

Analysis of moral personhood philosophy essay

[Experience](#), [Human Nature](#)



The incessant progress of contemporary science has given rise to ethical and policy-making conundrums causing the concept of moral personhood to reassume a central role in the deliberation of “ who, or what, is entitled to having rights.” The more scientists uncover what makes an entity biologically human, what societal relationships humans have in common with other species’ societies, and what science can do to prolong life, the more a consensus is needed for sound ethical deliberation. Throughout much of Western thought and history, the person has taken moral precedence over other beings-non-persons. Comparatively, the person is to ethics, what the cell is to biology. In fact, most of the reasoning behind moral and legal decision-making recognizes and utilizes this unique dignity and high moral worth of the person to protect and ensure her rights. However, concise reasoning in this debate is contaminated with questions such as: “ What is a person?” “ Is humanity coextensive with persons?” and “ Are humans guilty of speciesism if persons are not co-extensive with the notion of personhood?”

The evolution of moral personhood’s importance is seen with ancient Greek’s hierarchy of beings. Under such a theory, persons were those entities with an exceptional ability to rationalize and consequently ranked superior to those that lacked that ability. Judeo-Christians, on the other hand, believe that mankind was created in the image of God. “ Humanity’s uniqueness and qualitative superiority of the rest of creation was anchored in the rational soul, which was both the source of biological life and personal individuality.” The rational soul created in the image of God allows persons to act in accord with His commands. More simply, the Judeo-Christian view of personhood

establishes the extra-ordinary status of personhood because 1) persons are made in the image of God as humans and 2) God has blessed each life with a unique and rational soul. Under this view, one encounters the sacredness of human life and the consequent dignity of personhood since human beings were called by God to participate in a life that requires an absolute love for Him. That is He granted them a rational soul that may choose to act out a moral, God-loving life. This view remains influential in modern dialogue concerning the issue of personhood and has done much to assimilate the notion of humanness with the sacred dignity of personness.

However, the demand for secularized ethical and policy decision-making has created juxtaposition in how one argues for the moral status of the person. It generates much confusion in how to approach a cohesive, contemporary concept of personhood. Because secularized policy and ethical decision making do not appeal to the Judeo-Christian notion of sacred ensoulment, a conceptual clarification and thorough analysis of moral personhood is needed for subsequent normative claims to be reasoned beyond the scope of religious indoctrination.

Historically, arguments appealing to an entity's personhood were used when abolishing slavery and establishing women's and immigrants' rights. Today, argumentation concerning moral personhood is used in the contentious abortion debate, animal protectionism, the permissibility of stem cell and embryological research, as well as end of life and severely injured treatment. In the future, the notion of moral personhood may be used to appeal to the rights of machines, supercomputers, or even extra-terrestrial life.

Similar to James Rachels, I suggest that evolutionary theory coupled with the demand for secularized policy and ethical decision-making seriously undermine the traditional assumption that biological human life—that is, entities belonging to the species *Homo sapiens*—hold special value and dignity. Rather, human exceptionalism becomes deflated as science increases the way one analyzes the social, human animal. In fact, the more advances in the scientific understanding of the human animal, the more we struggle to ascertain the true moral “specialness” of humanity and moral personhood. This thesis, motivated by such argumentation, is an examination and constructive attempt to fully understand a workable notion of moral personhood.

Conceptual Clarification

An unclear frame of reference for moral personhood incites much of the philosophical confusion surrounding this issue. So, in order to better understand the contexts regarding the notion of personhood, this section will clarify and elaborate on key concepts used throughout this thesis. Academic literature typically contemplates personhood in 3 ways:

within the context of having a serious right to life,

moral agency, and

entities possessing autonomy.

For the purpose of this thesis, moral personhood is discussed in terms of moral agency. Moral agency is foundational in the discussion of having rights (#1). Similarly, the notion of autonomy (#3) is dealt with insofar as it seems

an essential component of an entity's acting for moral reasons and being held morally accountable-that is, autonomy is such that it is inextricably tied to moral agency.

A second ambiguity in the discussion of moral personhood rests in the distinction of the metaphysical and the moral. Consider John Locke:

Person stands for-which I think, is a thinking intelligent being, that has reason and reflection, and can consider itself as itself, the same thinking thing, in different times and places; which it does only by that consciousness which is inseparable from thinking, and as it seems to me, essential to it.

In this passage, Locke describes personhood in terms of cognitive capacities resultant of a special self-awareness. This is a descriptive and metaphysical account of what it is to be a person. Metaphysical personhood deals with the properties-cognitive and physical-that make a person what it is.

Consciousnesses, intelligence, mind, and body, for example, are all properties commonly used to describe an individual's metaphysical personhood. Beauchamp elaborates, "Metaphysical personhood is comprised entirely of a set of person-distinguishing psychological properties such as intentionality, self-consciousness, free will, language acquisition, pain reception and emotion." Again, metaphysical properties of personhood are those properties that describe the necessary and sufficient cognitive properties of an entities' personhood. Notice, in the discussion of personal identity metaphysical personhood tackles the question of what properties are essential for a person to be considered an enduring person through time.

This essay will elaborate on the properties essential to moral personhood- what properties are essential to an entity's personhood qua agency.

Locke dovetails his notion of metaphysical personhood with the notion of moral personhood:

“ Person” is a forensic term. Person, as I take it, is the name for this self. Wherever a man finds what he calls himself, there, I think, another may say is the same person. It is a forensic term, appropriating actions and their merit; and so belongs only to intelligent agents, capable of a law, and happiness, and misery. This personality extends itself beyond present existence to what is past, only by consciousness,- whereby it becomes concerned and accountable; owns and imputes to itself past actions, just upon the same ground and for the same reason as it does the present. All which is founded in a concern for happiness, the unavoidable concomitant of consciousness; that which is conscious of pleasure and pain, desiring that that self that is conscious should be happy. And therefore whatever past actions it cannot reconcile or appropriate to that present self by consciousness, it can be no more concerned in than if they had never been done: and to receive pleasure or pain, i. e. reward or punishment, on the account of any such action, is all one as to be made happy or miserable in its first being, without any demerit at all.

Here, Locke utilized the cognitive (metaphysical) properties of personhood to make assertions regarding the basis of moral personhood. In essence, the metaphysical properties of the person-“ the thinking intelligent being, that has reason and reflection, and can consider itself as itself, the same thinking

thing, in different times and places; which it does only by that consciousness"-leads to a moral context of personhood-" whereby it becomes concerned and accountable; owns and imputes to itself past actions." This type of analysis is the goal of this thesis. Ideally, I wish to establish a set of metaphysical properties such that one is able to discern which entities - collectively X - possess the metaphysical properties - P - such that having P entails the moral personhood of X. Simplified, X are persons in the moral sense because they possess P.

Moral personhood deals with the notion of person within an ethical context. In this thesis, we are examining the type of metaphysical beings that we are to apply ethical rights and responsibilities. Consider the analogy I used in the introduction, " The cell is to biology what moral personhood is to ethics." By studying the foundation of ethics - just as the biologist studies the foundation of life - I wish to illuminate the metaphysical properties of a thing that give it moral personhood.

Moreover, this thesis will explicate the differences that exist in a thing's being a moral agent and a moral patient. This is another ambiguity encountered in the academic dialogue concerning moral personhood-moral agency vs moral patiency. Agency is the ability to act. Moral agency is a person's capacity to mobilize herself into action for moral reasons. It is the capacity to carry out actions entitling it to both rights and responsibilities within the moral community. Moral agency, or the ability to act for moral reasons, is the foundation for all ethical systems. A system of ethics is able to work because persons are able to act for moral reasons. This is the

grounding for the significance and elevated moral worth surrounding moral personhood. Thus, a moral agent is such that, by its very nature, it derives her serious right to life and a life of non-interference. Without it, moral systems cannot work-no one is protected. This is the source of the person's dignity and deserved moral respect.

Understanding moral personhood allows us to understand those beings with the highest moral worth. Because of this highest moral worth, they are given the right to life. Because of its foundational role in ethics, moral agents are those beings that possess the highest moral standing and a strong right to life. A right to life is such that it is a right of freedom coinciding with all others not to be interfered with in respect to remaining alive. On one hand, moral patients have sufficient moral status and a right to life. However, it is not to the same degree as a moral agent. For example, in most cultures a dog is not expected to fulfill the role of a moral agent. It may possess certain rights, yet its moral responsibilities are little or none and the consequences for harming a moral agent are much less than a being possessing moral personhood. It is important that we understand that moral personhood does not seem to be such that a being has full moral worth (personhood) or no moral worth (non-personhood). This is developed in detail by David De Grazia in *Great Apes, Dolphins, and the Concept of Personhood*. De Grazia disagrees with the notion that moral status is an all-or-none principle. Moral patiency is a step down from moral agency and provides an account for the way we treat beings that are not fully persons, nor are they rocks. It is a goal of this thesis to illuminate the differences that exist within moral agency and moral patiency by discussing the distinctive properties of a moral agent.

Analytic Structure of this Thesis

In this thesis, I raise the metaphysical question-what constitutes moral personhood-to help solve-or, at the very least - arouse dialogue concerning practical biomedical concerns. The thesis is organized such that I will first discuss contemporary moral and legal issues in which the indefinite notion of personhood plays a large role in our moral reasoning. I will then provide a brief analysis concerning the role personhood plays in three widely studied ethical theories-namely, those of (1) Aristotle and virtue ethics, (2) Kant and deontological ethics, and (3) Bentham and Mill and the ethics of utilitarianism. The next chapter will be analyses of personhood as presented by contemporary philosophers. Much of the academic literature concerning moral personhood deals with the moral status of the fetus. Thus, much of this section will examine how we view potential persons and their relationship to moral personhood. For example, when one examines the space-time worm of a person, he must discern the points at which the being metaphysically possesses moral personhood. More simply, he must examine at which points the entity possesses the relevant properties of moral personhood. Furthermore, he must examine how one should deal with the unique entities which are not yet persons, yet show a strong tendency to become one. I will examine whether or not potential persons possess the same moral worth as moral agents. Upon completion of these analyses, I will end the thesis with a proposed concept of moral personhood followed by a revisiting of the practical concerns discussed in Chapter Two.