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## *Dimensions of Personhood*

*Editors' Introduction*

This collection includes original papers on central philosophical questions concerning *personhood*. Before introducing the individual contributions, or the specific issues they tackle with, we would like to preliminarily clarify what this collection, as a whole, is about. Saying that the articles focus on personhood is not yet very informative since 'person' and 'personhood' are words with multiple and often quite unclear meanings. With these introductory remarks we wish to show that behind the multiplicity, there is a unified, even if complex phenomenon, and that it is useful to grasp it synoptically as a whole.

Consider the following question. What is the most important thing that you, me, and everyone like us, share and that distinguishes us from everything else? You and I are bound to be similar in many ways; but we are also bound to be different in many ways. Furthermore, you will most certainly consider some of our mutual similarities and differences more important than others, and so will I — and most certainly we will partly agree and partly disagree on what is more and what is less important in our similarities and differences. But is there any chance that we could *agree upon* a meaningful answer to the posed question: what is *the most important* thing that you, me, and everyone like us, have in common, and that distinguishes us from everything else?

There are two prominent candidates for an answer upon which, initial scepticism settled, we might well end up agreeing on. The first candidate is that despite all our mutual differences, and abstracting from all of our less important similarities, we are *humans*. The second candidate is that despite all our mutual differences, and abstracting from all of our less important similarities, we are *persons*.

Were we to agree that *being human* is the most important thing that you, I and others like us share we would be in an influential company. Much of our history of ideas supports the thought that being human is something very special indeed: for the Ancients, humans were the only rational animals, for the Mediaevals only humans had immortal souls, and according to the Moderns humans are distinct from all other species as bearers of ‘human rights’. Assuming that we would subscribe to one or more of these beliefs about humans, it would certainly be hard for us to see what other similarity between us could be more important than the fact that we are humans (assuming that we are).

Suppose, then, that we would want to look at this question more closely and to make it explicit to ourselves *why* we, and so many others, find being human so immensely important. Suppose that we would conclude that we find being human the most important characteristic that unites us and distinguishes us from everything else, *because* humans (in contrast to everything else) are rational beings, and/or *because* humans (in contrast to all other beings) have immortal souls, and/or *because* humans (in contrast to everything else) have some basic rights. Thus, in brief, we would conclude that the fact that we are humans is of major importance to us because of the uniqueness of the ontological, theological and/or moral position of humans in the universe.

Should we accept these views, it would of course be appropriate to evaluate their credibility. Obviously, each one of these thoughts is quite forcefully challenged today. First of all, after Darwin, we understand that the human species is one biological species among others, so that if something is a ‘rational animal’ it need not be, by definition, a *human* animal. It is by no means conceptually impossible that we might meet rational creatures that are not humans. (Many primatologists, we hear, actually say that the so called great apes are not that far from humans in this sense.)<sup>1</sup> Secondly, even if the belief in immortal souls is far from uncommon even today, it hardly is unchallenged. Perhaps there are no immortal souls (most philosophers, if that matters, do not seem to think there are). Or even if there were, is it really in our power to know that humans are *the only* mortals who have them? Finally, the claim that there are rights called ‘the human rights’ that all and only humans have, is despite its undeniable popularity not particularly uncontroversial, either. We do not have to go all the way to saying, like Jeremy Bentham did that human rights are nothing else but ‘rhetorical nonsense upon stilts’, to admit that it

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[1] See Hurley & Nudds (2006) on debates concerning the rationality of non-human animals.

would be morally dubious to deny these rights from otherwise similar creatures (say, rational beings and/or ones with immortal souls), who just do not happen to be humans.

All in all, after such reflection, we would come to notice that much of the apparent obviousness of the central importance of being human rests on ideas that are far from unchallenged. If these ideas cannot withstand scrutiny — that is, if there at least seems to be no *necessary* connection between having rational capacities, immortal soul, rights, etc., on the one hand, and being human, on the other — then the odds are that we would conclude that being human may not, after all, be so hugely important as we first thought it to be. It may not be *the most important thing* that we and others like us share, and that distinguishes us from all other kinds of beings.

What about the other candidate for an answer to the question: despite all our mutual differences, and abstracting from all of our less important similarities, we are *persons*? Even if ‘being human’ is not as credible an answer as it was taken to be for a long time, central elements of this answer have not become obsolete. In fact, it is quite accurate to say that together they form the second answer. That is, leaving aside the controversial question of immortal souls, it is certainly a very significant feature you and I share, that both of us are rational beings in some relevant sense; similarly, it is certainly very important that despite our differences, and independent of our less important similarities, we are both holders of some basic rights or other moral (or normative) statuses. The notion of personhood, as it is nowadays mostly used in philosophy, combines these two ideas, but leaves out the problematic reference to a biological species.<sup>2</sup>

But if the idea of human being no longer unproblematically keeps together the two attributes of rationality and moral status, by attributing both of them to humans, what is the point of keeping them together by packing them somehow into one notion? Are they simply not two different attributes that we should analyse separately instead of pre-judging, by terminological choice that they go together? In other

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[2] Different, more exact concepts of personhood emphasize the two attributes of ‘rationality’ and ‘moral or normative statuses’ differently, but in most philosophical discussions on personhood both elements are present in one way or another. ‘Rationality’ can here be understood as a general title for a number of more particular ‘rational capacities’ that have been proposed as characteristic of or defining personhood. Typical lists of such capacities include things like self-consciousness, capacity for moral agency, free will, capacity to think, responsiveness to normative demands, fitness to be held responsible, mastery of language, capacity to communicate, capacity to participate in norm-governed practices etc. Here it is not necessary to go into details about any of these.

words, what is the point of the notion of personhood which simply seems to be a mix of two different ideas?

The answer, which the articles in this collection support, is that it is not a matter of mere stipulation that rational capacities and moral statuses go together. Rather than being an artificial mixture, or a simple confusion, of two distinct phenomena, the composite notion of personhood grasps a real life intertwinement. The ontological and moral facts that intuitively make ‘us’ special form a holistic unity which it is indeed useful to try to conceive as a whole. To make this claim preliminarily plausible let us make a short excursion to the world of science (or rather moral) fiction.

Some philosophers have argued that in the imaginary situation where you and I were to meet previously unknown, intelligent-looking creatures — say, in another solar system — the most fundamental question in our minds would not be whether they are humans (obviously, they are not), but, rather, whether they are persons. But what exactly does this question mean? Wilfrid Sellars thinks that it basically means asking whether they belong to ‘us’ in the sense of a *moral community*, whose members have a moral standing — rights, duties etc. — with regard to each other. Thus, for you and I to ask whether the aliens are persons is to ask whether we ought to relate to them in some fundamentally similar way we relate to each other.

John Harris looks at a similar situation from a slightly different angle and formulates it somewhat humorously: were you and I to meet intelligent, and very hungry members of an extraterrestrial species looking for food on Earth, it might be wise to think of a way to convince the visitors of the appropriateness of ‘having us for dinner’ in the one sense rather than the other.<sup>3</sup> Humans are fleshy beings full of protein and other vital nutrients, thus the right point to make would not necessarily be the argument that we are humans. Rather, it would be in our interest to convince the aliens of a morally important similarity between us and them: that despite our differences, and abstracting from our less important similarities (say that that they too have four limbs), we all — both the visitors and the earthlings — belong to an overarching ‘we’ of a moral community whose members have moral claims and status with regard to each other. In Sellars’ terms, this would merely mean saying that we are all persons. Persons have other persons for dinner as guests, not as the meal.<sup>4</sup>

[3] See Sellars 1963, chapter VII, and Harris 1999, p. 302.

[4] Perhaps it is best to note here that of course there may be good considerations against eating *any* animals. In general, what kind of moral implications something’s not being a

Is 'being a person' in the sense implied by the above imaginary examples nothing else than 'having some basic moral status'? That is certainly one possible way of *defining* what being a person is: having a moral status such as a right to life.<sup>5</sup> But moral statuses obviously rest on ontological features in at least two senses. First, it is more or less unanimously accepted by philosophers, and supported by common sense, that our being rational creatures gives us, or makes us deserving of, a special moral status or statuses with regard to each other. Secondly, it is clearly only rational creatures that are capable of claiming for and acknowledging or respecting, moral statuses. Therefore, having special moral statuses and having rational capacities (or moral and ontological uniqueness) are, as it were, two dimensions of the Sellarsian 'we' or moral community of persons. There is no definite answer to the question which one of these dimensions is more important, and no intuitively or philosophically obvious need to answer it, since they intimately go together. It is exactly this intimate intertwinement of the ontological and the moral dimension of what we think is important in us, that arguably makes the composite notion of personhood important and philosophically useful. The collection, as a whole, illuminates this intertwinement from different, mutually complementary points of views.

The examples above also illustrate another guiding idea of this collection: personhood, as a complex or composite topic, can be helpfully approached by focusing on the special kinds of *relations* persons have to each other, as well as to themselves. As we saw, persons, thought of as members of the Sellarsian moral community stand, or are capable of standing, in particular kinds of relations with regard to each other. This is not merely a matter of conceptual relationships, but of concrete interpersonal relationships involving special kinds of attitudes, emotions and actions (which, roughly, establish and/or respond to the relevant statuses). That persons, characteristically or perhaps by definition, stand in such relationships to each other, is related to the fact that persons also have special kinds of relationships to themselves, 'self-relations'. In philosophy, persons are typically thought of as being self-conscious, as having self-concern, second-order desires, moral conscience, first-person perspective or other epistemic and practical, conscious or unconscious ways of relating to their attitudes, emotions and actions, and to themselves as their subjects. Indeed,

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person has, is a large topic and it is not necessary to take any particular philosophical stance on the relevant debates here.

[5] For instance, according to Michael Tooley's definition, being a person is (nothing else than) having 'a serious right to life' (Tooley, 1972, p. 40).

being self-related in such ways is widely thought of in modern philosophy as a general structural feature of what it is to be rational in the ways specific to persons in distinction to less complex beings. If a being does not have various epistemic, evaluative and conative relationships to its inner life which make it capable of controlling and being responsible for itself, then it is not a rational agent in the sense that we think is distinctive of persons.

The interpersonal relationality and the self-relationality of persons are intertwined in at least two ways. Clearly, only beings that have some such self-relations can stand as moral subjects or agents in interpersonal relations to others: you cannot establish a mutual moral relationship with a creature that has no reflexive relationship to its desires or intentions but, as it were, acts on them automatically. From another point of view, at least empirically speaking, it seems to be impossible for such 'person-making' self-relations constitutive of the way persons are rational, to develop or actualize fully, if the individual is left outside of the realm of interpersonal relationships.<sup>6</sup>

This collection is organized in three parts, with thematically different focuses, but also significant overlap due to the interconnectedness of the discussed issues. The first part discusses and distinguishes specific ontological and conceptual questions concerning personhood and our fundamental nature; the second part focuses on some of the most fundamental kinds of self-relations of persons, as well as their preconditions; finally, the third part focuses on interpersonal or social relations characteristic or constitutive of personhood. The collection includes both synoptic articles outlining holistic ways of conceiving a multiplicity of features or dimensions associated with personhood, and articles concentrating on specific sub-questions.

The first part opens with an article by *Lynne Rudder Baker*, introducing several themes discussed throughout the collection. In her earlier work Baker has defended a view according to which persons are beings with a 'first person perspective'. Persons, as subjects of a first person perspective, are ontologically related to their bodies through a relation that Baker calls 'constitution'. In this paper Baker elaborates on some of the details of her 'constitution view' of persons, and widens the perspective of her approach by discussing intentional relationships that persons have to things other than themselves. These relationships — which first person perspective makes possible —

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[6] The dependence of different kinds of self-relations on interpersonal relations is widely discussed in developmental psychology. For a philosophical work systematically utilizing this general idea, see Honneth (1995).

include moral relationships (which Baker conceives in terms of duties towards other persons as well as to non-persons), interpretive relationships (in which we redescribe things in different creative ways), and productive relationships (in which persons bring about ontologically novel kinds of things).

In the next paper, *Eric Olson* introduces and clarifies the question ‘what are we?’ — what are we metaphysically speaking, or what is our fundamental ontological nature? He distinguishes this question from the more widely discussed questions concerning the conditions of personhood and persistence of persons. Having introduced the question, Olson points out that every account of what we are (including Baker’s constitution view, and a view Olson has previously defended, according to which we are animal organisms) appears to face grave objections. One difficult problem is how to rule out, in some principled way, the threat that there are *two* things (say, an animal and a person constituted by it; or an animal and a part of an animal) thinking your thoughts. The possible solutions come in metaphysical, psychological and epistemic varieties, but none of them are likely to be very appealing.

*Michael Quante* distinguishes, in turn, between four different questions that get easily confused in the discussions on personhood. These are the questions concerning (a) the conditions of personhood, (b) the unity of personhood, (c) the persistence of human persons and (d) the structure of biographical or narrative ‘personality’ or ‘selfhood’. (These all differ from Olson’s question of what we are). Quante analyses closely these questions and their interrelations, and suggests that while personhood and personality are irreducibly socially constituted, our unity and conditions of persistence are not. Quante also argues that while the concept of a person is not logically tied to the concept of human being, our experiences and intuitions about what it is to be a person are inevitably intertwined with those about what it is to be human.

In the second part, focussing on the self-relations of persons, *Dieter Sturma* starts by outlining a comprehensive theory of ‘persons as subjects’. His central thought is that personhood consists of a system of self-referential activities, or of dynamic self-relations which reveal themselves in expressions like: ‘I think, I feel, I notice, I want, I act, I wish, I suffer, I care etc.’ In Sturma’s account, a systematically clarified concept of self-reference, purged of all reifying or ‘egological’ readings of the ‘self’ is a tool with which to construe a de-transcendentalized and holistic conception of personhood uniting both its ontological and moral dimensions. Such a conception takes

seriously the irreducibility and ineliminability of the subjective first person perspective, and yet, does not lead to a problematic ontological dualism involving dubious non-worldly mental entities.

The next article by *Robin S. Dillon* focuses on a particularly important self-relation, namely self-respect which she, following Kant, takes to be essential to personhood. There are many varieties of self-respect, but the so called 'recognition respect' for oneself as a person involves appreciation of oneself as someone with dignity and moral status just by virtue of being a rational agent. Such recognition self-respect comes in two forms: the first is a view of oneself as someone entitled to being regarded and treated *by others* with respect, and the second concerns one's own regard and treatment of oneself as a moral and rational agent. Dillon argues that there are correspondingly two forms of arrogance, violations of these forms of self-respect, which as such corrupt our personhood. In her view, understanding the connections between different kinds of arrogance, self-respect, respect for others and personhood is the key to understanding the subtle, but profound ways in which arrogance corrupts the very qualities that make persons persons.

Whereas Dillon's focus is on self-respect, the article by *Andreas Wildt* focuses on theoretical or epistemic self-relations, and more exactly, on the unconscious ones. Wildt argues that there is a meaningful concept of unconscious knowledge of one's mental states, and shows that this concept plays a number of roles in the writings of Sigmund Freud. Freud is often seen as one of the thinkers who 'de-throned' man by depriving him of the illusion of the full mastery of himself, and this has been interpreted as a sign of the general 'death of the subject (or man)'. Yet, there is nothing particularly threatening in Freud for the theory of personhood. Unconscious self-relations are part of the complexity of what makes us persons, and therefore Freud, as the master thinker of the unconscious, is someone who cannot be ignored in attempts to come up with a synoptic conception of personhood.

*Manfred Frank* concludes the second part by arguing that it is necessary to presuppose, 'behind' the reflective self-relations constitutive of personhood, a non-reflective or non-relational core of personhood without which no genuinely self-reflective relations would be possible, and without which also the normative or moral status of persons would lack a *fundamentum in re*. Frank discusses a number of contemporary approaches to self-consciousness, and shows how each of them fails as a comprehensive account in that they either presuppose or leave unaccounted for this non-relational core

that all genuinely first-personal consciousness or knowledge of one-self presupposes. Frank shows that Fichte, an immediate successor of Kant, was already well aware of the problems involved in the attempts to account for the core in terms of a subject-object-relation, and points out that a contemporary of Fichte, Novalis, suggested an alternative approach to the foundation of the first-person phenomena — one which conceives it in terms of the concept of feeling.

Like the second part, the third part of the book, focussing on interpersonal relations or sociality of persons, also opens with a piece outlining a broad holistic conception of what defines personhood. In it *Pirmin Stekeler-Weithofer* argues that to be a person is essentially to take part in a system of social practices. This involves not only the capacity to follow rules or norms constitutive of such practices (or *understanding*), but also the capacity to take evaluative distance from, and thus to challenge and develop further the system of practices (or *reason*). Stekeler-Weithofer criticizes reductivist programs for their incapacity to really grasp the phenomenon of personhood, and argues that a satisfactory answer to the very basic questions of philosophy point towards a comprehensive conception of personhood. According to Stekeler-Weithofer, the fundamental conviction of the German idealist philosophers from Kant to Hegel was that philosophy is ultimately philosophical anthropology. This does not mean studying man as a biological creature, but conceiving comprehensively the structures that make him, in suitable circumstances, a person with the spontaneous and critical capacities of reason — a free being.

Whereas Stekeler-Weithofer discusses *sapience in general* as what makes persons persons, *Shaun Gallagher* suggests that practical wisdom, *phronesis*, is the specific person-making feature. He illuminates the nature of practical wisdom by drawing on rival analyses of expertise. Although expertise and practical wisdom are different things, they are alike in that we can acquire them only in interaction with other persons and through habituation. In general, Gallagher argues for an embodied and intersubjective account of personhood, and supports his view with evidence from neuroscience, developmental psychology and phenomenology. According to Gallagher, such a view can account for all the items in standard lists of conditions of personhood better than views, such as Daniel Dennett's, which leave open the possibility that persons could be brains-in-a-vat.

After Gallagher, *Heikki Ikäheimo* outlines a synoptic conceptual model, in which a number philosophical and common sense candidates for features that define personhood are conceived of as interrelated, yet irreducible, 'layers' and 'dimensions' of what it is to be a

person in the full-fledged sense of the word. Ikäheimo distinguishes between three layers of personhood — consisting of person-making psychological capacities, person-making interpersonal significances, and person-making institutional or deontic powers. Running through the layers there are then two dimensions — the deontic and the axiological — corresponding to the ‘recognitive attitudes’ of respect and love. These recognitive attitudes of ‘taking something/-one as a person’ are responses to the psychological layer, and directly constitutive of the interpersonal layer of the respective dimensions of personhood. Ikäheimo argues that, in a number of ways, persons bootstrap themselves into personhood collectively by taking each other as persons.

In the closing article *Arto Laitinen* asks how three aspects of personhood — capacities of individuals, normative requirements concerning the treatment of persons, and the social aspect of recognition by others — are related, and how personhood depends on them. Laitinen first defends a ‘basic view’ holding that while actual recognition is among the constitutive elements of full personhood, it is the individual capacities (and *not* full personhood) which ground the basic normative demands. Actual recognition in turn depends analytically on such pre-existing normative requirements: it is a matter of responsiveness to them. Anyone with the relevant capacities ought to be included into the group of persons, whether or not they actually are. Laitinen acknowledges that the basic view as such is not sufficiently refined to meet some central objections (which claim that the capacities depend on recognition; that recognition seems to have normative relevance; and that the basic view as such does not suffice to explain the equality either of persons or of humans). The basic view can, however, be refined so as to respond to these challenges, and thus to give a fuller view on how the aspects of personhood are to be sorted out.

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