

# Can a Rabbit be a Person?

A rabbit can be a person, upon two lines of argument. The first of these is linguistic, and can be dealt with quickly, the second is an argument of ethics, which will take longer to address. As words themselves are devoid of any inherent meaning (the meaning that words appear to have is merely an illusion created through popular usage), the word "rabbit" can refer to what we may recognise as a "person" just as easily as it could refer to a furry grey animal which eats carrots. However, if we consider a "person" as a being or object which must be taken into consideration when making an ethical judgment, a discussion of what this may be becomes necessary. Any sentient being, that being something which has the ability to feel pleasure or pain, will be affected at least somewhat by an ethical judgment. The essay will address the problem of lowering humanity's position in the moral community, and the objection that we should not consider animals in judgments, as they would not do the same for us. However, this essay will argue that neither of these objections are sufficient to say that rabbits are not persons at all.

Upon hearing the word "person", many automatically think of human being, and this is much more than just a misunderstanding of the term. According to Wittgenstein, language is just a game played by all those who speak it,<sup>1</sup> with the words having no necessary meaning. Consider a child who has been brought up in one room. This child has learned language only from one person, and this person has told the child that when it looks at the ceiling, it is looking "down", and when the child looks towards the floor, it is looking "up". The most common usage of the word "person" is to human beings, so if it became understood to call some humans "rabbits", as well as "people", a "rabbit" could be a "person", in the context of a language game.

Some claim that a person is something the DNA of a homo sapiens (known as the genetic criterion), however this claim is false. In order to even be considered being called a person, it must be alive, and be physically self-sustaining. If one were to lose a limb, the lost limb is evidently not in itself even a human, let alone a person.

---

<sup>1</sup> Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Philisophical Investigations*. Blackwell Publishers, 2001

The same can be said of dead human bodies, as they have essentially the same qualities as a lost limb: they contain human DNA, but are not alive, thus are not persons. So what about a human in an unconscious vegetative state who is certain to die in a month? Despite being physically alive, an unconscious human with no feeling, and no chance of recovery, has the same qualities as a dead human, and so is not a person. Therefore there must be something more to being a person than simply having human DNA, this would leave open the possibility of rabbits being persons.

Perhaps a more attractive definition of personhood is sentience, that is the ability to feel pleasure and pain. Argued by Peter Singer<sup>2</sup>, the view goes like this:

1. *We feel pain or pleasure in some degree as a response to any action that affects us*
2. *Anything that is affected by my action must be considered a member of the moral community.*
3. *That which is sentient is a person*

This definition brings in some new members of the moral community, for example any animal that feels pain. But it also excludes some members which we may instinctively believe are persons, such as foetuses, and also small infants. Singer defends this on the basis that nothing has a necessary right to life, and killing must merely be seen as an independent ethical decision, where ethical pros and cons of the action must be considered. Some have criticised Singer on the basis that he does not think infants are persons at all, and would value animals over them, thus lowering the position of the human race in the moral community, possibly even causing a resulting breakdown of what civilisation has become. However this may not be the case, and in fact a more nuanced argument seems to be implied. Singer argues that the reason killing is wrong is because we have a desire to continue living, which necessitates a concept of the self existing over time. But this does not mean that infants are not persons, as they are sentient, simply that killing them is not as unethical as killing a grown adult. The line of argument that is now developing alludes to gradients of personhood, rather than an absolute, "all or nothing" personhood.

---

<sup>2</sup> Singer, Peter. *Practical Ethics*. 1980, Cambridge University Press.

In Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, one chapter is entitled "Of Identity and Diversity", where he argues that our personal identity is formed by our experiences, and the memories which are subsequently created<sup>3</sup>. Perhaps in order to be regarded as a person, we must have some level of continuity over time, and form a personality. Some object that there is no connection between personhood and personality, and while this may be true, it can be argued that we gain personhood in the same way as we gain personality. Lynne Baker<sup>4</sup> argues that self-consciousness is directly derived from our experiences, as it develops from a comparison with other beings.

1. *A "first person perspective" is developed if and only if one can consider the existence of oneself*
2. *One can only consider what makes up oneself with the knowledge of concepts that can apply to something other than oneself*
3. *This can only be developed through experience and memory of encounters with these concepts*
4. *Therefore a first-person perspective can only be developed through experience.*

This argument, when used in conjunction with Locke's, provides us with a good explanation of how self-consciousness can be derived from memory and experience. But does this mean that Elephants, who remember a great deal, must also be treated as persons? Not necessarily. In order for a being to develop a self-consciousness, not only must it remember concepts and subsequently apply them to oneself, it must understand these concepts in the first place. In order to state that "I am strong", one must also first have understood the concept of strength. When this develops to the more complex idea of mortality, a brain belonging to an animal of a species with lower intelligence than humans may not be able to understand the concept, and therefore could not recognise it within themselves. This idea of mortality, rather than the instinctive action of a rabbit running from danger, is something that perhaps only developed humans are capable, as it is such a complex idea. So the conclusion that there are levels of personhood can be explained through Locke's consideration of what constitutes the personality.

---

<sup>3</sup> Locke, John. *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. 1979, Oxford University Press

<sup>4</sup> Baker, Lynne 2000. *Persons and Bodies: A Constitution View*, New York: Cambridge University Press

But are rabbits really less intelligent than humans, or is it just that we do not understand their form of intelligence? The Encephalization quotient (EQ), a system developed to compare the intelligence of various mammals, has humans on a score of 7.44, while rabbits very low on the scale at 0.4. It is only a rough guide, but this score is supported by tests, showing that while they can complete basic problem-solving tasks, such as navigating a series of obstacles, rabbits are of relatively very low intelligence, and so it is extremely unlikely that they have a concept of the self existing over time, and so killing a rabbit is not morally equivalent to killing a self-conscious human. So it can be concluded that a rabbit is less of a person than a human .

Another possible objection to allowing rabbits, or any animal, the status of personhood is that of moral responsibility. If these animals do not have the ability to develop the concept of morality, and therefore do not treat others with ethical consideration, why should we treat them with a sense of morality? <sup>5</sup>It could be that, if some animals cause more pain to others than pleasure, that killing them could be ethically justifiable from the perspective of a Utilitarian such as Singer. However, the fact that it can be ethically justifiable to cause harm to an animal, is not a valid objection to the granting of personhood to that it. This is because we must still take the harm caused to this animal into consideration, as it could be affected by our judgment, but after making this judgment, it is perfectly likely that we may decide that to kill the animal is ethically justifiable.

An imaginable situation would be where an adult human falls into the lion's enclosure in a zoo, and (for the sake of an easily explained argument) it is known beyond doubt that the Lion will kill the human, and the only way to save the human is to shoot the lion. As the human is self-conscious and aware of her own mortality, while the lion is not, the decision which will cause the least harm to these two individuals is to kill the lion *painlessly*. It would almost certainly still be better to kill the lion while inflicting pain than to let the human die, but as there would be at least some suffering when killing the lion, it is better to kill the lion painlessly. The fact that the Lion is about to kill the human due to its lack of understanding of morality does not mean it forfeits its position in the moral community, it simply means that it is now in a position where its death may be ethical. So the objection a rabbit would

---

<sup>5</sup> This idea likely stems from the commonly held belief in "The Golden Rule", that we should treat others as we wish to be treated.

not treat us morally should be taken into consideration when thinking about how to treat it, but it does not remove it from consideration entirely, as it remains a sentient being.

In conclusion, this essay has made the argument that all effects of an action should be taken into consideration, and while a rabbit may be affected by a lesser degree than more intelligent mammals, it could still feel the effect of an action, and so should be taken into account. Prior to this, it was noted that Wittgenstein's theory of language suggests that the words "rabbit" and "person" could be given the same meaning, allowing a rabbit to be a person. Lastly, the essay has addressed the objection that the position of humans could be lowered, and has shown that as there are two levels of personhood, the lowest of these being sentience and the higher level being self-consciousness, humans would remain in the same position. A rabbit can be a person, but it cannot be more of a person than a self-conscious human being.

### **Bibliography**

<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3207484/> (accessed on 01/09/16)

<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/moral-animal/> (accessed on 02/09/16)

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Philosophical Investigations*. Blackwell Publishers, 2001

Singer, Peter. *Practical Ethics*. 1980, Cambridge University Press.

Locke, John. *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Oxford University Press, 1979

Baker, Lynne. *Persons and Bodies: A Constitution View*, Cambridge University Press, 2000

Lowlands, Mark, *Animal Rights*, Hodder and Stoughton, 2013