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Faulty Phrases: “Only Human”

Jaret Kanarek, Editor-in-chief

After a forceful lesson demonstrating his incompetence as a green lantern, Hal Jordan, the hero of 2011’s blockbuster *Green Lantern*, claims, “I’m done. He’s right. I’m only human.”¹ This anti-man attitude pervades the movie, and seems warranted given the portrayal of a reality in which there are non-human species capable of accomplishing feats incomprehensible to mankind. Unfortunately, this anti-man attitude is not limited to the realm of fantasy and science fiction where the facts of reality, i.e. laws of logic and physics, have no bearing. For millennia, this attitude has been just as prevalent in the earthly world in which men reside, and has arrived on the doorstep of today’s culture in the form of the bromide: “only human.”

“Only human” typically serves either as an excuse for oneself or for others (“I am only human” or “you are only human,” respectively). Whether it is an excuse for flaws, mistakes, or just overall incompetency, the source of such negative attributes is clearly denoted. Man’s nature is the culprit. In fact, the first entry in the *Oxford American Writers Thesaurus* for *human* (as an adjective) is “they’re only human: mortal, flesh and blood; fallible, weak, frail, imperfect, vulnerable, susceptible, erring, error-prone.” It is these assumptions about man’s nature that makes the use of this phrase so troubling.

It is not difficult to find these underlying assumptions in the prevalent uses of the phrase. In response to mistakes, for example, the purpose is to absolve blame for things someone could not help.² If a man fails a task, the phrase is supposed to console him. He could not help making such a mistake because of his human nature. Other such uses include responses to failures and psychological abnormalities. The latter point is quite an interesting one when considering current legal debates about the validity of the insanity plea. This contentious issue still gives rise to disagreement regarding the special treatment of criminals who are diagnosed with certain

1 All quotes from the *Green Lantern* are from the film’s respective imdb.com page.

2 According to the *Macmillan Dictionary and Thesaurus*, “only human” is used predominantly in this manner. It specifically denotes man’s nature as the cause of the mistake, which is why blame should be absolved.

psychological disorders. Regardless, most generally feel that it is wrong to punish someone who just “couldn’t help it.” In contrast, when someone achieves a great deal of success he is thought to be “not human,” and his achievement “out of this world.”

In accordance with the prevalent use of the phrase, then, man is not only susceptible to error but by his nature is destined to a life full of it. He is not a rational animal but is an irrational mistake-prone being who can only succeed by chance.³ Such a view of man embodied in the use of the phrase should not be surprising considering its philosophical antecedents. Plato regarded man as a soul destined to a realm of darkness and ignorance because of its bodily prison.⁴ Various religions throughout history have advocated Original Sin or some variant of it, claiming that man, because he is man, is evil. Nietzsche popularized the phrase “human, all too human.” These are just a few examples of the prevalent view; however, the phrase “only human” need not be regarded this way.

When examined through the lens of objectivity, “only human” is value-neutral. Taken literally, the phrase says only that the entity being referenced is “solely or exclusively” a human being.⁵ *Only* is a limiting term and, as such, it functions to modify the scope of its referents. By definition, *only* cannot have any negative value judgments associated with it. The same holds true for the term *human*. The phrase simply posits the idea that the entity being discussed is of human nature. It does not include any intrinsic value judgments regarding what it means to be human. The phrase, then, can be used in any context without the assignment of positive or negative value judgments.

Even in the most frequently used context, i.e. in response to mistakes, this is true. If a man makes a mistake, he may say “Well, I am only human,” or someone else may console him by saying “You are only human.” In this context the fault of the mistake is assigned to his nature as man, but what it means to be human is still unclear. The mistake could have occurred because man, by nature, is helpless, error-prone, and even evil; or because he is a being that is simply not omniscient and omnipotent. The difference in the use of the phrase will rely on the user’s evaluation of

3 Chance is regarded as external to, and thus impervious from influence by, man’s nature.

4 See Plato’s *Phaedo* and *Republic*.

5 All definitions are from the *New Oxford American Dictionary*.

man. Whether error is viewed as the norm or as the exception is not clear in this case; however, it is clear that the context in which the phrase is used depends solely on user's assumption of man's nature. It is thus highly illuminating, albeit off-putting, that the phrase is used in the capacity that it is today.⁶ It is illuminating in that the implicit notions about humanity have overtaken the actual definitions, and it is off-putting in that these implicit notions are quite negative. Ultimately, the phrase is delegated exclusively to contexts in which man's nature is seen as weak, frail, error-prone, et cetera.

Perhaps it will take another philosophic revolution, such as the Enlightenment, before the proper view of man is discovered again. If anything is to be learned from the *Green Lantern*, it is that the proper view of man matters. In reflecting on the past events, one prominent green lantern surmises, "At first his humanity was thought to be a weakness, and yet it proved to be his greatest strength." The lanterns eventually learned that man's nature is not that of a tortured soul but of a possible hero. This normative view of man as hero is the proper view of man, and the use of "only human" will not change until it is adopted. At the end of the film, Hal Jordan articulates precisely the application of this view to the current discussion when he says: "You know, we have a saying on earth. We say: 'I'm only human.' We say it because we're vulnerable, we say it because we know we're afraid, but it doesn't mean we're weak...Don't give in to fear. Fight it. Fight it with me."

6 That is, in regard to mistakes and errors where man's nature is clearly denoted as the cause. It is also interesting to note that the negation of the phrase is often used to note some magnificent accomplishment. For example, many people say about athletes or genius inventors, "he is not human," or, "he is superhuman." In referring to the accomplishment it is often said, "that is not humanly possible."