

Defining and analysing personhood



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Person hood has always been an ill-defined term. The gray area between animal and person being one targeted and argued over since its original conception. It all seemed to begin with a proposition by John Locke, which constitutes that the rules governing personhood are:

“ 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.”(MHR, p. 134)

Then many philosophers began to develop, and retake Locke's definition and make it their own. Though, all of these people seemed to follow suite that the gray area's border lays upon the idea of our mind, our thoughts, and our memory. However, one person seems to completely disagree with the tradition Locke notions of personhood. Paul Snowdon is instead a member of the animalist belief. This belief is seemingly more straightforward when compared to Locke's ideas, as rather than putting its focus on the continuity of the mind; instead he believes it is the continuity of the body that defines one person now, as the same person later. Snowdon figured that if one tried to define the separation between the person and then animal in all of us, a grave issue would unfold. This is due to the ideas of one being able to separate the animal from the person, for if this idea is to happen, then one must also define the mental capability of the animal within the person. This is seemingly impossible. Thus the animalist believes that we are all organisms, and rather than create an identity separation between animals and persons, rather we are all animals on a scale of being.

This idea has a very small following when compared to Locke's theory; however, there are still a few philosophers that disagree with Locke's rules and have come up with their own definition for personhood. Still many of these theories have disagreements with Snowdon's principles, but there are a few I believe Snowdon has many agreements with. The one I think Snowdon would agree with the most is Annette Baier. Her ideas on personhood are against the principles of Locke, moreover statements show her disagreement with not only Locke, but many philosopher representing theories similar in Locke's belief " Baier says that ' person tests' too often reflect the narrow values of those who design them." (MHR, p. 135).

Both philosophers agree in their disagreement with Locke. Snowdon believes that one cannot decompose a person into a person and an animal without deficient results; likewise Baier believes that, due to person tests being set-up to reflect human nature, often philosophers put too much focus on the mental aspect of the creature, in many cases over the social interactions. Snowdon's idea that separating a person into two is closely related with Baier's theory in that, they both represent the idea that animals and persons are one and the same, that it is only our human hierarchal needs that seemingly force us into the thought process that there must be a defining barrier between us, and the rest of creature kind.

Furthermore, Baier says " the emphasis of the tests on the cognitive conditions of personhood seems to imply that people can float free of their own history, dependency, mortality, and biology." (MHR, p. 135) all of these ideas she disagrees with. Snowdon would also surely disagree with all of these ideas, as he spoke of the impossible reasoning behind the

transplanting of one's brain, not from a scientific viewpoint but from a theoretical one. Thus both philosophers agree in their own disagreements with the modern system of defining personhood.

Finally, Baier decided to create her own naturalist view, “ of persons as embodied, interpersonally responsive, and dependent creatures.” (MHR, p. 135) Though her view does not completely discredit the idea of persons, it does share many of its merits with Snowdon's principles, whilst expanding his ideas to encompass a new form of personhood. For instance, with the mention of “ persons as embodied ... creatures” she is showing a similar opinion to that of Snowdon's. The belief in that the continuity of our very bodies is a quite important aspect in the continuity of ourselves. One may also infer from her statements, that she believes it impossible to separate the person from the animal. That shows another level of agreement with Snowdon's reasoning.

With all this research on other philosopher's ideas on personhood, it seems impossible to have not developed a theory of my own. However, my theory is more based upon the underlying structure philosophers should be forced to realise before arguing their ideas of personhood, rather than my own opinion on the matter.

It seems that the consistent underlying structure among all these theories is based on separate classes of personhood, and what answers these classes wish to define. It seems though that most philosophers ignore these separate classes, and end up arguing that one theory holds illogical reasoning, even though this reasoning only seems illogical due to the theory attempting to

solve an entirely different problem from their own. It seems that all this began due to Locke's overly generalised theory; he covered the classes of identity tests, person continuity, as well as ethical standings. Whereas realistically all these issues should be dealt with separately.

The classes of personhood as I see them are answers to the following questions. What separates me now from me then? What separates me from an animal? When does personhood begin? (These are only a few personhood questions, however they seem to make up the common definitions, and would well enough for an example of my theory.) Now the real issue is that these questions are often attempted to be answered with the same solution, even though these questions have very different ethical backgrounds. One attempts to develop a way of making "identity checks", whereas another tries to define a hierarchy of the species, finally one is trying to define when life begins. As an example of the confusion this error can often cause I will examine Locke's definition.

"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."(MHR, p. 134)

He tries to solve the identity check question with "the same thinking thing, in different times and places", or as discussed on Philosophy Bites, the memories of past events in one's life. However, he also tries to produce a solution to the problem of, "what separates me from an animal?" in saying "

a thinking intelligent being, that has reason and reflection, and can consider itself as itself”.

Thus even in Snowdon’s very own argument, many of his reasons are flawed, do to comparing one question to another. It is my belief that each of the questions should be answered separately, rather than trying to develop a solution that fails in answering all of them at once.