WHAT IS THE HUMAN?

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Australian Voices from the Humanities

edited by
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What is the Human?
The Reach of the Imagination

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What does it mean, and what does it take, to be human? This ancient issue will continue to puzzle people as long as there are humans on earth (or elsewhere) and it is a question in which everyone, presumably equally, has a stake. At one level it is profoundly simple to be human – if one *is* human, that is, but not so easy if one is not as some chapters in this book will demonstrate. But things are more complicated than this. As anyone on the wrong side of state law, cultural norm, adequate health or personal aggression might testify (but of course, frequently they are not given the chance) the pain of being refused, diffused or abused, of enduring bare life or a state of exception, of being swept backwards out of the definition of the human, is excruciating beyond description.[1]

Beyond description? Not entirely. Description is what humans are good at—definitively so. In his influential account of human nature, Thomas Hobbes theorised that human curiosity and the ability to apply names to things, to reason and remember, and thence to develop conceptual lines of argument and communicate these to one's fellows, all these amount to a defining capacity of the human (Hobbes 94–118). Unlike forgetful beasts, who lack *scientia* and are ever subject to their appetites, the human possesses a rational soul evidenced, as Descartes also argued in his *Discourse on Method* (1637), by agile mental and discursive ability (Descartes 40–42). The perceived world can be put into trains of thought, into variously meaningful stories that can be shared and built upon. Stories that in turn shape further realities and on it goes in ever increasing complexity. Postmodernism would

seem to affirm, rightly or wrongly, the Romantic truth that the imagination in part, perhaps in large part, creates the world.

Hobbesian and Cartesian accounts of the human clearly had implications not merely for the animal, but also for the divine. While these issues were explored at length in antiquity (Sorabji), early modernity in the West (roughly from 1550–1750) was a watershed moment of renegotiation of the rights and oligations of the human, a tipping point in the secularisation of the western mind that was bound up with the rise of global economies of cultural and economic exchange. The incipient atheism of Hobbesian theory and the self-empowered, system-building drive of new philosophers like Descartes, joined an upsurge in empirical inquiry in science and medicine to create a launch pad for the human as many now live it.

The ever present murmur of scepticism and relativism – from Sextus Empiricus through to Montaigne and Shakespeare's Hamlet, and then on to Nietzsche and postmodern theorists such as Baudrillard and Lyotard – has thrived in modern times where total war, economic rationalism and terroist ambush have fuelled and been fuelled by technological advances. This astonishing, modern melange, powerfully inflected by the now historical theories of Freud and Darwin and the still unfolding electronic and bioscientific revolutions, necessarily strains the relationships human beings might have with animals, nature and God. Definitions of the transhuman and posthuman are becoming ever more credible in the developed world,[2] while at the same time religious conservatism and fundamentalism are vivid realities. In a world that is increasingly wealthy and populated, what does it mean that between one to two billion people remain living in poverty?

How are we to make our way in such a world? And when we do manage to chart a personally acceptable path, what degree of freedom to think our own thoughts and be our own selves are we really experiencing? A world where irresistible cultural tides preform or co-opt our thoughts and plans, and our deepest beliefs feel vulnerable to casual deconstruction or local politics; a world where the structures that our species has developed – biotechnology, capitalism, disciplinarity, for example – overshadow quintessential human values, urges and capacities that refuse to die; a world ultimately of fraught

freedoms and contradictions that puzzle the will (as Hamlet might say), all this seems a mixed blessing indeed.

It is remarkable that we can think at all, or, once we start that we can stop. And yet the contradiction is that while the Danish prince is crippled by simply entertaining notions of being, the English play *Hamlet* succeeds beyond measure as creative expression. Albeit as 'tragedy', but also as a stretching of the imagination, something positive because artful, affective and insightful, and the same could be said of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* or Cimino's *The Deer Hunter*. Vexed we may be, but the long record of human aesthetic and cultural production is unequivocally affirming – from dystopias to deathworlds and memorials, from doll culture to manga and CG humans, and from primeval demonology to secular leadership and soaring religious verse. It is this reach of imagination that is the lens through which our contributors explore the problematics of being human. Literature, philosophy, cultural studies and history – key disciplines represented in this collection – are the frames around these cultural mirrors.

While the fundamental tenets of our humanity are of crucial importance to how we live and think about our world, they are often left in the hands of 'experts' while the rest of us get on with the exigencies of day-to-day life. But Socrates spoke a deep human truth when he said that the unexamined life is not worth living.[3] The purpose of this collection is to stimulate thought and debate, and to have voices from the past converse with those of our present day. These are global concerns that can only be addressed via analyses of local exemplars that are dazzling in their diversity.

Part 1 of this collection, 'What is the Human? Expressions and Suppressions', considers aspects of 'humanity' through the prism of evolution and simulation, a prism that blends theory, technics and texts and throws uncanny light on formerly familiar subjects, transforming them and us in the process. The first chapter, Elizabeth Grosz's 'The Inhuman in the Humanities: Darwin and the Ends of Man,' explores Darwin's theory of evolution as a reinstatement of the animal in understandings of the human, and suggests that Darwin's categories of being are mutually supportive and life-enhancing. All forms of life enter the realm of art when they exceed the basic requirements of existence. Darwin, according to Grosz, defines two

processes that regulate all of life; one is natural selection and the other is sexual selection. Natural selection is about survival, and sexual selection, for Darwin, is largely about reproduction or a kind of sexual *seduction*. Grosz sees the origin of art as pertaining to the realm of seduction: so that all forms of art are an expression of the body, and all forms of life express this artistic intention.

In the following essay, 'Narratives of Identity and Authenticity: The Humanities meets Leadership Studies,' Jan Shaw prompts us to ask: how possible is it to articulate stories of one's identity that are both professionally functional and authentic? When a leader tells an inspirational story of his or her rise to the top, how 'true' does this life story need to be in order to connect actuality to ideal leadership? If real change and philosophical clarity are to occur in the theory and practice of human leadership, the starting point must be a properly nuanced understanding of the problematics of authenticity, storytelling and truthfulness.

'[I]t is only by being "recognized" by another, by many others, or – in the extreme – by all others, that a human being is really human, for himself as well as for others,' writes Alexandre Kojève as cited in Hannah Stark's chapter, 'A Critical Politics of the Human: Judith Butler and Gilles Deleuze'. The question here, Stark argues, is not just 'who is endowed with recognition?' but 'what are the frameworks we use to create and announce those forms of recognition?' Stark explores this conundrum via two philosophers, Judith Butler and Gilles Deleuze, whose work overlays Hegel's thinking on what 'humanity' constitutes and how it can be expressed and analysed, and engages with the insights of Elizabeth Grosz, the author of our book's first chapter. In what ways can we use palimpsestic layers of philosophical thinking from past and present to stretch and re-formulate what it means to be human?

In Chapter 4, 'Not Quite Human: Traversing the Uncanny Valley,' Kathy Cleland examines the uncanny space between robotic human simulations and the human physiognomies and functions they replicate. The more technically 'human' these robots seem to be, the more we expect from them, while failures in technical function can lead to notions that they are 'unconvincing'. Powerful gaming computers such as IBM's upgraded Deep Blue seemingly can beat even the best human chess players – and yet no one

has created a robot or a digital animation that can pass as human. The real problem is not just that these near-human creations don't pass as human, but that they can generate decidedly uncanny responses in audiences. This fundamental unease about the nearly human and the havoc it might wreak on our deepest assumptions, ethics and species identity no longer exists solely in the fictive realms of *Blade Runner* and *Frankenstein*, but is finding more general release via the provocations of real science, entertainment and art.

Mio Bryce's chapter, 'Diffused Reflection of Body Imageries: Dolls as Humans and Humans as Dolls,' probes the importance of dolls in contemporary Japanese culture. Toy and religious dolls, along with dolls in manga and anime, serve an extraordinary range of purposes that cut to the heart of human needs for play, transcendent meaning and power. Bryce explores how doll culture bridges the human and its material and spiritual environments as well as raising complex questions about the internal mind-body relation and human emotions and interactivity. Living doll stories and the fictional possibility of humans morphing into dolls have disturbing power and brings us back to the uncanny that Cleland approached by another route.

The concluding chapter in Part 1, Rebecca Suter's 'Human and Superhuman in Contemporary Japanese Girls' Manga,' examines the role and importance of science fiction animations that focus on the machine's 'encroachment' on the human and the place of sexuality in these stories. A central theme in Japanese comics and animation has for a long time been the question 'what is human?' Suter adds to the conversation about manga in the previous chapter by demonstrating how *shôjo* (girl's manga) and *shônen ai* (the 'boy's love' subgenre) present complex visions of race, gender and sexuality.

Part 2 of the collection, 'Spaces for the Human: Personal and Political Frontiers,' concentrates attention on literary and cultural analysis as a way of opening out notions of humanness. In Chapter 7, 'Frontiers of Life and Death: The Human, New Wars and World Literary Sensibilities,' Debjani Ganguly argues for a new configuration of the 'human' via exploration of contemporary world literatures in English. This global literary space, she suggests, has emerged at the intersection of post-1989 geographies of violence, hyperconnective information technology, and a new humanitarian

sensibility in a context where suffering has a presence in everyday life through the shocking immediacy of digital images. But even in this context, people can simply 'turn it off'. They can control and mediate exactly how much 'reality' they allow in, and what this reality means. This has profound implications for any overarching understanding of, or ethics of, or sympathy for, the human and its actors and patients.

In Chapter 8, 'Neurology is Destiny: Character and Consciousness in Ian McEwan's *Saturday*', Nicole Heber teases out the kind of direct emotional expression that McEwan puts in dialogue with the tendency of Henry Perowne, *Saturday's* protagonist, to abstract and categorize. Expert at keeping life at one remove, Perowne is confronted by the challenging figure of a character called Baxter who suffers Huntington's disease. There is Baxter's shocking interjection of himself into Perowne's household; and then there is the diminished responsibility that is the effect of his disablement. Perowne is helpless against the force of this unreason, although his own clinical faculties compulsively chart it all the while, in the process illuminating for us core vulnerabilities of the human.

Peter Goodall follows with his chapter, 'Human Values in a Mass Society: A Reading of George Orwell's Novels,' which demonstrates the fruitfulness of literary analysis to understandings and expressions of 'the human' in Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. This novel is usually read as political satire, but is at heart a sustained meditation on what it means to be human and on the future of human-ness as it has been traditionally understood and valued in society. Goodall follows Orwell's journey to the proles of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* from his early work and sets it in the context of an evolving presentation of the poor in modern society that developed from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century.

In Chapter 10, 'Telling Stories at the Permeable Borders of the Human in David Malouf's *Ransom*,' Yvonne Smith explores Malouf's ongoing desire to grasp through the working of the imagination what the past can bring to the present. In the process Smith shows how how old myths and tales might become untold tales we need to hear as we make meaning in today's societies.

The final chapter in Part 2, Matthew Graves's 'Displacing Geographies of Memory: The Australian and New Zealand Memorials, London,' also

deals with the past's significance in the present. He examines the Australian and New Zealand Memorials in London and the repatriation of Unknown Soldiers to the southern hemisphere as recent developments in the ANZAC landscape that highlight paradoxes in the geographies of remembrance. Graves probes the way memorials produce landscapes of human memory that are political, cultural and artistic.

Part 3 of the collection, 'What was the Human? Then and Now', explores the 'translation' of old stories into contemporary identity practices. In Chapter 12, 'Must Humanity perforce Prey upon Itself? *King Lear*, War and the Humanities', R. S. White uses Shakespeare's bleakest war-play to consider the place and value of human pacifism. The play has always been seen to have a parable-like quality, and yet any parable drawn differs from age to age. White shows how *King Lear* speaks to the present via its representation of political and personal ruptures. The characters illustrate fundamental human flaws and needs as the plot carries them to the heights of human art, evil and suffering.

In Chapter 13, 'Defining the Demonic in Ancient China,' Jeffrey Riegel considers the human in tension with the demonic and its other world. He draws on the history of Chinese tales of ghosts and spirits from their earliest written forms to text messages of today. It is salutary to consider ancient traditions of demonic stories that frighten us, especially stories woven into quite specific cultures and times, for they reveal as much about their moment of origin or popularity as they do about the limits and commonalities of other human cultures and times.

Bob Hodge and Marina Gerzic offer essays on that most famous of identity puzzles, Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. In Chapter 14, 'Hamlet and the Crisis in the Humanities,' Hodge delivers a dynamic and wry portrait of what the 'businessman' Hamlet can teach us today. Hamlet has often been thought of as a soft scholar, 'fat and scant of breath', full of scrupulous cogitation but not the model of efficacy. He declares that he has 'that within', but what does he have to reveal to modern business? Hodge illuminates the gap and overlap between the humanities and the world of business via a novel approach to Hamlet's most famous question. Marina Gerzic follows with, 'Reel Life: Representing the Human in Michael Almereyda's *Hamlet*', an analysis of the

mediatized, postmodern Hamlet constantly replacing human interactions with virtual ones. He obsessively replays, reconfigures and manipulates images in an unsuccessful attempt to make the virtual 'real'. What happens to humans in this *Hamlet* is conveyed most strongly by the character of Fortinbras, who is completely disembodied, and also by the pandemic of surveillance that infects us all.

Chapters 16 and 17 offer two views of John Milton's enduring impact on modern readers: silent readers of his complex printed words and vocal readers of his verse as sound performance. Ronald Bedford's 'Milton and the Fit Reader' explores a continuing paradox of the human activities of writing and reading: that is, the way in which readers cannot be counted on to read in ways desired by authors, nor can readers always agree among themselves about the 'meaning' of what they read. The example of Milton's attempt to create a 'fit audience', or readership, for his epic poem, *Paradise Lost*, raises fascinating questions of readerly – and writerly – competence, which might turn, for instance, on the perception of irony, or of its absence, or on the differences between legitimate figuration and mere lies. And radical differences may issue forth between equally competent readers as they mobilise the author for one cause or another.

Beverley Sherry's chapter, '*Paradise Lost* Aloud: Then and Now,' takes account of the high priority Milton placed on the sound of poetry and the fact that the blind poet dictated the poem to amanuenses. Since it first appeared in 1667, *Paradise Lost* has stayed alive through readings. Sherry asks: how was *Paradise Lost* heard in the past and how is it heard today? Beginning with scant reports from Milton's own time, Sherry moves to more substantial evidence from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and finally to the late 20th and early 21st centuries, where she documents ear-witness accounts of public readings, including the popular 'Milton marathons.' If speech is a defining trait of the human – as Cicero (13), Hobbes, and Descartes affirm – surely sounds carry potent meanings when poetic art is read aloud.

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This book, *What is the Human? Australian Voices from the Humanities*, as its title suggests, presents a range of Australian scholarly voices speaking about the human. They do so via reflection on its cultural products and from various disciplinary locations within the humanities. The essays indicate something crucial about the notion of humanity – its parameters are forever shifting, so that it is, in a sense, always a retrospective consideration as we race toward the next phase of what humanity entails. Perennial issues such as evil and suffering, meaning and art, the animal and the divine, persist. Yet, massive cultural revolutions continue to unfold through the realms of medicine, philosophy, gender, politics and science and technology. Continuity and change in the zone of the human together produce astonishing and relentless art. This artistic response testifies to the reach of human imagination, a reach so profound that it troubles us, yet so enabling that it reshapes the world before it. The human may not be the final or sole arbiter of reality, but is undoubtedly a player on that stage and a shaper of its stories. The human reimagining of humanity in all its forms deserves the scrutiny we apply here because it is through both creativity and analysis that we bequeath new worlds to new generations.

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Notes

1   On bare life and the state of exception, see Agamben 1998, 2005.
2   See the websites of: The Extropy Institue, Humanity+, and Transhumanist Arts and Culture.
3   Plato, *The Apology* 38a, in Plato 63.

Part One
What is the Human? Expressions and Suppressions