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When human rights become wrongs

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WHAT is a human? This is possibly the oldest question in the Western intellectual tradition. Today, there are three influential and competing definitions. The first is the Christian theological view that humans are made in the image of God. The second is a more philosophical position that defines humans as possessing certain capacities, such as self-consciousness and rationality. Finally there is the biological view, where humans are defined – and differentiated from animals – by their DNA.

This is more than an academic debate. Scholars have long argued that these definitions matter in the real world because they influence how people treat one another. Proponents of each definition claim that if the public accepts the “wrong” one, we will end up mistreating other humans.

Christian theologians have long claimed, for example, that if we reject the idea that humans are made in God’s image, we will no longer see them as sacred and begin to see them as entities we can use for our own ends. Things like torture would become more acceptable. Social scientists and bioethicists have similarly argued that the biological view leads people to think of humans – ever so slightly – as being like other animals or objects, and treat them as such. As a result, the argument goes, a practice like buying organs from poor people will seem more acceptable.

These are important claims. Are they true? Some episodes from history suggest they might be. The paradigmatic claim of this kind is that the Nazis had a false notion of humans based on pseudoscientific racism, and this contributed to the holocaust. Similarly, the eugenics movements of the 19th and 20th centuries focused on a list of valued capacities, and therefore that people with fewer of these capacities should be valued less.

What about today? To answer that it is important to note that what humans actually are is irrelevant: people act on what they think is true. The debate thus boils down to an empirical question: what do people think, and how do they think others should be treated?

Empirical claims are there to be tested. In the first social science study to tackle this question, I examined public attitudes among a representative survey of more than 3500 adults in the US. I started by asking people how much they agreed with strong and pure versions of the three definitions of a human that concern the academics. I also asked them how much they agreed with four statements about humans: that they are like machines; special compared with animals; unique; and all of equal value. These questions were designed to assess whether any of the three competing definitions are associated with ideas that could have a negative effect on how we treat one another.

I finished with a series of direct questions about human rights: whether we should risk soldiers to stop a genocide in a foreign country, be allowed to buy kidneys from poor people, have terminally ill people commit suicide to save money, take blood from prisoners without their consent, or torture terror suspects to potentially save lives.

What came out was very striking. The more a respondent agreed with the biological definition of a human, the more likely they were to see humans as being like machines and the less likely they were to see them as special, unique or all of equal value. On the human rights questions, they were less willing to stop genocides and were more likely to accept buying kidneys, people committing suicide to save money and taking blood from prisoners.

In contrast, those who agreed with the theological view were less likely to agree with suicide and taking blood from prisoners against their will.

Shockingly, then, the critics appear to be right. People who agree with the biological definition of a human are also likely to hold views inconsistent with human rights.

Before anyone concludes that dystopia is upon us, note that only 25 per cent of the US public agreed with the strong and pure biological definition that concerns the critics. What's more, this study is far from the last word on this topic. It was only about what people think instead of what they do, and did not distinguish cause and effect (demonstrating causality with social science is notoriously difficult).

That said, these findings suggest a real problem for those who subscribe to both the biological view of humanity and to human rights. The most influential person in that position today is Richard Dawkins. He is a vocal defender of the view that humans are DNA-based machines. He is also an honorary vice president of the British Humanist Association, which promotes human rights and recognises "the dignity of individuals".

In light of my results, many humanities scholars would consider these two positions to be in great tension. I do not doubt anyone's sincerity in believing in both the biological definition of the human and in human rights, but teaching the public the former risks undercutting support for the latter.

What is to be done? If Dawkins's priority was human rights, he could switch to teaching us that humans are made in the image of God. This is not going to happen, and it shouldn't; nobody should change their view of what a human truly is. In any case, Christian definitions of the human have not always been a recipe for the humane treatment of others.

The answer, I think, is for influential people like Dawkins to try to sever the link the public apparently makes between definitions and treatment. The way to do this is to promote the idea that however a human is defined, humans are sacred.

This sacredness does not have to be of the religious variety: it could be based on secular ideas of dignity found in many European constitutions, treaties and human rights documents. (Incidentally, I suspect that if replicated in a secular European country, my study would get quite similar results. Fewer people would subscribe to the theological view, but their attitude to human rights would be tempered by secular notions of dignity found in those constitutions and human rights documents).

Therefore, whenever we talk about the biological view of humans, we must also say that it does not mean we should treat people like machines. Dawkins, to his credit, often does this in press interviews, but apparently he should redouble his efforts. Yes, the public is apparently making the mistake of mixing up an "is" (what humans are) with an "ought" (how they should consequently be treated). But academics need to be attuned to the fact that some ideas have unintended consequences.

John H. Evans is a professor of sociology at the University of California, San Diego. This article is based on his latest book *What is a Human? What the answers mean for human rights* (Oxford University Press)