



The Crisis of Humanistic Values and the Construction of the Non-Human in Attack on Titan

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Abstract. This paper examines the ethical construction of the human and the non-human in situations of collective fear and violent conflict. Drawing on humanistic ethics and contemporary theories of dehumanization, the study analyzes how moral exclusion functions as a mechanism through which human subjects are symbolically transformed into non-human enemies. Particular attention is given to the instability of the moral boundary that defines who counts as human. Adopting a qualitative philosophical and interpretative approach, the analysis focuses on narrative structures and discursive mechanisms within contemporary popular culture. Using *Attack on Titan* as a case study, the paper demonstrates how the construction of the 'demon' destabilizes the ethical distinction between human and non-human. The argument suggests that the narrative exposes the fragility and constructed nature of the category of the human itself, reflecting a broader crisis of humanistic values and indicating that humanity must be understood as an ethical responsibility rather than a biological or national given.

Keywords: Dehumanization; Humanistic values; Moral status; Moral exclusion; Ethical boundary; Cultural narrative.

1 Introduction

Processes of dehumanization remain among the most persistent and troubling ethical phenomena in contemporary culture. In contexts structured by fear, historical trauma, and violent conflict, collective identities are frequently stabilized through the symbolic exclusion of an enemy [1, 8]. Such exclusion transforms the opponent into a being perceived as outside the moral community, and therefore beyond the scope of ethical obligations [2]. From genocidal rhetoric in political discourse to dehumanizing portrayals in media and propaganda, the figure of the "non-human" enemy continues to shape collective behavior and justify extreme violence across diverse cultural and historical settings [3].

The boundary between the human and the non-human therefore functions as a normative demarcation rather than a purely biological distinction [4]. It determines who deserves recognition, dignity, and protection; who may be held accountable for their actions; and whose suffering warrants moral response [3]. When this boundary becomes unstable or is deliberately manipulated, violence can be justified, empathy suspended,

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and moral responsibility obscured [1, 9]. The question of who counts as human is thus not settled by empirical criteria—by reference to species membership or cognitive capacity alone—but is continuously contested through cultural narratives, visual representations, and discursive practices that shape collective understanding [5].

This instability has profound implications for humanistic ethics, which has traditionally grounded moral claims in an essential or universal conception of the human [6]. If the category of the human can be symbolically withdrawn from entire populations through rhetorical and narrative means, then human dignity cannot be assumed as a given but must be understood as fragile and dependent on conditions of recognition [4]. This insight challenges foundational assumptions of Western humanism and calls for a re-examination of how moral communities are formed and maintained [7].

This paper asks how the ethical construction of the human and the non-human operates in situations of collective fear and violent conflict, and what this reveals about the crisis of humanistic values in contemporary culture. The aim is to analyze mechanisms of dehumanization and moral exclusion and to examine how these mechanisms destabilize traditional humanistic values through a philosophical reading of *Attack on Titan* [8]. The series offers a uniquely sustained exploration of these dynamics, tracing how populations become demonized, how victims become perpetrators, and how the very category of the human unravels under the pressures of war, historical trauma, and ideological manipulation. By attending to the narrative strategies through which *Attack on Titan* stages these ethical dilemmas, this paper argues that the work does not simply depict dehumanization but actively exposes its constructed nature, inviting critical reflection on the fragility of humanistic commitments in times of crisis [8]. In doing so, the series functions as a philosophical text in its own right, dramatizing questions that ethical theory has long grappled with and revealing the extent to which humanity is not a biological given but an ongoing ethical task [9]. This study contributes to current discussions on dehumanization by demonstrating how contemporary cultural narratives can expose the instability of the human/non-human boundary and encourage ethical reflection on the conditions of moral recognition.

2 Humanistic Ethics and the Problem of Dehumanization

Within humanistic ethics, humanity signifies intrinsic worth and moral autonomy [6]. To be recognized as human in a normative sense is to be acknowledged as a subject capable of responsibility and deserving of ethical regard [4]. This conception has deep roots in Western philosophical traditions, where the human being is understood not merely as a biological entity but as a locus of dignity, rationality, and moral agency [6]. The capacity for rational self-determination grounds the claim that human beings ought never to be treated merely as means but always also as ends in themselves [6]. Similarly, the ethical demand arises from the encounter with the Other, whose face calls the subject to responsibility and forbids violence [4]. In both traditions, the human is not merely a descriptive category but a normative status that commands respect and imposes obligations.

However, the very universality that grounds humanistic ethics also renders it vulnerable. If humanity is understood as a property inherent to all members of the species, then the symbolic exclusion of particular groups from the category of the human represents a profound contradiction—one that cannot be adequately addressed within the terms of essentialist humanism itself [2]. The philosophical tradition has long grappled with this tension, recognizing that the boundaries of the moral community are not fixed but are continually drawn and redrawn through social practices, cultural narratives, and political institutions [7]. This paper draws on contemporary theories of dehumanization to analyze how such exclusion operates, building on insights from social psychology, moral philosophy, and critical theory [10].

Dehumanization operates by symbolically denying moral status to certain groups [1]. This denial typically involves two interrelated processes: the exclusion of others from the community of those whose individuality is recognized, and their exclusion from the network of mutual obligations and responsibilities that define moral community [1]. When both forms of denial operate together, the target group is placed outside the sphere within which moral norms apply [1]. Harm directed toward them is reframed as necessary, defensive, or even virtuous rather than unjust [2]. The perpetrators of such harm may understand themselves as acting in the service of higher goods—protecting their community, preserving their way of life, or defending against existential threat—and may therefore experience no moral qualms about violence that would otherwise be unthinkable [1, 14].

Contemporary research has further refined our understanding of dehumanization by distinguishing between its different forms [8, 11, 13]. Animalistic dehumanization denies uniquely human attributes such as morality, rationality, and refinement, portraying targeted groups as crude, instinct-driven, or lacking in civilized sensibilities [10]. Mechanistic dehumanization, by contrast, denies human nature by treating others as cold, rigid, unfeeling objects—as automatons or instruments rather than as living beings with inner lives [10]. Both forms appear in contexts of intergroup conflict, often operating in tandem to produce a comprehensive denial of the other's humanity [10]. In *Attack on Titan*, both forms are discernible: the inhabitants of Paradis are rendered animalistic through the 'demon' label, which associates them with irrational destructiveness and moral depravity, while the Titans themselves—particularly the mindless variants—embody a mechanistic indifference that challenges any simple attribution of agency or moral standing.

The boundary between human and non-human is culturally mediated and discursively maintained [5]. Narratives and collective memory shape moral categories, transmitting images of the enemy across generations and embedding dehumanizing assumptions in the fabric of social identity [8]. These narratives do not merely describe pre-existing differences but actively construct the reality they purport to represent [5]. Through repeated telling, stories of the other's inhumanity acquire the status of received truth, insulated from counter-evidence by the very structure of collective memory [8]. Children are taught to fear and despise those who have been designated as enemies; historical grievances are curated to emphasize one's own victimhood and the other's culpability; moments of empathy or cooperation are forgotten or reinterpreted as exceptions that prove the rule.

Humanity depends on recognition and is therefore vulnerable to symbolic withdrawal [9]. To be human is not simply to possess certain biological characteristics but to be seen, addressed, and responded to as a human being by others [4, 12]. This insight has profound implications for how we understand moral responsibility in contexts of conflict [9]. If humanity is a status conferred through recognition rather than a property inherent in individuals, then it can also be withdrawn—and such withdrawal is accomplished not through physical transformation but through symbolic means [3]. Certain lives are rendered visible, grievable, worthy of mourning, while others are rendered invisible, their suffering passing without notice, their deaths counting as nothing [3]. This differentiation is accomplished through frames of representation that determine whose lives matter and whose do not, and these frames are themselves products of cultural narrative and discursive practice [3].

The study of dehumanization thus requires attention to the concrete mechanisms through which moral exclusion is accomplished [1]. It requires analysis of the narratives that construct the enemy, the images that circulate to sustain those narratives, and the institutions that embed them in social practice [5]. It requires attention to the ways in which fear and historical trauma are mobilized to justify exclusion, and to the ways in which those who are excluded may themselves internalize or resist the terms of their dehumanization [9]. And it requires reflection on the possibility of rehumanization—on the conditions under which those who have been cast out of the moral community may be recognized once again as subjects worthy of ethical regard [9].

This paper undertakes such analysis through a philosophical reading of *Attack on Titan*, attending to the narrative strategies through which the series stages these dynamics and invites critical reflection upon them [8]. The series provides a uniquely sustained exploration of how dehumanization operates, how it is sustained across generations, and how it may be contested or destabilized [8]. In doing so, it illuminates not only the mechanisms of moral exclusion but also the fragility of the humanistic values that such exclusion threatens.

3 The Discursive Construction of the 'Demon'

In *Attack on Titan*, the inhabitants of Paradis Island are systematically designated as 'demons' by the Marleyan authorities and by the broader world beyond the walls. This label is sustained through inherited narratives rather than direct encounter; generations of Marleyans are taught to view Paradisians as devils who once brought destruction upon the world and who retain the capacity to do so again [8]. The label functions as a performative act that reorganizes the moral field, establishing a fundamental asymmetry between those who name and those who are named [5]. Importantly, this designation precedes any actual contact—Marleyan children learn of Paradisian demons from textbooks, propaganda, and cultural memory long before they might ever encounter an actual inhabitant of the island [8]. The demon is thus a product of discourse before it is an object of experience [5].

By naming a population demonic, the narrative suspends moral reciprocity [4]. The demon is positioned as a being to whom ethical obligations do not apply; indeed, the

very act of naming forecloses the possibility of mutual recognition [4]. Violence against demons requires no justification beyond their demonic status, and those who inflict such violence may understand themselves as acting defensively or even heroically [2]. This suspension of moral reciprocity can be understood through the framework of moral exclusion, whereby certain groups are placed outside the sphere within which moral norms apply [1]. Harm directed toward them is reframed as necessary, defensive, or even virtuous rather than unjust [1]. The demon becomes a symbolic instrument through which exclusion is justified and violence normalized [2]. This suspension operates at multiple levels: it licenses state violence against Paradisian populations, justifies the internment of Eldians in Marleyan ghettos, and renders unthinkable any form of political negotiation or peaceful coexistence [1]. The demon cannot be reasoned with, cannot be trusted, cannot be granted rights—it can only be contained or destroyed.

The process of dehumanization evident in *Attack on Titan* operates through what has been theorized as the denial of two fundamental human attributes: identity and community [1]. When identity is denied, others are excluded from the community of those whose individuality is recognized; they are perceived as interchangeable, nameless, without distinctive personhood [1]. When community is denied, others are excluded from the network of mutual obligations and responsibilities that bind moral agents together [1]. In the series, Paradisians are denied both: they are rendered as a homogeneous mass of "devils" rather than as individuals with unique life stories, and they are placed outside the moral community within which obligations apply. This double denial produces a condition in which violence against them encounters no internal moral resistance from perpetrators [1].

Contemporary research has further refined our understanding of dehumanization by distinguishing between its different forms, both of which appear in *Attack on Titan* [10]. Animalistic dehumanization denies uniquely human attributes such as morality, rationality, and refinement, portraying targeted groups as crude, instinct-driven, or lacking in civilized sensibilities [10]. The designation of Paradisians as "demons" partakes of this animalistic register, associating them with irrational destructiveness, moral depravity, and monstrous appetites. Mechanistic dehumanization, by contrast, denies human nature by treating others as cold, rigid, unfeeling objects—as automatons or instruments rather than as living beings with inner lives [10]. This form appears in the treatment of Titans themselves, particularly the mindless variants, who are perceived as mere obstacles to be eliminated or resources to be exploited. Both forms operate in tandem to produce a comprehensive denial of the other's humanity [10].

The visual dimension of the series reinforces this discursive construction [5]. Titans are initially presented as purely monstrous, their grotesque forms and mindless consumption inviting horror rather than empathy [8]. The camera lingers on their vacant expressions, their slack jaws, their complete indifference to the suffering they cause. Yet as the narrative unfolds, viewers learn that Titans were once human, and that the boundary between human and monster is permeable [8]. This revelation destabilizes the initial visual coding and compels a re-evaluation of what has been seen [5]. The series thus uses its medium to enact the very destabilization it thematizes, inviting viewers to question their own investments in the human/non-human binary [8]. This narrative strategy aligns with the insight that certain lives are rendered visible and grievable

while others are not, and that this differentiation is accomplished through frames of representation that determine whose death counts as a loss and whose passes without notice [3]. The gradual revelation of Titan origins challenges these frames, rendering grievable those who were previously invisible [3].

The durability of the demonic label across generations points to the power of inherited narrative in sustaining dehumanization [8]. Marleyans do not need to encounter Paradisians to know them as demons; the knowledge is transmitted through textbooks, monuments, public rituals, and family stories [8]. This inherited quality makes the label resistant to counter-evidence; individual Paradisians who appear sympathetic or reasonable can be dismissed as exceptions, as cunning deceivers who hide their true demonic nature [2]. The label thus functions as what might be called a hermeneutic lens—a framework that organizes all subsequent experience, ensuring that evidence contrary to the label is either assimilated to it or disregarded entirely [5]. When the Marleyan warrior candidate Gabi Braun finally travels to Paradis and encounters its inhabitants directly, her struggle to reconcile what she has been taught with what she now sees dramatizes the tension between inherited narrative and lived experience [8]. Her eventual transformation—from faithful believer in Marleyan propaganda to someone capable of recognizing Paradisian humanity—suggests both the power of discourse and the possibility of its undoing [9].

The series further complicates this picture by showing that the demonized may themselves internalize the terms of their dehumanization [9]. Some Paradisians come to accept that they are demons, either as a matter of tragic fate or as a source of terrible power. Eren Yeager's eventual embrace of the demonic identity—his declaration that he will become the monster that the world fears—represents a paradoxical form of agency achieved through the assumption of dehumanized status [9]. If the world insists on seeing him as a demon, he will become one on his own terms, wielding the destructive power that the label confers. This move dramatizes a tragic dialectic of recognition: denied acknowledgment as human, the dehumanized subject may embrace monstrosity as the only form of power available [9]. Yet this embrace carries its own costs, perpetuating the cycle of violence and ensuring that the next generation will have new reasons to fear and hate.

From an ethical perspective, the discursive construction of the demon in *Attack on Titan* demonstrates that humanity can be symbolically withdrawn through discourse [4]. The boundary between human and non-human is constructed rather than ontologically given [9]. This insight challenges foundational assumptions of humanistic ethics, which has traditionally grounded moral claims in an essential or universal conception of the human [6]. If the category of the human can be withdrawn from entire populations through rhetorical and narrative means, then human dignity cannot be assumed as a given but must be understood as fragile and dependent on conditions of recognition [4]. The series does not simply present this dynamic as a feature of Marleyan propaganda; it shows how similar processes operate on Paradis itself, revealing that the capacity for moral exclusion is not confined to one side but is a recurring feature of intergroup conflict [1].

The Walls that surround Paradis are not merely physical barriers but symbolic boundaries that separate human from non-human, inside from outside, us from them

[8]. Within the Walls, generations have been raised on narratives of the Titans as mindless monsters, their humanity forgotten or suppressed [8]. When the truth emerges—that Titans were once human, that the enemy is not other than the self—the foundations of this moral order are shaken [8]. This revelation carries profound ethical implications, for it suggests that the boundaries of moral community are never finally settled but are continually drawn and redrawn through the narratives we tell and the images we circulate [9]. The task of maintaining humanistic values in contexts of fear and conflict is therefore not to defend an essential human nature but to sustain the practices of recognition through which humanity is continually achieved [9].

4 The Destabilization of the Human Category

As the narrative of Attack on Titan unfolds, the binary opposition between human and non-human progressively collapses [8]. Several narrative developments contribute to this destabilization. First, the revelation that Titans are transformed humans complicates any simple attribution of monstrosity [8]. Second, the disclosure that the Marleyan–Paradisian conflict is rooted in a shared history of violence and mutual demonization undermines the moral clarity that initially seemed to structure the narrative [8]. Third, the introduction of characters who occupy ambiguous positions—Eldians who fight for Marley, Titans who retain traces of human consciousness, Paradisians who commit atrocities in the name of survival—multiplies the perspectives from which the conflict can be viewed and renders any fixed moral hierarchy untenable [8].

Biological humanity no longer guarantees moral superiority, and symbolic non-humanity does not eliminate moral agency [9]. Characters who have been demonized nevertheless act, choose, and bear responsibility for their choices [9]. Conversely, characters who occupy the position of the human—those who name and judge—are shown to be capable of cruelty, self-deception, and moral failure [2]. The neat alignment of human with good and non-human with evil that initially seemed to structure the narrative gives way to a more complex and unsettling picture [8].

Humanity emerges in this context as a contingent ethical achievement rather than a fixed identity [9]. To be human is not simply to belong to a species but to be recognized as a subject worthy of ethical regard—and such recognition can be withdrawn [4]. The collapse of the binary reveals that humanism cannot rely on essentialist assumptions; it must instead confront the fragility of the categories on which it depends [6]. This insight has profound implications for how we understand moral responsibility in contexts of conflict [9]. If humanity is not a given but an achievement, then the task of maintaining humanistic values becomes an ongoing ethical practice rather than a settled possession [9].

5 Ethical Implications

The narrative of Attack on Titan exposes the fragility of humanistic values without rejecting them outright [8]. On the contrary, by dramatizing the consequences of dehumanization and the collapse of moral boundaries, the series invites reflection on what

is lost when humanity is symbolically withdrawn [8]. The suffering that results from dehumanization is rendered visible, and the cost of moral exclusion is counted in lives destroyed and possibilities foreclosed [3].

Yet the series also resists any easy resolution. It offers no position of innocent judgment from which dehumanization can be condemned without complicity [8]. Viewers who have followed the narrative from the perspective of Paradisians are themselves implicated in the processes they observe; they have shared the fear and hatred that animate dehumanizing rhetoric and have perhaps endorsed violence that now appears morally ambiguous [8]. This narrative strategy aligns with the philosophical insight that dehumanization is not simply something done by others but a possibility inherent in human sociality itself [2].

Humanity, the series suggests, must be continually enacted through recognition and responsibility [9]. It cannot be secured once and for all but must be renewed in each encounter with the Other [4]. This is a demanding ethics, one that offers no guarantees and requires constant vigilance [9]. Yet it is also an ethics that remains committed to the possibility of humane relations even in the midst of conflict [4]. The crisis of humanistic values that *Attack on Titan* dramatizes is not, therefore, an argument for abandoning humanism but a call to rethink it in more self-critical and reflexive terms [9].

6 Conclusion

The boundary between the human and the non-human is a culturally constructed ethical category rather than a natural kind. Through the discursive construction of the 'demon,' *Attack on Titan* illustrates how dehumanization operates as moral exclusion, transforming populations into enemies who can be destroyed without remorse. This process reflects mechanisms well documented in moral philosophy: the denial of identity and community, the attribution of inhuman qualities, and the reframing of violence as necessary defense.

Yet the series also demonstrates that this boundary is unstable. The revelation that Titans were once human, the shared historical trauma linking both sides, and the multiplication of perspectives all destabilize the human/non-human binary. This suggests that dehumanization, however powerful, is never irreversible; the possibility of rehumanization remains.

Attack on Titan reveals that humanity persists not as a biological certainty but as an ethical responsibility grounded in recognition. To be human is to be seen and responded to as a subject worthy of moral regard. This insight has urgent contemporary relevance. In an era of resurgent nationalism and rhetorical dehumanization of migrants and political opponents, the mechanisms the series dramatizes operate in our own world.

The task of maintaining humanistic values is therefore not to defend an essential human nature but to sustain practices of recognition through which humanity is continually achieved. This requires critical attention to the narratives we inherit and the categories through which we perceive others.

The series invites reflection on what it means to affirm humanity in a world defined by existential threat. In doing so, it contributes to debates about ethical life and the

prospects for humanistic values in contemporary culture. The questions it raises—who counts, and what we owe to those cast out of the moral community—are not merely academic but urgently practical.

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