

Characteristics of personhood

Religion



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Characteristics of Personhood Rationality The ability to reason is seen as being one of the defining characteristics of personhood. Rationality can be summarised in our ability to make considered choices and decisions at a higher intellectual level. Rationality is illustrated in our ability to justify our thoughts and actions through reason, scaled to emotional or practical variables. Aristotle considered that the thought-processes that precede our actions are pivotal to personhood. Such thought-processes generally involve evaluating the positive and negative consequences of our actions, and deciding whether the 'reward' is worth the 'cost'. This ability to predict consequences of our actions isn't shared by the lower animals, and is pivotal in making the distinction between a person and a non-person. We have the ability to justify our beliefs and actions and to enter into reasoned dialogue with others. Rationality also leads to the ability to evaluate experience and draw logical, considered conclusions which will influence our actions in the future. The lesser animals lack this capability, a view which is illustrated in the following example: the squirrel stores food for the winter in order to survive, however the squirrel does not store food because it knows that food will be scarce in the winter; the squirrel stores food because of impulses governed by animalistic instinct, and nothing besides. The squirrel could not consider the possibility of an abundance of food in the winter, and decide that it did not wish to store food for the winter, and is confined to the demonstration of instinct. To further illustrate this point we could say that dogs have desires but they do not have choices. For example, when a piece of meat is left unattended, a dog would see it and eat it straight away because it desires the meat and has no regard as to whom it belongs or whether eating the meat would be of benefit to it. In this sense, animals such

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as dogs act on the basis of their desires. On the other hand, we as humans would firstly deliberate between the pros and cons of what to do with this piece of meat, taking into account the various factors and potential consequences of eating it. Humans will not simply act on the basis of their desires but will make a decision and then perform an action according to the decision that we make through our rationality. Possessing a network of beliefs Possessing a network of beliefs is a characteristic that predominately distinguishes humans as persons, as opposed to animals. A network of beliefs can be formed on the basis of reasons in accordance with our rational nature as persons are able to reflect upon the relative strengths and weaknesses of the evidence of these beliefs, basing our belief system on what others tell us and on our own experiences. It is believed that in comparison to most animals, humans have a much more complex network of beliefs. For example, a dog may avoid eating chocolate because of a bad experience devouring a whole box - but it is doubtful that the dog is able consciously to hold the belief that “ chocolate makes me sick”. A human, however, has the ability to make a rational decision from past experiences and act upon this belief. For example, if a person eats chocolate and is allergic to it and is thus made ill by it, through a network of wider beliefs such as “ allergies causing illness”, “ the feeling of being ill being horrible”, etc a person can deduce that “ chocolate makes me sick and therefore I won’t eat it again”. Unlike animals we can have beliefs about the past and future and refer to these beliefs as the past and future; an animal may remember something as a belief from the past such as the chocolate but can only see how it will affect the present. We can also have beliefs about beliefs; humans have the ability to hold beliefs about possibilities and things

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that may happen in the future, whereas animals can only have beliefs about the actual and fact. Language User Language users are beings who can communicate with others through a range of mediums. This means that they are able to talk about ideas in the abstract. Furthermore, language is necessary for the possession of genuine ideas and concepts about the world. Language allows people to understand their desires; without language, beings would be unable to communicate and request their desires. For example, a cow can feel hungry and desire grass but it doesn't know that it desires grass and feels hungry because it does not have those concepts. These concepts are human linguistic concepts. A creature's mental horizon is broadened by the ability to represent the world by signs. Language gives the user the ability to express thoughts about an infinite number of things. Furthermore language allows the intelligent construction of arguments; it allows the user to criticize and justify. Moreover, language permits a new kind of socializing, based upon discussions. It allows interaction and develops personalities. Language broadens people's knowledge and their emotions. All of these examples mean that one is a person if one can use language. This is because language allows you to formulate your thoughts and having thoughts and self-awareness means you have the capacity to understand the thoughts of others. This means you are a person. Self Awareness Self awareness is the ability to experience and do things whilst understanding what it is that's going on and having an awareness of the fact that it is ' I ' that is having the experiences. Descartes defines self awareness as having a conscious mind. He believed that using speech and reason were good examples of the mind working. He uses this theory to eliminate animals from what he classes as a person, and in turn describes them as ' nothing more

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than a complex machine.’ However, although we are unable to know whether an animal is self-conscious or not, they are clearly conscious in the sense that they are aware of their surroundings and at times can be unconscious. However, consciousness is not the same as self-consciousness. Another way in which self awareness can be described is by a person’s ability to talk about themselves using words such as ‘ I’ or ‘ mine’. It is the ability to describe ones mental state to others and to understand them from the first-person point of view. Looking back upon your memories is another example and knowing that it is ones self that has experienced these memories. A good example to illustrate self-awareness is the ‘ mark test’. This is where a mark is placed on the head of a participant who is then placed in front of a mirror. If the participant tries to wipe the mark off their reflection in the mirror, then it is argued that they do not recognise the reflection in the mirror as them and therefore lack self-awareness. If, however, they wipe the mark off their foreheads, then clearly they understand that the reflection in the mirror is them and they therefore have a sense of self. Infant humans beyond the age of 24 months, as well as some animals such as apes, dolphins and elephants, can successfully complete the test whereas other animals are not. This shows that self-awareness is not a characteristic that can be associated with all animals and as such may be a way of distinguishing between animals and persons. Social Being One characteristic that is thought to be essential for personhood is that of being a social being. Humans, unlike other animals, have a “ prior awareness" of the existence of other human beings. We identify ourselves in the context of our relationships with other human beings and through our various roles in society. Arguably, we can only recognise ourselves as a person if we have

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prior awareness of the existence of other such persons. Throughout life, humans form complex social relationships with others which they often maintain and develop. Human beings have a more developed society than animals such as dogs and horses due to the fact that humans have plans, intentions and schemes. They are individuals but this individuality stems from society. This inherent social nature is dependant upon our ability to communicate, allowing us to establish social roles and connect with others. Through this we see our own identity, as belonging to groups: work, culture, nationality and so on. Arguably, our " persona" might be largely formed because of these networks. To have a good life, we must interact with others in order to be able to reflect upon our own selves. In this sense, persons depend on society for not only specific ambitions and goals but also for language, beliefs and to compare themselves to other individuals. It is through this that we can discover the best way to live and therefore hopefully live a good life. We cannot achieve a good life in isolation as we cannot share our thoughts and feelings with other people. Human beings are social animals and it can be argued that being a person necessarily involves having complex relationships with others. Penguins huddle together for warmth, instinctively, not for any reason more complex than this. They don't have meetings, parties or " heart to hearts", and wouldn't later reflect upon this, or develop because of it. Creativity, autonomy and individuality

Autonomy is the ability to reason about whether to perform an action or not and suggests that persons are not controlled by our natural instincts, unlike animals. It appears that a person is not entirely influenced by basic instinct, and can refer to more complex thoughts and ideas in decision making. This is shown through the example that a dog does not reflect on whether to bark

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at the stranger in the street, or continue to go about its own business in the shade, whereas a person will often reflect upon the reasons for and against acting upon their immediate desires. A person is able to rise above their basic animal drives and take a measure of control over their own lives. By enabling us to reflect on how to act, reason gives us some mastery over our passions, elevating us above the level of creatures of instinct. The capacity to reflect and reason gives us a measure of autonomy or self-control.

Individuality allows each person to identify and emphasize the uniqueness of each of us and it is argued that an individual person is defined not so much by their shared human essence as by the particular characteristics of his or her own nature. Human beings in all societies give themselves proper names which uniquely identify them as individuals and some philosophers have argued that it is a natural tendency for all human beings to construct a unique personality. Also, animals appear to have no concept of creativity or imagination and only experience things for what they are. For example, an animal would not understand metaphor, because a metaphor is a representation of something else, and an animal cannot fathom this concept. Yet, people do have the ability to be creative and imaginative. Moral Sense Having a moral sense means that we are able to decide what we should and shouldn't do, to identify what is good and bad, and to label actions moral or immoral. Kant says that a person uses their moral principles and this determines their actions. He also says that we, as moral persons, are able to recognise what our duties are and then we can further choose whether to act in accordance with these duties. Acting in accordance with our moral duties rather than our desires is what makes our actions truly free as we can transcend our desires in order to do what we see we ought to. For example, <https://assignbuster.com/characteristics-of-personhood/>

although we may not want to give £5 to famine relief, we realise that we ought to and recognising this duty can motivate us to act on it. Morals tend to be related to humans, as animals don't have the notion of morality. For example, in the case of a lion killing an antelope for food, we see this as an act of survival; therefore we cannot blame the lion for being immoral. However if a human killed an antelope for sport it could spark a moral debate, as some people would agree with it and some people would think it immoral. If we can't attribute morals to animals, but we can attribute morals to humans, then there is a distinct difference between the two. This distinction illustrates that maybe we only attribute morals to persons.