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Human Personhood from a Kantian Perspective

Jennifer Nelson

What sets humans apart from all other creatures? If you were to approach a biological *Homo sapiens* with the question “what makes you human?” how would they respond? Do we have value simply as humans, or are we nothing more than what we offer the world? Philosophers have discussed these questions for centuries and it seems that there have been a few concrete conclusions. These conclusions depend on how one views ethical theory.

Ethical theory and personhood go hand-in-hand. Immanuel Kant, one of the greatest philosophers of the 18th Century, developed his moral philosophy in what is now known as Kantian Ethics. Using this viewpoint, we can argue that Kant’s opinion about personhood is more in line with an ontological perspective, based on three things: his idea of reason and human knowledge, an emphasis on moral duty, and the Humanity Formula.

Before diving into Kant’s philosophy, we first must understand both sides of the personhood debate. Generally speaking, there are two main philosophical viewpoints on human personhood. The first is Empirical Functionalism. This viewpoint defines human personhood as “a set of functions or abilities” (Sullivan, 2003). Many philosophers have broken these functions down into a list of what makes a human a person. This may list include such ideas as self-awareness, higher brain functions, and the ability to relate to others. Simply put, empirical functionalism reduces human value to the sum of a human’s parts, and what abilities they offer the world. One of the many problems with this viewpoint is that it denies personhood to anyone who does not contain these qualities at all moments of life. This means that people sleeping, infants, the elderly, and those with a mental illness might not be considered persons, based on these particular circumstances.

The flip side of this debate is called Ontological Personalism. “Ontological Personalism states that all human beings are human persons” (Sullivan, 2003). By a human’s very nature, they are a person. Personhood does not depend on what one can or cannot do; all that matters is that one is a biological human being.

Kant’s opinions on the world and how it works are confusing. Yet his insights on reason and human knowledge lead us to believe that he views humans as having intrinsic value. Kant believes in transcendental idealism. This means that, “in this world, we do perceive things, but we can only perceive them the way our senses are made. The inputs we get are organized by our senses and our mental faculties and thereby we create the objects we see out in the world” (as cited in Gilgen, 2005). In Kant’s opinion, there are two worlds. The first world is the real world, known as the noumenal world. The second world is the world we perceive, called the phenomenal world. We are influenced both by the noumenal and phenomenal world.

Simply put, we create what is in front of us: We make the world. Kant’s view of the world puts great emphasis on human opinion and perception. This follows an ontological perception rather than an empirical perception on whether a human is a person, because it does not say that humans must have certain traits. In fact, it does not say that humans have to have the same phenomenal world at all. This idea cannot be empirical functionalism, because not everyone sees the world the same way. On this viewpoint, what makes us persons is the value of each perception, and Kant says we all have common ground.

With that background in mind, let’s look at what has become known as Kantian Ethics. This is grounded in the idea of moral duty, which has two meanings. First, “there is no conceivable circumstance in which we regard our own moral goodness as worth forfeiting simply in order to obtain some desirable object” (Johnson, 2008). Second, everything else is

worthless without moral goodness. So how do we determine if an act is in line with our moral goodness?

For Kant, the basic principle is the Categorical Imperative (CI), a command with no exceptions, to “act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law” (Wilkins, 1995). In other words, only do an action if you can generalize it for everyone. In regards to personhood, the CI eliminates the possibility of having an empirical perspective.

As an example, consider someone in a coma. Would one consider him to be a non-person simply because he is not self-aware? To generalize this rule, one would have to say that everyone who is sleeping is also a non-person, because they are not self-aware. One cannot generalize this rule for everyone based on this example and still have it be true; therefore it is not a moral act. From the ontological viewpoint, Kantian Ethics seems to support the idea that all humans are persons as members of the human race. If a biological *Homo sapiens* is a person, that means that all *Homo sapiens* are persons.

The most compelling argument for Kantian Ethics in support of ontological personalism is Kant’s Humanity Formula. This CI says one is to “act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end” (Wilkins, 1995). “This is often seen as introducing the idea of ‘respect’ for persons, for whatever it is that is essential to our humanity” (Johnson, 2008). This formula gives humans inherent value. Each individual is valued, not on what they can do, but on that fact that they are persons. Treating them as means to an end does not give them the individual freedom they deserve. Treating them as an end in itself looks at what would be best for that person.

Kant and his ethical theory are grounded in moral duty and human value. With the emphasis on individuals and respect, Kantian ethics agrees more with the ontological personalist view of personhood, rather than the empirical functionalist view. Kant and his followers would argue that humans are not equal to the sum of their parts, but rather are valued because they are humans.

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