

## Concept of a Person

If we say there a lot of 'people' on the beach, or even 'dead people' in a war zone, we usually mean human beings, and that is fine for normal practical talk. In some contexts, though, such as a law court, not every human being is accepted as a full participant of the proceedings. We do not hold human beings legally responsible if they are small infants, wildly irrational, senile or comatose. In philosophy this led to attempts to distinguish those human beings who are full rational and moral **agents** from those who are not. In modern times we have also seen the clear possibility that robots might become so sophisticated that they could engage with human beings as equals, and we have found animals such as bonobos which are much closer to human intelligence than those previously encountered.

The key proposal was to make the word '**person**' more precise in philosophy, referring to what is needed to be a fully qualified agent, defined in such a way that robots, more developed apes, ghosts, and aliens from other planets might qualify as 'persons', despite being non-human. So the question was, what features does a human being exhibit which qualifies them to be treated as fully responsible agents? Approaching the question that way does not face the possibility that aliens might have even higher qualifications than we do, but philosophers will presumably cross that bridge when they reach it. The original proposal was that a human being, and hence any being, is a 'person' (in this new sense) if they exhibit a coherent combination of **intelligence**, **rationality**, **self-awareness** and **consciousness**.

Thus a being might fail to qualify if it fully exhibited three of the four features, but was exceptionally unintelligent, or highly and consistently irrational, or quite lacking in self-awareness, or appeared not to be conscious. The original proposal concerned biological creatures, and a non-conscious robot which strongly exhibited the other three features would present a tricky problem case. Modern accounts of persons are also likely to add a capacity for **language**, and the ability to function as a legitimate speaker in a linguistic community. This is partly because accounts of language need the basic concept of a 'speaker', but also because it is hard to see a being meeting the original four criteria if it were devoid of language. A robot might meet that qualification more easily than consciousness.

All five of these criteria (if we include language) come in degrees, so being a person is **not all-or-nothing**. This is fairly obvious in the development of a child, which exhibits none of the criteria at birth, and eventually reaches the age of '**legal responsibility**'. That age varies between countries, showing that we are not fully clear about the concept, and we also treat children of around eight as persons, before they acquire full responsibilities, rights and duties. Even more controversial is the fact that human beings can gradually lose the qualifications, especially if senility hits in old age. We do indeed withdraw people's legal rights in such circumstances, but the philosophers' concept of a person is not precise enough to give firm legal guidance. If we dislike saying that an elderly human being is no longer the same person, we might be drawn to '**animalism**', the view that a person is identical with a human creature, and not with a set of philosophical abstractions. For example, we might still love a human person, even if they fail to recognise us. Two robots from a factory might be indistinguishable, and thus interchangeable, but we don't regard identical twins (or even potential cloned people) as interchangeable, and we care very much about which of two twins we marry. There is something very particular about how we view real people, which is not captured by the philosophers' definition. If I write '66', that is two 'tokens' (digits) of one 'type' (6). Using these terms, generalised discussion of persons describes them as a type, but our concerns for persons (such as love) focus entirely on them as tokens.

It is common to talk of '**personal identity**', but this needs some clarification. Psychologists and therapists use it to mean a person's sense of who they are, allied to aspects such a self-esteem and social role. In philosophy two things are only 'identical' if they are precisely the same, and so the identity of a person concerns what makes them that very person from one day to the next. Since we all continuously change in small ways, a person can only remain identically the same if there is some unchanging core, such as the essence of the person, or their 'Self'. Two distinct questions are involved, of what makes a person who they are (individually) at a given moment, and what preserves our conviction that they are the same person, even after a lifetime of change. Most philosophical discussion focuses on the concept of Self which is needed to preserve a person's identity over time.

It is no accident that the concept of a person arose from theorising about the law. This concerns **rights** (such as ownership, inheritance, and equality before the law), and this only requires some minimal criteria for deciding whether a human being is entitled to such rights. This is different from when we discuss the virtues and vices of a human being, which needs a richer concept such as '**character**', with its different aspects, self-criticism and inner conflicts. If we settle on the concept of a person for legal ('forensic') reasons, we can still ask whether we view a person as essentially active or passive. That is, is the hallmark of a person (apart from the five criteria already mentioned) that they are a consciousness capable of experience, or that they are a **will** capable of decisions and actions? Being conscious was among the original criteria, but maybe we should add a capacity to make choices (and hence to participate). We may want to say both are vital, but are the extreme cases (of a robot which acts but cannot feel, and a paraplegic who feels but cannot act) equal in status? A slave is included among persons for their inner life, but is almost excluded by their curtailed power of action.

Language needs the basic concept of a person as an **utterer of speech**. This is not merely to provide a source for a sentence, but to provide a sustaining person who keeps the sentence focused from beginning to end. We have a similar need for the person to remain the same when we talk of them having **beliefs**, hopes and fears. To plan your future it needs to be you who will be the participant. We might relax this if teenagers start planning for retirement, when their characters may be different, but they still need token-identity (or 'numerical' identity), if only to legally claim the pension at the end.

Similarly, the processes of reasoning and **logic** presume a single thinker in a chain of reasoning, who abides by its definitions and assigned meanings. An ancient proof may be intrinsically valid, but the modern reader must maintain the same focus which was required by the original logician. Without enduring persons, civilization collapses.