Human values and moral exclusion

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Abstract

This article uses empirical data from the anthropology of human rights and the ethics of everyday life to examine the relationship between dominant value frames, moral action, and the rise of ‘counter-humanities’ in the form of cultural identitarianism, racial and class-based nationalism, apocalyptic theologies, and nativist populism. This article focuses, in particular, on the emergence and growing power of the value frame of human rights in the post-Cold War period and argues that the more recent spread of violent movements based in forms of moral exclusion was an ironic consequence of the power of human rights. After considering, and then rejecting, the possibility that citizenship can stand in for ‘humanity’ as a more sustainable value frame, the article concludes with an argument for the promise of a post-utopian solidarity inspired by the humanism of Montaigne and More and the pluralism of Berlin.

Keywords: human rights; nationalism; citizenship; anthropology; humanity; ethical theory; moral practice; solidarity; post-utopian

Hope is the worst of evils, for it prolongs the torments of man.
—Nietzsche, Human All Too Human

This article uses a conceptual distinction between human values and moral action to examine the current status of a particular subspecies of hope that Nietzsche (and, before him, Hesiod) refers to above: the hope for humanity. By this I don’t mean humanity itself, that is, the living and breathing mass that inhabits the anthropocene in all of our troubled, illuminating, and ambiguous diversity. Rather, I mean the collective body that constitutes what the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) describes as ‘the human family’, the fictive universal kin group that is bound together by virtue of its ‘inherent dignity and … equal and inalienable rights’. As the UDHR

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explains, the recognition of humanity in this sense is fundamental: with recognition comes ‘freedom, justice and peace and world’; to deny the primacy of the human family, however, is to continue to live under the ‘tyranny and oppression’ of ‘barbarous acts which have outraged the conscience of mankind’. We are called on, therefore, to pledge our lives, to reaffirm our faith, to strive for this ‘highest aspiration’, this hope for humanity.

But is this a hope that is actually a cause of suffering, misunderstanding, or disenchantment? Is this hope for humanity the final ‘evil’ loosed upon the world when the Pandora’s Box of human rights was opened, finally, after many long decades, when the rhetorics of the ‘last utopia’ took root in actual practice throughout the post-Cold War as the ‘only legitimate language’ of democratic transition, political belonging, and moral outrage? This article argues that the unfolding of this last utopia, from the level of international institutions to the ethics of everyday life, led to a growing gap between the values that make up humanity itself—inherent dignity, human rights, and equality—and moral practice. The reasons for this gap will be taken up in more detail below, but here I want to argue further that the opening of this gap has been accelerated by what I will describe as the ‘paradox of human rights’. By this, I mean that close observers of what anthropologists call the ‘practice of human rights’ have documented the fact that as human rights emerged from the closet of the Cold War to become a dominant mode of contemporary world-making, its power was linked to the proliferation of what might be called ‘counter-humanities’ in the form of cultural identitarianism, racial and class-based nationalism, apocalyptic theologies, and nativist populism. This nature of this linkage will also be examined at length in this article.

Third, this article argues that we now find ourselves at a moment in history in which the troubling, even chilling, implications of this paradox have become all too apparent. That is to say, what we are witnessing now is in many ways the diffuse response to what comes after the flame of humanity, which had been burning so brightly in the liminal years of the early post-Cold War, has dimmed to the point at which it threatens to go out. If we, of the post-1989 generations, have been taught to put our faith, our hope, in the promise of humanity, the current moment can be read as a response to the horror vacui that comes after the impossibility of this hope has been made agonizingly clear. But if nature does, indeed, abhor a vacuum, is there yet another framework of universal values that might eventually come to fill it? This article will explore the possibility for the emergence of what might be called ‘alternative humanities’, even as the spaces of contemporary life quickly fill with tribal anger and nationalist righteousness.

Finally, this article will draw from the contemporary anthropology of human rights and everyday ethics to argue for the development of a value framework that does not simply replace one set of values without qualities for another. For, as we have seen with the ‘rise and fall’ of human rights, which now appear to be in the midst of their ‘endtimes’, it is not enough to simply say that it cannot do any real harm to put our faith in humanity, if we also expect this faith to be a true guide to moral action. When the ‘highest aspiration of the common people’, as the UDHR puts it, was shown to
be too abstract to ground action in any meaningful and generalized way, a sort of nihilistic emptiness set in that was soon replaced by the worst pestilence of all—despair. Yet as it turns out, we were asking the wrong questions all along. It is not a question of finding new ways to embrace what the first cosmopolitan Hierocles called the ‘outermost circle’—whether to draw it toward the center or otherwise. Rather, it is a question of finding new ways to create meaning and translocal solidarity that pass—not without hazard—between the Scylla of humanity and the Charybdis of moral exclusion.

**VALUE FRAMES AND MORAL ACTION**

In order to follow the broader argument about the relationship between the waxing and waning of the last utopia and the rise of destructive counter-humanities that promise nothing more than omission, denial, and violence, it is important to define the relationship, as I understand it, between value frames and moral action. By value frames I mean modes of orientation that are grounded in values and ways of understanding self and the world that seem to form a connected whole. Two qualifications must immediately be made: first, value frames, in this sense, must be envisioned in the plural; and second, the integrity of value frames, their self-contained coherence, is more apparent than real. That is to say, there are many, usually competing, value frames present in any social or ethical space and these plural value frames are porous and imbricated with each other, forming a sort of loose assemblage that resists fine parsing and the demarcation of clear boundaries.

To give a more concrete illustration of what I mean, imagine that ‘human rights’, ‘French nationalism’, ‘Catholicism’, and ‘la culture Bretagne’ can be considered value frames that coexist within a loose assemblage in a particular place and time in contemporary France. There are points at which these various value frames overlap in terms of the specific ways of understanding self and the world that characterize them. Yet there are even more points at which they do not overlap but rather coexist as a tense mélange of value frames that impinge upon a person’s moral self to greater or lesser degrees depending on context. This fraught interplay among value frames is similar to what Bourdieu called the ‘transposable dispositions’ that make up the habitus. But in this case, I want to emphasize less what results as ‘structured structures predisposed to function’ as such, and more the uncertain coexistence of multiple value frames that evocates insights from the anthropological study of legal pluralism.6

Yet where my understanding of value frames *does* begin to coincide with Bourdieu’s conception of the habitus is in the relation between them and moral action. If the real purpose of habitus is to establish ‘principles which generate and organize practices and representations’, the same can be said of value frames. To return to the example above: a person living in contemporary Rennes might be influenced primarily by these four value frames—human rights, French nationalism, Catholicism, and la culture Bretagne—each and every time a moral action takes place. However, the degree of influence of each value frame, and the resulting action (or *practice*, in Bourdieu’s
terms), will vary according to myriad contingencies and idiosyncrasies. In addition, the movement from value frame to moral action is not ‘conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of … operations’, but rather a much more implicit process that resembles the performance of a script so rough that it approximates improvisation. Nevertheless, even with this essential slippage between value frame and moral action, the basic link is there—value frames orient us both in and to the world, and it is on the basis of these ambiguous orientations that we engage with this world as moral actors.

With this as a key starting point, the social inquiry then becomes concerned with the many resulting questions: Which value frames are operative in any one place and time?; How do they uneasily relate to each other as ‘semi-autonomous social fields’; What kinds of moral actions are likely to emerge from these loose assemblages?; Why do value frames change over time and how?; Is the rough movement from some value frame assemblages to some forms of moral action more consistent with broader, perhaps international, goals and aspirations?; What is the relationship between what might be called ‘global’ and ‘local’ value frames?; and, Are some value frames more tightly connected to types of moral action while others are not? To pose these questions and then to examine them as a form of critical social analysis is to confront the mechanisms that in part explain some of the most important crises of our time.

In the next section, I narrower the lens a bit further to take up the problem of one particularly consequential value frame, human rights, before moving out again to consider the relationship between human rights and moral action as a problematic linkage that deserves close scrutiny.

VALUES WITHOUT QUALITIES

And suddenly, in view of these reflections, Ulrich had to smile and admit to himself that he was, after all, a character, even without having one.

Robert Musil, The Man Without Qualities

In his 20th century masterpiece, Musil gives us the indelible character of Ulrich, a 32-year-old mathematician living in the waning days of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Amid his many adventures, failed relationships, and loss of faith in the old ideologies, Ulrich comes to a startling conclusion: that in order to survive in the modern world, a person must let go of any attempt to link personal identity with grand collective narratives, for to pursue such narratives is to open the door to greed, economic exploitation, ethnocentrism, and, ultimately, war. The central illustration of this troubling insight takes place in Volume 2 of the novel, in which Ulrich finds himself part of a committee of Austrian loyalists making preparations to honor the 70-year reign of the Emperor Franz Joseph. The committee settles on several vague mottos to characterize Franz Joseph’s rule, including progress, happiness, and humanity. But because these noble ideals dissipated in an air of abstraction as the months of organization unfolded, the space was opened for a series of unscrupulous figures to take advantage of the situation to promote their own institutional and
economic interests. The result was the onset of a set of processes that not only did not honor Franz Joseph as a steward of humanity but also, in fact, led seemingly inextricably—in retrospect—to the cataclysm of World War I.

I invoke this rediscovered archetype of modernism because among the most important of contemporary value frames, human rights likewise suffers from a certain emptiness born from the noble vagueness of its aspirations. And, as we will see in greater detail in the next section, the specific values that constitute human rights simply magnify the emptiness of humanity itself. This is not, however, a critique of human rights à la Bentham, that is, a critique of the essentially metaphysical claims at the heart of the modern human rights project. Rather, it is a recognition of the fact that the value of the rights-bearing member of humanity is a value that is so thin with normative content that it is essentially empty. As we will see, when values without qualities capture the collective imagination over a period of time, eventually a break with moral action occurs.

Because I am an anthropologist and not a philosopher, I can still keep my epistemological integrity intact and sidestep several questions that might occur at this point, such as whether all values are equally ‘empty’ in some sense. For example, an important value for many religious value frames is ‘righteousness’. Likewise, a nationalist value frame might privilege ‘patriotism’, a trade unionist value frame might revolve around commitment to class, and so on. Nevertheless, and without venturing too far down this path, I am inclined to say that emptiness is not a characteristic of values in general and that there is rather a spectrum of normative thickness or thinness along which value frames can be placed. Moreover, to understand, as an anthropologist must, how these relative degrees of normative density have consequences for practical moral action, it is necessary to examine what thickness or thinness means in particular cases. With human rights, the consequences of thinness bordering on emptiness must be understood in relation to the broader ideological and historical contexts in which human rights embodied a range of ‘protean social forms’8 that eventually came to dominate the normative landscape.9

With the end of the Cold War, what Eleanor Roosevelt, the first Chairman of the UN Commission on Human Rights, had called (1948)10 a ‘curious grapevine’ of human rights consciousness took root in many parts of the world through the energetic activism of thousands of non-governmental and governmental institutions, politically engaged scholars, and local political, religious, and cultural leaders. The promise of human rights was not offered as simply one among a range of viable value frames, each with its own advantages and disadvantages. Rather, the ‘power of human rights’11 was promoted as a global replacement discourse, a meta-value frame that would ideally come to bracket all others and serve as the ultimate normative standard against which they would be judged.

The global emergence of human rights in this way was accompanied by a sort of millenarian fervor: finally, after decades of fits and starts, decades in which the geopolitical logics of the Cold War and the spiraling processes of decolonization played themselves out, the world was apparently ready to be ‘made new’.12 But in
order to be reborn under the sign of humanity, it was necessary to promote the vaguest of values, those capable of encompassing humanity in one broad sweep. Even Kant had recognized the dilemma inherent in the move to put into practice a global vision of ‘perpetual peace’ that was driven by an ideology of universal normative belonging. Between the philosophers, who dream the ‘sweet dreams’, and real-world institutions, which ‘must proceed on empirical principles’, according to Kant, there lies a tension between theory and practice in which the global values of the visionary are more likely than not to be dismissed as ‘empty ideas’.

Nevertheless, from time to time, the spread of the curious grapevine of human rights throughout the 1990s and early 2000s catalyzed national or regional movements that were equally millenarian and equally grounded in value frames that seemed to promise everything from nothing. For example, in 2005, Evo Morales was elected as the first self-identifying ‘indigenous’ president of Bolivia. As many observed, his rise was made possible through the influence of both human and indigenous rights discourse within civil society in Bolivia, as well as the establishment in the early 1990s of so-called neoliberal institutions to implement international human rights law in the country.13

Yet almost immediately, his government sought to identify this historical moment with the Andean concept of Pachakuti, the literally millenarian belief that history passes through 1000-year cycles, with each cycle marked by a particular rupture or turning point or radical break in the prevailing cosmovisión. Morales mobilized a new department of communications that eventually produced masterful political posters and other official government propaganda that represented Morales as heir to Tupaj Katari, the 18th century Indian leader, who directed a failed rebellion against the Spanish Empire. The legacy of his defeat and brutal execution—he was drawn and quartered in front of a large and somber throng in La Paz in 1781—resonated down through the ages, to be reappropriated by Morales as a rallying cry to ‘re-found’ Bolivia. Morales even suggested that he was the embodiment of the spirit of Katari when he adopted Katari’s apocryphal last words to justify his election: ‘Volveré y seré millones’ (‘I will return and I will be millions’).

Yet over the subsequent decade, the promise of a revolution based in the values of indigenous rights proved to be elusive. As the years passed, the linkage between indigenous rights and moral action became more and more tenuous. By 2011, during a severe political crisis over a governmental proposal to build a major highway through a protected bioreserve, the linkage suffered a breach so profound that it threatened to bring down Morales’s government. The proposed highway seemed to violate every expectation for Bolivia’s indigenous rights revolution: self-determination, respect for Pachamama (Mother Earth), and the injunction to vivir bien, that is, to live in harmony with others in a spirit of sustainability and humility. Yet the Morales government—in large part, through his Vice President, Álvaro García Linera—argued that the highway was precisely a form of action that promoted indigenous rights, since it promised to open up remote regions of the country to economic development and thereby pave the way to greater collective autonomy and economic self-sufficiency for indigenous communities. But when indigenous rights could be invoked to both
justify the highway, and vehemently oppose it, it eventually became clear that the values of indigenous rights themselves were problematically thin. Indeed, in 2016, Morales paid a heavy political price for asking Bolivians to put their faith in indigenous rights as the country’s core value frame when the government’s proposal to amend the revolutionary constitution of 2009 to allow Morales to stand for additional terms in office was rejected in a bitter electoral defeat.

Thus, like its normative cousin human rights, indigenous rights has likewise proven to be a zealously promoted value frame, one that demands precedence, reverence, and devotion, since, like human rights, it too claims to be precisely what it is not: that is, the revelation of an ontological truth that transcends human values, which are mere social constructions. Yet as we will see in the next section, which examines the linkage between human rights and moral action ethnographically, the loss of hope in the values of humanity has been an inevitable consequence of the growing influence of these values. And as with the implosion of indigenous rights value frames in revolutionary Bolivia, the implosion of humanity has, on the one hand, left true believers bereft and, on the other hand, has left those who never believed, like the unscrupulous characters General Stumm von Bordwehr and Arnheim in Musil’s novel, eager to rush in with very different visions of apocalypse now, class privilege, ethnic chauvinism, and moral exclusion.

THE PARADOX OF HUMAN RIGHTS

Between the end of the Cold War and the end of the first post-Cold War decade, the global landscape had shifted dramatically. At transnational, international, national, and local levels, human rights had become a powerful value frame shaping everything from national foreign policy to international development. It is true that there were moments in this period of liminal ascendancy when the apparently solid edifice of human rights was weakened. For example, after China had been severely criticized by both global institutions like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch and western governments for its bloody crackdown on pro-democracy protesters in Tiananmen Square in 1989, it defended itself by claiming that such actions were consistent with ‘Asian values’, in which the selfish individual cannot be allowed to threaten the harmony of the community. This ‘Asian values’ opposition to the spread of ‘universal’ human rights was then picked up and developed at some length by leading thinkers and diplomats in countries like Malaysia and Singapore. Yet these glimpses of what would later become a backlash against human rights were the exception that proved the rule during the first ten post-Cold War years. As Kofi Annan, the UN Secretary-General, put it, by 2000 the world had entered the ‘age of human rights’.

For methodological reasons as much as anything else, anthropologists became critical observers of the rise of human rights during this period, a fortuitous development that led to an eventual data set on the global practice of human rights that revealed an unexpected paradox. As the millenarian project of human rights became established as a dominant value frame within politics and social policy, this
growing hegemony was accompanied by the rise of moral practices that often contradicted the values of humanity from which human rights were derived. For example, in his provocatively titled study of human rights in Malawi, ‘Prisoners of Freedom’, Englund\textsuperscript{14} found that human rights came to replace existing value frames for everything from early childhood education to language policy. Malawian elites had come under great pressure during the 1990s from both international donor institutions and transnational NGOs to adopt human rights as the basis for national development and social engineering. Yet the values of universal humanity were not so easily vernacularized in practice. Even the phrase ‘human rights’ could not be directly translated into the local Chichewa language. Eventually, national policymakers settled on the phrase \textit{ufulu wachibadwidwe} (‘the freedom one is born with’). However, the use of this phrase as the rhetorical symbol of the value of human rights led to a range of problematic moral practices that included the refusal to participate in group lessons in schools by children. Here, the hope for humanity was ironically translated into a language of selfishness and the denial of group legitimacy.

In an ethnographic study in which the loss of hope in humanity had more serious and potentially violent consequences, Allen\textsuperscript{4} examined what she called the ‘rise and fall’ of human rights among the key actors in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. Focusing on institutions and political and social actors in the occupied West Bank, Allen demonstrated how generations of participants—on both sides—came to play parts in a pervasive ‘shared charade’, a sort of large-scale performance in which the players acted ‘as if’ their decisions, their beliefs, and their moral visions were shaped by human rights. In fact, as Allen shows, the collective performance was directed primarily to international and transnational donors, for whom the presence of the language of human rights was an essential requirement for financial aid and institutional concern. Despite the shared charade, the major actors in the conflict readily acknowledged that the values of humanity were largely irrelevant in shaping their moral actions on a day-to-day basis. Israelis approached the conflict from a position of national security strength and a sense of historical-theological destiny; the Palestinians, by contrast, a stateless people living under conditions of occupation and violent microgovernance, viewed their actions as the result of resistance shaped by moral righteousness. Yet in the end, as Hannah Arendt had realized decades before, the Palestinians could never act on the common values of humanity with Israelis because they lacked a basic political precondition: the right to have rights.

Finally, as Goldstein shows, in his long-term ethnographic research on citizen insecurity and vigilante justice in Bolivia,\textsuperscript{15} when the gap between the influence of human rights and the failure to realize its promises grows wide enough, a tear in the social fabric can occur through which violent counter-humanities can enter and take root. His research managed to capture the growing power of human rights in Bolivia during the 1990s and the early 2000s, a time in which a succession of pre-Morales governments adopted human rights value frames for many social and political programs, including in campaigns against gender violence, urban renewal, and poverty reduction. Even more, successive Bolivian governments, particularly during the neoliberal era, had facilitated the work at the local level of hundreds of
development NGOs, whose policies had likewise been reinscribed as a form of human rights activism.

Yet over the same period, indicators of economic destitution and structural violence grew with equal measure. Particularly within Bolivia cities and peri-urban barrios, the ambitions of the human rights movement diverged widely from the everyday reality of people’s lives, which was marked by a pervasive sense of insecurity, hopelessness, and, eventually, a simmering rage that could explode into collective violence. The values of humanity were of little consequence for people living on the edges of survival, for whom the simple act of petty theft by neighborhood youths was seen as a crime deserving of the harshest punishment. As Goldstein’s research demonstrates, without any way at all for the state or other actors to meaningfully foster the link between the value frame of human rights and moral action, a dangerous vacuum was created, which was filled by practices of violent tribalism and inhumanity—the torture of suspects by local residents; the use of threats of killing to control neighborhoods; and, in the worst of cases, the burning and lynching of suspected local thieves and the public display of their battered bodies as a warning to others.

But if the paradox of human rights has revealed the troubling association between the universal values of humanity and local histories of violence, deception, and desperation, what about the potential for the emergence of more widespread, organized counter-humanities, such as nationalism, ethnic cleansing, and racial mobilization? The next section focuses on more recent developments, particularly in Europe, to consider what happens when the hope for humanity has lost its power on larger scales and hope itself has given way to resentment, nostalgia, and moral withdrawal.

THE SIREN SONG OF CITIZENSHIP

At least since September 11, 2001, many of the world’s most powerful avatars of humanity have been confronted with sudden and catastrophic reminders of how values without qualities are no match for the values of counter-humanities that can shape the moral imagination quite brutally and direct it toward immediate and irreversible ends. The attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon in the United States, the London bombings of July 2005, and the 2015 coordinated attacks in Paris brought into stark and ferocious relief the enormous difference between a value frame that is anchored in the ‘inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family’ and a value frame that is anchored in the call to jihad. Here was a clash between values without qualities and what might be called values with hyper-qualities—intense, visceral, indeed, biopolitical.

It was also a frank acknowledgment that the ‘age of human rights’, which had dawned with such promise and was apparently inevitable, a period that some had likened to the ‘end of history’,16 had come to a close, to be replaced by the ages of necropolitics,17 forever war,18 savage capitalism,19 and apocalyptic death cults masquerading as religious movements. What unites these post-human rights currents is the fact that they feed on various forms of exclusion: political, economic, and above
It is only possible to burst into a crowded theater of young people in the full flush of life and then coldly and systematically destroy them if they are seen as moral outlanders who must be eliminated. It is not an act of hate, for to hate someone enough to kill them presupposes the existence of bonds that have been broken. Rather, it is an act of moral exclusion, the inability to live on earth with the moral Other whose very presence is intolerable.

The responses to the tragic emptiness at the core of humanity have been varied. But perhaps the most consequential for understanding the relationship between values and moral action in the current conjuncture has been the retreat behind the walls of citizenship. This is being done as an apparent compromise between the utopian sweep of humanity and the surrender to the necessity to respond to exclusion with exclusion of even greater power. There is, of course, obvious precedence for the progressive recourse to citizenship, beginning in the late-18th century, when French revolutionaries made citizenship a co-equal, but distinct, value category with that of the rights of man. Yet this normative equation is sustainable only for as long as the state is seen to be the political embodiment of the rights of man writ large. But when this equivalence breaks down, when the rights of man or human rights have finally dissipated from a global landscape that has no more use for them, what is left is what might be called ‘bare citizenship’, that is, a structural relic of the age of Enlightenment that works as an efficient instrument of exclusion only on a larger scale.

How else to explain the mangled uses to which the category of citizenship is currently being put? In the United States—the place which (even before France) boldly declared that ‘we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights’—the masses now yearn for the time in which tens of millions of their neighbors, co-workers, classmates, and, perhaps, even friends will be rounded up by the military, herded into concentration camps, and then forcibly expelled from US territory, simply because they are not fellow citizens. And on the high seas, thousands of migrants go to their deaths as a last act of desperation, whether they were fleeing from war, hunger, or the ravages of savage capitalism (that is, those derisively called ‘economic migrants’). Yet because they are not citizens of the countries that lie on the other side of the sea, they are left to drown with only symbolic, perhaps nostalgic, gestures to save them in response. If small children are washing up on the shores of Europe like so much rotting seaweed, it is because citizenship in our post-human rights age is a siren: it promises a warm embrace with its song of belonging, but in reality it is a cruel creature ready to destroy through exclusion and apathy.

Thus, citizenship can never be a progressive alternative to the collapse of humanity. If citizenship seems to promise security and greater normative coherence as a response to the emptiness of human rights and other supranational value frames, this promise must be seen as false. It is an apparent solution to the moral dilemmas of our time that, in fact, functions as form of exclusion that is even more insidious than its doppelgänger nationalism, since citizenship forms the basis of sovereignty and thus of international law. Citizenship functions as the most pervasive value frame of moral exclusion in the world today. But if citizenship is not the answer to the moral
crisis of a world that has definitively shut the door on the utopian optimism of the post-Cold War, what is?

CONCLUSION: TOWARD POST-UTOPIAN SOLIDARITY

In his relatively early attack on multiculturalism, La Défaite de la Pensée, Finkielkraut argues that postcolonial guilt created a political environment in which dark currents from the 19th century counter-Enlightenment were being reinvented and reintroduced into the heart of Europe in the form of cultural and religious pluralism, group rights, and ethnic political mobilization. Finkielkraut has a particular distaste for anthropologists because of their role in the process through which ‘culture’ became a euphemism for ethnic chauvinism, class leveling, and, most worryingly, the rise of irrationality. As recompense for the injustices of colonialism, Finkielkraut asserts, Western countries, and France, in particular, went too far. Instead of doubling down on the values of the political Enlightenment (liberty, equality, and universal rights), successive governments allowed these values to be undermined through state policies of cultural accommodation, multicultural education, and laws protecting religious diversity. For Finkielkraut, as difficult as it might be, the only true path forward is the path of a universal humanity. As he puts it, without humanity, what we are left with is the mindless consumer on the one hand (the ‘zombie’) and, on the other, the traditionalist trapped within the boundaries of an imagined Volksgeist (the ‘fanatic’).

In many ways, over the course of the following decades, Finkielkraut’s wish came true, at least along the curious grapevine that transformed international development and multilateral relations. As we have seen, in the years after 1987, the neo-Enlightenment age of human rights dawned, particularly across wide swaths of the Global South, and the values of liberty, dignity, and individual autonomy became the foundation for a new international order, a ‘world made new’. However, as I have argued, this turning point in history did not lead inevitably to the establishment of ‘freedom, justice and peace in the world’, as the UDHR had imagined, but, rather, something quite unintended and troubling—the rise of counter-humanities that embraced exclusion, violence, and fundamental inequality. And, as I have also argued, this was the result of a basic characteristic at the core of humanity itself: its essential normative emptiness. When it became clear that it was not possible to translate the values of humanity into concrete, and pervasive, forms of moral action in the ways that were predicated, a vacuum was created at just that moment in the post-Cold War in which the power of human rights seemed to be reaching its apogee. As we have seen, although it was not immediate, eventually this vacuum was filled with precisely the kind of exclusionary value frames that guardians of the Enlightenment like Finkielkraut feared most.

So although this is a difficult and perhaps counterintuitive conclusion to come to, the solution to our contemporary moral crisis is not more humanity, but less. But the struggle here is not, as Finkielkraut and others have argued, between the forces of rationality and irrationality, or between new iterations of the dialectic of the Enlightenment and the Counter-Enlightenment. Rather, it seems to me, the real
struggle is between the forces of humanity and those of humanism. Here, I follow the analysis of Toulmin, who argued that the key conflict of modernity was not between, say, Voltaire and de Maistre, but between Voltaire and Montaigne.

From Montaigne, we learn not to search for timeless truths about human nature and then to make them the basis for global projects of moral transformation, but rather to pay close attention to what might be called the ‘small commonalities’, the little inflections of life that would be recognizable to anyone, anywhere. This is humanism in the most practical of senses and one that is, ironically, universally applicable. This is not a prescription for a flat, horizontal conception of the human experience, but one that imagines a thick account, full of contradiction and pluralism. It is a response to our contemporary moral dilemmas and the loss of hope in humanity that lets go of the basic search for a grand, final synthesis, one that will resolve all existing tensions in a final assertion of the collective moral will. Yet this neo-humanism inspired by Montaigne, Erasmus, More, and Rabelais is not a descent into the ‘fanaticism’ of culture, to recall Finkielkraut, because it anticipates inclusion along radically different lines. In its consequences for legal, economic, and social policy, the kind of neo-humanism I have in mind is one that would tolerate and encourage pluralism—yet within limits.

The range of these limits, the scope of what kinds of values and value frames fall within what Forster called ‘the human tradition’, and which do not, is clearly an important question and one that cannot be avoided, for to envision no limits at all is to surrender to moral nihilism. As Berlin put it, in his final essay published in the year after his death, ‘I am not a relativist; I do not say “I like my coffee with milk and you like it without; I am in favor of kindness and you prefer concentration camps” each of us with his own values, which cannot be overcome or integrated. This I believe to be false. But I do believe that there is a plurality of values which [people] can and do seek, and that these values differ’. This, I argue, is a framework for inclusion not in terms of the grand values of humanity, but in terms of the everyday points of understanding that form the basis of solidarity.

NOTES
1. Samuel Moyn, The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010).
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