It is a widespread belief that to be human just is to be a person. There is also a widely held expectation that for any individual to be a person, she must resemble a human. Consequently, those properties that make us human are also taken to be essential for any individual to be a person. Rationality, autonomy, moral awareness, self-awareness, and linguistic capacity are all frequently taken to be necessary and sufficient for personhood. Simply put, many of us have the view that if you are a human, then you are a person and if you are a person, then you are a human. This view is, however, clearly false.

First consider the claim that if you are a person, then you are a human. We can surely imagine that there are other inhabited worlds, perhaps even with intelligent or sapient life. But it would be an incredible coincidence if this life were also human (some might say its naturally impossible [i.e. it could not happen in any possible universe with the same natural laws as this one]). Even if these extra-terrestrials are not human, it seems at least possible that they are also persons, or, at the very least, there is nothing fantastic or unintelligible about such a suggestion. Perhaps not so incredibly, there may be Deities or angels. At least, it is as widespread a belief that there is a personal Deity or Deities as that humans are persons. Yet these Deities are not supposed to be human (pace Christ of course). Depending on how anthropomorphic the relevant theology is, these Deities may not even resemble humanity. It doesn't seem to be correct, then, that to be a person you must be a human.

The claim 'If you are a human, then you are a person' fairs no better than the first one. At least, it is certainly literally false. Imagine you visit the city morgue after hours. If the staff have left for the night, and there are no janitors or security guards on duty, how many persons do you suppose are in the building? I suspect that, on reflection, you'll say 'One, just me'. You'll likely say this even if the morgue is full of dead humans. The prospect for this claim doesn't get better if we add 'living', so that the claim now becomes 'If you are a living human, then you are a person'. Imagine you're a doctor whose patient (though still hooked up to life support equipment) is now, in fact or actually, brain dead. (To make it even easier, imagine that the brain has been removed.) If you, as the doctor, remove the life support, have you killed anyone? That is, have you murdered someone by turning off the machines? I suspect your answer will be 'No'. Can we save the claim by adding 'living and viable' (meaning that the individual can survive, if only for a time, independently of life support)? The claim is now 'If you are a living and viable human, then you are a person'. Here, again, the claim fails. Take anencephaloids as our test case. With little more than a brain stem, certainly lacking higher cognitive functions, these individuals sometimes survive, at least for a time, independently of any life support equipment. But are they persons? It is difficult to imagine a plausible defense of the view that they are. At least, I find it difficult to develop one, and I have as yet to hear or read one. So, what would we have to add to make our claim true? What, that is to say, is missing in the subjects of all our examples?

I think you can see that what is missing from our subjects is a mind, or more particularly, beliefs, desires, preferences and the like. How minded an individual must be in order to count as a person is the million dollar question. To up the ante too high (perhaps demanding a great deal of cognitive sophistication), however, will exclude those who many might want to regard as persons. After all, if infants (or perhaps toddlers), the autistic (at least the mildly or moderately autistic), the insane or the mentally challenged are persons, we must take care when identifying those properties or capacities which make them, one and all, persons. Under such a restriction it is reasonably clear that to be a person it is not necessary that you have the capacity to do calculus, philosophical analysis, a cost benefit analysis of actualizing your preferences, or that you can have an awareness of yourself in contrast to other selves. This can admitted even if such capacities are sufficient for personhood.

The point made here is no small one. If individuals who are not human can be persons, we raise as a distinct possibility the personhood of nonhuman terrestrial animals. Of course, it is possible that not all nonhumans are persons. But that's no surprise, not all humans are either.

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