

Oh, the humanity: an
analysis of
characteristics by
species in the trial of
an ox...



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How can we define humanity? The word “ inhuman” is used to describe cruel and brutal actions. Thusly, a human’s perspective would dictate that humanity should be interpreted as the opposite, and entail dignity and goodness – but it is important to consider how humanity is defined through the lens of the natural world. The works *The Trial of an ox for killing a man* : with the examination of the witnesses before Judge Lion, at Quadruped Court, near Beast Park (henceforth referred to as *The Trial of an Ox*) and Isaac Watts’ “ *The Ant, or Emmet*” explore humanity in contrast with animality through interactions between humans and animals.

In *The Trial of an Ox*, a man inflicts such cruelty on an ox he owns that an animal tribunal rules that the ox was driven to kill his tormentor out of madness. This work examines the motives and morals of humans and animals from an animal perspective, whereas Isaac Watts’ “ *The Ant, or Emmet*” takes a human point of view to examine the minuscule world of ants as an example for human behaviour. Humanity is defined in these two works through an exploration of violence, ignorance, and free will. The use of violence and propensity for ignorance by humans differs slightly in each narrative, with direct cruelty and lack of sensitivity featured in the former and indirect murder and wilful ignorance in the latter. What unites these two works and truly defines humanity is that humans are capable of choosing the way that they behave and are not driven by instinct. Violence and brutality is a central theme of *The Trial of an Ox*. The Ox is on trial “ for having gored his Driver in such a brutal manner” (6). This is met with outrage from the animal community, but is not the gravest act of atrocity committed according to the animals at the trial. It is revealed that, in truth, the Ox was abused, “ pricked

and beaten” by the driver he killed (17). The Bee testifies that the Ox had no intent to gore his driver, but “ had lost his senses, and therefore could not be held accountable for his actions” (12). Ultimately, the trial finds the Ox guilty not of murder but manslaughter, which asserts the involuntary nature of the action. As revealed through the verdict, in the animal world it is impossible for the Ox to have made the conscious decision to kill the drover.

Furthermore, the animals are held to a standard of law if they harm another, whereas humans can choose to be cruel to animals and undergo no repercussions. In Watts’ poem, humans still enact violence towards animals, as “ We tread them to dust, and a troop of them dies” (4).

“ The Ant, or Emmet” treats violence by humans differently than The Trial of an Ox. While humans are still tormentors of ants, they do so quickly and with ignorance, trampling them “ Without our regard or concern” (line 3). This act of brutality, while committed flippantly, shows a conscious choice to commit violence as humanity has knowledge of their impact on ants but chooses to continue killing them. Ants, in any case, cannot harm their larger aggressors, so this brutality again enforces the same power dynamic as that of the ox and the drover: man is allowed to cause harm, but reciprocity of this act is not allowed. In both works, humankind is portrayed as a conscious aggressor towards nature, whereas animals are portrayed (be it by law and consequence or by weakness) as incapable of inflicting suffering unto humans. This capability to mistreat nature without consequence is shown in these two works to be unique to humans. In “ The Ant, or Emmet”, humans are portrayed as complex and capable of deep thought, but having a blatant disregard for nature and animal life. Revisiting the earlier quote from Watts’

poem, we step on ants “ Without our regard or concern” (3). Watts acknowledges that humans are “ wise”(9) and have the knowledge of ants and the fact that that we kill them, but we continue to do so and do not feel burdened. Watts continues that, should humans put aside their ignorance of ants, there are “ Some lessons of wisdom” to be found in the way in which ants “ manage their work” (6, 10). Humans, who are apt to “ trifle”, do not have the same sensibilities as the tiny ant, but what makes them human is their ability and privilege not to notice the intricacies of animal life and nature.

The Trial of an Ox further reinforces the notion that humanity is defined by its ignorance to its impact on animals. After the ox is tormented by his drover, the other animals lament his lack of sensitivity towards animals. States the Tiger, “ Tis amazing that humans should complain of cruelty of animals, when their own minds are productive of scenes of such inhumanity” (14-15). Humans, while they believe themselves to be more morally sound than animals, are not capable of understanding the negative impact they cause. While in a different sense, in The Trial of an Ox humans are just as ignorant to the suffering of animals as in “ The Ant, or Emmet”, and this lack of sympathy and understanding towards nature is a defining trait that sets humans apart.

The most defining characteristic of humanity in these two works is that humans have agency and intent, whereas animals lack these in some capacity. In “ The Ant, or Emmet”, the humanity is defined by having the choice between frivolity and pious work. Watts knows that he must choose the direction of his life, pining for good faith in his decision: “ Let me think
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what shall serve me” (20). Though there is the possibility that he can make the choice between the human propensity to “trifle away” or to “read in good books, and believe, and obey”, the ant does not have this choice (18, 22). Thus, the definition of humanity is the option to choose whether or not to educate oneself and devote oneself to religion, knowledge, and godliness. In this work, ants are instinctive and do only what they need to live. The human, possessing possibilities of either righteous or slothful behaviour, acts as a foil for the ant who has no other option than to work diligently to survive. The animals in *The Trial of an Ox* act to further contrast humankind through their system of choice and accountability. While in this work, animals are seen to converse and negotiate, they are ultimately bestowed with less agency than their human counterparts. Animal decisions, while allowed, are filtered through the complicated lens of the court system. In order to even consider the punishment of the Ox, a thorough trial presents itself as a barrier to choice for the animals. According to *The Trial of an Ox*, while animals are capable of violence, what separates humans from animals is their capability for violence with intent.

The ultimate judgement, which states that the Ox was “driven to desparation by the cruel treatment”, takes the agency away from animals – humans can commit grave actions with intent, but animals can only commit impactful actions not by choice, but under the influence of madness (17). The two works, though differing in the depth of dialogue shown, both show an uninhibited possibility of choice and agency for humans, but a fundamental lack thereof for animals. Revisiting the earlier question, humanity can be defined by what it is and what it is not. Through *The Trial of*

an Ox, humans are characterized through their capability for active violence without consequence and their ignorance towards the ways in which they harm animals. In “ The Ant, or Emmet”, humans have knowledge of their violence, but choose wilful ignorance. The uniting characteristic of these two definitions of humanity is that humans are not bound to instinct, duty, or natural law: humans have pure freedom of choice in their actions.

Works Cited

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