Chapter 7
Dehumanization: Perceiving the Body as (In)Human

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Abstract Dehumanization – the designation of the unlivable, the unintelligible, the ungrievable inhuman – is that almost unimaginable process by which human beings are rendered so radically other that their lives count for nothing. In this chapter, the author considers how victims, perpetrators and bystanders of atrocity come to perceive the loss of humanity and, in particular, the extent to which this (mis)perception is linked both physically and discursively to the figure of the human body. Paying attention to the concrete corporeality of dehumanization as it is described in testimonial texts, the author suggests that to think of "human dignity" as an abstract and disembodied quality becomes problematic in its failure to recognize the embodied, lived experience of suffering human beings. By focusing on testimonial accounts of dehumanizing atrocity, this chapter points to the significance of our role as receivers of testimony, also potentially guilty of dehumanizing perception, and emphasizes the possibility within the testimonial encounter both to repeat and to resist the logic of dehumanization and the unmaking, self-destroying power of bodily pain.

7.1 Introduction

It is customary when seeking to understand the somewhat elusive concept of "dehumanization" to refer in the first instance to that which it works against, in other words, to begin by defining what we understand as *human.* Standard definitions of dehumanization define the concept in terms of a negation of such positive "human" qualities as individuality, autonomy, personality, civility, and dignity. While this approach may provide us with relative conceptual clarity, it can lead one to pay too little attention to what I shall call the "lived experience" of dehumanization. Attending to the concrete corporeality of dehumanization as it is described in personal narratives of atrocity, and offering in this way a phenomenology of dehumanizing atrocities, this chapter seeks to present a more holistic view of

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dehumanization, while at the same time reflecting upon our understanding of what it means to be human or inhuman. If testimonial accounts of dehumanizing processes such as genocide, torture, and rape warfare demonstrate anything, it is the precariousness of such abstractly formulated concepts as human dignity. By embodying, and thus demystifying the concept of human dignity, it is argued, we may begin to think new ways to resist the logic of dehumanization.

Drawing on a range of theory and testimony, then, I hope to demonstrate just how closely the physical and discursive violation of the flesh is bound up in the minds of victims and perpetrators with processes of dehumanization and subjective destitution. If the link between sub-humanity and embodiment is so intricately made in the perception of victims and perpetrators, I will later go on to ask, to what extent are bystanders' perceptions also colored by negative symbolisms of the body in everyday dehumanization? The first section of the chapter is dedicated to presenting an overview of the theory of dehumanization as moral exclusion, while thinking also about the reasons why and methods by which individuals and groups are excluded from the human community: this demonstrates the perspective of the perpetrator. As the chapter progresses, the methods and processes of moral exclusion will be examined more closely and with reference to the lived experience of dehumanization as it has been described in testimonial texts; this should provide the reader with a better understanding of the meaning of dehumanization from the perspective of its victims, and not merely that of its theorists. The final section of the chapter will consider dehumanization from the perspective of the bystander or observer, pointing to the significance of our role as receivers of testimony, also potentially guilty of dehumanizing perception, and emphasizing the possibility within the testimonial encounter both to repeat and to resist the logic of dehumanization and the unmaking, self-destroying power of bodily pain.

7.1.1 A Truly Vicious Circle: Dehumanization as Moral Exclusion

> At various periods in history and in different societies, groups and individuals have been treated inhumanly by other humans: slaves by their masters, natives by colonialists, blacks by whites, Jews by Nazis, women by men, children by adults, the physically disabled by those who are not, homosexuals by heterosexuals, political dissidents by political authorities, and one ethnic or religious group by another [. . .]. Who is and who is not entitled to fair outcomes and fair treatment by inclusion or lack of inclusion in one's moral community? (Deutsch 2000: 49–50)

Let us begin with some general clarifications. The term "dehumanization" refers in the most basic terms to the denial, in part or whole, of the humanity of a person or group of persons. It is possible to think of degrees of dehumanization; we might speak of extreme or "mild" forms of dehumanization, the former occurring in instances of, for example, genocide and torture, and the latter in the everyday structures of social, political and economic marginalization, where ambiguities about what might constitute inhuman or dehumanizing treatment are most likely to arise.

There will be times when the threshold for that which we consider a violation of our humanity is historically and culturally dependent. Is it, for example, dehumanizing to deny a particular race or gender the right to vote, as was the case not so long ago in Europe and is still the case within some other cultures today? Is it dehumanizing to deny the very old and very sick autonomy of choice regarding their care or the time and manner of their death? The limits of dehumanizing behavior are often controversial. And yet, even as it is possible to speak of degrees of dehumanization, a general principle is constant: to perceive of or treat someone as less human, not fully human, or subhuman is an act of dehumanization, just as is the total denial of the humanity of an individual or group in genocide or torture. For what these have in common is their foundation in attitudes of exclusion, of which the psychological processes are alike, no matter the severity of the consequences.

Herbert C. Kelman (1973) explains dehumanization as a violation of the two qualities that he suggests we must accord to a person in order to perceive him as fully human: identity and community. To accord a person identity, he writes, "is to perceive him as an individual, independent and distinguishable from others, capable of making choices" (Kelman 1973: 48). This identity (which we might also call agency) is, as we shall see later, among the most affectively devastating losses suffered by victims of dehumanization. But let us focus for now on the loss of community, which is also at the crux of what dehumanization means in *effect*. Kelman's concept of community imagines humanity as "an interconnected network of individuals who care for each other, who recognize each other's individuality and who respect each other's rights" (Kelman 1973: 48). To be dehumanized is to be excluded from this community. It is to be perceived by the "in-group" as outside the moral kinship or scope of justice, and thus as a legitimate target for more active oppressions and exclusions. This, claims Kelman, is what makes sanctioned massacres and mass human atrocities possible. By excluding a person or persons from our moral community, it becomes possible to act inhumanly towards them, or else to allow harm to be done to them by others, without invoking any sense of moral inhibition or self-reproach. Psychological studies have demonstrated the extent to which perceiving others as less human than ourselves increases the opportunities for moral disengagement or indifference (Bandura et al. 1975, 1996). Susan Opotow explains further:

> We perceive those outside [our scope of justice] as nonentities, undeserving, or expendable. Harm that befalls them does not prompt the concern, remorse, or outrage that occurs when those inside the scope of justice are harmed. (Opotow 1995: 347–348)

Morton Deutsch (2000) outlines a number of social and psychological conditions that may serve to propagate excluding attitudes. Moral exclusion of particular groups, he suggests, is often a means of providing a scapegoat upon whom to place the responsibility for economic hardship or political strife. The excluded group may be perceived as a threat (thus during the Rwandan genocide it was claimed that Hutus should kill their Tutsi neighbors in pre-emptive self-defense), or as inferior in terms of race, ethnicity, gender, or class, and thus persecuted because of a fear of contamination, or because of a perceived deviance from normalized standards of

appearance or behavior. Moral exclusion and dehumanization may also represent a form of displacement or projection: in psychological terms, the projection of disapproved aspects of the self onto others, through whom the unwanted elements are attacked or expelled (Deutsch 2000: 51). In his essay "Dehumanisation: An Integrative Review," psychologist Nick Haslam points to this phenomenon of placing onto the other that which cannot be accepted in the self; negative and excluding attitudes towards others, he suggests, are a means of confirming in our imagination our own humanity, contrasted with the perceived inhumanity of those seen as exhibiting "undesired" attributes, such as the "animality" of embodiment:

> Disgust enables us to avoid evidence of our animality, so representing others as animal-like may elicit the emotion. Contempt, a kindred emotion, plays a similar role, locating the other as below the self or in-group. (Haslam 2006: 258)

As William Gamson points out in his analysis of the politics of exclusion, the "*other-creating* process" is not limited to its extreme manifestations, but rather it has "certain tendencies and sub-processes that apply across the whole continuum [of exclusion]" (Gamson 1995: 17). Klaus Günther concurs, drawing our attention to dehumanization in the undramatic episodes of the day-to-day: in our attitudes towards certain criminals, or towards asylum seekers, or towards whomever the media chooses to present as "non-members of the community of human beings" (Günther 1999). While such systematic exclusion is in most cases a gradual process by which "over time, harms and dissimilarities eclipse benefits and similarities, gradually moving marginal groups outside the scope of justice" (Opotow 1995: 365), it is possible to identify active strategies of dehumanization, such as labeling, which occur not only in extreme cases but also in the everyday. As Kelman notes, the "traditions, the habits, the images and the vocabularies for dehumanization are already well established through everyday prejudice and labeling, and can thus be drawn upon when groups are selected for massacre" (Kelman 1973: 50). Haslam identifies two "metaphors of inhumanity" which often form part of active dehumanization processes: animalistic metaphor and mechanistic metaphor. These, in turn, correspond to two conceptual models of the human: "unique human" and "human nature". Animalistic metaphor, Haslam suggests, is a process of dehumanization whereby people perceived to be lacking in uniquely human characteristics such as rationality, civility, refinement, and moral sensibility are "seen implicitly or explicitly to be animal-like" (Haslam 2006: 257). Thus during the genocide in Rwanda the ethnic category of "Tutsi" was replaced in the discourse of the perpetrators with the signifier "cockroach", and survivors of Nazi persecution recall the daily insults of which they were the target: "blöde Schweine!", "blöde Hunde!" ("stupid pigs!", "stupid dogs!"). Images of prisoners at Abu Graib being lead naked on a leash, or of medical experiments in concentration camps, or of slaves held in cages, all serve as examples of the use of *physical* metaphor in dehumanizing practices: by treating the bodies of their victims as if they were animals, perpetrators reinforce the belief in their non-humanity. For Haslam, animalizing dehumanization – the denial and destruction of a person's sense of rationality, autonomy, and moral self – is a highly

embodied process, not only in the victim's experience but also in the emotional and psychological perceptions of the perpetrators:

> Being divested of [uniquely human] characteristics is a source of shame for the target – often with a prominent bodily component, as in the nakedness of the Abu Graib prisoners [. . .]. Disgust and revulsion feature prominently in images of animalistically dehumanized others: Represented as apes with bestial appetites or filthy vermin who contaminate or corrupt, they are often *viscerally* despised. (Haslam 2006: 258, my emphasis)

Haslam's second term, "human nature", is associated with qualities such as emotional responsiveness, interpersonal warmth, individuality, and agency, and corresponds to mechanistic dehumanization or objectification, whereby people are perceived as "object- or automaton-like" (Haslam 2006: 258). Again, the figure of the slave or the concentration camp victim serves to illustrate this metaphor in action: deprived of autonomous agency and choice, existing as an object of forced labor, as the Foucauldian "docile" body, these individuals are perceived by others and at times by themselves as mere machines, marching "like automatons" with "no words of defiance, not even a look of judgment" by which to assert their agency (Levi 1987: 156).

Dehumanization as moral exclusion functions in a circular, self-reflexive motion by which the perceived in/sub-humanity of the victim(s) is both the effect of and the justification for acts of humiliation, degradation and instrumentalization. The abject status of those degraded by exclusion serves in turn to justify the violence enacted upon them within a vicious circle characterized by what Opotow has called a "bidirectional causal relationship" (Opotow 1995: 350). As Kelman puts it: the process of dehumanization feeds upon itself (Kelman 1973: 50). Thus, as Primo Levi describes in his book "The Drowned and the Saved," former SS Officer and Commandant of Solibor and Treblinka concentration camps Franz Stangl explains the reason for the dehumanizing cruelties of Nazi persecutions:

> "Considering that you were going to kill them all . . . what was the point of the humiliation, the cruelties?" the writer asks Stangl, imprisoned for life in the Dusseldorf gaol, and he replies: "To condition those who were to be the material executors of the operations. To make it possible for them to do what they were doing." In other words: before dying the victim must be degraded, so that the murderer will be less burdened by guilt. This is an explanation not devoid of logic but which shouts to heaven: it is the sole usefulness of useless violence. (Levi 1989: 100–101)[1]

Dehumanization, then, is the process by which human beings are rendered so radically other that it becomes possible for their persecutors to commit murder on a mass scale, and for bystanders to stand by without objection or remorse. For this all the humiliations, defamations, starvations, degradations: the provision of a "false motive" (Scarry 1985) to the perpetrators of genocide, torture, and other gross atrocities. Like Agamben's "Homo Sacer," the dehumanized, the misrecognised, is one who can be killed with impunity because, already in exile from the moral community, his life counts for nothing (Agamben 1998: 71–115).

[1]The interview cited by Levi appears in Gitta Sereny's "In Quelle Tenebre" (Sereny 1975).

7.1.2 *The Lived Experience of Dehumanization or* This Is Not My Body*: Autonomy, Identity, and Dignity*

> I'm not human anymore. I have no name and even less soul. I'm a thing, not even a dog that gets stroked or a goat that gets protected and then eaten with gusto. I'm a vagina. I'm a hole. (Courtemanche 2003: 244)

This statement made by Gentille, the female protagonist of Gil Courtemanche's novel "A Sunday by the Pool in Kigali," provides readers with a sense of what dehumanization might mean for its victims. For this young Rwandan woman, dehumanization means the loss of identity and spirit. *I have no name and even less soul.* It is the loss of agency and recognition. *I'm a thing*, *not even a dog that gets stroked.* It is the loss of physical health, strength and beauty, and with that the presentiment of total dissolution. As Gentille comments later in the novel: *I'm a body that's decomposing.* It is also the loss of autonomy and voice: Rather than tell her own story, Gentille recites the narrative imposed upon her body by the authors of the crime to which she has fallen victim. Gentille's semi-fictional story recalls countless testimonial narratives of dehumanization in which victims are all too often reduced, through acts of physical and discursive or symbolic violence, to the status of objectified, fragmented, and abject bodies emptied of "human" subjectivity. What I would like to demonstrate by a reading of testimonial texts is the extent to which violations of human dignity and autonomy are so often inextricably linked to violations – both literal and symbolic – of corporeal integrity, which in turn impacts upon other core concepts such as identity, voice, and recognition. As Courtemanche most crucially portrays here, for its victims dehumanization involves a fragmentation of the self *and* of the body: In Gentille's own eyes, she is no longer whole, no more a unified person; she is a vagina, a body part; she is a hole, an *absence*. The *génocidaires* have not only made her into an object, they have also violated her sense of integrity, and the image of her decomposing, falling apart body-in-pieces mirrors that of her fragmented subjectivity.

Perhaps one of the best-known survivor writers to testify to the horror of the Nazi concentration camps is the Italian born chemist Primo Levi. In February 1944, Levi was deported and interned at Auschwitz, where he remained until the camp was liberated 11 months later. Levi's testimonial writing is so remarkable because, as Judith Kelly notes, it "concentrates upon the moment, the particular episode, the instant that epitomizes for him the nature of the concentration camp experience, the dehumanization of his state" (Kelly 2000: 6). One such moment takes place on the prisoners' arrival at the camp and demonstrates the devastating effect that the loss of personal and physical autonomy can exert upon victims. Having been taken from their homes and separated from their families and their possessions, Levi and his fellow prisoners are ordered to strip naked before their heads are shaved and their bodies "disinfected". For Levi, this violation of the prisoners' intimate, physical being instills in them the first knowledge that they have reached "the bottom" of human experience. The imposed ritual of physical transformation represents for Levi a kind of theft or expropriation of all that belongs to the prisoners, including

their own corporeality. As in slavery, the deportees are denied autonomy over their own bodies and deprived of their sense of self-ownership, reinforced by a loss of voice and lack of recognition from the guards: "they will not listen [. . .] they will not understand" (Levi 1987: 33). Dehumanization in the camps begins here and is forever marked by the loss of autonomy symbolized by acts of physical control. For Heinz Wollmann, survivor of Sachsenhausen concentration camp, the initiation constituted both a physical and a symbolic humiliation, and, combined with months or even years of starvation, disease, forced labor, and other horrors, it came to deprive victims of their personality, reducing them to a state of mute infancy, powerless to alter or even lament their situation. His testimony demonstrates how even apparently minor violations of physical integrity – the shaving of the head – can be felt as humiliating and dehumanizing because of what they come to represent, namely, the loss of personal and public autonomy:

> Then something I personally found really demeaning happened, they took away our personality. I was shaved completely bald, and I cried like a baby and just as naked, I was nothing anymore. At least babies can scream and kick. (Wollmann, Sachsenhausen Memorial Museum Audio Tour)

In these accounts of the lived experience of atrocity, in which both animalistic and mechanistic dehumanization are discerned, the victims' sense of individuality and self is jeopardized by forced acts of corporeal control and humiliation, indicating the extent to which corporeal integrity is connected with the concepts of autonomy, identity, and dignity upon which theories of modern subjectivity are based. For the torture victim, too, dehumanization is a process enacted on and through the body of the victim – a body that suffers, starves, and trembles in stark contrast to the strength and power of the torturer's body. For the victim of torture, physical pain and degradation carry with them intense psychological effect. As in the concentration camp, dehumanization of torture victims is to a large degree achieved through the denial of autonomy and the objectification of victims, but also, as Elaine Scarry describes in her enduring study "The Body in Pain," through the alienation of those victims from their own bodies. According to Scarry, physical pain is in itself a weapon of exclusion. A vital aspect of the loss of physical and psychical integrity in dehumanization processes lies in "the unseen sense of self-betrayal in pain." In moments of extreme physical suffering and humiliation, Scarry explains, the body comes to be felt more and more as the source of suffering, as an "active agent" of pain:

> The ceaseless, self-announcing signal of the body in pain [. . .] contains not only the feeling "my body hurts," but the feeling "my body hurts me." (Scarry 1985: 47)

In such instances, the victim's sense of self becomes fragmented: The persecuted body becomes persecutory, alien, other. The body, once a source of pleasure, becomes the source of torment, something to be feared, avoided, fled from. All good in the body, all solidarity in the flesh, is transformed into betrayal, and the prisoner is left in a paradoxical predicament, both detached from and consumed by his body, which "is made a weapon against him, made to betray him on behalf of the enemy, made to be the enemy" (Scarry 1985: 48).

A further dehumanizing effect of physical pain, Scarry suggests, lies in its language destroying capacity. Intense physical suffering is an unshareable and thus isolating experience, cutting its victims off from all forms of worldly extension including this most fundamental symbol of human community. Intense pain is inexpressible; resisting objectification in language, it cannot be spoken. Argentinean survivor Jacobo Timerman describes the pain of torture as "a pain without points of reference, revelatory symbols, or clues to serve as indicators" (Timerman 2002: 32). As Scarry writes:

> Physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned. (Scarry 1985: 4)

An episode from Alicia Partnoy's testimonial "The Little School" illustrates Scarry's observation. A survivor of torture under the Argentine military dictatorship, Partnoy recalls listening to another woman's desperate cries from within the prison. The effects of pain, fear, and humiliation upon this woman are so devastating that she appears disconnected from her own humanity, a condition communicated in her broken and distorted speech:

> But when they come for me . . . to kill me next time . . . No, please don't come . . . I'm not an animal . . . don't make me believe I'm an animal . . . but that's not my scream . . . That's an animal's scream . . . Leave my body in peace. (Partnoy 1988: 96)

If in psychoanalytic theory the birth of the subject coincides with the birth of language, then, here, linguistic paralysis is simultaneous with subjective destitution. Alienation from language, Scarry argues, is devastating for the victims, depriving them of the "final source of self-extension" (Scarry 1985: 33). In being refused access to the speech community and to the possibility of interlocution except with the torturer/interrogator, the torture victim – like the deportee – is denied the possibility of narrating his or her own life story. The act of confession represents the culmination of this loss and constitutes, in this sense, a moment of tragic resignation and self-abandonment in the victim; confession is "a way of saying, yes, all is almost gone, there is almost nothing left now, even this voice, the sounds I am making, no longer form my words but the words of another" (Scarry 1985: 33).

The destruction of language is linked to other "world-destroying" tactics evident in dehumanizing practices, in particular the use of symbolism and metaphor. Traditionally comforting or nurturing objects are "unmade" or transformed into agents of pain, with apparently benign names and expressions such as the "submarine" or "tea party for two" used to indicate even the most brutal acts of torture.[2] This corruption of everyday speech further unmakes the civilizing function of language, closing yet more rapidly the prisoner's space and means for worldly self-extension. The "circle of negation" produced by "the designation of an intensely painful form of bodily contortion with a word usually reserved for an instance of civilization"

[2]The "submarine", for example, refers to the torture method during which the prisoner is immersed to the point of drowning in water that is often dirtied with feces.

ends in a black hole of denial in which the humanity of the victim appears to be irretrievably lost:

> [T]here is no human being in excruciating pain; that's only a telephone; there is no telephone; that is merely a means of destroying a human being who is not a human being, who is only a telephone, who is not a telephone but a means of destroying a telephone. (Scarry 1985: 44)

This in turn enacts what Scarry calls the "double negation of humanity" – a denial both of the specific humanity of the victim and of the collective human present in the objects and language of civilization. The denial of voice, through the apparent reduction of the victim to the status of suffering body, devoid of metaphysical "human" characteristics, can be read both as a cause and an effect of the losses of dignity, autonomy, and identity – concepts which are themselves brought into question through their violation.

7.1.3 Perceptions of the (In)Human Body: Recognition as Resistance

Dehumanization, I suggest, is first and foremost a problem of (mis)perception. In order to murder, rape, and torture their victims, perpetrators must perceive those victims as sub- or inhuman, as outside the scope of moral responsibility. The violences enacted upon the body and person of the victim reinforce this (mis)perception in the perpetrator's mind, while all too often leading the victim him or herself to feel as if they were no longer part of the human community. The role of the bystander, who we have not yet discussed, also figures in this dynamic of perception. Let us try to think about this with the aid of the well-known visual trope: the atrocity triangle. In one corner of the triangle, the victim, to whom wrongs are done; in another corner, the perpetrator, who does harm to the victim; and in the third corner, the bystander or observer, who sees or knows what is happening. The role of each is crucial to the logic of dehumanization, for if all three perceive the victim as somehow in- or subhuman, then any possibility of an alternative narrative is excluded. The bystander is thus a decisive actor in the resistance of dehumanization, and the way in which he or she receives images or testimony of atrocity is a vital ethical concern; as Stanley Cohen has pointed out, the corners of the triangle are not fixed and the boundary between observer and perpetrator of dehumanization is often a fluid one (Cohen 2000: 14). The failure of the bystander, witness, or receiver of testimony to acknowledge the victim's experience, to listen to her story, and to recognize as human the traumatized body of atrocity is itself a reiteration of the logic of dehumanization encountered in magnified form in torture: Voice, recognition, and worldly self-extension are obscured behind the totality of the body in pain. Conversely, the observer's recognition of the victim as a member of the human community can provide the basis for a resistance or rejection of dehumanization: As in the brief moments of communication and solidarity between prisoners in the clandestine prison or the concentration camp, it offers victims (and

survivors) a corridor to identity, language, and voice. In this light, failing to *witness* the body in pain as integral to the subjective and psychological experience of suffering works to allow for oppression and the abuse of power, not only in the torture chamber, as Scarry describes, but also in the dehumanizing perceptions of the everyday. If dehumanization is an embodied process, then recognition must also take into account the corporeal aspects of human (and inhuman) experience. How to give voice to the traumatized body is a question wracked with complications and controversy. Any attempt to "lift the interior facts of bodily sentience out of the inarticulate pre-language of 'cries and whispers' into the realm of shared objectification" (Scarry 1985: 11) will depend upon the prefigured perceptions of that body's interlocutor(s). Let us consider then what the roots of our prefigured perceptions of the body may be.

In dominant modern philosophical discourse, the body has figured as an abject entity, secondary or even irrelevant to the construction of a human subject that is posited as rational, autonomous, and largely disembodied. Thus, it is claimed, historically oppressed groups such as women, slaves, non-white, and disabled people have been categorized in dominant discourse as "too fully embodied" and somehow less than human, uncivilized or irrational. One of the major contributions of feminist scholarship has been to highlight (and contest), firstly, the ways in which "woman" has been culturally and politically designated as less than fully human and, secondly, the extent to which this dehumanization depends upon negative discourses of the body, as well as philosophical constructions of the human subject as disembodied. Feminist theorist Elisabeth Grosz makes the connection clear:

> Patriarchal oppression [. . .] justifies itself, at least in part, by connecting women much more closely than men to the body [. . .]. [W]omen are somehow *more* biological, *more* corporeal, *more* natural than men. The coding of femininity with corporeality in effect leaves men free to inhabit what they (falsely) believe is a purely conceptual order. (Grosz 1994: 14)

The feminist argument draws attention to mind/body dualism as the basis upon which modern notions of human subjectivity have been built. The construction of embodied female otherness, it is suggested, is precisely that which allows man to regard himself – the universal "self" – as a stable, thinking being. Such binaristic devaluing of the body, of course, has implications not only for women, but for various groups and individuals historically and culturally associated with symbols of abject embodiment. This includes victims of dehumanizing atrocity, whose traumatized bodies, in their failure to conform to the norm of the stable, bounded subject, threaten to disrupt the ontological and epistemological matrices to the margins of which they have been so violently thrust. This presents as a fundamental paradox in human rights discourse, for while any practical endeavor of human rights to protect human beings will nearly always, in some form, work to protect the *bodies* of human beings, in discursive terms the "subject" of human rights is almost always articulated as disembodied – the universal declaration stating the human condition in the most abstract terms as "equal in rights and dignity" and "endowed with reason and

conscience," but without a single reference to corporeality. Our moral relation to the suffering other is thus rarely, if ever, phrased in terms of embodied inter-subjectivity. And yet what is ethics if it is not embodied? However hard it tries, ethical theory cannot sustain itself purely in the realm of the metaphysical; it must always return in the end to the lived experience of human beings. In the same way, any attempt to resist dehumanization, whether materially or conceptually, must recognize the embodiment of the human subject. Holocaust survivor Robert Antelme draws attention in his testimony to the impossibility of resisting dehumanization simply by "re-humanizing" victims of atrocity – re-attributing to them abstract qualities such as autonomy, personality or dignity. For Antelme, the only viable resistance to dehumanization is to alter our understanding of the human, since "to locate humanity in positive qualities or capacities is to repeat the logic of the camps, by excluding from this humanity those stripped of such qualities or capacities" (qtd. in Crowley 2003: 10).

Human dignity is a particularly significant concept in this regard. Highly abstract, it has taken on an almost mystical nature within modern moral discourse. A key ideological concept in what Elie Wiesel has called the secular religion of human rights, human dignity is difficult to define, seeming somehow to encapsulate any number of moral and ontological propositions, from Kant's categorical imperative to the ideals of liberal autonomy and moral agency. Rarely is it expressed in relation to embodied subjectivity, however. Posited as an innate or universal human quality, dignity has been shown through historical experience to be a fragile ideal. To return to our atrocity triangle: if victim, perpetrator, and bystander each perceive an absence or loss of human dignity in the victim, does it still exist? Of course, we would like to answer yes. And yet, we can and do perceive or treat people as if it were absent. The violations of human dignity already described in this volume exist on a continuum with dehumanization; if I degrade, humiliate, or instrumentalize another person, I am also to some extent denying or belittling their status as a human being. While an individual violation of human dignity is always also potentially dehumanizing, purposive acts of dehumanization enact a double negation of human dignity, both in the particular and in the universal: The very possibility of dehumanization threatens to destabilize the *ideal* of human dignity as we currently understand it. But what happens when we think dignity as embodied? We may speak about the dignity of the body, which is violated through acts of torture, humiliation, or coercion, as illustrated in the testimonials discussed. From here we may establish the imperative to recognize the position of the body within processes and narratives of dehumanization. To truly think dignity as embodied, however, implies more than this: it involves a re-imagining of the human so as to include within its category that which was hitherto excluded. It involves bearing witness to the body as part of human as well as inhuman experience, thereby refusing to accept bodily suffering and abjection as dehumanizing. If dignity is embodied, then it is inclusive of pleasure and suffering, beauty and disease, strength and vulnerability, life and death. If dignity is embodied then it is local as well as universal; always situated, it cannot be understood as distinct from the individual who carries it, and any defense

of dignity must acknowledge and recognize the specificity of its circumstance. To respect the embodied dignity of a human being, therefore, is first and foremost an act of recognition: to recognize as human every aspect of their experience, however abject and foreign it may seem, to acknowledge the specificity of their person, and by doing so to affirm the place of the other alongside the self within the human community.

7.2 Conclusion

As this necessarily limited reading of a vast resource of testimonial and theoretical texts should help us to understand, dehumanization – whether enacted through processes of active or indirect exclusion, metaphorical objectification, or physical violence – depends to some extent upon experiences and/or perceptions of the body and embodiment. Metaphors of inhumanity are, as we have seen, frequently constructed in relation to the corporeal status of the targets of dehumanizing processes. The concentration camp victim is reduced through violences and humiliations to the status of an empty body or walking corpse; the torture victim is alienated from language as well as from her own body as a result of intense unshareable pain. This state of embodied suffering is perceived as confirmation of that which perpetrators claim as vindication for the injustices: It is "proof" of their victim's inhumanity. And yet, if dehumanization depends upon our perceptions of what it is to be human, then we may all play a role in resisting – or at the very least not repeating – its logic of exclusion. This requires a rethinking of the human that demystifies and embodies those abstract concepts that can be denied in our perception, including human dignity. As Giorgio Agamben writes in "Remnants of Auschwitz," the Muselmann's destitution from such positive "human" qualities as "dignity" must be seen not as proof of the victims' inhumanity, but as evidence of the inadequacy of ethical concepts of the human:

> If there is a zone of the human in which these concepts make no sense, then they are not genuine ethical concepts, for no ethics can claim to exclude a part of humanity, no matter how unpleasant or difficult that humanity is to see. (Agamben 2002: 64)

Thinking dignity as embodied calls for a politics or ethics of witnessing that acknowledges and listens to the lived experience of those who have been excluded and dehumanized both past and present; it calls for us all, as bystanders and spectators of suffering, to attend to the concrete and individual humanity of the one who suffers and to reclaim, through recognition, their status as member of the human community. To be human, as those who have suffered the effects of dehumanization will testify, is first and foremost to be included within the community of human beings, to be recognized and accepted as part of this community and thus deserving of its protection. This recognition must occur on the concrete as well as the metaphysical level; our own humanity – always embodied, always situated, and at times suffering – depends upon it.

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