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Assaulting 'diversity as such': The ontology of dehumanisation in mass violence

Torsten Michel*

School of Sociology, Politics and International Studies (SPAIS), University of Bristol, Bristol, United Kingdom
*Corresponding author. Email: torsten.michel@bristol.ac.uk

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Abstract

Dehumanisation is one of the most invoked factors in analyses of mass atrocities with many scholars focusing on its crucial role in enabling perpetrators to inflict violence on their victims. However, while its application is widespread, its relevance is often assumed *a priori*, with claims regarding its empirical relevance often asserted rather than argued for. Not only does its meaning, nature, and function remain amorphous, current scholarship also lacks a general conceptualisation of the basic features that bind the manifold appearances of dehumanisation together. It is this paucity of sustained reflection and particularly the lack of conceptual clarity that the present article seeks to address. Drawing on the work of Hannah Arendt, it aims to deliver a more thoroughgoing appraisal of the nature of dehumanisation as a fundamental violation of plurality to conceptually consolidate and ground its meaning and bind together its diverse manifestations across cases of mass violence.

Keywords: Dehumanisation; Genocide; Human Condition and Mass Violence; Hannah Arendt

Introduction

The notion of 'dehumanisation' is an often-invoked factor in analyses of politically motivated mass violence to the extent that '[w]hen violence becomes excessive, it is common to explain it with reference to dehumanization.'[1] It is most often perceived as a process by which perpetrators come to disregard the human status of their victims, enabling them to commit crimes that would be unthinkable against human beings.[2] Indeed, victims of mass atrocities themselves invoke the notion of dehumanisation to capture the extraordinary levels of cruelty and depravity they suffer at the hand of perpetrators.[3] Even perpetrators make frequent references to the process of dehumanisation,[4] indicating that while committing their crimes they, fuelled by the prevailing ideological propaganda,[5] did no longer perceive victims as human and hence were able to commit

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[1] Johannes Lang, 'Questioning dehumanization: Intersubjective dimensions of violence in Nazi concentration and death camps', *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, 24:2 (2010), p. 236.

[2] Herbert C. Kelman, 'Violence without moral restraint: Reflections on the dehumanization of victims and victimisers', *Journal of Social Issues*, 29:4 (1973), pp. 48–52; see also Albert Bandura et al., 'Disinhibition of aggression through diffusion of responsibility and dehumanization of victims', *Journal of Research in Personality*, 9 (1975), pp. 253–69.

[3] Primo Levi, *If This Is a Man/The Truce* (London, UK: Abacus, 1987), p. 118.

[4] David Livingstone Smith, *On Inhumanity: On Dehumanization and How to Resist It* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2020), p. 9; see also David Livingstone Smith, 'Paradoxes of dehumanization', *Social Theory and Practice*, 42:2 (2016), p. 416.

[5] Livingstone Smith, 'Paradoxes of dehumanization', p. 434.

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the crimes they did.[6] Consequently, '[t]he idea that dehumanization is an essential element in genocidal conflicts is now almost a truism …'.[7]

However, while its application is widespread, its relevance is often assumed intuitively and *a priori*, leading to shortcomings and omissions that leave its meaning, nature, and function in episodes of mass violence amorphous, empirically and conceptually. Indeed, while references to dehumanisation abound, 'there has not been much research into the nature of dehumanization.'[8] Resulting from this dearth of actual research, we have recently seen the emergence of critiques that question the conceptual soundness and empirical relevance of dehumanisation in instances of mass violence.[9]

It is this paucity of research and particularly the lack of conceptual clarity that the present article seeks to address. It aims to deliver a more thoroughgoing appraisal of the nature of dehumanisation as a fundamental violation of plurality to conceptually consolidate and ground its meaning and bind together its diverse manifestations across cases of mass violence. To develop such a conceptual grounding, the article proceeds in four steps. Firstly, it begins with an overview of the main conceptions of dehumanisation – moral, cognitive, discursive, behavioural, and institutional – and the critiques that question its conceptual coherence and empirical relevance in cases of mass violence. The second section, drawing on Martin Heidegger's distinction between 'ontic' and 'ontological' levels of analysis, identifies two connected but distinct dimensions of conceptual engagement in response to these critiques: dehumanisation in its specific manifestations on the one hand and the nature of its general character on the other. It locates the main conceptual weakness in current accounts of dehumanisation in a lack of engagement with the 'ontological' level of analysis. To correct this omission, the third section turns to the work of Hannah Arendt and outlines an 'ontological' conception of dehumanisation by engaging anew with the central question of what it means to be human. While Arendt's work is much referenced in the wider area of the study of war and violence,[10] very few references are made to her insights in the literature on dehumanisation.[11] Bringing her wider thoughts on collective violence to the subject of dehumanisation, the article delineates the elements of humanness that are the target of dehumanising processes to achieve a more systematic and coherent 'ontological' description of its central characteristics. Finally, the last section offers reflections on how this new conceptualisation can aid our understanding of dehumanisation during mass violence, 'ontologically' and 'ontically'. Before this new 'ontological' conceptualisation can be developed, however, it seems prudent to provide a brief overview of the existing accounts and critiques of dehumanisation in the literature on mass violence.

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[6] David Livingstone Smith, *Making Monsters: The Uncanny Power of Dehumanization* (Cambridge, UK: Harvard University Press, 2021), p. xi.

[7] Nick Haslam, 'The many roles of dehumanization in genocide', in Leonard S. Newman (ed.), *Confronting Humanity at its Worst: Social Psychological Perspectives on Genocide* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2020), p. 119. See also Neil J. Kressel, *Mass Hate: The Global Rise of Genocide and Terror* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2002), p. 172 and Harriet Over, 'Seven challenges for the dehumanization hypothesis', *Perspectives of Psychological Science*, 16:1 (2021), p. 3.

[8] Livingstone Smith, *Making Monsters*, p. xiii.

[9] Over, 'Seven challenges', pp. 3–13; Lang, 'Questioning dehumanization', pp. 225–46; Johannes Lang, 'The limited importance of dehumanization in collective violence', *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 35 (2020), pp. 17–20; Nicolas Mariot, 'On the role of dehumanization of victims in the perpetration of mass killings', *Violence: An International Journal*, 1:1 (2020), pp. 102–22; Harriet Over, 'Falsifying the dehumanization hypothesis', *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 16:1 (2021), pp. 33–8.

[10] See, for example, Patricia Owens, *Between War and Politics: International Relations and the Thought of Hannah Arendt* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2007); Richard H. King and Dan Stone (eds), *Hannah Arendt and the Uses of History: Imperialism, Nation, Race and Genocide* (New York, NY: Berghahn Books, 2007); Bernard J. Bergen, *The Banality of Evil: Hannah Arendt and the 'Final Solution'* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998) and Patrick Hayden, *Political Evil in a Global Age: Hannah Arendt and International Theory* (London, UK and New York, NY: Routledge, 2009).

[11] Notable exceptions include Johannes Lang, 'Explaining genocide: Hannah Arendt and the social-scientific concept of dehumanization', in Peter Baehr and Philip Walsh (eds), *The Anthem Companion to Hannah Arendt* (London, UK: Anthem Press, 2017), pp. 175–95 and Luigi Corias, 'Crimes against humanity, dehumanization and rehumanization: Reading the case of Duch with Hannah Arendt', *Canadian Journal of Law and Jurisprudence*, 29:2 (2016), pp. 351–70.

Dehumanisation and mass violence: A critical appraisal

Within the wider remit of the social sciences and humanities, research on dehumanisation has seen various approaches to situate and understand this phenomenon in a variety of contexts.[12] Many of those approaches address what has been termed 'subtle' forms of dehumanisation, covering instances where seeing others as non-human occurs in indirect and even subconscious manners. Social psychology in particular has developed one of the most consolidated research agendas on forms of milder, everyday occurrences of dehumanisation – termed infrahumanisation.[13] In relation to more overt, conscious, and direct forms of framing and perceiving others as non-human – often termed 'blatant' dehumanisation – that are prevalent in episodes of mass violence, however, we find a much less established research agenda.[14] As a result, its treatment remains lacking in both depth and coherence compared to the much more consolidated research on subtle dehumanisation.[15]

Current understandings of blatant dehumanisation

This uneven engagement has left research into blatant dehumanisation in an ambiguous position. On the one hand, references to this overt form of dehumanisation abound in empirical studies of particular cases[16] where it is often perceived as crucial for perpetrators in helping to overcome the natural inhibition in humans to kill their own kind.[17] On the other hand, more general conceptual reflections on its central characteristics remain rare with only very few attempts to illuminate its constitutive parts.[18]

Furthermore, the literature that currently addresses instances of blatant dehumanisation is characterised by a considerable diversity of meanings of and means by which dehumanisation manifests itself.[19] In these accounts it either appears as a *deus ex machina* that is being invoked as a self-evident explanatory factor, or, across more sophisticated engagements, it is presented in multiple and competing understandings. Among those, one can identify five prominent approaches to dehumanisation. Firstly, *moral* dehumanisation, which sees the exclusion of victims from the universe of moral obligation as the key characteristic of denying humanness.[20] In this view, dehumanisation places victims outside the accepted normative order creating a situation where 'principles of morality no longer apply … and moral restraints against killing are more readily overcome.'[21] Secondly, *cognitive* dehumanisation addressing the lack of perception of victims as fully human by perpetrators.[22] In such accounts dehumanisation 'is something that happens inside people's heads'[23] and is manifest as a 'cognitive bias'[24] expressing itself in the denial of essential human traits in the victims.[25] A third approach focuses on the *discursive* nature of dehumanisation, which foregrounds the construction of non-human victim identities in ideological, propagandistic, or everyday language.[26] As a 'discursive strategy',[27] it provides the basis for the motivation of perpetrators to commit violence and the ground on which such violence can be legitimised.[28] Fourthly, we find accounts of *behavioural* dehumanisation that capture the different forms of action brought upon the persecuted victim group 'which [perpetrators] dehumanize by torture and slaughter'.[29] Here, dehumanisation is expressed in corporeal practices of persecution[30] rather than the thoughts or discourses of perpetrators, in some cases to the point where dehumanisation becomes an effect of this violence rather than its enabling condition.[31] Finally, some authors have identified *structural* or *institutionalised* dehumanisation as crucial in cases of mass violence. These accounts highlight that the bureaucratic administration that oversees and organises the persecution of victims leads to the '*dehumanization of the objects of bureaucratic operation*; the possibility to express these objects in purely technical, ethically neutral terms'.[32] The reduction of victims to purely quantitative units, handled or disposed of with as much efficiency and as few resources as possible, occurs long before the scenes of physical brutality most often associated with dehumanisation and furthers conditions leading to disenfranchisement and 'social death' as key manifestations of dehumanisation.[33]

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[12] For a wide-ranging overview, see, for instance, Maria E. Kronfeldner (ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of Dehumanization* (London, UK and New York, NY: Routledge, 2021).

[13] Nick Haslam et al., 'Humanness, dehumanization, and moral psychology', in Mario Mikulincer and Phillip R. Shaver (eds), *The Social Psychology of Morality: Exploring the Causes of Good and Evil* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2012), p. 204; Paul Bain et al., 'Attributing human uniqueness and human nature to cultural groups: Distinct forms of subtle dehumanization', *Group Processes and Intergroup Relations*, 12:6 (2009), pp. 789–805.

[14] While the initial focus in social psychology engaged with violent conflict, (see for instance Kelman, 'Violence without moral restraint', pp. 25–61), it shifted to everyday instances around 2000 with the rise of infrahumanisation research initiated by Leyens. See, for example, Jacques-Philippe Leyens et al., 'Infra-humanization: The wall of group differences', *Social Issues and Policy Review*, 1:1 (2007), pp. 139–72 and Nick Haslam and Steve Loughnan, 'Dehumanization and infrahumanization', *Annual Review of Psychology*, 65 (2014), p. 402.

[15] Nour Kteily et al., 'The ascent of man: Theoretical and empirical evidence for blatant dehumanization', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 109:5 (2015), p. 902; see also Nour S. Kteily and Emile Bruneau, 'Darker demons of our nature: The need to (re)focus attention to blatant forms of dehumanization', *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 26:6 (2017), pp. 487–8.

[16] See, for example, Maureen S. Hiebert, 'The three "switches" of identity construction in genocide: The Nazi final solution and the Cambodian killing fields', *Genocide Studies and Prevention*, 3:1 (2008), pp. 5–29; John Hagan and Wenona Rymond-Richmond, 'The collective dynamics of racial dehumanization and genocidal victimization in Darfur', *American Sociological Review*, 73:6 (2008), pp. 875–902; Jade Munslow Ong, '"I'm only a dog!": The Rwandan genocide, dehumanization, and the graphic novel', *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 51:2 (2016), pp. 211–25; Lisa Haagensen and Marnix Croes, 'Thy brother's keeper? The relationship between social distance and intensity of dehumanization during genocide', *Genocide Studies and Prevention*, 7:2/3 (2012), pp. 223–50; Aniuska M. Luna, 'Cultural dehumanization of Holocaust testimonials', *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology*, 24:2 (2018), pp. 250–4; Nicole Ephgrave, 'On women's bodies: Experiences of dehumanization during the Holocaust', *Journal of Women's History*, 28:2 (2016), pp. 12–32; Johannes Steizinger, 'The significance of dehumanization: Nazi ideology and its psychological consequences', *Politics, Religion & Ideology*, 19:2 (218), pp. 139–57; David Yanagizawa-Drott, 'Propaganda and conflict: Evidence from the Rwandan genocide', *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 129:4 (2014), pp. 1947–94.

[17] Kelman, 'Violence without moral restraint', p. 48; Tage S. Rai et al., 'Dehumanization increases instrumental violence, but nor moral violence', *PNAS*, 114:32 (2017), p. 8515; Alexander Alvarez, 'Adjusting to genocide: The techniques of neutralization and the Holocaust', *Social Science History*, 21:2 (1997), pp. 144, 166–8.

[18] See, for instance, Aniuska M. Luna, 'The components of dehumanization', *Peace and Conflict Studies*, 22:1 (2015), pp. 20–30.

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[19] Haslam and Loughnan, 'Dehumanization and infrahumanization', pp. 404–10.

[20] See, for example, Susan Opotow, 'Moral exclusion and injustice: An introduction', *Journal of Social Issues*, 46:1 (1990), pp. 1–20; Daniel Bar-Tal, 'Causes and consequences of delegitimization: Models of conflict and ethnocentrism', *Journal of Social Issues*, 46:1 (1990), pp. 65–81 and Kelman, 'Violence without moral restraint', pp. 25–61. See also Omar Shahabudin McDoom, 'Radicalization as cause and consequence of violence in genocides and mass killings', *Violence: An International Journal*, 1:1 (2020), p. 126; Alexander Laban Hinton, *Why Did They Kill? Cambodia in the Shadow of Genocide* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press 2005), pp. 86, 281, 288; and Kressel, *Mass Hate*, p. 172.

[21] Kelman, 'Violence without moral restraint', p. 48.

[22] See, for example, Nick Haslam, 'Dehumanization: An integrative review', *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 10:3 (2006), pp. 252–64; Livingstone Smith, *Making Monsters*, p. 9; Nick Haslam et al., 'Attributing and denying humanness to others', *European Review of Social Psychology*, 19:1 (2008), pp. 55–85; Lasana T. Harris and Susan T. Fiske, 'Dehumanized perception: A psychological means to facilitate atrocities, torture, and genocide?', *Journal of Psychology*, 219:3 (2011), pp. 175–81.

[23] Livingstone Smith, *Making Monsters*, p. 9.

[24] Harris and Fiske, 'Dehumanized perception', p. 175.

[25] See, for instance, Nick Haslam et al., 'Dehumanization: A new perspective', *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, 1:1 (2007), pp. 409–22, who distinguishes between animalistic dehumanisation denying human uniqueness attributes and mechanistic dehumanisation, which denies victims human nature attributes.

[26] Rowan Savage, 'Modern genocidal dehumanization: A new model', *Patters of Prejudice*, 47:2 (2013), pp. 139–61; see also Cristian Tileaga, 'Ideologies of moral exclusion: A critical discursive reframing of depersonalization, delegitimization and dehumanization', *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 46:4 (2007), pp. 717–37. See also Yanagizawa-Drott, 'Propaganda and conflict', pp. 1954, 1956.

[27] Savage, 'Modern genocidal dehumanization', p. 144.

[28] Ibid., pp. 156–60.

[29] Madelaine Hron, 'Gukora and Itsembatsemba: The "ordinary killer" in Jean Hatzfeld's machete season', *Research in African Literatures*, 42:2 (2011), p. 140.

[30] Sophie Oliver, 'Dehumanization: Perceiving the body as (in)human', in Paulus Kaufmann et al. (eds), *Humiliation, Degradation, Dehumanization: Human Dignity Violated* (Heidelberg: Springer, 2011), pp. 90–3; see also Ephgrave, 'On women's bodies', pp. 12–32.

[31] Aliza Luft, 'Toward a dynamic theory of action at the micro level of genocide: Killing, distance, and saving in 1994 Rwanda', *Sociological Theory*, 33:2 (2015), p. 164; Kelman, 'Violence without moral restraint', p. 50.

Dehumanisation and its critics

Despite a burgeoning literature emphasising the salience of these manifestations of dehumanisation, recent critiques have raised a number of important substantial challenges, both empirically and conceptually. While early critics such as Leo Kuper already raised doubts in the late 1980s,[34] more recent critics offer more detailed empirical and conceptual analyses. They establish clear limitations to the use of dehumanisation as a crucial element in occurrences of mass violence arguing that 'although the dehumanization hypothesis is prima facie reasonable and indeed intuitively compelling, it does not withstand scrutiny.'[35] To begin with, critics point out that in various instances perpetrator violence, to be effective, must continue to assume the humanity of victims.[36] Indeed, in their persecution it is often 'precisely the human, or intersubjective, qualities of the violent interaction that provided the violence with much of its meaning'.[37] The intuitive assumption that such violence could not occur without perpetrators having denied human status of their victims does not hold up against empirical evidence as common forms of harm and abuse frequently observed during episodes of mass violence, show that 'victims of atrocities are humiliated and tortured because their abusers at least implicitly recognize their humanity.'[38] Indeed, some forms of violence require the explicit recognition of the human status of victims as they are designed 'to harm victims who deserve it, can experience it fully, and understand its meaning. To do so, … victims must be capable of thinking and having intentions, feeling pain and other sensations, and experiencing moral emotions –they must be human.'[39] Characterising such violence as dehumanising may serve a moral purpose for observers and analysts to reject and condemn the appalling cruelty brought to bear upon victims.[40] It does, however, fail to recognise that analytically, the relations between perpetrators and victims are more complex than often assumed with '[g]rounds for skepticism [being] compounded by the fact that those who characterize their victims as nonhuman animals also describe [and behave towards] them in ways that are uniquely applicable to human beings.'[41] In a detailed study tracing the engagement of members of the *Einsatzgruppen* with their victims shortly before murdering them, Nicolas Mariot, for instance, has demonstrated that in the perfidious intimacy and close proximity of perpetrators and victims 'it becomes difficult to imagine that the killers could have maintained any fiction of inhumanity while watching the scenes unfolding before their eyes.'[42] Especially in instances where killers established some connection with victims, be it that they recognised each other, that victims addressed them directly in German, came from the same town or reminded perpetrators of their own private circumstances, does Mariot discover manners and ways of interaction on the part of perpetrators that affirm and display the recognition of the human status of those to be killed.[43]

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[32] Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1991), p. 102, emphasis in original; see also Stewart Clegg, 'Bureaucracy, the Holocaust and techniques of power at work', *Management Revue*, 20:4 (2009), pp. 326–47 and Hans Sherrer, 'The inhumanity of government bureaucracies', *The Independent Review*, 5:2 (2000), pp. 249–64.

[33] Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust*, pp. 12–27 and Claudia Card, 'Genocide and social death', *Hypatia*, 18:1 (2003), pp. 63–79. See also Brock Bastian and Nick Haslam, 'Excluded from humanity: The dehumanizing effects of social ostracism', *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 46:1 (2010), pp. 107–13.

[34] Leo Kuper, 'The prevention of genocide', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 12:2 (1989), p. 161.

[35] Over, 'Seven challenges', p. 3.

[36] Livingstone Smith, 'Paradoxes of dehumanization', p. 417.

[37] Lang, 'Questioning dehumanization', p. 226.

[38] Over, 'Seven challenges', p. 9; see also Kate Manne, 'Humanism: A critique', *Social Theory and Practice*, 42:2 (2016), pp. 391, 407–15; Lang, 'Questioning dehumanization', p. 235.

[39] Rai et al., 'Dehumanization increases instrumental violence', p. 8511.

[40] Harald Welzer, 'Mass murder and moral code: Some thoughts on an easily misunderstood subject', *History of the Human Sciences*, 17:2/3 (2004), p. 16.

[41] Livingstone Smith, 'Paradoxes of dehumanization', p. 417.

[42] Mariot, 'On the role of dehumanization', p. 113.

This recognition of the victims' humanness is also visible in wider discourses that frame victims in distinctly human terms.[44] While characterisations such as 'rats', 'lice', 'cockroaches', and so on can indicate a specific construction of identity that suggest inferiority and can aid facilitating violent action,[45] 'it is clear that comparisons to nonhuman entities are not always used as a way to insult or demean.'[46] Even more problematic for accounts locating dehumanisation at the level of discourse are many instances in which 'target groups are often described in ways that apply only to humans. For example, Nazi propaganda often referred to Jewish people as criminals, murderers, enemies, and traitors.'[47] These characterisations also contradict the widespread assumption that dehumanisation entails a form of moral exclusion. According to this understanding, dehumanisation should be seen 'not as a denial of specific attributes but rather as a categorical act of exclusion from a moral community',[48] enabling perpetrators to justify the denial of basic rights and normalise inhumane treatment. As with the characterisation of Jewish people as murders and criminals, in a large number of instances perpetrators take a distinctly moralistic position towards their victims.[49] Far from being excluded from moral considerations, victims appear as thoroughly immoral and subsequently human. Indeed, the recognition of this humanity is central to the violence perpetrators unleash against them.[50]

While proponents of the central role of dehumanisation have begun responding to these challenges,[51] the so far assumed centrality of dehumanisation has been thrown into doubt, both empirically and conceptually. Far from being isolated criticisms, these recent contributions raise the broader question of where to go next in dehumanisation research. This question assumes specific importance, as these challenges do not aim at a wholesale denial of the presence of dehumanisation in cases of mass violence. Rather, their analyses suggest that '[a]lthough there may be some cases in which out-group members are genuinely believed to be less than human, there is not yet convincing evidence that this is a common phenomenon.'[52] Their conclusions reveal the partisan nature of much of dehumanisation research to date, showing that even in circumstances where dehumanisation has so far been affirmed axiomatically, its role and importance is ambiguous at best.[53] Besides substantially challenging the usefulness of dehumanisation as an explanatory factor and probing its role as a central empirical feature in mass atrocities, these critiques also question the conceptual clarity and coherence in current accounts of dehumanisation.[54] When it is not simply understood tautologically as the process of denying the humanity of victims – leaving open the question of what constitutes the 'humanity of victims' –, we encounter widely diverging conceptions that are only able to provide partial and situationally grounded accounts. Consequently, we lack a clear understanding of how the different manifestations of dehumanisation – moral, cognitive, discursive, behavioural, and structural – hang together as parts of the wider phenomenon of dehumanisation. This lack of conceptual coherence and rather diffuse meaning also makes it challenging to distinguish dehumanisation from related terms such as humiliation, degradation, deindividuation, objectification, and so on which often appear alongside it.[55]

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[43] Ibid., pp. 108–14.

[44] Ibid.

[45] Kressel, *Mass Hate*, p. 172.

[46] Over, 'Seven challenges', p. 5.

[47] Ibid., p. 6; see also Manne, 'Humanism: A critique', pp. 403–04.

[48] Haslam and Loughnan, 'Dehumanization and infrahumanization', p. 401; see also Bar-Tal, 'Causes and consequences of delegitimization', pp. 65–6 and Roger W. Smith, 'State power and genocidal intent: On the uses of genocide in the twentieth century', in Levon Chorbajian and George Shirinian (eds), *Studies in Comparative Genocide* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999), p. 4.

[49] Didier Pollefeyt, 'The Kafkaesque world of the Holocaust: Paradigmatic shifts in the ethical interpretation of the Nazi genocide', in John K. Roth (ed.), *Ethics After the Holocaust: Perspectives, Critiques, and Responses* (St Paul, MN: Paragon House, 1999), p. 230.

[50] Rai et al., 'Dehumanization increases instrumental violence', p. 8511.

[51] See, for instance, Livingstone Smith, 'Paradoxes of dehumanization', pp. 416–43 and Adrienne de Ruiter, 'To be or not to be human: Resolving the paradox of dehumanization', *European Journal of Political Theory*, online first (2021), pp. 1–23.

[52] Over, 'Seven challenges', p. 11.

[53] Ibid., p. 9.

[54] See, for instance, Over, 'Falsifying the dehumanization hypothesis', pp. 33–8 and Lang, 'The limited importance of dehumanization', pp. 17–20.

Even such a brief overview of the different forms dehumanisation assumes in current scholarship and the challenges that have been brought against it, makes clear that what has long been assumed to be a core feature in occurrences of mass violence is in need of much further reflection. These reflections must address the two main avenues of critique identified above, interrogating the empirical presence and relevance of dehumanisation on the one hand, and offering more coherent deliberations on its conceptual grounding on the other. It is the latter avenue that will be the focus of the remainder of this article, beginning with the crucial distinction between 'ontic' and 'ontological' levels of analysis in the study of dehumanisation in the next section.

'Ontic' and 'ontological' approaches to dehumanisation

Considering the critiques outlined above, providing a conceptually coherent engagement with a phenomenon as complex as dehumanisation presents a number of challenges. As we have seen, the widespread references in the literature on mass violence and the diverging conclusions regarding its nature, function, and relevance for analysing episodes of such violence has contributed to the emergence of a plethora of diverging understandings. In order to attempt a more systematic and coherent conceptual grounding, it seems helpful to draw an initial distinction between two possible approaches to the study of dehumanisation: on the one hand, we can delineate an understanding of dehumanisation from within episodes of mass violence illuminating how, if at all, it presents a core characteristic of the way perpetrators relate to their victims. On the other hand, we can conceptualise dehumanisation from a more general angle, which seeks to understand its basic character and identify the central elements its moral, cognitive, discursive, behavioural, and structural manifestations share.

To foreground and further clarify these two levels of analysis, this article will loosely draw on Heidegger's famous notion of 'ontological difference',[56] which captures 'the difference between what there is and the being of what there is, the difference between beings and being.'[57] Matters related to 'beings' in Heidegger address the level of the 'ontic', whereas matters related to the 'being of beings' relate to the 'ontological'.[58] Adapting this differentiation, the article distinguishes between 'ontic' and 'ontological' engagements with dehumanisation. The former address its contextual manifestations in various cases and are concerned with the diverse appearances and techniques of dehumanisation, the way it is planned and carried out in and across individual instances. Analyses adopting this 'ontic' angle can be, and have been, used to provide critical investigations on its form, function, and relevance in empirical instances of mass violence. The 'ontological' dimension, on the other hand, addresses matters regarding the general character of dehumanisation as such. It seeks to identify the 'being' of dehumanisation in violent conflict and provides considerations that transcend its 'ontic' manifestations. As such, it is more concerned with conceptual questions regarding the way in which dehumanisation can and should be understood as a coherent phenomenon.

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[55] Luna, 'The components of dehumanization', p. 20.

[56] As my use of Heidegger's notion of 'ontological difference' is purely heuristic and not related to the thrust of Heidegger's own argument, I will leave the terms 'ontological difference', 'ontic', and 'ontological' in inverted commas to signify the difference in use.

[57] Graeme Nicholson, 'The ontological difference', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 33:4 (1996), p. 357.

[58] Richard Polt, *Heidegger: An Introduction* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), p. 34; Richard Schmitt, *Martin Heidegger on Being Human. An Introduction to Sein und Zeit* (Lincoln, NE: iUniverse.com, 2000), p. 29.

Approaching the fragmented landscape of dehumanisation research from these two levels of analysis, we can see that existing accounts often focus on the diverse 'ontic' manifestations of dehumanisation. Given that many aspects of current critiques question the presence and importance of dehumanisation in specific contexts of mass violence, continuing an 'ontic' focus may be appropriate in order to reconsider the importance of dehumanisation and determine whether and how its role affects the emergence and unfolding of violent conflicts. It will provide the basis for investigating claims of an exaggerated role of dehumanisation in violent conflict, offering a detailed understanding of the importance of its moral, cognitive, discursive, behavioural, and structural dimensions. The emphasis put on dehumanisation in analyses of mass atrocities so far may be indeed be vastly overstated.[59] At the same time, this approach will continue the current stand-off between proponents and opponents as a purely 'ontic' focus remains empirically underdetermined – available empirical evidence supports both proponents and critics of the role and importance of dehumanisation. Additionally, it will continue to avoid a more systematic conceptual grounding by neglecting the 'ontological' level of analysis. It will perpetuate the failure of current approaches to develop a clear and coherence sense of how the diverse 'ontic' manifestations relate to the overarching concept of dehumanisation and what binds them together as 'dehumanising'.

Consequently, while 'ontically' focused analyses undoubtedly have their merits, further 'ontological' reflections are needed to achieve a fuller exploration of the concept of dehumanisation in pursuit of a more parsimonious understanding of its general character. Such reflections are not without their own challenges, however. While, if successful, an 'ontological' line of inquiry can offer a general, sound, and coherent conceptualisation of the phenomenon of dehumanisation, it must remain cognisant of the situational ('ontic') diversity of its concrete manifestations in instances of mass violence and provide a framework under which the 'ontically' diverse manifestations across moral, cognitive, discursive, behavioural, and structural dimensions of dehumanisation can be subsumed.

The remainder of this article presents a path to such an 'ontological' reflection by turning to the thought of Hannah Arendt, and specifically her understanding of the human condition and the nature and origins of mass violence.[60] Due to both her personal experiences and the trajectory of her thought, Arendt's work offers sustained reflections on the (political) nature of human existence and its relation to violence.[61] Most fundamentally, her approach provides an 'ontological' angle on the fundamental question of what conditions human *being*, opposing current attempts to understand dehumanisation with recourse to 'ontic' instances relating to historically concrete human *beings*. Given the core concern of this article, the task of the subsequent reflections is not to develop a comprehensive philosophical anthropology, providing a complete delineation of all aspects of what it means to be human. Rather, it seeks to identify the elements of human being that are relevant for the process of dehumanisation, that is, those aspect(s) of humanness that are being denied to victims of dehumanisation. Such a delineation will serve as the ground on which an 'ontological' conception of dehumanisation can stand.

Hannah Arendt and the path to a new 'ontological' conception of dehumanisation

The question of what it means to be human, and subsequent explorations of the 'ontological' conditions of being human forms one of the most enduring facets in Arendt's work. Her perspective on these questions arises out of her immediate experiences as a witness to and victim of mass violence as a German Jewish emigrant, combined with her engagement with key thinkers in the early twentieth century, most notably Martin Heidegger and Karl Jaspers.[62] As most attempts to understand what it means to be human within the modern context, her account combines descriptive reflections with normative elements,[63] grounding dehumanisation as a process that not only captures a specific descriptive dynamic between perpetrator and victim, but also always entails a normative component that excludes the targeted group(s) and individuals from specific rights. Within such accounts of what it means to be human, Arendt shifts to a more anti-foundational position by moving away from concerns about human nature and towards a conception of the 'human condition'.[64]

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[59] Lang, 'Questioning dehumanization', pp. 225–46; and Mariot, 'On the role of dehumanization', pp. 102–22.

[60] Key publications on these aspects of her thought include Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1998); Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1973); and Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (London, UK: Penguin Books, 2006).

[61] Owens, *Between War and Politics*, pp. 13–32.

From the outset she follows a broadly Heideggerian trajectory by shifting the emphasis away from identifying common features among human beings that could ground their shared humanity, for example, rationality, the possession of a soul, or secondary emotions. Such an endeavour, which is most often visible in foundational accounts, pertains to the 'ontic' presence of *human beings* and indeed provides grounds for exclusionary dynamics.[65] Most crucially, it fails to capture the basic conditions of human existence in general, conditions that can apprehend the character of *human being* and therefore enter the level of 'ontological' reflection.[66] Within such an outline of the human condition, Arendt foregrounds the irreducible complexity and heterogeneity of human being as a central 'ontological' condition in so far as 'we are all the same, that is, human, in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives, or will live.'[67] This 'ontological' perspective postulates sameness in difference as characteristic of the human condition, abandoning attempts to forsake, ignore, or overcome difference in pursuit of some homogeneity of human beings. In its most fundamental positioning Arendt points to 'the fact that men [*sic*], not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world.'[68] It is this sameness in difference that not only establishes the most basic ontological frame in Arendt's account of the human condition. It also offers the chance to conceptually develop a clearer understanding of the way central elements of the human condition are contested in the process of dehumanisation in cases of mass violence.

Hannah Arendt and the ontology of human being

To open this conceptual path, it is helpful to begin with Arendt's understanding of the episode of mass violence that most profoundly shaped her personal and professional life – the Holocaust.[69] In her controversial, and often misinterpreted, reflections on the Eichmann trial, Arendt criticised the way the charge against one of the central characters in the destruction of European Jewry were phrased. While she credited the trial for drawing a clear distinction between 'inhuman acts' and

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[62] For a poignant biographical overview, see Patricia Owens, 'Hannah Arendt: A bibliographical and political introduction', in Anthony F. Lang and John Williams (eds), *Hannah Arendt and International Relations: Readings Across the Lines* (New York, NY and Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave MacMillan: 2005), pp. 27–37. For her indebtedness to Heidegger in relation to thinking about the consequences and challenges of the Holocaust, see, for instance, Natalie Nenadic, 'Heidegger, Arendt, and *Eichmann in Jerusalem*', *Comparative & Continental Philosophy*, 5:1 (2013), pp. 36–48.

[63] Eveline Cioflec, 'On Hannah Arendt: The worldly in-between of human beings and its ethical consequences', *South African Journal of Philosophy*, 31:4 (2012), pp. 646–63; Anne Phillips, *The Politics of the Human* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 59.

[64] Phillips, *The Politics of the Human*, p. 58.

[65] Ibid., pp. 43–4.

[66] Cioflec, 'On Hannah Arendt', p. 648; see also Jeremy Waldron, 'Arendt on the foundations of equality', in Seyla Benhabib et al. (eds), *Politics in Dark Times: Encounters with Hannah Arendt* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 29–30.

[67] Arendt, *The Human Condition*, pp. 8, 177–8.

[68] Ibid., p. 7.

[69] Shiraz Dossa, 'Human status and politics: Hannah Arendt on the Holocaust', *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, 13:2 (1980), p. 310.

'crimes against humanity', she observed critically that '[a]t no point … did the Jerusalem trial ever mention even the possibility that the extermination of whole ethnic groups … might be more than a crime against the Jewish or the Polish or the Gypsy people, that the international order, and mankind in its entirety, might have been grievously hurt and endangered.'[70] In her view, the crime Eichmann, and by extension Nazi perpetrators in general, had committed was 'an attack upon diversity as such, that is, upon a characteristic of the "human status" without which the very words "mankind" or "humanity" would be devoid of meaning.'[71] Indeed, in her view, 'the physical extermination of the Jewish people, was a crime against humanity, perpetrated upon the body of the Jewish people.'[72] As these quotes demonstrate, something in the nature of the crime she observed exceeded the specific sufferings that Jews and other victims of Nazi atrocities had endured. It extended beyond the 'ontic' circumstances of persecution, the moral exclusions of victims, the cognitive states of perpetrators, the racist and degrading discourses, the machinations of the Nazi state apparatus and the numerous and diverse actions of cruelty and murder millions of victims had suffered. Indeed, in Arendt's view, understanding the scope of the crimes is an 'ontological' challenge, requiring the recognition that the attack on the various victim groups was an attack against 'diversity as such', which constitutes a 'characteristic of the human status'. The distinction she draws in these utterances is not merely an attempt to grasp and illustrate the scale of the crime the Nazis committed. It points towards something more profound pertaining to the nature of such crimes and mirrors broader 'ontological' themes that appear in various forms throughout her work. Arendt's position on the Holocaust as an 'attack upon diversity as such' is grounded in three core components that capture the nature and character of the human condition and can help build the foundation for an 'ontological' conception of dehumanisation: firstly, her notion of *natality* offers the basis for general reflections on the nature of human being necessary for an 'ontological' account of humanness; secondly, her understanding of *plurality* as the fundamental 'ontological' structure of human existence helps conceptualise the basic ground of contestation in cases of dehumanisation; and thirdly, her emphasis on the particular human potential for spontaneous *action* helps identify the target in processes of dehumanisation.

As we have seen above, Arendt's thought on the human condition starts from the central premise that the world is inhabited by 'men, not Man', and the subsequent emphasis on diversity emerges out of the understanding of human being as born into an always already present and heterogenous world. She captures this basic 'ontological' character of human being in the term *natality*[73] – the 'fact that new people are continually coming into the world, each of them unique, each capable of new initiatives that may interrupt or divert the chains of events set in motion by previous actions'.[74] Contrary to many foundationalist attempts to conceptualise what it means to be human, however, the fact that we are all born does not imply that we are all born the same. For Arendt difference is not a secondary super-structure built on top of an essential sameness of human beings. Rather, difference pertains to the very nature of human being as such. It is of 'ontological', not merely 'ontic' importance.[75] Therefore, the notion of natality as the 'ontological' condition of human being gives rise to the second feature central for our reflections here – the condition of *plurality* (or *diversity* as in her quote on Nazi crimes above).[76] While the notion of natality describes human being as born into a world already shaped by the thought and actions of human beings, plurality captures the manifold ways in which human being relates to this world.[77] Heterogenous and diverging systems of beliefs and practices shape the relation between communities, individuals, and the world. This abundance of ways in which human being apprehends, engages and shapes the world inscribes diversity, rather than sameness, as a fundamental ontological condition of human being. Consequently, any attempt to understand and capture what it means to be human must start with this plurality instead of pursuing a path that seeks to inscribe some form of immanent or transcendental sameness, which unifies human beings beyond all difference. Indeed, for Arendt such attempts to overcome or minimise difference lie at the heart of processes, which, in their extreme consequence, pave the way to the eradication of all difference and find their modern political expression in the form of totalitarianism.[78] It is exactly this basic concern with the 'ontological' condition of plurality that grounds her assessment of the scale of Nazi crimes as attacking diversity by 'not wanting to share the earth'[79] with others. In this emphasis on plurality emerges the normative side of Arendt's conception of the human condition. Plurality, far from being merely a descriptive term, is something that needs to be defended and upheld.[80] Indeed, Arendt goes so far as to inscribe plurality as safeguarding the very existence of reality in that the necessary situatedness of our coming into the world prevents human beings from developing a comprehensive and objective understanding of the world they inhabit.[81] Reality for Arendt depends on the continued creation and interaction of perspectival meanings to capture and maintain the richness and potential for human (inter)action.[82]

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[70] Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, pp. 275–6.

[71] Ibid., pp. 268–9.

[72] Ibid., p. 269.

[73] Arendt, *The Human Condition*, pp. 8–11.

[74] Margaret Canovan, 'Introduction', in Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. xvii.

[75] Seyla Benhabib, 'International law and human plurality in the shadow of totalitarianism: Hannah Arendt and Raphael Lemkin', *Constellations*, 16:2 (2009), pp. 334, 342.

[76] Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 7; Cioflec, 'On Hannah Arendt', p. 649. On the connection between natality and plurality, see also Siobhan Kattago, 'Why the world matters: Hannah Arendt's philosophy of new beginnings', *The European Legacy*, 18:2 (2013), p. 172.

While the notions of natality and plurality apprehend a form of being that from its very inception is plural, its situatedness, as much as it conditions human being, does not foreclose the potential for change.[83] Human being does not passively encounter its world but has the ability to actively take part in it. This potential for change brings us to the final component of Arendt's thought relevant for our reflections – *action*, the potential to make a difference in the world. Indeed, the very plurality that conditions human being is the outcome of (inter)actions of communities and individual human beings harbouring the ability to initiate change and act spontaneously and unpredictably.[84] This potential for spontaneous action forms a crucial dimension of the human condition and is most closely tied to what it is to be human, descriptively and normatively. Action, for Arendt, 'rests on initiative, but it is an initiative from which no human being can refrain and still be human'.[85] Action is here not to be perceived in the narrow sense of 'doing something' but rather describes the inherent spontaneity human being possesses in its (inter)actions with the world it finds itself in. It presents an ontological disposition that presents itself in the way human being does not simply dwell on earth but actively engages with others to form a world by establishing meanings and pursue futures through interactions with others.[86]

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[77] Benhabib, 'International law and human plurality', p. 334.

[78] Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, p. 438.

[79] Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, p. 279; see also Benhabib, 'International law and human plurality', pp. 332–3.

[80] Hannah Arendt, *The Promise of Politics* (New York, NY: Schocken Books, 2005), pp. 175–6.

[81] Arendt, *The Promise of Politics*, p. 175; Arendt, *The Human Condition*, pp. 57–8; see also Benhabib, 'International law and human plurality', p. 334; Shmuel Lederman, 'A nation destroyed: An existential approach to the distinctive harm of genocide', *Journal of Genocide Research*, 19:1 (2017), pp. 117–18.

[82] Benhabib, 'International law and human plurality', p. 342; Dossa, 'Human status and politics', p. 316.

[83] Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 11.

[84] Cioflec, 'On Hannah Arendt', p. 651.

[85] Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 176.

[86] The understanding of action remains somewhat ambiguous in Arendt, both in its conception and in its normative consequences. As some critics have noted, in a few of her writings, she links action to a notion of engagement in the public sphere modelled along the lines of the Western tradition, creating terms of exclusivity that open paths to deny human status to those pursuing forms of action not conforming to this tradition (though Arendt never explicitly denied human status to particular groups). This has invoked charges of ethnocentrism by some critics. While such charges need to be taken seriously, in this article I align with an understanding of public sphere and action in Arendt that ground these in any form or

Action in this sense is public,[87] it is an (inter)acting with others and the world in ways that defy any essentialist notions of predetermined ways to act or predictable outcomes of such action. In the emphasis on its public nature, action is axiomatically political. It is 'the only activity that goes on directly between men [*sic*] without the intermediary of things or matter, [and] corresponds to the human condition of plurality, … this plurality is specifically *the* condition … of all political life.'[88] Crucially, the ability to act for Arendt is not a secondary feature that arises within a specific set of normative principles (for example, human beings *should* have the right to act) but captures an existential characteristic of being human.[89] It establishes an arena of contestation in which everyone can take initiative, a possibility that 'springs from the beginning which came into the world when we were born and to which we respond by beginning something new on our own initiative. To act, in its most general sense, means to take an initiative, to begin …, to set something in motion.'[90] The 'ontological' conditions of natality and plurality open the possibility for indefinite futures in which everyone is 'capable of action [which] means that the unexpected can be expected'.[91]

An 'ontological' conception of dehumanisation

These three central elements of the human condition are the very targets of processes of dehumanisation and provide the path to an 'ontological' understanding of its character. As we have already seen in Arendt's reflections on the nature of the crime committed by the Nazi regime, the 'ontological' focus is not caught up in the immediacy of moral, cognitive, discursive, behavioural, or structural aspects as they pertain to human beings but offers deeper 'ontological' reflections on what dehumanisation consists in in cases of mass violence. Indeed, at the very basis of dehumanisation in instances of mass violence lies the perpetrators' rejection of plurality, their attack on the potential for spontaneous action of victims whose unhindered participation in the public sphere is perceived as negating the realisation of the perpetrators' own future.

Of course, political contestations within the plurality of human beings frequently exhibit power imbalances, necessitate compromises and regularly express inequalities as our individual and collective lives intersect with those of others. Such contestations as they characterise much of the reality of the public sphere[92] still leave open multiple futures to be realised, they do not seek to overcome or indeed eradicate plurality in pursuit of a single apprehension of the world. In cases of dehumanisation during politically motivated mass violence, however, the perpetrator group seeks to exclude the victim community from this realm of political contestation altogether and deny them *any* future. The victims' very capacity for spontaneous action is constructed as an existential threat to the perpetrator collective and its continued participation in the public sphere seen as tantamount to the extinction of the perpetrator group. To ensure its survival, plurality itself must be targeted and replaced with the singularity of the perpetrator utopia. In such circumstances, the ordinary process of political life, in which futures are negotiated and intersect, is narrowed to a Manichean polarity of existential importance.[93]

In their political imagery, perpetrators construct victims as part of a particular (real or imagined) group and reduce their essence to an ideal type or *Gestalt* that defines the immutable

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engagement with others and the world, constituting an ontological disposition not bound to any particular conception of what constitutes a public sphere and/or 'proper' or 'appropriate' action. See, for instance, Margaret Canovan, *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of her Political Thought* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 99–154.

[87] Cioflec, 'On Hannah Arendt', p. 654.

[88] Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 7, emphasis in original.

[89] Ibid., p. 176; see also, Kattago, 'Why the world matters', p. 179.

[90] Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 177.

[91] Ibid., p. 178; see also Cioflec, 'On Hannah Arendt', pp. 648–9.

[92] Patricia Owens, 'Hannah Arendt, violence, and the inescapable fact of humanity', in Lang and Williams (eds), *Hannah Arendt and International Relations. Readings Across the Lines*, p. 44.

[93] Dossa, 'Human status and politics', p. 315.

nature of their victims – we see the emergence of imageries of ‘the Jew’, for instance.[94] In this essentialisation, it is no longer important *what* victims actually do or have done but *who* they are.[95] While collectivised essentialisations inscribe a preconceived nature to the victim collective,[96] the potential for spontaneous action inherent in individual members of the victim group still allows for an infinite number of ways in which they may enact this nature, each existentially threatening to the future of the perpetrator society. Out of this collectivised and essentialised conception develops a doubly threatening construction. On the one hand, the victims’ nature is predetermined and individual members of this collective act and will continue to act within its prescriptive confines – they cannot but remain an existential threat to perpetrators simply because of who they are.[97] On the other hand, while the collective aims and objectives and the resulting overall trajectory of action are seen as unchangeable, the specific actions of individual members of the victims’ collective remain unpredictable and spontaneous in the sense that, in the perpetrators’ imagination, individual victims will always find new and imaginative ways to pursue their pregiven and unchangeable collective nature. In such a scenario, perpetrators move their interaction with victims beyond political contestation in an attempt to annihilate the very plurality of human being, which would ground the victims’ ability to further partake and act in the public sphere.[98] It is this double construction of an essentialised and threatening nature intrinsic to the victim collective and the inherent potential for realising this nature through spontaneous action by its individual members that opens the view to an ‘ontological’ conception of dehumanisation as the *process by which perpetrators intend to systematically and absolutely deny the victims’ collective and its individual members any future through the destruction of their ability to act spontaneously and take part in the plurality of the world.*

While practically targeting individuals, dehumanisation in cases of mass violence metaphysically aims at the exclusion of the victims’ group as such from the public sphere. Indeed, the persecution of victims becomes the battleground on which the perpetrators’ future is secured; it is a continuous battle against the possible resurgence of individual spontaneity of action through which victims try to realise their essentialised natures, endangering the perpetrators’ own future. ‘Ontologically’, dehumanisation describes a process that seeks to alter the conditions of human being by targeting both the plurality of diverging apprehensions of the world and the concomitant spontaneity of action that sustains and underwrites such plurality.[99] Ultimately, dehumanisation in cases of mass violence intends to guarantee the denial of the victims’ own future in perpetuity – if necessary, through the physical annihilation of current and future generations. If successful, the victims’ potential to act is reduced to a pure reactive presence, ‘living corpses’,[100] their *vita activa*[101] transformed into a *vita moritura*, a trajectory bound towards death in which any spontaneity of action, any hope for new beginnings has been terminated.[102]

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[94] Alvarez, ‘Adjusting to genocide’, p. 148.

[95] Zygmunt Bauman, *Life in Fragments* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1995), p. 203.

[96] See, for instance, Michael Berkowitz, *The Crime of My Very Existence* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2007), pp. 24–7.

[97] Bauman, *Life in Fragments*, p 203.

[98] Shelley Baranowski, ‘Against “human diversity as such”: *Lebensraum* and Ggenocide in the Third Reich’, in Volker Langbehn and Mohammad Salama (eds), *German Colonialism: Race, the Holocaust, and Postwar Germany* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2011), p. 61; see also Lederman, ‘A nation destroyed’, p. 122.

[99] Dossa, ‘Human status and politics’, pp. 317–18.

[100] Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, p. 447; see also Michal Aharony, ‘Hannah Arendt and the idea of total domination’, *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, 24:2 (2010), p. 198.

[101] Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 7.

[102] Some have argued that the closest any perpetrator society has come to achieving such a transformation can be seen in the *Gestalt* of the Muselmann, emerging as a purely passive and reactive figure in Nazi concentration camps. See, for example, Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz: The Nazi Assault on Humanity* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1996), p. 90 and Aharony, ‘Hannah Arendt and the idea of total domination’, pp. 210–13. The extent of this ‘ontological’ transformation,

The completion of this process would reduce the existential plurality of human being to the singularity of a utopian vision, '[t]he curious sterility of [which] comes from the absence within [it] of any scope for initiative, any room for plurality.'[103] Such a vision negates the human condition of plurality and the realisation of the fundamental ontological potential of humans to act 'as an individual, independent and distinguishable from others, capable of making choices, and entitled to live his own life on the basis of his own goals and values'.[104] This attack on the plurality of human being, leaving victims excluded from the world, bereft of their potential to act and pursue their own future captures the 'ontological' essence of dehumanising regimes.

The prospects of an 'ontological' account of dehumanisation

Understanding the 'ontological' character of dehumanisation as an attack on the plurality of human being through the systematic denial of any possibility for spontaneous action on the part of the victims provides a much larger scope and deeper 'ontological' meaning compared to present attempts to understand its basic character. As such it offers a number of advantages over the current focus on a plethora of 'ontic' manifestations of dehumanisation during mass violence.

Firstly, it avoids the reliance on observing what specific perpetrators think, perceive, say or do and the subsequent disintegration into a multitude of related, yet disjointed understandings of dehumanisation. Instead, its focus on the intent to target plurality as such provides a conceptual framework that unifies the heterogenous 'ontic' manifestations of dehumanising practices without negating their occurrence across different empirical cases. As a result, this 'ontological' grounding not only offers a clearly articulated conception of what element of being human is denied to victims. It is equally able to accommodate the 'ontic' complexity and diversity of forms of dehumanisation with their exact shape and implementation determined by specific sociocultural, ideological, and political conditions across moral, cognitive, discursive, behavioural, and structural patterns.

Secondly, a conceptualisation that offers both the opportunity to illuminate the 'ontological' ground for dehumanisation and provides the space for the exploration of its various 'ontic' manifestations answers many core concerns of recent critiques. On the one hand, it elevates the occurrences of dehumanisation above individual perpetrator-victim relations and, on the other, does not presuppose the sameness of perpetrators. As recent critiques have rightly established, empirical evidence suggests that the very way in which some perpetrators relate to some victims reaffirms (or even requires) their recognition as human *beings*, for example, a recognition of their biological and moral humanness.[105] The fact that perpetrators nevertheless continue to take part in a systematic attempt to permanently deny their victims any participation in the public sphere,[106] however, manifests a denial of their victim's human *being*, that is, a denial of their place in the world. Consequently, even if individual victims are not being 'ontically' dehumanised by every perpetrator they encounter, their 'ontological' dehumanisation continues unabated in the persistent persecution and destruction of their ability to act and pursue a future within the plurality of human being. Thus, dehumanisation does not necessitate all perpetrators to cognitively perceive victims as non-human (though many may do so), nor does it necessitate a commonly accepted and practiced discourse that is consistently framing victims as non-human (though discursive practices that do so may well be prevalent in perpetrator societies) or the denial of the victims' moral agency. An 'ontological' conceptualisation recognises that

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however, remains contentious. See, for instance, Sharon B. Oster, 'Impossible Holocaust metaphors: The Muselmann', *Prooftexts*, 34:3 (2014), pp. 302–48.

[103] Canovan, 'Introduction', p. xviii; see also Aharony, 'Hannah Arendt and the idea of total domination', p. 196.

[104] Kelman, 'Violence without moral restraint' p. 48; see also Aharony, 'Hannah Arendt and the idea of total domination', p. 204.

[105] Rai et al., 'Dehumanization increases instrumental violence', pp. 8511–12; Pollefeyt, 'The Kafkaesque world of the Holocaust', p. 229.

[106] Dossa, 'Human status and politics', p. 317.

dehumanisation occurs not solely on the level of individual beliefs and practices and adds a crucial collective dimension that captures the relation between the perpetrator collective and the victim group(s) above and beyond any occurrences between individual perpetrators and victims. Indeed, in the occurrences of dehumanisation, the killing of human *beings* (the individual victims) occurs in pursuit of the eradication of their human *being* (their contribution to the plurality of the public sphere and their inherent spontaneity to act in pursuit of their future).

Thirdly, the unified conceptualisation of dehumanisation presented here allows for a reappraisal of the presence and importance of dehumanisation in occurrences of mass violence. 'Ontic' accounts have so far been marred by a triple ambiguity: the diversity of conceptions of what constitutes dehumanisation, the differences in the presence of these conceptions across empirical cases, and the diversity of perpetrators and their dehumanising beliefs, motives, and actions. Apart from the very individualistic presence or absence of dehumanisation, the determination of its actual role and function in these cases oscillates between being a characteristic of the perpetrator-victim relationship and/or a factor crucial for the facilitation and enabling of violence, on the one hand[107] and an epiphenomenal occurrence and explanation of violence, on the other.[108] Consequently, tracing dehumanisation in these 'ontic' manifestations leads to a picture of patchy occurrences, varying widely in appearance across perpetrators and cases, seriously questioning its relevance for the study of mass violence.

Grounding an assessment of the presence and relevance of dehumanisation in an 'ontologically' conceived conceptualisation allows for a much clearer delineation of its presence and relevance, both within and across cases of mass violence without undermining or negating the richness of its 'ontic' manifestations. Mirroring Arendt's distinction between 'inhuman acts' and 'crimes against humanity', dehumanisation cannot be reduced to the situational (i.e., 'ontic') violation of historically specific normative frameworks declaring some forms of violence as immoral and/or illegal. It rather points to the much wider and more fundamental negation of 'diversity as such', and only in cases where such a negation and the subsequent denial of participation and action of victims in the public sphere is present can we speak of dehumanisation. While such a strong normative commitment to the importance and maintenance of spontaneous political action at the expense of, for instance, economic and social aspects of human existence has engendered a number of critical responses,[109] it offers a clear path to conceptualise and defend an analytically sound and empirically relevant understanding of dehumanisation.

While the most extreme forms of mass violence, for example, genocide, often exhibit this dehumanising dimension, many cases of mass violence do not. Such cases may still violate specific normative frameworks (e.g., the violation of the laws of war enshrined in the Geneva Conventions), exhibit inhuman acts, and can be judged to be illegal or immoral in accordance with specific principles. Equally, individual victims may suffer various kinds of harm during episodes of mass violence, aimed at humiliating, degrading or deindividualising them and their community. Such actions can, and frequently are, used to achieve specific tactical or strategic economic, military or political aims and objectives, or spring from the dispositions of particular perpetrators. In contradistinction to dehumanisation, however, such actions remain very much situated at the 'ontic' level, violating historically specific conventions in targeting particular human beings. Dehumanisation only appears when such 'ontic' expressions of violence are complemented by a systematic attempt to deny the victim group any place in the public sphere and political contestations – if perpetrators refuse 'to share the earth'[110] with them. As a result, this annihilatory violence sets dehumanisation apart from violence undertaken within forms of political contestation by seeking to end such contestation as such.

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[107] See, for example, Haslam et al., 'Humanness', p. 203; Alvarez, 'Adjusting to genocide', p. 146; Mark J. Brandt and Christine Reyna, 'The chain of being: A hierarchy of morality', *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 6:5 (2011), pp. 428–46; Timothy Williams, *The Complexity of Evil: Perpetration and Genocide* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2020), pp. 142–6.

[108] See, for instance, Scott Strauss, *The Order of Genocide: Race, Power, and War in Rwanda* (Ithaca, NY and London, UK: Cornell University Press, 2006), pp. 93, 97, 128; Over, 'Falsifying the dehumanization hypothesis', pp. 33–8; Lang, 'The limited importance of dehumanization', pp. 17–20.

[109] See, for instance, Jane Duran, 'Arendt and the social: "Reflections on Little Rock"', *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*, 12:4 (2009), pp. 605–11; Robert Bernasconi, 'The double face of the political and the social: Hannah Arendt and America's social divisions', *Research in Phenomenology*, 26:1 (1996), pp. 3–24.

Finally, while this article remained focused on the question of the meaning of dehumanisation in cases of mass violence, it provides the grounds for a wider reconsideration of dehumanisation. The conceptual toolset that has been presented here can in principle be extended to instances that target the plurality of human being outside the wholesale persecution and destruction of particular groups. At the same time, it is prudent to recognise that such an extension would require further conceptual thought. As we have seen, within an Arendtian conception of dehumanisation, the key violation consists in diminishing the plurality of the public sphere and the subsequent denial of spontaneous (political) action. For her, without the ability to act, an ability that is provided and secured within political communities,[111] human beings are reduced to 'abstract nakedness',[112] a vulnerability that she saw as characteristic of victims of genocidal violence. While this provides a productive basis to conceptualise dehumanisation as violating the human condition in such cases of mass violence where this exclusion from the political realm is central, it provides a minimalist conception of dehumanisation outside these instances. Minimalist in the sense that it would only consider limitations or attacks on the *political* dimension as constituting a violation of human plurality and the human condition, more broadly. Arendt's view on plurality as manifest in the participation and action in the public sphere and the concomitant foregrounding of the political has informed her sharp distinction between politics and related spheres of human interaction, the private realm and the social realm.[113]

In cases where human beings are enjoying, at least in principle, political and civil rights that allow their continued participation and presence in the public sphere, Arendt would see possible inequality in, for instance, economic and social status as outside the basic normative considerations related to the human condition – such issues for Arendt would not be political.[114] This conception of political action within the public sphere as a defining element of the human condition has raised questions of ethnocentrism regarding, for instance, her views of indigenous peoples under colonialism, which cannot easily be discounted.[115] Equally controversial is the separation between political concerns on the one hand and those that fall into the social realm; a distinction that surfaced most controversially in her essay 'Reflections on Little Rock',[116] where she took a stance against mandatory school desegregation in the US. For many back then, and to no lesser extent now, instances of blatant discrimination (racial or otherwise) constitute an attack on the ability of those suffering under it to fully realise their potential for spontaneous action and diminish their presence within the plurality of human being, bringing such instances within the remit of dehumanisation as we have developed it here. Consequently, while our conceptual framework can in principle be extended beyond the remit of mass violence, its normative limitation to the realm to the political would require a more thorough interrogation for cases outside of occurrences of mass violence – a task, however, that lies beyond the scope of this article.[117]

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[110] Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, p. 279.

[111] Aharony, 'Hannah Arendt and the idea of total domination', pp. 199–200.

[112] Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, p. 299.

[113] Arendt, *The Human Condition*, pp. 22–78.

[114] Phillips, *The Politics of the Human*, p. 71.

[115] See, for instance, Dossa, 'Human status and politics', pp. 319–23; Phillips, *The Politics of the Human*, pp. 61–2.

[116] Hannah Arendt, 'Reflections on Little Rock', *Dissent* (1959), pp. 45–56. For a critical engagement with her arguments, see, for instance, Michael D. Burroughs, 'Hannah Arendt, "Reflections on Little Rock", and white ignorance', *Critical Philosophy of Race*, 3:1 (2015), pp. 52–78.

Conclusion

The phenomenon of dehumanisation has informed the analysis of politically motivated mass violence for decades but at the same time mostly assumed a rather intuitive relevance, which often lacked a deeper and more thorough exploration of its precise nature and role in mass atrocities. Recent critiques have begun to challenge this often-intuitive invocation of dehumanisation and revealed empirical and conceptual shortcomings, necessitating a more rigorous and substantive engagement with the role, nature, and function of dehumanisation in mass atrocities. While sharing many of the concerns expressed in these critiques, this article has focused its investigation on the current lack of a systematic conceptual grounding that can grasp the general character of dehumanisation above and beyond its manifestations in specific practices and particular instances. Introducing the crucial difference between 'ontic' and 'ontological' levels of analysis has allowed the investigation to move away from 'ontically' derived accounts of dehumanisation towards a renewed and systematic engagement with the central question for any account of dehumanisation: what is it to be human?

A renewed reflection on the 'ontological' dimension of dehumanisation based on the thought of Hannah Arendt revealed a conception of dehumanisation based on a reappraisal of its 'ontological' character, without compromising, narrowing, or foreclosing the diversity and complexity of its 'ontic' manifestations in and across particular episodes of politically motivated mass violence. Perceiving dehumanisation as an attack on the plurality of human being and the denial of spontaneity of action to a victim collective as it is defined by the perpetrator captures not only the deeply anti-political character of dehumanisation, but also offers a general framework through which and in which to locate the divergent practices and dimensions – moral, cognitive, discursive, behavioural, and structural – of the persecution of victims. It allows us to recognise that while the overall trajectory of mass violence can assume an 'ontologically' dehumanising quality, this general character does not necessitate the presence of 'ontic' forms of dehumanisation in every instance of victim-perpetrator interaction. Perpetrators can 'ontically' recognise features of humanness in victims and yet actively partake in their systematic, 'ontological' dehumanisation.

As such, dehumanisation transcends the individuality of persecution and establishes itself on a collective level where the victim group is essentialised as possessing an existential essence whose presence endangers the survival of the perpetrator collective. Within this context the killing of individual victims is essentially grounded in their collective identity, not just their personal actions. The potential inherent in their nature to engage in spontaneous action to the detriment of their persecutors, be it in their own lifetime, or indirectly through their children or grandchildren, necessitates their persecution and dehumanisation.

For the future of dehumanisation research, this distinction between the 'ontological' and 'ontic' levels of analysis necessitates a reconsideration of the role of dehumanisation and requires not only more meticulous studies of the 'ontic' complexity of this phenomenon but also a systematic analysis of the perpetrator collective and its underlying motives, intentions, and rationalisations regarding the persecution of the victim group as such. Only research taking into consideration both these levels of analysis and their accompanying complexities can achieve a differentiated and nuanced understanding of the role and nature of dehumanisation and its function and place in episodes of politically motivated mass violence.

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[117] For an outline of such an attempt to move Arendt beyond these limitations, see, for instance, Philips, *The Politics of the Human*, pp. 70–9.

Torsten Michel is a Senior Lecturer in International Relations at the University of Bristol. His main research interests lie in International Relations (meta-)theory, the politics and ethics of mass violence and the nature and function of trust in international politics. He has published widely in leading journals including the *Review of International Studies* and the *European Journal of International Relations*, authored a number of book chapters, as well as a recent single-authored monograph as part of the *New International Relations* book series with Routledge.

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