

Non-Humans As Persons
Bioethics & Animals (Spring 2013)
Laura Guidry-Grimes



'Person' as a Philosophical Term

- ❖ "any and every creature, whether organic or not, who is capable of valuing his or her own existence" (306)
 - Conceptually, could have humans who are not persons and persons who are not humans!
 - Personhood status confers moral status, moral rights or entitlements, respect-worthiness





Moral Standing

❖ *Comes in degrees?*

- *Can have morally relevant interests without being a person*
- *But "personhood confers a particular level of moral standing" (308)*
 - ❖ *More rights, protections*
 - ❖ *Interests receive greater weight (less likely to demand sacrifices from persons than from non-persons)*

Valuing Your Existence

- ❖ Epistemic barrier: Given the differences in communication and cognition between humans and non-humans, we cannot easily know what other animals value.
- ❖ What capacities and abilities are required?
 - Language? – Not clearly a pre-requisite for thought, self-concept
 - Self-awareness? – Needed to understand and value continued existence



Consciousness



❖ Evolutionary analogues of behavior and cognition in non-humans → unlikely humans are the only creatures who are conscious

❖ Can be aware of environment, predict likely effects, and act intentionally without being self-aware



▪ Consciousness requires more than merely being subject to experience

❖ Self-consciousness requires that the creature views itself as a "subject of a life"



Being the Subject of a Life

- ❖ Requires psychological unity (connectedness + continuity)
 - Makes it possible to have sustained mental life, to view oneself as a self enduring over time
- ❖ "function of the richness, complexity, and coherence of the psychological architecture that is carried through time" (McMahan, qtd. on 316)
 - Degree of psychological unity depends on the complexity of psychological capacities



Subject of a Life



- ❖ *Episodic memory: recall and re-experience past experiences*
 - *Requires sense of self over time*
 - *More than mere past-present association*
 - *Might not be strictly necessary for personhood*

- ❖ *Metacognition: Awareness of and reflection on mental states*
 - *Required for personhood status*

Valuing a Life



❖ *What is needed to value something?*

- *Identifying what could be valued*
- *Desire to keep and protect it*
- *Robust intentions to maintain it*

❖ *To value one's continued existence, then...*

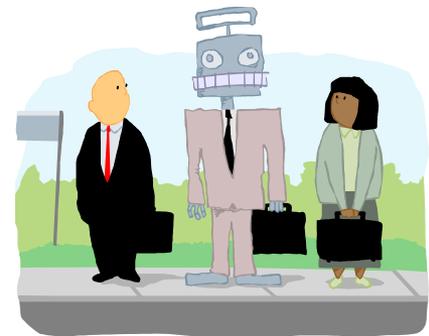
- *Need to view and value oneself as a continuing self over time*
- *Need to have robust and reflective preferences and intentions of protecting one's existence*

Not Required for Personhood

- ✗ *Autonomy*
- ✗ *Rationality*
- ✗ *Moral agency*

❖ *Problems with these criteria:*

- *Each comes in degrees, and determining absolute threshold is far from clear*
- *Protections and rights should not be act-relative*



Discussion Questions

- ❖ For each of these test cases, consider the following:
 - Is he/she/it a person? Why or why not?
 - What other evidence would you want to determine the status for certain?
 - Is one of these more of a person than the others?
 - Do we have different obligations as a result of this status?



Koko the Gorilla



Chaser the Dog



Dolphins



Data the Android

Questions? Comments?

