



‘A DEFECT IN THE MIND’:
COGNITIVE ABLEISM IN SWIFT’S
GULLIVER’S TRAVELS

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Modern conceptions of mental disability did not begin to take shape until the concept of intelligence came into formation. This development occurred at about the same time – roughly the later seventeenth century – that an individual’s perceived possession of intelligence rose in value vis-à-vis more traditional status-bidding claims such as lineage (nobility) and election (being saved in the Christian sense). One’s ability to think abstractly, regardless of birth, was privileged more and more by those seeking to curb the monarch’s prerogatives and create a political order in which power devolved to individuals. Laying out the terms of this new order, John Locke invoked social contract theory, and argued that a society composed of freely associating individuals would be governed through reciprocal contracts. In making this argument, he maintained that the parties to these contracts would need to possess sufficient mental capability to understand the agreements into which they were entering. In sum, they would require intelligence, which Locke defined as the ability to engage in abstract thinking.

Locke’s impact on Book Four of Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726)¹ is a well-worn topic of discussion among scholars. Most of the criticism rejects the idea that the philosopher exerted much influence. Rather, a substantial body of it takes its cue from Swift’s letter of 29 September, 1725, to Alexander Pope in which he protests against the ‘falsity of that definition *animal rationale*’ and redefines the human as ‘*rationis capax*’ (capable of reason).² With this letter in mind, most scholars have assumed that the targets of Swift’s attack in the fourth book are the Stoics, the Deists, or the general cultural drift of Enlightenment thought. These positions are grounded in the thinking that Swift is exploring the age-old binary of reason versus the passions. However, a few scholars have diverged from this line of thought, most notably W. B. Carnochan, who argued that Gulliver’s character satirizes Lockean epistemology.³



What has not been considered heretofore by Carnochan or others is a specific role Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689)⁴ may have played in regards to Book Four, one having to do with a distinction the philosopher draws between *person* and *man* (hereafter in most cases *human* or *non-person*). The categories of *person* and *human* provided Locke with a way to distinguish between offspring born of human parents and having human morphology who will grow up to become abstract thinkers (*persons*), versus those born with the same parentage and shape but who will never develop reasoning capabilities (*humans*). Locke's differentiation becomes explicit in those sections of the *Essay* discussing the changeling. When William and Mary signed the Bill of Rights in 1689 and England's subjects thereby entered into a contract with their king, not everyone, in Locke's view, could be party to this agreement. Those able to think abstractly could take part in the new public sphere, but those who could not do so could not participate. A novel political distinction thus arose à la Locke: *persons* (those with intelligence) qualified to be rights-bearing individuals and so could engage in public affairs, but *humans* (those lacking it) possessed a diminished set of rights (if any) and would be relegated to the private sphere, to the supervision of others. This distinction and Locke's invocation of the changeling figure underwrite what evolves into the modern concept of mental disability.⁵

In contemporary bioethics, one finds remnants of Locke's distinction expounded in the writings of Peter Singer⁶ and Jeff McMahan,⁷ who in turn are challenged by two other philosophers, Licia Carlson⁸ and Eva Feder Kittay.⁹ The latter accuse the former of practicing *cognitive ableism*, which Carlson defines as 'a prejudice or attitude of bias in favor of the interests of individuals who possess certain cognitive abilities (or the potential for them) against those who are believed not to actually or potentially possess them'.¹⁰ Long before *cognitive ableism* was coined, however, Swift's Book Four critiqued this same bias, for its protagonist, Lemuel Gulliver, is a cognitive ableist *par excellence*. This chapter will argue that Gulliver epitomizes the attitude Carlson describes, that Locke's *person* / *human* binary broadly comes into play in the fourth book of the *Travels*, and that the character of Gulliver straddles the *person* / *human* divide, thereby vexing Locke's binary. Indeed, the characterization of Gulliver not only parodies Locke's distinction, but also exposes the Lockean notion of intelligence upon which it rests to be a fiction, one mainly useful for stoking self-esteem and self-deception that combine to form the cognitive ableist attitude of arrogance and complacency.



Jumping to conclusions

One of the most trodden paths in Swift criticism of Book Four is the meaning of Lemuel Gulliver's wholesale rejection of the Yahoos, his intense desire to 'distinguish myself, as much as possible, from that cursed race of *Yahoos*'.¹¹ And yet, the criticism curiously has avoided discussing the extreme lengths to which the narrator goes in rejecting them. To review, in Book Four Gulliver winds up on an island inhabited by rational horses, the Houyhnhnms, and irrational humans, the Yahoos, and comes to admire the former to such an extent he wishes to spend the rest of his life with them. However, in chapter nine their assembly expels him, and since he must leave, in chapter ten he builds a boat. Upon the completion of it, he makes what should be a remarkably troubling, even shocking, revelation:

in six Weeks time with the Help of the Sorrel Nag, who performed the Parts that required most Labour, I finished a Sort of *Indian* Canoo, but much larger, covering it with the Skins of *Yahoos* well stitched together with hempen Threads of my own making. My Sail was likewise composed of the Skins of the same Animal; but I made use of the youngest I could get; the older being too tough and thick.¹²

This matter-of-fact, deadpan description seems designed to be overlooked. Does Gulliver capture, kill, and flay the young Yahoos himself? Or does he obtain the skins by some other means? The disclosure is provocative – even appalling. One of the few commentators to remark upon this passage is not a literary scholar but science fiction writer Isaac Asimov, who glosses the line 'the youngest I could get' in this way:

How did Gulliver get the young Yahoo skins? Having but a limited time to complete his task, he could scarcely count on finding dead Yahoo infants. ... The conclusion is that he must have killed them for the purpose or had them killed.¹³

In this gloss, Asimov makes three rhetorical moves. First, he transforms 'youngest I could get' into 'dead Yahoo infants'. Second, he uses the word *infant*, which denotes, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED), either a 'child during the earliest period of life' or a 'person under (legal) age'.¹⁴ And third, his phrasing, 'he must have killed them for the purpose or had them killed', leaves open the possibility that Gulliver commits, or is a party to committing, infanticide. However, outside of the narrator's phrase, 'the youngest *I could get*' (emphasis added), nothing in the text authorizes a reading that Gulliver engages in vicious and bloody infanticidal killing. No scene of slaughter and skinning appears, and even if one had appeared involving killing baby Yahoos, it would have been very odd, considering that a few



chapters earlier Gulliver had noted that Yahoos 'are prodigiously nimble from their infancy'.¹⁵

Thus, Asimov's gloss begs the question: it assumes as true the two things in dispute, whether the Yahoos are human, and whether Gulliver commits or orders infanticide. On the other hand, with a few exceptions, critics have not much concerned themselves with figuring out how Gulliver obtained the skins. No one has asked if he found them or whether they were given to him. Gulliver does state, after all, that he '*made use of* the youngest I could get', with the '*made use of*' suggesting he had no direct hand in the killing (emphasis added). However, the alternative explanations of the source generate many questions. Could these Yahoos have died from natural causes or internecine struggles, and he afterward stumbled upon the remains? And yet, do not bodies left in the sun quickly corrupt? And why would so many young ones have died? If they succumbed to disease, would Gulliver, a physician, have wanted to work with such material? Could the Sorrel Nag 'and another servant' have supplied him with the Yahoo skins?¹⁶ Even conceding that they may have, why did they supply him with Yahoo skins rather than cowhide, which also is available?

To latch onto one of these alternatives as true would be to mistake a speculation for a conclusion. As to how Gulliver obtained the skins, the text will not yield an answer. One issue beyond dispute though is Gulliver's cavalier attitude: he registers neither objection nor hesitation. Most critics do not discuss Gulliver's nonchalance, and two mutually exclusive explanations can be produced for this reticence. Either his admission is so repellent that speaking about it proves difficult; or it invokes no ethical question worth discussing beyond whether killing animals and using their hides is morally justifiable. Toggling between these mutually exclusive explanations is Gulliver's own wording. On the one hand, throughout Book Four he uses phrases indicating he believes he is harvesting parts from animal carcasses: 'Springes made of *Yahoos* Hairs',¹⁷ '*Yahoos* Tallow',¹⁸ and 'hides of *Yahoos*'.¹⁹ On the other, in chapter ten he uses the word *skin* three times: 'skins of *Yahoos*'²⁰ and, from the passage quoted above, 'Skins of the same Animal'. While the term *skin* can be applied interchangeably to animals and humans,²¹ his back-to-back usage forces the reader to wonder why he prefers this word to the less equivocal *hide*. It would be a mistake to make too much of Gulliver's terminology, but his refraining from *hide* while repeating *skin* three times in succession at the moment in the text foregrounding Yahoo deaths does seem curious. In a way that *hide* does not, *skin* raises the question of whether the Yahoos may be considered human. Gulliver's preference for *skin* opens the door to the text taking a dramatic turn into the ethical realm, for, if the Yahoos have skin rather

than hides, could they possibly be human? And if they may be human, one must choose an appropriate verb for the act of bringing about their demise. Regardless of who or what does this, are the Yahoos *killed*, as occurs with animals? Or are they *murdered*, as can only happen with humans?

No question seems to exist in Gulliver's mind as to this matter: in his eyes, the Yahoos are animals. However, one must ask whether he makes the same mistake as Asimov, but does so on the other side of the question, and from within the narrative itself. In other words, just as Asimov assumes as true the very question in dispute, namely, the humanity of the Yahoos – Gulliver similarly jumps to a conclusion, the difference between them being that in the latter's view they are not. What is the reader to think? As with the provenance of the skins, the text yields no definitive answer. This sort of indeterminacy forms a pattern in Book Four. Addressing a similar uncertainty (the derivation of the word *Yahoo* – more on this later), Carnochan writes of it that 'That would be a fairly characteristic Swiftian joke'.²² The indeterminate species status of the Yahoos may be another such joke, but one perhaps told at the expense of the 'Gentle Reader'.²³ For if the text refuses to yield answers about acts so heinous – infanticide and murder – then it compels the reader to draw conclusions based on insufficient information. The joke, or serious point, of Book Four does not concern concluding one way or the other that the Yahoos are animal or human. Rather, the point may have to do with how one should act in such an ethically charged but uncertain situation.

Locke's changelings

It is not possible to speak about the beginnings of cognitive ableism as it bears on human status without talking about changelings and Locke. Thanks in great part to Locke, changelings exist at the fulcrum of the transition from a traditional way of determining human status to a more modern criterion. However, understanding this transition requires going back prior to Locke. The Aristotelian tradition's human essence and / or the presence of a soul – that is, human morphology and parentage – were all that mattered in determining whether an individual was to be considered human. In making such determinations, the governing binary was human versus animal. The soul was presumed to be present in a human form no matter how deficient the mind because "soul" and "intellect" were notionally separate entities'.²⁴ Then, in the first half of the seventeenth century, René Descartes came along with the concept of mind-body dualism, and afterward it became possible to imagine a body without a working mind, with such a body representing 'a numerical subtraction from what makes us human'.²⁵

Thus, it became conceivable to ask, are mindless humans *human*? Locke then enters the discussion. In the *Essay*, he debunks the concept of innate ideas and replaces it with a model in which humans are born with innate cognitive processes, or *abilities*. By doing so, he establishes a normative human mental standard that will bring about a paradigmatic shift in Western thinking. After Locke, shape and morphology alone no longer suffice to determine human status. Irvin Ehrenpreis makes the point that, by the Augustan period, 'it was a commonplace that the human body makes an insufficient mark of humanity; apes, monkeys, and monsters were invoked to prove this'.²⁶ In making the case for innate cognitive *abilities*, Locke summons examples in which the ability to reason and human birth/morphology do not align. He does so in order to point out that contradictions exist between those with human parentage and shape who grow up to think abstractly and those with the same prerequisites but who will never be able to reason. Definitions are important to Locke, and so he attempts to clarify matters by assigning the term *man* to the latter cases and *person* to the former. Locke specifically defines a *person* as a 'thinking, intelligent Being, that has reason and reflection, and can consider it self as it self, the same thinking thing in different times and places'.²⁷ In other words, a *person* is able to think abstractly, process information swiftly, and retain and quickly recall memories. Resemblance between parents and offspring now must be *intellectual resemblance*.²⁸ By making this distinction, Locke changes the focus as to what matters in such a way that to be a *man* no longer is enough: one must be a *person*. In this new person-human binary, *person* becomes the privileged term. Two things should be noted here: first, for Locke this is an all-or-nothing affair: either one is or one is not a person. He does not allow for gradations between one extreme and the other.²⁹ And second, the person-human binary supplants the former human-animal binary. Interestingly, to a considerable extent the former maps over the latter so that one must conclude that the human and the animal become equivalent when positioned vis-à-vis the new valorized term, *person*. In any case, the person/human distinction will have tremendous consequences, for it facilitates imagining a new social order in which those who believe themselves to be *persons* can assume prerogatives and power over those whom they deem to be merely *human*. Essentially, Locke's novel distinction facilitates restructuring society along the lines of *cognitive ableism*.

The chief example of a human birth in which there is physical but not intellectual resemblance to the parents is, according to Locke, the *changeling*. Locke needs the changeling to operationalize his argument about its opposite, the *person*, because, as C. F. Goodey notes, 'Pathology etches in the normal'.³⁰ *Changeling* was a holdover from folklore but also was much more. According

to the *OED*, the first recorded usage appears in 1561 and refers to ‘A person or thing (surreptitiously) put in exchange for another’.³¹ The second, with a different meaning, appears two years later: ‘One given to change; a fickle or inconstant person; a waverer, turncoat, renegade’.³² The meaning most commonly attributed today did not appear until 1584: ‘A child secretly substituted for another in infancy; esp. a child (usually stupid or ugly) supposed to have been left by fairies in exchange for one stolen’.³³ Then, in 1642, yet another meaning enters circulation: ‘A half-witted person, idiot, imbecile’.³⁴ In the middle of the seventeenth-century, the four concepts – substitution, inconstancy, switching at birth, and imbecility – began to coalesce.³⁵ Thus, when Locke is writing the *Essay* in the 1670s and 1680s, he uses the word *changeling* – and uses it frequently – because it is common parlance, ‘plain and “civil” (public) language’.³⁶

‘Changeling’ also carried medical significance. Locke was a physician, and early modern doctors were still under the influence of *The Art of Medicine* by the second-century Roman Galen. In one part, this text describes the ancient concept of dispositional disabilities or mental weakness – the paradigm of problematic mental states.³⁷ While it is well known that Galen comments on the dispositional malady of melancholy, it is less well known that he discerned a related one: “mobility” or “instability of opinion” (*mobilitas opinionum*), which is to say, *changeableness*, the symptoms of which were thinking rashly or variably.³⁸ *Mobilitas opinionum* appears ‘mainly in the (Latin) commentaries on Galen’s *Art of Medicine*, which was the central component of the medical education curriculum – and this explains how it would have become a commonplace’ even though it fell out of circulation when medical texts started to appear in the vernacular.³⁹ Those suffering from it were known as *changelings* on account of a propensity to change. Goodey describes how physicians would have understood the condition:

Unstable opinion was a defect of the will. ... If a patient’s opinion simply followed his appetites, it showed that his will was divorced from his reason. ... The paradigmatic mind changer was Eve, when she listened to the serpent. It went with her gullibility, a frequently cited medical symptom of unstable opinion. Instability undermined the patient’s knowledge of what was true and (the same thing) what was good for him.⁴⁰

Those with unstable opinions – those who were constantly changing, especially their religious beliefs – were known as *changelings*.⁴¹ In Locke, the term undergoes further refining, coming to suggest an entity with human shape that is congenitally intellectually disabled. The *tabula rasa* of the changeling’s mind will forever remain blank – nothing can be written there. A changeling thus is

a mindless child who will grow up to become a perpetually irrational adult and so represents 'soulless bestiality'.⁴²

Abstract thinking consists of reflecting on the process of thinking, and changelings are incapable of doing this.⁴³ Thus, they are equivocal men, existing in the interstices between species. At one point, Locke notes that *physically* monstrous births often are put to death without such killings being considered murder.⁴⁴ And yet, these physically monstrous births, if not killed, have been known to grow up and exhibit typical human consciousness.⁴⁵ Later, Locke points out a seeming contradiction – the killing of *physically* defective babies who grow up to be rational human beings, versus the saving of changeling babies that will grow up to be irrational beings.⁴⁶ Paul de Man notes that the changeling figure is 'powerfully coercive since it generates, for example, the ethical pressure of such questions as "to kill or not to kill"'. This question eventuates in that of 'what to do with the "changeling"'.⁴⁷ Locke suggests that readers engage in a thought experiment in which they distort the facial features of a newborn changeling just slightly, but enough, so that it no longer appears entirely human.⁴⁸ At what moment in this reconfiguring, he asks, does one stop calling the infant human, concede it is a soulless beast, and allow it to be destroyed? His implication is clear: changelings have transformed into an Other whose alterity is irreducible: 'the externally well-formed but mentally deficient changeling is in fact inhuman'.⁴⁹

A Lockean thought experiment *in extremis*

With some justification, one can speculate that Swift some thirty years later in the 1720s took Locke up on his suggestion and engaged in his thought experiment. Could the result have been the Yahoo? How much Swift's Book Four distorts the Yahoos from the typical human form – if indeed it distorts them at all – depends on which chapter one is reading. If so, at what moment in Book Four does the reader concede that the Yahoos are soulless beasts, as Gulliver does, and allow them to be destroyed? Swift was familiar with Locke's *Essay*, and, according to Carnochan, his response 'ranges from ambivalent to critical'.⁵⁰ More recently, J. A. Downie comments that 'Locke's argument about real essences and complex ideas informs Swift's satire in Part Four'.⁵¹ Locke's ideas indeed were circulating in the culture. While it may be going too far to assert that Swift was satirizing them, it can be argued that Book Four plays with them in tantalizing ways.

One can hardly read the entirety of the *Travels* without noticing, in addition to the numerous defects and distortions of body that Dennis Todd has pointed out,⁵² the distortions in ways of thinking and the apparent defects in the minds



of those the narrator encounters. These defects and distortions of mind reach a crescendo in Book Four vis-à-vis the Houyhnhnms and Yahoos. Hermann Real and Heinz Vienken point out that all that the reader knows about either of them derives entirely from Gulliver.⁵³ That said, for the purposes of this argument it is important to note that, within his admittedly limited and unreliable account, the Yahoos appear to utilize no language and do not seem to exhibit any ability to retain and recall memories. Because they seem to be unable to speak for themselves, readers 'have no recourse to' their minds, and they 'do not appear to have self-consciousness'.⁵⁴ If this indeed is the case, they can 'have no notion of a continuous identity. ... [Thus,] the Yahoos ... [do not] conform to the Lockean criteria of "person"'.⁵⁵ In other words, they answer to Locke's definition of *man*, not *person*. Most significantly, they instantiate changelings to the degree that they resemble changeling births who have grown up into adult form but who remain unable to think abstractly.

If the reader must mediate everything he or she knows about the Yahoos and Houyhnhnms through Gulliver, then who, or what, is *he*? Ian Higgins comments that from the book's beginning 'a faint hint of puritan zealotry attaches itself to Lemuel'.⁵⁶ In Book One's second sentence, Gulliver announces that he attended Emmanuel College, 'a Cambridge College of Puritan foundation'; the reader also learns he 'studied medicine at Leyden in the Netherlands, an educational destination abroad for Protestant dissenters'.⁵⁷ Moreover, Gulliver seems intent to impress the reader that he is a learned person. In fact, on page one he feels compelled to deliver a curriculum vitae of educational accomplishment to demonstrate his credentials as a narrator.

Furthermore, throughout the text he presents himself as one of the new, empirical men, someone who prides himself on his intelligence. And yet, does he live up to his own billing? Anthony Manousos describes him as a 'mechanical empiricist',⁵⁸ and, as Higgins points out, he is an empiricist to a fault: he outdoes everyone 'in over-particularity'.⁵⁹ Todd describes him as 'Literal-minded and superficial', someone who 'travels through the world like the stereotypical tourist, staring at everything and seeing nothing'.⁶⁰ As such, Gulliver becomes one of the satire's butts: he is 'a fully-fledged caricature of the "Modern"', a 'simplificateur of complex issues', and, at the end of the day, an "enthusiasm" or fanatic of ideal Reason'.⁶¹ Most importantly, in the opening of Book One, Gulliver mentions that his formative years were spent under *Master Bates*, and this revelation allows the reader to connect his developing character with 'an unseemly self-absorption'.⁶² Indeed, from the beginning, pride in his own intelligence is juxtaposed with a hint of mental masturbation. In sum, Gulliver manifests an intellectual narcissism that epitomizes cognitive ableism.



As a character priding himself on his intelligence, Gulliver sees in the Yahoos everything he wishes to define himself against. And yet, for a self-proclaimed intelligent person – as the epitome of cognitive ableism – he does not exhibit a high level of acuity. When he first comes to land in Book Four, he detects ‘Tracks of human Feet’ and, immediately after, spies ‘these creatures’, meaning the Yahoos.⁶³ However, while he does not refer to any other humans who could have made the tracks, he never ties the tracks to ‘these creatures’. His failing to connect the two may be attributed to the visual impression made by ‘these creatures’, which causes him to be ‘a little discomposed’.⁶⁴ His use of ‘discomposed’, which the *OED* defines as ‘Disordered’, reveals that his thoughts have deviated from their usual order on account of the Yahoos not meeting his expectation of a customary human form.⁶⁵ ‘Their Shape’, he states, is ‘very singular, and deformed’.⁶⁶ The *OED* defines ‘singular’ to mean ‘Different from or not complying with that which is customary’,⁶⁷ and *deformed* as ‘Marred in shape ... distorted’.⁶⁸ The Yahoos being ‘marred ... distorted’ and ‘not complying with that which is customary’ discloses that he recognizes traces of an original human form. In his perspective, then, the combination of these traces and deviations from them brings to the fore their monstrosity.

Monstrosity disorders Gulliver’s mental processes, but not in the way one might think, for monstrosity itself is complex. David Williams demonstrates that *monster* has not held a consistent meaning through time. In Medieval theology, the concept served as a signifier of unintelligibility, while in post-Medieval thinking (scientific and aesthetic), it came to represent the exception, that which occupied the horizon of the human.⁶⁹ Both exceptionality and unintelligibility are forms of monstrosity, but with different valences. Dramatic irony consequently is created in the *Travels* when its naive narrator insistently views the Yahoos scientifically and aesthetically as exceptions, while the astute reader probes between the lines and realizes the Yahoos are unintelligible. Enhancing the irony is the reader’s recognition that the narrator’s prejudices in one direction bar him from looking in the other. Roger Lund notes that ‘By the time we reach the early eighteenth-century, monstrosity had lost its power to shock or to amaze, and tended instead merely to annoy the observer because of its “unseemliness”, inspiring mere repugnance at the violation of “conventions of beauty and decorum”’. In sum, Gulliver’s animosity is aroused by the Yahoos’ exceptional deviation from the “conventions of beauty and decorum”’.⁷⁰ Their aesthetic deviance drives his behaviour and backfires on him a few lines later in the ‘contact-zone’ moment when he encounters one of them face to face.⁷¹ In this scene he becomes the aggressor, giving the ‘ugly monster’ a ‘Blow with the flat side’ of his sword.⁷² Of the approaching ‘monster’, David Nokes claims that it ‘is a human being who



approaches Gulliver, with his hand raised in greeting'.⁷³ While the text never authorizes Nokes' reading of the Yahoos as definitively human, Gulliver for his part hastily jumps to the opposite conclusion and so initiates the violence, to which the Yahoos respond by defecating on him. What the reader understands but Gulliver fails to grasp is that, if the new, empirical man persists in viewing the Yahoos as exceptions, he must come to terms with the fact that, on this island at least, he is the one who is the exception.

In Swift's Lockean thought experiment, the Yahoos differ just enough from the typical human form – the form as Gulliver has known it up until then – for him not to ask the question of whether they possibly may be human. Later, under the coaxing of his Houyhnhnm *master* (recalling the earlier 'Master Bates'), Gulliver acknowledges he has the same shape as the Yahoos,⁷⁴ and the young Yahoo female's sexual attack indeed confirms this species similarity. However, he deduces the wrong conclusion from his Houyhnhnm master and the female Yahoo, for, instead of accepting his and the Yahoos' shared humanity, he decides instead that he himself and they must be animals. Thus, he embraces 'the position of submissive servant to his Houyhnhnm 'master'',⁷⁵ the position of a faithful dog.

Why does Gulliver make the choice that he does? What are his criteria? Once he has encountered the Houyhnhnms, no entity with human shape in his estimation will ever be able to prove itself capable of being a person. Moreover, without discretion or moderation, he opts for reason as the marker of *person* to the extent that an entity with a human's shape is merely a human until he or she can demonstrate themselves to be a person. However, in the process of becoming enamored of the Houyhnhnms, Gulliver engages in a chiasmatic switching of the usual coordinates of shape and reason. Horses now possess reason; humans do not. Could this inversion constitute textual play regarding Locke's famous 'association of ideas'? Locke speculates that the mind can randomly associate unrelated ideas in such a way that they become irrevocably and permanently – but wrongly – linked together. Once one idea is invoked, 'the whole gang always inseparable shew themselves together'.⁷⁶ In this case, Gulliver detaches one idea, *ability to reason*, from another idea, *human shape*, then re-associates the former idea with *horse shape*: then, forever after, he cannot release himself from this new association. The Houyhnhnms now qualify as *persons* because, even though they do not have human shape, they do appear to him to possess the ability to reason. In fact, he frequently refers to them as *persons* and *people*. In one example, Gulliver states, 'I could with great Pleasure enlarge further upon the Manners and Virtues of this excellent people'.⁷⁷ Again, as with 'skins', it may be a mistake to make too much of Gulliver's word choice, but his diction does arouse curiosity. While it is possi-



ble *people* merely signifies *race*, as in *a people*,⁷⁸ *people* also signifies *person* in the plural.⁷⁹ In addition, while he does not restrict the term to the Houyhnhnms, he does use *persons* ten times and *people* six times to refer to them. His extensive usage of *person* and *people* to refer to the island's horses suggests that his mental wires have crossed so that, in his Lockean association of ideas, equine morphology becomes associated with rationality.

A further possible caricature of Lockean theory may be part of this textual play: Locke argues that names take on an importance and life of their own so that it becomes easy to forget *how* they became associated with the things they signify. Allen Michie draws attention to the fact that Gulliver first hears a horse neigh, which he transcribes as 'Yahoo'. He next learns to connect this name with negative connotations – brutishness, filth, and ignorance. Then he concludes he himself must be this thing he himself has named a Yahoo, so he not only links himself to the name, but he also assumes he must embody its bad attributes. In the final step, he undertakes an obsessive personal mission to divorce himself from every tincture of the name's connotations, all the while forgetting that he is the one who coined the term in the first place. As Michie sums it up, 'There is circularity to this argument'.⁸⁰

In his self-constructed linguistic prison, Gulliver is caught in the middle, trapped in a Yahoo body but yearning to join the society of 'this excellent people'. The Houyhnhnms constitute an intelligence society – a regime in which those who display reason to competitive advantage become the elite and in which intelligence rather than honor (nobility) or election (being saved in the Christian sense) serves as the primary marker of social status. Gulliver wants to join the horses' intelligence society, but he has no way to enter into it except by occupying its fringe, becoming a marvelous oddity by playing the oxymoronic 'wonderful Yahoo' – a self-admitted freak on the outskirts. As Todd has demonstrated, this self-denigrating description recalls the kind of billing used in Augustan Britain to draw the public's attention to a freak show exhibit. Indeed, in Books One and Two, Gulliver's freakishly sized body already has been placed on display. Todd confirms that 'From the beginning, Gulliver has been driven by this desire for "Distinction"',⁸¹ and in Book Four he once again earns a variety of it. Learning to speak Houyhnhnm and emulate their virtues, he attempts to carry through with his intention to become, in the worst possible way, a member of the island's intelligence society.

Blows to this aspiration come with the two meetings of the Houyhnhnm Assembly. In the session following the one in which they discuss 'Whether the Yahoos should be exterminated from the Face of the Earth',⁸² the horses vote to deport him, a decision they base solely upon his Yahoo shape. For them, his shape serves as the primary indicator of his inability to reason. In so

doing, they disregard the evidence of his rationality. Because he has the Yahoo shape he does, he cannot possibly be capable of abstract thought and, thereby, answer to their understanding of *person*. Gulliver now must build a boat, and it is in its construction that the killing, or murder, of Yahoos can be inferred. Obviously seduced by the Houyhnhnms' debate – not decision – about exterminating Yahoos, Gulliver takes his cue from the intelligence society he wishes to join: he too judges on the basis that Yahoo-shape indicates an inability to think abstractly.⁸³

In terms of genre, Book Four moves back and forth between functioning as a beast fable and as a fictional narrative populated by humans. In a *mise en abyme*, the Yahoos replicate in miniature the generic oscillation between beast and human. This alternation should not stop readers from asking questions of Gulliver that they would not bother to ask of the beasts. In ethical terms, it would be one thing for beasts to kill Yahoos, and quite another for Gulliver to do the same or to have the killings carried out at his behest. In other words, the Houyhnhnms are horses confined to the beast-fable portion of the narrative, while Gulliver interacts with – as best as the reader can judge – creatures who may turn out to be of the same species as himself. Consequently, readers hold him – or at least should hold him – to a different standard.

As was noted at the beginning, when he informs the reader about the skins, he does so as a casual aside. In fact, his tone becomes so matter-of-fact that his obliviousness that anything morally may be at stake becomes the thing that most stands out. Is Gulliver's association with the killing of Yahoo babies for their skins a parodic version of Lockean thinking about changeling infants? After all, Locke strongly implies that if he could know *with certainty* at the time of birth that the changeling infant would grow up to be an irrational humanoid entity, he would endorse destroying that infant.⁸⁴ Additionally, as was noted earlier, de Man remarks that Locke's rhetorical moves in the unfolding of the *Essay* raise 'questions [such] as "to kill or not to kill"' and 'what to do with the "changeling"'.⁸⁵ In the *Travels*, the Yahoos as adult changelings confirm what Locke suspected them to be in their infancy. Gulliver then seemingly demonstrates what Locke would have done, or, at least, what Locke might have done with their skins.

Gulliver, the changeling

Gulliver appears neither to think about using the skins, nor even to know *how* to think about the moral implications the skins raise. And this inability brings to the foreground a central irony of Book Four, namely, that of the individual who aspires to join the intelligence society but who does not know

how to think. And yet, thinking is only one of the things an intelligence society respects; it also values social hierarchy and order, which can only be achieved by an in-group defining itself in opposition to an out-group. Hence, the more Gulliver aspires to join the intelligence society, the greater grows his revulsion for its antithesis, the Yahoos. On one level, the Yahoos allude to human beings 'exemplified in nonreligious terms by [Thomas] Hobbes's portrait of life in a state of nature as "nasty, brutish, and short"'.⁸⁶ In *Leviathan* (1651), Hobbes describes a pre-social condition in which there prevails a 'war of every man against every man', where 'force and fraud are cardinal virtues', the strong prevail, and might makes right.⁸⁷ With Gulliver suddenly acting aggressively, or at least tolerating aggressive acts to be carried out for his advantage, the allusion's spotlight unexpectedly shifts, with readers experiencing whiplash, for now they must question whether it is Gulliver who is more brutish than the Yahoos. Is it Gulliver, the *strong* – in his own estimation the most intelligent – killing, or ordering the killing of, the *weak* – the least intelligent? Must the supposedly enlightened members of the intelligence society achieve social supremacy in the same way that every other group vying for dominance goes about attaining it, namely, by reverting to Hobbesian force? Enlightened intelligence resorting to brutishness to suppress those whom it considers brutish indeed presents the reader with a paradox.

Does any direct or indirect textual evidence suggest that the killing of Yahoos should be judged as immoral? In terms of indirect evidence, two pieces can be summoned. The first has to do with the *Yahoo* name. Herbert Zirker and Richard Crider have argued that Swift coined the word *Yahoo* from 'Yahu, variant of *Yahweh*, component of numerous names in the Hebrew Bible, including the Hebrew form of Swift's own first name, 'Yehonanian'.⁸⁸ As Crider explains, *Yahu* is a variant of the tetragrammaton, *YHWH*, and of *Yahweh*, 'the name agreed upon by scholars in the Christian era when they attempted to restore the vowel sounds of the tetragrammaton'.⁸⁹ *YHWH* is thought to be ineffable and to always be holy: its surrogates are assumed to be no less sacred. If this explanation has any truth in it, its point would be this: even if the Yahoos are fallen creatures, they are still made in *Yahweh*'s image and bear his name. Most critics correctly contend that Book Four is not a religious book; however, Biblical allusions do enter into it. Claude Rawson concedes the veiled references to Adam and Eve and Noah's flood.⁹⁰ Once these exceptions are admitted, the allusion to *Yahu* must also come into consideration. What might be Swift's reason for alluding to the 'Yahuistic names'?⁹¹ If *Yahoo* were a nonsense term Swift coined, the figures the word stands for would be equally nonsensical, and killing them would not rise to the definition of murder. If Gulliver kills animals, or has them killed, or benefits from their killing, that



would provide the basis for a discussion of ethics having to do with the killing of animals; but if he murders, or is complicit in the murder of, humans, that becomes a foundation for an ethical debate directly relevant to this chapter. As has been said before, the text ultimately does not allow the reader to decide one way or the other; for, as with just about everything else connected with the Yahoos, the answer must be deferred. Consequently, the allusion to the 'Yahuistic' names is just one more piece of information to muddy the waters. Writes Carnochan, 'That would be a fairly characteristic Swiftian joke'.⁹² Still, the joke would underscore what ultimately is at issue, namely, the Yahoos' uncertain species status: they are equivocal creatures, existing in the interstices between species. Final decisions as to their potential *personhood* must be endlessly deferred. At the very least, then, Gulliver lacks humility when faced with a complex ethical issue: he refuses to ask, or is incapable of asking, whether the Yahoos are human beings and whether killing them, or having them killed, or benefiting from their killing, amounts to murder or complicity in such acts. Most importantly, Gulliver's association with the killing provides an example of the individual with pretensions to being a 'person' assuming prerogatives over changeling-like creatures – humans in shape only – whom he considers to be non-persons.

While the indirect evidence of the word *Yahoo* does not provide anything definitive as to whether the killing of Yahoos should be deemed immoral, a second piece of indirect evidence, Gulliver's quoting of Virgil, may give some indication. After praising his 'noble Master, and the other illustrious Houyhnhnms', Gulliver recites the following line spoken about Sinon in the *Aeneid* (II: 79–80): '*Nec si miserum Fortuna Sinonem Finxit, vanum etiam, mendacemque improba finget* (Latin: 'Nor, if Fortune has made Sinon for misery, will she also in her spite make him false and a liar').⁹³ In Troy's last days, Sinon is the Greek who defends 'his veracity while attempting to persuade the Trojans to accept his gift of a giant wooden horse'.⁹⁴ The quote's proximity to the immediately preceding praise of the Houyhnhnms connects the Trojan Horse allusion to the intelligence society with which Gulliver has associated the horses. The vessel's surface appearance suggests the benefits of both Enlightenment reason and the tradition of rationality stemming back to the ancient Greeks. However, if the wooden horse's exterior is associated with the Houyhnhnms' seemingly benevolent intelligence society, then what threat lurks inside? Anne Barbeau Gardiner affirms that Book Four 'is about a new Trojan Horse', one that warrants the protagonist to do 'whatever cruel thing is useful to him'.⁹⁵ Penetrating the horse's outer shell to consider the hidden danger, one realizes that what looks like a benign gift turns out to be a vehicle for introducing a new social order that authorizes brutality in the name



of reason. This returns to the paradox mentioned earlier. In Swift's time, the contours of the burgeoning order could be observed not just in the Augustan satirists' disdain for dunces, but also in the formation of the bourgeoisie, which pointed to its own increasing wealth as a sign of its superior intelligence. Furthermore, what lies concealed is not just brutality, but also the inauguration of rationally systematized violence: when they reach a consensus in their assembly, the horses' intelligence society will exterminate the unintelligent humanoid figures *en masse*. Thus, the allusion to the wooden horse seems to take a sharp turn into the ethical realm. And yet, it does not answer the question of whether the killings of Yahoo offspring in which Gulliver is implicated should be read as morally wrong. It raises the spectre of killing for reason's sake and of systemic killing, but on the question of whether the killing of Yahoo infants should be judged immoral it remains agnostic.

The strongest, direct evidence supporting a reading in which killing Yahoos can be understood to be unequivocally condemned appears in the intellectual resemblance Gulliver himself bears to the Yahoos. Like them, Gulliver too functions allegorically: as has been said, his empiricism marks him as someone with pretensions to membership in the new elite of the intelligence society. And yet, while he empirically *observes closely* in order to imitate the Houyhnhnms' speech and behaviour, this close observation leads to nothing more than earnest mimicry on the level of a parrot. Gulliver in effect demonstrates Goodey's point that the 'concepts of intelligence and intellectual disability are mutually reinforcing';⁹⁶ that is, the reader can observe in Gulliver both the affectation of possessing superior intelligence and the malady mentioned earlier, *mobilitas opinionum*, or instability of opinion. While it cannot be said that his character lives with an intellectual disability resembling any present-day diagnosis, he does answer to a dispositional disability that some physicians of his own time would have recognized. Because *gullibility* was 'a frequently cited medical symptom of unstable opinion',⁹⁷ the connection between the symptom and Lemuel's surname should be obvious. Does Gulliver suffer from *mobilitas opinionum*? So inconsistent is his character that critics debate whether he qualifies as one at all. Many assert that he really is just a figure supplying whatever Swift's satirical fancy requires in the moment.⁹⁸ However, a strong case can be made that Swift is not changing his protagonist from moment to moment to suit his own needs; rather, it is Gulliver the character who lacks stability. He is as protean as another seafarer, Odysseus, but without the cleverness. He can be considered changeable for five reasons of ascending importance.

First, from Book One to Book Four his chauvinistic British nationalism evaporates but without any explanation. For example, in Book Two he brags to

the Brobdingnagian king about his nation's greatness, but by the end of Book Four he gleefully contemplates a fantasy of the Houyhnhnms overrunning an invading British force. Second, throughout the first three books and into the first chapters of Book Four, he has engaged in empirical thinking in the Baconian and Lockean traditions. However, midway through the last book, he switches to become a Cartesian rationalist, a way of thinking that had bewildered him in Book Three.⁹⁹ In other words, by the end he operates under an intellectual system that (at least to him) seems logical, and he has grown skeptical of the evidence of his senses. Indication of this change comes to light in his classification of the Portuguese sea captain, Pedro de Mendez, as a Yahoo. Gulliver's insistence on considering de Mendez to be a Yahoo despite all of the tangible evidence to the contrary found in the good captain's exceeding kindness illustrates just how much his mind is gripped by an *idée fixe*. Thus, he swings wildly from one system to its opposite without attempting to synthesize the two. Third, signals of *mobilitas opinionum* come to light in the shift in his attitude regarding brutality. Gardiner states that in 'Lilliput he was against persecution', refusing to use his tremendous bulk to subdue Blefuscu. However, in Book Four, after the Houyhnhnm Assembly debates genocide, he himself decides to join 'in on the persecution', at least to the extent that he employs the skins of dead young Yahoos.¹⁰⁰

Fourth, a striking sign of instability of opinion occurs between the chapter in which he employs the skins of dead Yahoos, and the last,¹⁰¹ in which he excoriates European colonizers for slaughtering natives. Gulliver is scathing in his denunciation, yet is unable to recognize that his own earlier behaviour with the skins intersects with the very thing he is criticizing. One must ask whether these other white colonizers similarly never stopped to consider whether their non-European victims might also be persons? The reader is supposed to glean that the ethical calculations – or lack of them – transpiring in the minds of these other Europeans engaged in slaughter similarly went on in Gulliver's mind but that he does not make the connection between himself and them. The disconnect inherent in killing natives, or ordering them to be killed, or at least using their skins, but then condemning those who kill natives, demonstrates an instance of 'thinking variably'. Thus, he answers to a dispositional disability that would have been recognized by some doctors of his own time. In sum, when he kills, or orders to be killed, beings who are the equivalent of Locke's *changelings*, he is bringing about the deaths of those whom he himself resembles intellectually, or at least semantically. Indeed, his dispositional disability – excessive changeability – is not controlled until the end (if even then), when, back at home in England, alone with his horses, he finally is 'stable-ized'.¹⁰²

Lastly and most decisively in the matter of his changeability is the way he moves back and forth across the boundary separating *person* from *human*. After his rescue, Gulliver assesses everyone to be a *non-person*, including occasionally himself. Thus, within this narrative in which Gulliver appoints himself arbiter of everyone's personhood status, including his own, no *person* in the Lockean sense rises to the bar and meets the qualifications. In other words, no *person* exists within the story proper, except perhaps Gulliver himself. And even then, he qualifies as a *person* only sporadically; that is, he meets the requirements only during those moments when he is deeming everyone around him to be a Yahoo. But in this he does not remain consistent, for he toggles back and forth between being *person* when he is judging others to be Yahoos and being a *non-person* when he is excoriating himself for being a Yahoo. Proudful in one second, riddled with abject shame the next, he becomes the ultimate *changeling*, alternating between *person* and *non-person* in the blink of an eye, like a figure under a strobe light. By so doing, he becomes a parodic version of Locke's person/non-person binary, with the parody directing attention to the fundamental lack of viability and stability inherent in Locke's category of *personhood*. Gulliver's radical inconsistency in this matter calls attention to the fact that no individual – no matter how 'intelligent' – can think abstractly every second of every day for the duration of a lifetime. In other words, no individual can persist in the pure, whole, and lasting state of perpetual abstract thinking in the way Locke describes it. This realization may be behind what Swift intended in his letter mentioned earlier to Pope when he uses the phrase *rationis capax*. Human beings are *capable* of reason, but even the most intellectually gifted hardly practise it all of the time. Everyone lapses; everyone falls away for periods of time from being a perfect Lockean *person*.

As someone exhibiting extreme changeability in these five ways, Gulliver can be identified as a changeling. While Gulliver reluctantly but explicitly accepts his Yahoo bodily configuration, he is unable to perceive that he also resembles them intellectually. In fact, the more he attempts to emulate the Houyhnhnms, the more he thinks like a Yahoo. As a result, even as Gulliver bids for status based on what he deems to be his own flawless mental powers, he shares with the Yahoos what Locke terms 'a defect in the mind'.¹⁰³ Once resettled in England, he again asserts a kind of status bid based on intelligence, one appropriate for *that* island, when he announces in a 'Messianic tone' that he intends to teach his fellow, presumably unteachable Yahoos.¹⁰⁴ This tone goes to the issue of pride. Critics correctly note that the text attacks pride, but they do not go far enough because they speak of a vice along the lines of one of the seven deadly sins. Real and Vienken are more specific when they affirm that Gulliver, on account of 'his pride of reason', is "mad" for



reason'.¹⁰⁵ More precisely, Gulliver's pride – exhibited especially in the book's final lines – derives from his assumption that he is more intelligent than, and, therefore, superior to, others. Even more specifically, it is the pride of the new elite, one implicated 'in the rising faith of "progress", which assumed a perfecting of human behaviour in proportion to the increase of knowledge. All of these ideas, with their emphasis on men's completeness and self-sufficiency, would have seemed to ... Swift signs of an "age of pride"'.¹⁰⁶ Gulliver's pride is born of his believing neither that he is saved (one of the elect in the religious sense) nor that his ancestors were noble. Rather, his pride comes from a smug assumption of mental superiority. It becomes hubris when the reader begins to question whether this aspirant to the intelligence elite kills, or at least is implicated in the killing of, those whom he determines to be his mental inferiors.

Oddly, the reader may not notice these killings, for they occur *obscene* or off-stage, intimating they may have been designed to be easily overlooked. If they do register, the reader may excuse them, for Gulliver has so demonized the victims that the 'Gentle Reader' likely shares his antipathy and so believes they deserve whatever they get.¹⁰⁷ Overweening pride, therefore, may not be confined to Gulliver. Narrator and narratee together may become ensnared in a trap. As Laura Brown notes, 'Neither Gulliver nor Swift's reader can stand clear of this story. It is specifically structured to implicate its audience'.¹⁰⁸ Readers themselves are likely to aspire to join the intelligence society and perhaps themselves may be in the grip of cognitive ableist assumptions. The paradox resides in their being smart enough to understand the allegory's moral, namely, that those who fancy themselves intelligent should practise what Ralph Savarese terms 'an interpretive humility in the face of the cognitively "other"'.¹⁰⁹ However, in a further Swiftian 'joke', or irony, this lesson most likely will be lost on the Gentle Reader.

Ultimately, in addition to Gulliver, the arrogant and complacent readers of Book Four are the butt of Swift's satire. As Swift observes in the preface to *The Battel of the Books*, 'Satyr is a sort of Glass, wherein Beholders do generally discover every body's Face but their Own'.¹¹⁰ Readers are the butt because they pride themselves as much as Gulliver does on their own supposedly superior intelligence. Brown's insight that Book Four 'is specifically structured to implicate its audience' speaks to the issue of every reader's unperceived cognitive ableism, a prejudice resting on the assumption that intelligence and mental deficit are real things rooted in nature. Real they are for Locke, with the former serving as a punched ticket to personhood, the latter as a chute to changeling status.

An Essay Concerning Human Understanding so locks in a cognitive ableist bias that readers unwittingly influenced by Locke do not recognize how this bias limits understanding. This is the point of Book Four of *Gulliver's Travels*,



with readers' general failure to concern themselves with the provenance of the skins attesting to the extent that Locke's views have prevailed. So insidious is the *person-man* binary that it stops consideration of ethics before it can begin. And yet, the skins' provenance provides a place to begin interrogating the way that Gulliver's rapid switching back and forth between person and man not only parodies Locke's *person-man* distinction, but also exposes the notion of intelligence upon which it rests to be a fiction. What may not be apparent to readers under Locke's sway – as it is not obvious to Gulliver – is the possibility that the trait he and they most pride themselves upon having – (intelligence) does not exist. And if it is not real, but a constructed concept, Locke's political legacy of liberal democracy should be reevaluated. These democracies operate on the assumption (or pretense) that almost all individuals have sufficient intelligence to enter into social contracts. The reality may be that few, if any, do. If intelligence is a fiction, these institutions' foundation has a catastrophic structural flaw.

Notes

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- 34 'Changeling, n.4', *Oxford English Dictionary*.
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