What is Humanity?

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Daniel Chernilo's *Debating Humanity* (Chernilo, 2017) is a defiantly old-fashioned defence of humanism, universalism, and the need for a philosophical sociology. It is densely argued, rigorously coherent, it engages thoroughly and respectfully with the authors it discusses, and it carefully builds a provocative larger argument. Sociology and philosophy are deeply interwoven in it: the thinkers he draws on come equally from both. Each chapter both engages in depth with a crucial thinker from the last century and uses that thinker's work to examine an aspect of what it is that makes us all (equally) human. For Chernilo, humanity depends on both our physiological and our intellectual properties (233), but his focus here is on those qualities that make us inherently social beings, from language (approached through Habermas), through responsibility (Jonas), to the reflexive consideration of our plans (Archer). These shared qualities not only define our shared humanity but also enable us to reflect on questions of value (234) and thus define us as essentially moral beings: "These anthropological traits" he says, "define us as members of the same species and are the basis from which ideas of justice, self, dignity and the good life emerge" (1).

He begins with the dispute between Sartre and Heidegger in the late 1940s, using it to distinguish between humanism and anthropocentrism, and thus to defend the humanist principle that all humans matter (against Heidegger) while rejecting the anthropocentric conclusion that *only* humans matter (against Sartre). His sympathies certainly lie more with Sartre than Heidegger and a key theme is his rejection of Heidegger's argument "that is now

ubiquitous in the literature: he *blames* the humanism of Western metaphysics for the contemporary crises of modern society" (38). Heidegger's position, as Chernilo makes clear, is firmly located in his historical circumstances, and designed at least in part to deflect attention from his involvement with the Nazis. In a perverse twist of logic, Heidegger seems to think he can blame humanism for the dehumanisation by the Nazis of the groups they consigned to the concentration camps and the gas chambers (46-50).

Chernilo briefly connects this position to contemporary debates in posthumanism, which has sometimes (e.g. in the work of Braidotti) adopted the Heidegger-influenced position that humanism "is nothing but the violent and exclusionary master-ideology of the West that encapsulates all that is wrong with modernity" (14). His discussion of posthumanism is regrettably brief, but he still makes clear that posthumanism in practice employs a kind of humanism – Chernilo's kind! – to mount its critique of what it *calls* humanism: "the intrinsically racist, violent and exclusionary ideology of white, adult heterosexual and bourgeois men who have exported themselves violently the world over" (15). I would like to have seen this constructively critical engagement with posthumanism made into a more substantial focus of the book but perhaps this is something he will return to. There are multiple productive avenues to be developed here, notably that claims to humanism are ideologically powerful precisely *because* they echo our sense of who and what we are, and that they have been repeatedly employed to cover thoroughly anti-humanist structures and policies, from patriarchy and slavery through to modern racism, by excluding their targets from the category of *human*. The problem here is not a universalistic humanism, but the misappropriation of the rhetoric of humanism to legitimate oppression, often supported by a rhetoric of just *who* it is that counts as fully human. To the extent that critiques of exclusionary 'humanisms' are moves to include *more* people within the category deserving of moral protection, they are humanisms themselves, though often in denial of that. Such denials undermine their moral coherence.

One might expect a sociologist to counter that humanism is *inseparable* from rhetorics of who counts, but what Chernilo is constructing – what he calls a philosophical anthropology – is a kind of *ontology* of the human, an enumeration of at least some of the qualities that make us what we are. With such an ontology, perhaps, we might at last be able to separate the human from the non-human in a way that does not depend on flimsy and biased rhetorical foundations. One way to do that would be to look at the physical structures and features that are characteristically human and use these to delineate our humanity, but for Chernilo and I suspect for many of his readers, it is our social and intellectual capacities that make us distinctively human, distinctively

moral, and distinctively deserving of moral protection. Those capacities may rest on our physical structure and features, but they are emergent from them – and emergent, too, from the ways in which the larger social structures of which we are part feed back to influence what kinds of beings we are. As Chernilo puts it, "the sociological centrality of structure and agency is sustained by the fact that *it is constitutive of the human condition itself*" (182). The humans of any plausible humanism are humans enmeshed in and shaped by social life and structures.

This discussion of structure and agency brings Chernilo into contact with social ontology as it is practised by critical realists and indeed a range of other philosophical tendencies within the social sciences – scholars, incidentally who are already conducting a philosophical sociology, although a somewhat different variety of it. This raises the question of the relation between his philosophical anthropology and these other traditions, and in particular the question of whether philosophical anthropology is a variety of social ontology, or in conflict with social ontology, or simply different and perhaps potentially complementary. Perhaps the answer to this question might vary for different versions of philosophical anthropology, but for me, Chernilo's philosophical anthropology is largely a variety of social ontology – although one that productively expands our attention beyond the usual questions that social ontologists consider. He asks what are the distinctive capacities of humans, and gives a rich account of them that recognises that these capacities are both founded in our materiality as beings with bodies and brains but also shaped by our interactions with the social world. I would argue that some of these capacities, in causal terms, are really capacities of larger social structures that are implemented through the human beings that are their parts, though always dependant on the continuing contingent involvement of those humans and thus their reflexive choices. Language, for example, is ultimately a product of larger social groups that I have called linguistic circles, although the consequence is that these groups confer an enhanced capacity to communicate on their members (Elder-Vass, 2012, pp. 100–120). Chernilo's focus, however, is not on causality but on ethics (188) and this affects the elements of the ontology of the human on which he focuses, and the angle from which he views them.

This step from ontology – or philosophical anthropology – to ethics, however, is fraught with difficulty (Elder-Vass, 2010). Consider his discussion of Boltanski's work on abortion. He cites with approval Boltanski's desire to move the debate away from the question of when human life starts and towards, instead, a more fundamental question: "what is, and how do we acknowledge socially, a life that is indeed human" (207)? But already the moral quicksands beckon. Is the argument to be that foetuses are not yet human because they lack the social

capacities required to be human and therefore can be aborted without qualms? And if so, what is there to prevent the extension of the argument to others who are unable to participate fully in human sociality? Or is it to be that they are *capable* of becoming human and thus abortion is never acceptable? Wisely perhaps, neither Boltanski nor Chernilo, having raised the question, delivers a clear cut answer (219-220).

The problem, I suggest, is that complex moral problems can never be solved by the application of a single principle to a single object of concern – here, the foetus. All actual moral problems of any significance require us to balance multiple considerations, and in this case the most obvious balancing that must be done is between the needs and moral rights of the foetus on the one hand and the needs and moral rights of the woman carrying it on the other. Legal solutions based on the time since conception may seem arbitrary, but they are a practical solution to the need to strike this balance, and the question of when a life "is indeed human" does not provide a route to an ethically viable alternative. An ethics based on recognising the moral worth of all humans is only a starting point for real ethical debate, which must always balance the needs and rights of *different* humans (and indeed non-humans, once we reject anthropocentrism). It may sometimes be a decisive consideration, but there can be no *a priori* assumption that it will be.

But at least Chernilo sees these questions as *belonging* in sociology, and sees critical sociology as something to be addressed by explicit consideration of our values and their roots. He brings philosophy into sociology in order to engage sociology with the normative. Not for him the cryptonormativity criticised by Sayer: "much of [critical social science] just gives the reader a vague negative feeling about the phenomena being analysed, but does not attempt to say in what particular respects and for what reasons they are problematic" (Sayer, 2011, p. 229). This comes through particularly clearly in his discussion of Boltanski's critique of Bourdieu. Bourdieu, according to Boltanski and other critics, thinks of social scientists as capable of normative critique, while denying ordinary actors the "anthropological competences" that make this possible (225). Boltanksi's work is premised on almost the opposite position: ordinary actors are capable of judgement and critique and it is the work of the social scientist to describe and analyse how they go about it – but not to engage in normative critique themselves (227)! For a realist humanist (such as Chernilo or myself), by contrast, both ordinary actors and social scientists are human beings with roughly the same set of anthropological competences. Both are capable of critique, and both are entitled to put forward normative arguments. And if sociologists *do* put forward normative arguments, they have a responsibility to explain the basis upon which they believe they are justified: hence the need for a philosophical sociology.

In a sense, *Debating Humanity* is a version of what Bhaskar calls immanent critique (Bhaskar, 1975): it strongly suggests that even when sociologists reject humanism their work depends on treating humans as sharing many or all of the anthropological capacities he enumerates (184-5). Sociological anti-humanism, if this is true, is incoherent, and so the question for us is not "humanist or anti-humanist?", but rather "what kind of humanist?" and "where does humanism take us?"

References

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Biographical note

Dave Elder-Vass is a Reader in Sociology at Loughborough University, UK. His latest book *Profit and Gift in the Digital Economy* (Cambridge University Press, 2016) theorises appropriative practices, economic diversity and their implications for social theory and politics. He has also published extensively on social ontology and social theory from a critical realist perspective, including *The Causal Power of Social Structures* (Cambridge University Press, 2010) and *The Reality of Social Construction* (Cambridge University Press, 2012).