 'prepares' the society for physical violence (203, 190, 200–201, 205). More explicitly:

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[9] I explore these other factors in §4.

[10] Neufeld (2020; 2019) offers another interesting argument that I won't be able to address here for the lack of space. Neufeld ties the use of slurs to essentialism, essentialism to the denial of free agency, which is in turn linked to dehumanisation. For an instructive early argument in the same direction see Clor (1969).

[11] Interestingly, this claim is also endorsed by Jeshion who applies it to slurs across the board, however:

> By using the slur ['kike'], and by virtue of its semantics, the anti-semite indicates that being Jewish is a *fundamental negative characteristic-defining feature* of the target's identity *qua* person. As such, the speaker uses the slur to frame and dictate how others ought to conceive of and treat its target. If the use of the slur is public, the speaker invariably performs an act that contributes to making the property part of the target's *social identity*. (Jeshion, 2018:83, her italics)

See also footnote 13 below.

(4) At an early stage of the genocide, if *S* utters '*x* is a cockroach ("*inyenzi*")', then: (i) *S* is committed to the assertions '*x* is a pest', '*x* is dirty', '*x* is hard to kill', '*x* should be killed', and other; (ii) *S* is committed to the permission of the treatment of *x* as a pest, of the killing of *x*, and of certain other forms of treatment.

At this stage linguistic use is still 'dissociated from social behavior' (204). Let us say that at this stage slurs have a 'causal role' in dehumanisation.

The situation is different, Tirrell argues, at a later stage when dehumanisation is accomplished by the assignment of particular social positions (Searlean status-functions) to the targets. Specifically, deep slurs like '*inyenzi*' are used to assign definitive status-functions to the targets (196, 213). Hence slur-use is then directly associated with harmful treatment like depriving the target of human rights. Let us say that at the later stage slurs have a 'constitutive role' in dehumanisation. Slur-use 'constitutes' genocidal acts (185), rather than merely causing them. We may summarise this idea in the following clause:

(5) At the later stage of the genocide: If *S* utters '*x* is an *inyenzi*', then *S* assigns to *x* a certain social status such that it is permissible to kill every individual having that status (same for '*inzoka*').

We have, therefore, two different lines of argument here. Slurs dehumanise at the earlier stage of genocide by training the future perpetrators to see the victims as subhuman and so to facilitate their extermination. Slurs dehumanise at the later stage of the genocide by classifying their victims in such a way as to make them directly liable to extermination. Yet, I will now argue, neither of these two arguments withstands scrutiny.

The constitutive role of slurs in dehumanisation. The clause (5) may be illustrated with the case of Simon Bikindi (214–215). At the height of the Rwandan genocide, a Hutu political agitator is visiting a prison where he identifies several Tutsis *as* Tutsis, who are then instantly killed. The treatment inflicted on the Tutsi victims is arguably dehumanising. I will not pause to ask why we judge it so. I will instead assume that a denial of basic legal and social rights to a person *is* a paradigmatic case of a dehumanising treatment.

Such a change in the legal-political status of a person may be described in a Searlean fashion as an assignment of status-functions. And these status-functions, we may agree, are dehumanising in the sense of denying minimal social roles to the victims. Yet, what does the use of slurs have to do with this? Very little. The treatment of Tutsi prisoners was dehumanising, since they lost any political status, their preferences were completely ignored, their lives counted for nothing. But addressing them with slurs did not *subject* them to that treatment. In fact Bikindi, according to the report cited by Tirrell, didn't even use slurs. All he had to do was to identify the prisoners as Tutsis in some way, which is indeed what he did. Of course, he could use the slurs '*inzoka*' or '*inyenzi*' instead. But their only role in the ensuing dehumanising treatment—i.e. the brutal killing devoid of any pretence of legality—was identification. The persecutors had to know who the Tutsis were, and '*inzoka*' and '*inyenzi*' could fulfil that function well. There was nothing special about them in that regard, however: other expressions, gestures, all sorts of indirect speech acts could do the same.

You might say: this misses the point, for how were the status-functions assigned in the first place? Didn't slurs play a critical role in classifying Tutsis as subhuman and thus enabling

their dehumanising treatment? Beyond mere identification, slurs have an action-engendering normative force: they 'generate permissions' for non-linguistic behaviour (Tirrell, 2012:176). Therefore, when you say, '*A* is an *inyenzi*', don't you classify *A* as someone who should be killed with impunity?

I reply that the dual-content function of the slurs may be plausible. At any rate, let's grant it: slurs serve to both identify and classify. Still, no dehumanising *treatment* should thereby follow, or is even remotely likely to follow. When I say, 'This is my house' pointing at Blenheim Palace, I classify it as my house and lay my claim to it (according to Searle). But the palace wouldn't become my house following the declaration. What is required, in addition, is making others accept my classification.[12] A host of social and political conditions have to obtain for my bare classification to actually assign the intended status-function. Observe that this is a perfectly commonsensical take on what happened in Rwanda according to Tirrell's own narrative. Not until 1994 could a declaration like '*A* is an *inyenzi*' assign to *A* the dehumanising status-function. That is because by that time the Hutu population had *accepted* that Tutsis had to be exterminated.[13]

In short, in 1994 deep slurs could be used to identify the victims for the subsequent dehumanising treatment. This could be done by various other linguistic or non-linguistic means. Addressing *A* with a slur did not subject *A* to a dehumanising treatment, did not constitute it, and did not, *by itself*, ensure any such treatment. At times, indeed, Tirrell seems to appreciate the very special social conditions in Rwanda that could plausibly link slurs, and speech generally, to dehumanisation and genocide. At times she seems to play them down entirely. Consider this passage:

> In *most* language games that use racist derogations, the derogation is a *function* attached to a person, whose status changes because of the imposition of the function. Racist derogations are status-functions, for they tell the target, "You count as a so-and-so here." (Tirrell, 2012:213, italics added)

These claims are unconvincing. Derogation alone can't assign any status-functions, any more than I can make a palace my house by calling it 'my house'. For the function to be assigned it must gain widespread acceptance and become an institutional fact. In most cases of derogation, there isn't any such acceptance.

I conclude that there is no good argument to show the constitutive role of deep slurs. A large question remains though, and it is whether their use played a unique causal role in creating the conditions for a future dehumanising treatment. Through their systematic use, for example, prejudices may gradually become entrenched, thus paving the way for dehumanising treatment. This is the question of their role in dehumanising thought at the early stages of the genocide, and I turn to it next.

The causal role of slurs in dehumanisation. The predication '*A* is a snake' may be understood literally or metaphorically. If understood literally, then *A* is said to be a member of the animal

[12] Declarations and acceptance: Searle (2010:85).

[13] A parallel complaint should be lodged against Jeshion's version of this idea (footnote 11). How exactly would the use of 'kike' meaningfully 'contribute' to the target's 'social identity'? What would such a contribution consist in, exactly? and wouldn't it require a class of non-trivial social conditions to obtain, rather than a bare use of a slur?

kingdom having a particular appearance, mobility, and other physical characteristics including the manner in which it can be killed most efficiently. If understood metaphorically, then *A* may well be human, but possess some snake-like characteristics: attacking quickly, escaping from dangerous situations, moving stealthily, and poisoning reputations. Only some of these characteristics may be predicated of animal snakes. Others will only be similar metaphorically ('poisoning reputations') to those of animal snakes. At any rate, using this predicate does not license an inference to the conclusion that the metaphorical snake should be literally killed, let alone killed in some specific snake-like way.

If we take on board Tirrell's idea in (4) about the link between assertion and action, then the difference between the literal and metaphorical uses may be stated thus:

(6) a. If a speaker *S* asserts on the occasion *O* that *x* is metaphorically *F*, then: (i) *S* is committed on *O* to ascribe to *x* some properties G_1, G_2, ... that are widely ascribed to *F*s in *S*'s linguistic community and are salient on *O*; (ii) *S* is committed to treat *x* the way G_1s, G_2s, ... are treated in *S*'s community.

b. If a speaker *S* asserts on the occasion *O* that *x* is literally *F*, then: *S* is committed on *O* to treat *x* the way *F*s are treated in *S*'s community.

Now, in the course of the Rwandan genocide, was the use of '*inyenzi*' and '*inzoka*' metaphorical or literal? On one hand, Tirrell explicitly says that the use of '*inyenzi*' was in fact metaphorical (200–201, also compare the idiom of 'depiction' in 203). But then the proposed explanation does not add up. To repeat: When you say, 'Harry is a pig', your utterance, insulting as it may be, does not commit you to feeding Harry the leftovers or delivering him to the slaughter-house. Certainly not: Harry is only metaphorically a pig. When, in the Rwandan context, a speaker says, '*A* is an *inyenzi*', *A* is, again, only metaphorically a pest. Yet, according to (4), the utterance inexplicably commits you to killing *A* like any other (literal) pest. This is *ad hoc*. A metaphorical use of the predicate '*x* is an *inyenzi*' should be like any other metaphor. Then its use is no more dehumanising than the use of '*x* is the sun', '*x* is a rat', '*x* is a lion'.

Other revealing details in Tirrell's account suggest, however, that at least for some speakers the use of deep slurs was *not* metaphorical.[14] Consider this crucial passage about how the inference was actually made:

> The extremist propaganda *described* Tutsi as cockroaches or snakes. For many *uneducated peasants*, if the official authorities state that Tutsi are snakes, *it can't be wrong*. If the local official of the commune orders people to kill snakes, *it makes sense*. When you kill a snake, you smash its head, then you cut it up in different places to make sure it's really dead. These very same forms of torture were inflicted on many Tutsi. (Tirrell, 2012:205, citing a report by André Sibomana, italics added)

A plausible reading of this report is that the Hutu peasants understood the predicate '*x* is an *inzoka*' literally. They took it to have a plain descriptive content. Because Tutsis were literal, animal snakes, they had to die a snake-death, rather than a more familiar human death. This literal understanding was not doubted despite its evident absurdity, since it came from the authority.

[14] See Smith (2021:18ff) for an extended statement. I address Smith's view in §4.

But then the explanatory challenge should lie elsewhere. If I come to believe that you are a fly, don't ask why I spray you with a repellent: that's what people do to flies (rightly or wrongly). The challenge would rather be to explain how I came to have this preposterous belief about you in the first place. In the Rwandan situation, at least if we take Sibomana's report at face value, the challenge is to explain how the peasants could trust the authority so blindly as to develop such a radical delusion. Potentially, the use of slurs could be a causal factor in the treatment of the Tutsi victims if one could demonstrate how it was uniquely suited to trigger the delusion. Of course, Tirrell's argument invokes no such evidence. On the face of it, the Hutu peasants merely understood '*x* is an *inzoka*' as a descriptive term.

Supposing, however, that slurs as used by the authority *could* cause that radical delusion, should we *then* describe the resulting behaviour as 'dehumanising'? This kind of scenario provokes conflicting intuitions. Compare insults: you mistake your elderly boss for a friend and approach him with, 'Hey dude!' The boss may *feel* insulted. But once the facts are known, not only did you not intend to insult him, there was arguably no insult to begin with.[15]

As I said, intuitions vary. At a minimum, in the Rwanda situation we should only insist on the idea that dehumanisation, if there is any, does not explain why the killings happened. Furthermore, there is at least one theory of dehumanisation that delivers an unambiguous result. According to the view in Smith (2020; 2021), radical delusion of the kind apparently experienced by the Hutu peasants is on its own irrelevant to the fact of dehumanisation. I return to this issue in §4.

The upshot is a dilemma. If the use of deep slurs was metaphorical, then no specifically non-human properties were attributed to the target. No properties were attributed, at any rate, that could *in themselves* amount to thinking about the target in a dehumanising way. Moreover, if there were such properties, then the use of ordinary metaphors would be equally dehumanising. This is a cost we should be unwilling to bear. If, by contrast, the use of those predicates was literal, then there was a tragic delusion. Hutu peasants killed their victims, since they came to think of them as real, animal vermin and real snakes. Here we can explain the treatment of the victims, but so far as it was a result of a delusion, dehumanisation, if there was any, remains explanatorily idle.

Now if we embrace the first horn of the dilemma, we must say that the Hutu speakers did not at all think of the targets as subhuman or non-human. If we embrace the second horn of the dilemma, we must say that the speakers did think of them as non-human, but only because of a delusion prompted by their trust of the authority. This explanation, though possible, does not generalise and is plainly irrelevant to our purposes. Ultimately, therefore, Tirrell's account doesn't help to align deep slurs either with dehumanising thought (at an early stage of the genocide) or with dehumanising treatment (at a later stage of the genocide).

4. General diagnosis.—So far my discussion has been negative. I have argued that the views examined in §§2–3 fail to offer good reasons for either a constitutive or a causal link between the use of slurs and dehumanisation. It would be fitting to conclude with an argument that shows perfectly generally why we can't find such links in principle. One way to proceed is to offer a theory of slurs' meaning and then explain why slurs have little to do with dehumanisation. This I can't do: given the very large literature on both subjects, it would require another long paper, at

[15] For a useful discussion of insults see Milić (2018).

least. For the same reason I won't be able to offer a theory of dehumanisation. Instead, I will claim that, within the debate on slurs, the notion of dehumanisation was invoked for certain rhetorical purposes. But the notion that could serve those purposes cannot plausibly be aligned with the use of slurs, whatever our position on their semantics and pragmatics.

Why would slur theorists insist that the use of slurs is dehumanising? What was their reason to use specifically the idiom of 'dehumanisation'? Call this broad claim the 'dehumanisation thesis'. Conceivably their motivation was to charge slur-users with a grave moral violation. This goes pretty much without saying, and explicit statements are hard to find. Still, recall Jeshion's account in §2. Jeshion asks whether terms like 'derogate' or 'degrade' could adequately describe the linguistic function of slurs. On her view, a slur-user merely regards the target of slurs as an inferior human, rather than downright subhuman (the case of strong dehumanisation). But precisely because derogation and dehumanisation are 'continuous' with each other, we must insist on the idiom of 'weak dehumanisation' (2018:80). In general, the writers we have discussed wouldn't have invested a major effort in showing that slurs dehumanise, had they not assumed, and wished their readers to assume, that dehumanisation is a very serious moral wrong. Call this the 'moralistic assumption'.

Hence the concept that slur theorists are interested in (call it 'm-dehumanisation') must satisfy this condition:

(Gravity) M-dehumanisation is a moral violation of the highest degree.

Its next feature is a corollary of the first one (already noted in §2):

(Rarity) M-dehumanisation is relatively rare.

A grave moral transgression can't happen too often. How often is too often? Plainly no general formula is possible. Still, a grave transgression can't be routine. For example, some authors believe that very many phenomena of the modern culture are dehumanising. In Montagu and Matson (1983:xxix) dehumanisation is interpreted as 'the victory of the mechanical equation over the organic principle'. As a result, people are 'emptied out of essential humanity—in order to be restocked with artificial needs and scientifically conditioned reflexes.' Punk rock, Martin Scorsese's movies, professional sports, Marcel Duchamp's art—all of them dehumanise by representing people as, or encouraging them to be, mechanical and animalistic. But even though these authors diagnose certain social and cultural activities as a malaise, they don't intend them to be stopped and banned. Clearly they don't condemn artists or athletes as perpetrators of a terrible moral transgression.

Thus, if nearly all areas and cultural processes of modern life are dehumanising, as per Montagu and Matson, then this fact alone should diminish the scale of their putative immorality. Certainly, there will be conditions, as in totalitarian and genocidal regimes, that would enable a routine perpetration of moral crimes. But then these conditions, in the larger historical context, should themselves be relatively rare. If, e.g., you are told that all of the humanity is stained with an original sin, then the immorality of that bare sin can't be too high.

Similar considerations favour another feature:

(Complexity) M-dehumanisation is a relatively complex task to accomplish.

Again, how complex it is we can't tell in advance. But we may agree that something as easy as moving your finger can't m-dehumanise. Easily performed actions would violate (Rarity).

If such are the constraints on the concept of m-dehumanisation, what are the implications? Well, in the first place, there can't be m-dehumanising thoughts. They can't plausibly meet any of the three constraints. No bare thought, however morally repugnant, should count as a *grave* moral transgression. Similarly for rarity and complexity. Thus from the outset only a certain treatment could be accepted as m-dehumanising. And if the use of slurs does not constitute such a treatment, then it can't properly be described as 'm-dehumanising'.

This conclusion shouldn't be too controversial. Paradigmatic instances of dehumanisation that satisfy our three criteria would be certain kinds of treatment inflicted on humans, like imprisonment in labour camps, genocidal violence, and possibly some instances of extreme poverty. Conceivably that is why dehumanisation is associated with a grave moral wrong to begin with. If the present view is at all controversial, it is only because we now say that these forms of treatment are, in fact, the *only* proper instances of dehumanisation (interpreted as m-dehumanisation).

Perhaps, however, our imputation of the moralistic assumption is uncharitable, and the dehumanisation thesis has some other reasons behind it. Perhaps by claiming that slurs dehumanise the writers we have examined merely wish to gesture at certain qualities of thinking that characterise slur-users. Further, they are entitled to call those qualities 'dehumanising' not because of their immorality, but rather because the same qualities are recognised as dehumanising in other areas of research, in particular in social psychology where the focus is on 'dehumanising perception'. As before (§3), the claim may be either about all slurs or just some of them:

(7) a. For every slur s, for every speaker x, if x competently uses s, then x has a dehumanising perception of the target of s.

b. There is a slur s such that, for every speaker x, if x competently uses s, then x has a dehumanising perception of the target of s.

Now there are two approaches in the psychological literature. On one of them, associated primarily with David Livingstone Smith, dehumanising perception is Boolean. It has the following condition:

(8) *A* has a dehumanising attitude toward *B* iff *A* sees *B* as a subhuman animal. (Smith, 2020:19)

As Smith argues at length, dehumanisation is a unique phenomenon (2021:26ff). It is not continuous with other derogatory attitudes. In particular, to think of x as subhuman is not to attribute to x a certain descriptive property, like the lack of rationality or of emotions. It is rather to stipulate that x is not 'one of us': having first stipulated that he belongs to a natural kind of 'humans', the speaker next stipulates that x does not belong to that kind (2021:155). This entails, Smith further argues, that dehumanising thought is politically significant (157). It is part of the 'ideology' designed to 'produce, perpetuate, and augment oppression' (158).

One immediate benefit of Smith's view is in resolving the tension around radical delusion (§3). As a result of their (putative) delusion, the Hutu peasants failed to see their Tutsi victims as human at all. And they thought so precisely because they attributed to them a certain descriptive property of being non-human, on a par with the property that snakes or insects might have. In

contrast to the properly dehumanising thought, they didn't form that belief on the grounds of first thinking of Tutsis as 'not the same as us'. Further, their delusion itself was not part of what Smith calls 'ideology'—though very possibly it was a consequence of that oppressive ideology promoted by the authorities they trusted.

It seems now that only (7b) is a live option: only some slurs, like animalistic slurs '*inzoka*' or '*Judensau*' (discussed by Smith), may be associated with dehumanisation. Yet even (7b) may be too strong. It is a claim about the semantics of animalistic slurs. On many accounts it should be possible to use a slur competently without entertaining anything like a dehumanising thought in (8).

In fact, Smith himself is apt to reject (7b). The dehumanising thought associated with the slur *s* is part of ideology. But ideologies, Smith argues, can be latent for a long time. This can mean, for example, that at some point in medieval times the slur '*Judensau*' could be used as an instrument of oppression (to mark out those who are not part of the society), given the political conditions at the time and the willingness of the population to persecute the Jews. Later on, as the conditions change, the same slur may be used when it is not, in fact, part of the oppressive ideology.

As the conditions change further, the slur can once again become part of the ideology. Then only for those people who endorse this ideology and participate in its oppressive practices, the use of that slur should be associated with dehumanisation. To give a not too unrealistic example, imagine a German émigré in California in 1939 who disapproves of the Nazi racial persecution. The émigré has his prejudices: in fact, he is antisemitic. Yet he thinks that no dislike of the Jews, however plausible, should be turned into a state policy. On the lips of this person the use of '*Judensau*' will not be dehumanising. At the very same time, on the lips of a Nazi official fully on board with racial persecution its use *will* be dehumanising.

If this reasoning is sound by Smith's lights, as I think it is, then instead of (7b) we should only accept its watered down version:

(9) There is a slur *s*, there is an occasion *o*, there is a speaker *x*, such that if *x* competently uses *s* on *o*, then *x* has a dehumanising perception of the target of *s*.

The occasion *o* is special: many political factors must be in place to enable exclusion and persecution of *s*'s target. Since the bare use of a slur does not create an ideology and persecution, it does not warrant an ascription of a dehumanising perception. Hence Smith's account can't be a good reason for the dehumanisation thesis: it warrants a link between slurs and dehumanising perception only on some rare occasions, and only for some slurs. Thus in the case examined by Tirrell we certainly can attribute dehumanising perceptions to Simon Bikindi and his ilk. But using '*inzoka*' and '*inyenzi*' is just one way to express these perceptions, and it is not a necessary condition for these perceptions to arise. Equally, as already argued earlier, a dehumanising treatment does not require the use of any dedicated slurring terms.

As far as the theory of slurs is concerned, Smith's contention comes down to this: combined with many other political factors, dehumanising thought interpreted along (8) enables atrocities and violent persecution. Some of such treatments we describe as 'dehumanising'. Slurs, however, have a marginal role to play there. Only under very specific, historically unique conditions can we attribute dehumanising thought to their users. In contrast to Tirrell's view, the use of slurs can't constitute a dehumanising treatment, either. I conclude that Smith's account doesn't give

us a good reason for any interesting link between slurs and dehumanisation.

Smith's view is an outlier. Most researchers in this debate favour a scalar notion of dehumanisation. There are several versions of this idea. Haslam (2020; 2006) suggested a 'dual model' of dehumanising attitudes. Humanness should be interpreted along two dimensions. Cognitive abilities and self-control distinguish humans from animals. Sympathy, warmth, emotions generally, distinguish us from machines and robots. Thus dehumanisation in its extreme forms is 'animalistic'. It is characterised by a vertical comparison: humans are higher, better creatures than the animal-like subhumans. It is also aligned naturally with disgust and contempt (Haslam, 2006:258). 'Mechanistic' dehumanisation whereby certain groups are portrayed as machines is milder. It is characterised by a horizontal comparison: machine-like individuals are seen as strange, emotionally deficient, but not necessarily inferior. Hence you might appreciate the ruthless efficiency of a 'mechanical' person. The affect typically triggered by this form of dehumanisation is indifference, rather than disgust.

A similar idea is in the 'stereotype content model' of cognition in Fiske (2011; 2021).[16] Let's examine it in more detail. In their interactions, we are told, people divide social groups along the dimensions of competence, on the one hand, and trustworthiness and friendliness (or 'warmth'), on the other. One's own in-group is usually praised both as competent and trustworthy. Elderly people are pitied as incompetent, but trustworthy. Successful out-group members (e.g., Asian in the US) are envied as competent, but untrustworthy. Finally, homeless people, members of the 'extreme out-group', are perceived as disgusting and are scorned as both incompetent and untrustworthy.

This model fits very naturally the idea that slurs are linked to dehumanisation. We can, for example, paraphrase Jeshion's conditions (1) and say:

(10) x targets y with a slur s iff x thinks of y as belonging to an out-group G such that members of G are lacking either in competence or in trustworthiness, or both.

Each slur will have an identification function: it will assign y to a particular out-group G. The right-hand side of the biconditional is what, on this view, constitutes dehumanisation. And in saying that it does, to repeat, we are not spelling out a philosophical analysis of dehumanisation. Rather, we simply borrow idioms from the psychological research like Fiske's.

The problem with this manoeuvre is that Fiske's model seems motivated by the same moralistic assumption we have criticised earlier. That people divide social groups in accordance with certain (alleged) properties is an intriguing generalisation ostensibly supported by empirical evidence. But, Fiske insists further, the categorisations of out-groups are also 'dehumanising'. Individuals in the extreme out-group are 'extremely' dehumanised, the rest are dehumanised to a lesser extent. This is because to dehumanise is to 'refuse to acknowledge the complex human experience of other people' (2011:21). To different degrees we deny them warmth, familiarity, emotions, articulate language, and complex minds. Note the implications. If you faithfully and patiently care for your elderly grandfather whom you categorise as 'elderly' and who, you believe, has no longer the best command of his mental faculties, then your attitudes are now said

[16] Another closely related idea is developed in the theories of 'infrahumanisation' where A is said to infrahumanise B iff A thinks of B as lacking secondary emotions like remorse, pride, or nostalgia, that, according to A, characterise humans. See Leyens et al. (2007) and Rodríguez-Pérez and Betancor (2023) for a review. Although the terminology of 'infrahumanisation' is overtly chosen to contrast it with 'dehumanisation', the comments I make below about Fiske's view apply to infrahumanisation theories as well.

to be 'dehumanising', at least to a degree. Is there anything wrong with this description? Or rather: why should we choose exactly the idiom of dehumanisation to describe those kinds of attitudes?

I suspect that the choice, again, has to do with rhetoric. We begin with instances of dehumanising extreme out-groups that, on the face of it, are plausibly associated with a moral violation. Then we insist on the similarities between the attitudes toward these groups with the much broader attitudes toward many other groups. Many more attitudes, and many more people, are now implicated in essentially the same kind of violation. The risk here is not only the questionable expansion of moral violations. It is also that the paradigmatic, really serious violation is no longer grave or unique. For nearly everybody is doing the *same thing*, we say, just to another degree.[17]

What of the scorn and disgust toward extreme out-groups, the supposed primary locus of dehumanisation? We are told that:

> Dehumanized perception is a cognitive bias characterized by *spontaneous* failure to think about mental contents—thoughts and feelings in a social target's mind. [. . .][P]eople *spontaneously* fail to consider another person's mind if that person elicits predominantly disgust, a phenomenon we characterize as dehumanized perception. [P]articipants *spontaneously* think about the minds of dehumanized targets less often than the minds of other social targets. (Harris and Fiske, 2011:175, 180, italics added)

Suppose that this cognitive bias is real. Should we call it 'dehumanising'? If this is just another label, it's as good as any. Yet it can't be just another label: its use is intended to strike a chord. We are expected to agree that there is something repugnant, and deeply so, about that cognitive failure. This is far from clear. The problem is not only that we should hesitate to judge immoral a 'spontaneous' failure over which a person has no immediate control. It is also that merely having certain experiences, let alone spontaneous experiences, is not a moral failure. Or if it is, we can't grant it without a further argument.[18] It would be different if in addition we were shown how these experiences lead to an 'm-dehumanising' treatment—that is, to a treatment that can straightforwardly be interpreted as morally repugnant.

I think no evidence of this causal link is forthcoming. For we are not looking for *some* causal link between spontaneous biases of the kind described by Fiske and m-dehumanising treatments like various kinds of persecution. The truth is that very many causal factors enable these treatments. Thus consider the Holocaust. In the first place, it had transparent political and economic factors that provided ample motivation for murderous actions.[19] Secondly, as many historians have argued, the Holocaust was enabled in large part by the efficient German bureaucracy, as well as the German military and its highly distinctive ethos.[20] These social actors played an incomparably more central role in the Holocaust than Alfred Rosenberg's

[17] For a similar complaint see Bloom (2022).

[18] For an extended argument why thinking can't be morally wrong see Sher (2021).

[19] Typical economic factors: Evans (2004:22ff). Conspiracy theories: Evans (2009:242ff).

[20] German bureaucracy and the Holocaust: Hilberg (2003:1059ff). German military and the Holocaust: Elias (1996). The complexity of the more remote causes of the Holocaust, like the tendency to blind obedience, is addressed in Evans (1987:156ff).

racist ramblings. It would, however, be strange to call those institutions and their practices 'm-dehumanising' merely because of their causal role (though they may perhaps be mechanistically dehumanising in Haslam's sense of the term). So the evidence we should look for must show how biased thinking leads directly and inescapably, pretty much on its own, to an m-dehumanising treatment. But since this treatment results instead from a combination of complex social factors, we are not likely to find such evidence.

Summing up, there is no good reason to characterise the use of slurs as a form of dehumanisation. A likely explanation why different writers continue to insist on linking slurs to dehumanisation is their attempt to charge the users of slurs with a grave moral violation (the 'moralistic assumption'). But whatever moral violation can plausibly be aligned with the use of slurs, it is simply not grave enough to count as dehumanisation. The less likely explanation is that those writers merely aim to join ranks with social psychologists who have developed theories of 'dehumanising perception'. But in this case, either those theories, like Smith's, are not altogether relevant to the use of slurs, or else they rest on the same problematic moralistic assumption.

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