

TITLE: Being Human Does Not Make You a Person: Cross-cultural Variations in the Concept of Personhood

Subject: Philosophy

Qualification: A2

Module: Philosophy of the Mind

Topic: What is a person? Can only human beings be persons?

Anthropologists: Marcel Mauss and Brian Morris

Background:

Marcel Mauss

Mauss was the nephew and student of Emil Durkheim, the leading figure of French sociology. However, Mauss went beyond the discipline of sociology, incorporating data from ethnographic studies in order to develop and support his ideas. He had a profound influence on the anthropologists Levi-Strauss in France and Radcliffe-Brown in Britain and is now a key figure taught on all introductory anthropology courses. His work on exchange and the 'gift' are widely known but one of his last essays was on the concept of a person: **A category of the human mind: the notion of person; the notion of self.** It was first given in French as the Huxley Memorial lecture in 1938 and then printed in the *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 68 (1938). It has recently appeared in M. Carrithers et al (1985) The category of the person. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Brian Morris

Brian Morris has an eclectic range of interests that include religion, anarchism, psychology and anthropology, environmental anthropology, animals, insects and mushrooms. His main research has been undertaken in Malawi, a country that he first encountered in youthful travels when he took a job as a tea planter. Many of his interests have been manifested in his outstanding courses at Goldsmiths College, where he still teaches part-time. One such course was 'Anthropology of the Self' and he published a book of the same title in 1994. (London: Pluto). In addition, his inaugural lecture for his professorship carried the title: *Being human does not make you a person: Animals, Humans, and Personhood in Malawi*.

Application of Work to Topic

In philosophy, the question of what is a person occupies itself primarily with the question of whether animals or machines could be considered persons. A person is differentiated from human being because to be a person you need to have more than 'bodily existence'. The task is to first define the 'sense' of a person (what criteria are necessary of be a person) and then to decide the 'reference' (the class of things that has the properties of a person. In philosophy, having a mind or consciousness is the criteria for being a person. There is a debate about what constitutes the key features of a mind, but many philosophers consider rationality and the ability to reason a key aspect of the mind. Others would consider language and a sense of morality. So if you can demonstrate that animals or machines have these qualities, then they have minds and could be included in the category of a person.

However, the topic opens up a number of issues where an anthropological perspective is extremely relevant. As Matthews says,

'The questions about whether animals or machines can have minds are thus important in view of their bearing on our view of ourselves, and they can also help us clarify further the concept of what it is to have a mind' (Matthews: 2005: 71). Such values are necessarily culture-dependent.

Looking at Descartes and Aristotle's views on what counts as a mind shows how their cultures valued reason and rationality as opposed to emotion.

However, once the characteristics of mind or consciousness have been defined, the historical and cultural context again permeates who (or what) is assigned a full mind and gets admitted to the exclusive club of personhood, with its associated status, right and responsibilities. Descartes' insisted animals could not be persons because they did not have a soul, a view fully supported by his Christian culture. Aristotle believed that only aristocratic males could be persons, reflecting his culture's prejudice against women and slaves.

The following summaries of the work of Mauss and Morris can be used in a number of different ways to encourage critical reflection on the question of what is a person. By providing arguments and evidence for a variety of different cultural concepts of persons, the philosophy student will obtain another stance from which to consider whether animals and machines could be considered persons. If the category of a person is a cultural category and not a scientific fact, then the boundaries between animal/human/machine become more fluid and open to alternative interpretations. This material is therefore useful as stimulus for discussion, providing arguments for why animals and machines could be considered persons if there was a change in culture, causing a reconfiguration in how we define mind and who has the power to confer the status of personhood.

Marcel Mauss

'Let us say that social anthropology, sociology, history- all teach us to perceive how human thought moves on. Slowly does it succeed in expressing itself, through time, through societies, their contacts and metamorphoses, along pathways that seem most perilous. Let us labour to demonstrate how we must become aware of ourselves in order to perfect our thought and to express it better' (p. 23).

Mauss bases his ideas on the concept of a person on the ethnographic findings of others as well his own analysis of objects found in museums. He argues that in all cultures there has been an awareness of individuality, both bodily and spiritually. However, the **concept** of this 'self' or 'person' for 'men in different societies' changes 'according to their systems of law, religion, customs, social structures and mentality' (p. 3). He is particularly interested in showing how the concept of a person that we now take for granted, that of a rational, individual mind, differs from the concept of person in so-called primitive societies. His point is that the concept of a person is not a universal biological or metaphysical fact. He examines the data from a number of different cultures in order to make his point.

Pueblo Indians: Frank Hamilton Cushing

Rituals are acted out by individuals who take on distinct roles. They wear particular masks as part of their role. The wearing of the mask is an important indication of the concept of a person. An individual wears a mask and thus takes on a role, a role that does not belong to him/her individually but one that was taken on as a result of what position they were born into. An individual wears a particular mask because it is the mask that his/her ancestor wore, who now lives again in the body of the person who bears that name and is entitled to wear that particular mask.

'Thus, in short, you will understand that with the Pueblo we already see a notion of the 'person' or individual, absorbed in his clan, but already detached from it in the ceremonial by the mask, his title, his rank, his role, his survival and his reappearance on earth in one of his descendents endowed with the same status, forenames, titles, rights and functions' (p.6).

In other words, there is no individual mind with its own status, rights and responsibilities, free to direct his/her own life; the 'person' for the Pueblo is a 'role' in society that passes from one generation to another.

Mauss found further evidence for such a concept of a person in other cultures. He distinguishes between 'personage' (role) and 'persona' (person). He says: 'Plainly what emerges from it is that a whole immense group of societies have arrived at the notion of a 'role' (personage) (p.14). And he goes on to say, 'Those who have made of the human person a complete entity, independent of all other save God, are rare' (p.14).

Western concept of the person

Mauss then addresses himself to the issue of how the western concept of the person evolves. He defines this concept: 'The person is a rational substance, indivisible and individual' which is 'a consciousness and a category' (p. 20).

He traces one of the origins of such a concept of a person to Roman times. In Roman culture, there was still a use for masks, but they began to distinguish between the superimposed face of the mask and the 'personality' that is underneath. In other words, there is the 'inner most nature of the person' on the one hand, and the 'role player' on the other. As a result of this change in view of 'a person', the law incorporated a moral element. There now existed a 'person' who was conscious, independent, autonomous, free and responsible, so therefore **legally** responsible. Christians went on to make a metaphysical entity (a soul) out of this 'moral person' that had now been defined. All subsequent philosophers such as Descartes and Kant, assumed this view of the person and it is this concept that underlies the philosophy of the mind.

Mauss concludes that the concept of a person is historically and culturally constructed. In other words, it is not something fixed, that is universal to all humans in all cultures.

'Far from existing as the primordial innate idea, clearly engraved since Adam in the innermost depths of our being, it continues here slowly, and almost right up to our own time, to be built upon, to be made clearer and more specific, becoming identified with self-knowledge and the psychological consciousness' (p.20).

Brian Morris

Brian uses ethnographic material from his extensive research in Malawi to illustrate the cultural-specificity of the concept of a person that Mauss outlines. This information is based on his Inaugural Lecture for his Professorship given at Goldsmiths College on March 9, 1999, titled '**Being human does not make you a person: animals, humans and personhood in Malawi**'.

The people he studied are made up of a number of different ethnic communities, but who share a common cultural heritage exhibit a certain cultural unity. He stresses, however, that culture is always diverse, changing and of a historical nature, existing on different levels.

Malawians recognise that humans are a distinct form of living entity, but being human does not mean that one is a person in the cultural sense. Humans are distinct from animals as they each have their own species characteristics. But they 'do not make a radical distinction between humans and animals, but rather conceive of humans and animals as sharing many attributes' (p. 17). They would disagree with Descartes' concept of a person as a disembodied consciousness. Instead, humans, like animals are physical, social and moral, embedded in a world. Humans differ from animals, not so much because they have the attributes of subjective agency, consciousness, sociality and life, but because they have these attributes to a greater **degree**. They see humans and animals as **kin**. In their day-to-day lives, Malawians will refer to animals in an anthropomorphic way, as happens in a number of cultures, including our own. So Malawians, like other cultures, have a clear distinction between humans and animals. However, the distinction is not a clear-cut boundary, with humans having minds and animals not having minds. Instead, the distinction may be based on other attributes. For example, Morris tells a story to illustrate his understanding of the Malawian view of animals. He wanted to know what the difference was between baboons and humans since they kept referring to baboons as if they were human. When he asked the question he was told, 'Father you have a grey beard and know a lot about our culture, but sometimes you speak as a child; baboons have tails' (p. 18).

Another interesting feature of Malawian culture is the way that humans themselves are classified as persons and included in the community. Humans are animals that are particularly adept at reason and language but a very important aspect of personhood is that they are part of a social community. The individual has no soul but is the embodiment of the ancestral spirit, usually a grandparent of the same sex. There are certain individuals who are excluded from personhood because of their **moral characteristics** and get labelled as witches.

'For in a sense a human being who is isolated from others, who is ungenerous, unhelpful, melancholy and individualistic and with a 'bad heart' is not a real person' (p. 33).

Suggested Activities

The above material can be used as a stimulus for further work.

Questions to think about

Compare and contrast Kant's and Descartes concepts of the person with the other cultures studied by Mauss and Morris. Which view of animals is most in keeping with recent scientific findings?

In what way does our culture have similar and different ways of distinguishing between humans and animals?

What do we see as the main features of being human? Are there any humans that we would exclude from being persons? How do we compare with the Malawians?

If there is no definition of a person that remains fixed through-out time, what implications does this hold for the question of whether animals or machines could be persons?

Activity: Organise a mini-ritual whereby the students have to first undertake the ritual as they want to, with their concept of themselves as a individual person- then give them a specific role and ask them to now enact the ritual in role. What is the difference? Are there any situations in our own culture where we feel we are enacting a role rather than our 'real' self. Does the real self exist?

Activity: Imagine how our view of ourselves would change if we thought we didn't have our own soul but were an embodied spirit of an ancestor. List the ways it might affect your life. Would we make any changes to society?