

Engineering Docile Life: Bio-Politics and Ontological Instability in The Island of Doctor Moreau

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Abstract—The gap between science and ethics had widened in 1876 with the growing advances in vivisection and grafting. While the latter was an agricultural advancement, the former created a domain for the vertebrates on whom experimental dissection, toxin injection, and grafting would be performed. In 1867, such experimentation on animals kindled an ethical dilemma, from which sprouted the Anti-Vivisection Act, leading to the unlicensed and unsupervised continuation of experimentation. Furthermore, human experimentation had also picked up a pace during the times of World War II and the Second Sino-Japanese War. Unit-731, a research and development unit of the Imperial Japanese Army, performed various lethal experiments on humans; likewise, the records from the Nazi camps contain accounts of vivisections of Josef Mengele on live subjects and other similar medical experiments.

While human experiments were never re-recorded, animal experimentation continued and burrowed into the late Victorian science fiction narratives. Some of the most accurate accounts of animal grafting and vivisection in fiction are from *The Island of Doctor Moreau* by H.G. Wells. The reader is exposed to a myriad of chimeric subjects entities and Moreau's vivisectional zeal, the power-hold he keeps over his engineered subjects, and the strange yet conditioned behaviour of the 'beast folk' that changes over time. When studied through the lens of bio-power, the subjects' limited cognitive and emotional structures lead to subjectification and docility.

The paper discusses the notion of bio-power in the context of Moreau's scale of power over his engineered subjects, while also studying their locomotion, speech, and thought processes to argue that these experiments were intended to instil subjectification and docility, extinguishing any form of resistance.

I. Introduction

From the judicial discursive (hostile and repressive) forms of power similar to those practised in the regal ages, when a single power practitioner held his subjects from any developments, and social institutions arose, much later, an efficient form of control. Biopower, which did not replace the repressive and deductive function, began to develop alongside it, focusing on a possibly positive influence on life. "Deduction" has tended to be no longer the major form of power but merely one element among others, working to incite, reinforce, control, monitor, optimise, and organise the forces under it: a power bent on generating forces, making them grow, and ordering them, rather than one dedicated to impeding them, making them submit, or destroying them." (Foucault, Michel, *Right of Death and Power over Life*). By efficiently administering and regulating the subjects, their sustainability drastically increases. The current society is an example of biopower. Michel Foucault points to certain institutions as microcosms of broader power (prisons, governments, and even clinics). In the context of the research paper's subject, a medical vantage point is best suited.

Such exertion of power over the body and life was bio-power, also known as anatomo-power, which furthered this exertion and postulated that knowledge of how the human body functions allows one to consolidate certain norms. These norms would include every (biological) bodily feature, regulation of life expectancy, births, mortality rate, and level of health. While bodily norms focus on such regulations through social means and governmental interventions, narratives from the science fiction genre allow a different medium for a similar purpose. The power structure that aims to administer, multiply, and optimise life is retained, but theoretically, possible surgical methods, transfusion, vivisection, and grafting are introduced as the advanced regulators of life.

Similar accounts of power structure and regulatory functions are recorded in the work of H.G Wells, titled *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, which follows Doctor Moreau, an active practitioner of vivisection, who, after the ban on the process, fled to a remote island to continue his research. There, he begins creating cognitively conscious, grafted, chimeric subjects whom he calls the Beast folks, to establish a microcosmic society of animals that mimic human actions and behaviour while displaying signs of docility and subjugation to the island's code. Moreau is assisted by a London-based student, Montgomery, who imports animals to the island and works on improving the process of vivisection. Through the protagonist Prendick's detailed narrative, the reader is informed about engineering subjects, including the stowaway who fortuitously sails to the island.

II. The enhancements of the Beast folks, the epistemic incision

As mentioned earlier, theoretically possible enhancements of the Beast folks contribute to what Foucault terms population control, another aspect of bio-power. Cognition would be the subject of interest. The beast folks display signs of comprehension and response, making discourse possible. The Sayer of the Laws, a bipedal silver-haired Skye-Terrier, one of Moreau's successful creations, acts as Moreau's medium for effective crowd control, ensuring that the beast folks uphold Moreau's episteme. A factor contributing to such levels of enhanced cognition is the altered state of their neuronal generation. The glial cells (cells found in the central nervous system that support nerve cells and help them function properly), called astrocytes, assist in forming neurons and in neuronal development. There have been reports of astrocyte transplants in animals that showed improved cognition after the procedure.

An example of this occurred when a mouse received human astrocytes transplanted into its forebrain, which showed improved long-term potentiation (a process that strengthens neuronal connections for better learning and memory retention). Additionally, Moreau alters the spinal structure and the pelvic region to shift the centre of gravity, making the beast folk transition from quadrupedalism (locomotion on four legs) to bipedalism (locomotion on two legs). Such bodily alterations point to another aspect of bio-power, which states that the power practitioner's intel on the subject's body grants him the anatomic power to regulate it. In the narrative, this regulation comes from Moreau's institutional structure, the house of pain, as the beast folks call it.

After the medical regulations come the epistemic regulations. "Moreau, after animalising these men, had infected their dwarfed brains with a kind of deification of himself." The island revolves around Moreau's laws, and the beast-folk follow limited social norms. They are not kept in confined spaces all the time and are allowed to follow a routine and socialise with others. However, the socialising aspect never escalates into a revolt, even though they know they are being operated upon and work under Moreau's codes. This results from the limited episteme that Moreau had constructed on the island for the micro-society to follow. That is to say, the beast folk were never exposed to any form of power dynamics in the first place, and this

absence of primary knowledge gives no space for any consciously active rebellion. By removing critical thought, Moreau never lets the gap narrow between the governing body and its subjects, another reason bio-power is an effective form of power practice. The subjects have no epistemic access to who the power practitioner might be, and this does not give them a single target to remove from the dynamics since the actual power practitioner blends in with the subjects as Moreau does by never exposing them to any form of proper, critical thought and by also installing one of their own, Sayer of the Laws, as their leader.

Another form of withholding knowledge from propagation extends to the domain of language. The beast folks show a lack of recursion in their speech pattern. Recursion, as Noam Chomsky points out, is the ability of human beings to weave sentences in continuation with proper semantic and syntactic bonds. Most of the larger language families and their users display recursion, given that they are larger communities that use the language; there is also a variety of words to replace and keep the sentence going. However, smaller communities like the Pirahã, an indigenous people of the Amazon rainforest, show little to no recursion in their speech patterns, as their vocabulary is small and their grammatical structures are more limited. A reason, among many others, given for this is that the community is not widespread over a large area, and neither does it need a variety of grammatical structures to convey what needs to be transferred. Looking at the beast folk under the same lens, they show signs of little to no recursion. The logical, non-fictive point is the finer motor control the greater apes lack over their vocal cords; the narrative offers a different perspective. Since almost every beast folk has acquired speech to some level, their grammar has not been untouched, meaning Moreau had made no effort on their linguistic abilities. “Yesterday, he bled and wept. You never bleed nor weep. The master does not bleed or weep,” says the Satyr, another of Moreau’s creations (half goat, half ape), when it comes across Prendick.

There is no connection between the sentences, despite their shared subject, namely Prendick. The Satyr shows signs of comprehending the context, yet cannot intuitively reason regarding Moreau’s humanity. To the Satyr, Moreau is a god-like entity who creates them, lets them propagate and thrive, and grants them knowledge of certain aspects, like the ocean’s expanse and his lab where he makes them; thus, the name House of Pain, given by the beast folks. To them, Moreau has no characteristics of a living being since he neither “bleeds nor weeps.” His existence is understood as the cornerstone of the island because, to the beast folk, Moreau is far superior to Prendick and Montgomery, which is why Satyr compares Prendick to Moreau and finalises that he is neither the creator nor the master. At the base of this claim, it is to be noted that the beast folk are withheld from learning any form of grammar, thus having no intel on complex sentence patterns. They are shielded from exposure to the outside world, which could encourage them to think critically and act independently. The island was the confines of which the beast folk were ignorant; Moreau was the unethical scientist, the beast folk considered their god, not a mere leader. Moreau successfully created a micro-society of docile beings ready to be installed as cogs in the workforce. Of this, Mling, the brute, a hybrid of a bear, a dog, and a bull, is an example who was a trusted assistant of Montgomery, helping Moreau to import animal subjects to the island and doing other trivial chores on the island like serving food and protecting Montgomery. This could be studied under the concept of differential distribution, in which Foucault introduces a method of categorically assigning individuals based on characteristics, specific behaviours, and qualities for the purpose of adequate control. As discussed earlier, Mling and The Sayer of the Laws had particular roles based on their dominant function. The Beast Folk failed to understand the power practitioner’s whip as the symbol of complete mastery.

III. Blood in the tides

“That servant of mine... I showed him how to skin and cook a rabbit. It's odd...I saw him licking his hands...It never occurred to me.” Montgomery told Prendick when he discovered that blood could still catalyse a primal reversion.

The Leopard Man, one of Moreau's failed experiments who had not obeyed the island's laws, was also one of the first to display signs of primal reversion. The beast folk's conditioning had been explicitly done: whenever they felt hungry, they shouldn't hunt other animals but eat the fruits. This was primarily to keep them from tasting blood, which would trigger an instinctive drive. However, the Leopard Man, a combination of a human and a leopard, is the first to break the law. Leopards, in general, are known as solitary felines, stalking their prey and hunting more than they can eat. While it cannot be assumed that the human trait could have prompted it to break the law, a carnivorous instinct may be the reason. Generally, obligate carnivores like leopards and hyenas (in context to the Hyena-swine from the narrative) solely rely on meat for survival because their digestive enzymes cannot break down plant cellulose in plant cell walls. While the island's laws and episteme constantly keep the beast folk conscious so as not to fail or lapse, their instinct leads to an unconscious break from the order. This is the flaw Moreau had, which led to the eventual downfall of the micro-society. While Moreau had altered the physical conditions (spinal alteration for an upright posture, Laryngeal alteration for speech, and neural alterations for cognition and memory retention), he had failed at psychologically training the beast folk to alter their instincts since it is possible to improve animal instincts through conditioning them and this would have completed the establishment of order without any repressive need to put down the carnivores of the island.

While Foucault stresses bio-power's ability to improve the populace through progressively effective means of control, he also notes an ineradicable element in the equation. Death had always lingered in every power structure, whether it focused on the medical aspects of its subjects. The extent of the power only goes until the knowledge of the subject's organic status and the control over it. Similarly, Moreau's hold over the beast folk did not extend beyond the beast folk's consciousness. Until their primal reversion, the beast folk were constantly aware that Moreau was god-like. Still, in the case of the leopard man, neither Moreau's repressive institution (his lab) nor his ideological institution was at work. The only option to put down a rogue subject was to kill, thus entering death as the final element in the structure.

Achille Mbembe introduces this inescapable aspect of death in his essay titled “Necropolitics,” which chiefly discusses the state (any repressive institution present in the state) and its power to use weapons and kill in mass numbers, eventually leading to the death worlds, where mass subjugation hammers on the living the status of the living dead. Necropolitics, in turn, often emerges from biopolitics. Militarised spaces are created to deal with the unwanted population. The state must imprison and eliminate some of its subjects to uphold the conventions and neutralise any socio-political consternation. Moreau's island works similarly. “It killed several other things that it caught. We chased it for a couple of days... It was purely an experiment...Montgomery shot the thing.” The initial serpentine creation, of whom there is little description, disrupted the micro-society by breaking the island's law and killing on sight. Moreau's code was the monolith of a progressive society that would work to extend life spans and propagate the beast folk, and killing them was never his want. The killing, let alone the modification, is justified to maintain order on the island, since rogue beast folks would be excluded as unmanageable subjects who disrupt the micro-society. This does not spare the other beast folk from a bullet to their cranium. Discipline is not the only element in the surveillance equation; small doses of death are slipped into the daily existence of the beast folks to

extract the maximum utility. Take Mling, for instance, who not only acts according to Montgomery's pointer finger but also takes on the general chores at the settlement of the men despite constant humiliation from those who see him for the first time. The experimentation puts them in constant pain, leaving them devoid of any subjectivity, turning them into perfect cogs who could be removed and replaced at any given moment. To them, life becomes a medium for death, for they live at the edge of death. They are products of a power format that has manufactured a mass, "living at the edge of life." Having begun as a smaller community, they never transitioned to follow a proper culture or create an identity for themselves. The memory of their past lives was wiped out, their life a constant agony, and they died as hideous amalgamations of two or more creatures.

The circulation of weapons and paramilitary-like intrusion (Montgomery, Mling, and Prendick) became necessary to ensure safety and constantly remind the beast folk that going rogue or breaking the code would lead to execution. Still, as mentioned earlier, they had no knowledge on the execution being a repressive measure. Possession of weapons leads to the disintegration of any social bond, given that possessing a weapon (gun) determines one's social value. The Sayer of the Laws and Mling had the upper hand over the other beast folk, since Moreau and Montgomery installed them to oversee and maintain the code, but they were not allowed to wield weapons. In contrast, Moreau, Montgomery, and Prendick were armed. This could also suggest a sense of coercion on the part of the beast folk rather than submission. Teaching them to handle a weapon would enhance their social value, which, in turn, might lead to the subversion of hegemony. Montgomery and Prendick are the coercive institutions under whom Mling and The Sayer of Laws function.

"Before they had been beasts, their instincts fitly adapted to their surroundings, and happy as living things may be. Now they stumbled into the shackles of humanity, lived in a fear that never died, fretted by a law they could not understand," says Prendick while he ponders over Leopard Man's death.

IV. The death of a god and the aftermath

"They knew now that we of the Whips could be killed, even as they themselves were killed."

The panther's escape, followed by Moreau's death in its maw, kindled a series of killings on the island, and the beast folk had finally attained the forbidden knowledge that the power structure could be toppled with a properly instigated attack. A feral outburst quickly escalates to a mass killing within the beast people, proving that some of them were immediately aware of the advantage in Moreau's death. Like the Hyena swine, the smarter ones immediately had a target to take down. The Sayer of the Laws was a primary target to break free from the order of the island, and Prendick was next on the list to evade a brutal execution for being a normal animal. Moreau's corporeal death also removed the convention that the island had thus far followed; the ethical bounds had fallen apart, and the stubborn animal flesh was growing again, which, according to Moreau, was the animal instinct to live free of a code. At that moment, a structure built on moral and ideological codes had come down. An instant that collects the magnitude of this aftermath is when Prendick has a head-on encounter with the hyena swine and commands, "Salute, bow down," to which the hyena swine replies, "Who are you that I should..."

Moreau's death birthed a revolution and a new purpose for the beast folk, awakening a will to power in them. The power that was held in the hands of a few had now dispersed all over the island, letting the beast folk know that they could fight back and restructure the power dynamics. This sudden takeover of the Beast

folk does not mean that they would now regain complete control, since Moreau mentions earlier in the narrative that he had failed to extend their life span. It is worth noting that, even after the reversion, the beast folk did not return to living like normal animals; instead, they died due to their alterations and maladaptation. Moreau had also failed at letting them propagate as the offspring of the beast folk inherited none of their parent's traits but became fodder for the rogue carnivores.

On the other hand, Moreau's key purpose was to test the limits of plasticity "in a living shape," meaning he could easily justify his killings by branding his subjects, some as suitable for "man-making" while others as unsuitable. Foucault mentions two different notions when he explains the panopticon. While Moreau cannot be considered a complete panopticon, his practices include binary division, placing a social marker on subjects, effectively dividing them into groups: those fit to be in society and those to be excluded. Foucault's instance is the division between the mad and the sane or the normal and the abnormal, as Moreau does here by choosing specimens likely to become a successful bipedal over those that feared and writhed in pain. "The more I looked at it, the more clumsy it seemed, until at last I put the monster out of its misery. These animals without courage, these fear-haunted, pain-driven things, without a spark of pugnacious energy to face torment, they are of no good for man-making." Moreau had complete control over creation and death, discarding those deemed unfit and refining those capable of being a perfect cog in his society until his death had clocked everything to zero. Human intervention in certain aspects of nature has never been compatible. Large projects like windmills do not involve any alterations; instead, they harness energy from the flow, thus existing along with nature rather than gaining control, whereas actual cases of human intervention have only caused death in return.

V. Conclusion

On a deeper level, the beast-folks of the island exist in a suspended state. The threshold they are at in the narrative provides them with an unstable ontological space, where they are operated upon, modified, disciplined, and even killed without ethical consequences. It is the island itself that functions as the state of exception in the narrative, a juridically isolated space, totally detached from the outside world; it even serves as a space of sovereign violence, allowing Moreau to determine which animal, in what condition and with what alterations, is fit for man-making. This is not merely an act of experimentation, but an active creation of a space where one is classified, institutionalised and can even be killed without any consequences. The beast-folks, thus, resemble Agamben's homo-sacer, beings who are killed without the act constituting murder.

Furthermore, such a narrative even recreates the orientalist logic of the civilised centre regulating the primitive periphery, the scientific subject mastering the animalised other. This paves the way to the question of what categorises one as human and even addresses the instability of the category "human", anticipating post-humanist concerns. These experiments actively deconstruct the boundaries of different species, revealing the body as an artificial construct. The natural category of humanity is removed and replaced by a politically regulated designation imposed through discipline. The horror of the beast-folk emerges from the fragility and constructedness of human identity itself. There is an ambiguity that looms around the beast folk's identity. They possess speech, social organisation, and even emotions to some extent, but cannot be identified as humans given their bodily instability. It is this very ambiguity that destabilises anthropocentric definitions of humanity.

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