

The psychological concept of “person”

Commentary on [Rowlands](#) on *Animal Personhood*

Kristin Andrews

Department of Philosophy and Cognitive Science Program
York University, Canada

Abstract: Reluctance to overextend personhood seems to drive many of the skeptical responses in the first round of commentaries on Rowlands's target article. Despite Rowlands's straightforward Response that we already accept some nonhumans as persons, there is still hesitation to accept that other nonhuman animals are persons. Rowlands's argument is sound but the skeptics don't accept the Lockean notion of person. The metaphysical sense of person is a psychological one, however, and psychological properties grant one moral status according to many ethical theories.

[Kristin Andrews](#) studies folk psychology, moral psychology, and methodology in animal cognition. Author of *Do Apes Read Minds?* ([MIT 2012](#)) and *The Animal Mind* ([Routledge 2015](#)), Andrews is Member of the Executive Board of the [Borneo Orangutan Society Canada](#). <http://kristin-andrews.weebly.com/>



Rowlands (2016a) points out that we can divide discussions of personhood into three types: legal, moral, and metaphysical. He accepts Monso's (2016) point in the commentary that there are connections between these types of personhood. One point that hasn't been brought up yet, however, is that a metaphysical person can be understood more narrowly as a type of *psychological person*. Unlike *human*, the term *person* understood metaphysically is a social category. (A dead human lacks any psychological properties, and we would usually also exclude human DNA from the class of psychological entities.) The Lockean concept of person that Rowlands relies on is a psychological one that describes a cluster of properties needed for personhood.

A quick reminder: Locke (1690) defines a person as, “a thinking intelligent being, that has reason and reflection, and can consider itself the same thinking thing, in different times and places” (280). A person has to think, has to reason, and, as Rowlands argues, has a pre-reflective self-awareness.

In analyzing Locke's definition, Rowlands finds that the category of metaphysical person is coextensive with the category of experiencers — “Any creature that has experience is a person” — and experience is a psychological capacity. This is because, to put it briefly and in my own

terms, mentality entails at least an implicit sense of self insofar as it deals with the affordances of objects *for the actor*. Rowlands notes that this relationship is a discovery that comes from an analysis of the Lockean definition. As noted in his response to commentary, the consequences of the view gave him a few sleepless nights.

The worry about overextending personhood seems to drive many of the skeptical responses. Rowlands (2016b) reminds us in his Response to the first round of commentary that we already accept some nonhumans as persons: fictional persons like Mr. Spock, ET, and Marvel's mutants¹ as well as currently non-existent hominin persons, such as the Neanderthals with which our early relatives mated. Degrazia (1997; 2006) has made similar suggestions. There is nevertheless hesitation to accept that other nonhuman animals are persons.

The notion that these intelligent beings are persons is met with some skepticism even among researchers working with great apes. Indeed, among those who have written affidavits for the [Nonhuman Rights Project](#) – an NGO dedicated to gaining legal personhood rights for chimpanzees (initially) – one finds only a few well-known primatologists. Yet many of those same skeptics would accept that animals have experience of the sort Rowlands describes. The skeptics also seem to be worried about overextending personhood.

I take Rowlands's argument to be sound. Hence my diagnosis is that the skeptics don't actually accept the Lockean notion of person, and that Rowlands's argument serves as a *reductio* against the primacy of that definition. Instead, there is a closer connection between the metaphysical sense of person and the moral one because the metaphysical sense of person is a psychological one and (according to many ethical theories) psychological properties grant one moral status.

It will be helpful to review the range of definitions of "person" that are currently out there. Even when focusing on only psychological definitions, it is clear that Locke's does not exhaust our thinking. DeGrazia (1997) lists rationality, self-awareness, moral agency, and autonomy as properties typically associated with personhood. In a later article (DeGrazia 2007), he adds linguistic competence, sociability, and the capacity for intentional action to the list. Frankfurt (1971) emphasizes that persons have free will and autonomy so that they can critically (and, presumably, not implicitly) examine their reasons for actions. Chan & Harris (2011) argue that a person is anyone capable of valuing their own existence. According to Varner (2012), a person must be rational, self-conscious, and a full-blown moral agent having the following four concepts from which to construct a self-narrative: self, birth, death, and personality. To build the narrative they require language.

Alongside these diverse accounts of personhood are questions about the usefulness of the Lockean concept. Considering the *function* of personhood might help address the worry about overextension without challenging Rowlands's argument that experiencing creatures are Lockean

¹ Even Pope Francis said that he would baptize any alien creature who asked him to do so (*The Independent* UK, Adam Withnall, May 13, 2014).

persons. Rowlands accepts that Lockean personhood may be necessary but not sufficient for acquiring any special moral status. The Lockean definition does not reflect current usage.

DeGrazia argues that the concept of person is not a useful one: It does not help us in our moral dealings with other organisms. There are no necessary and sufficient conditions for being a person. The psychological and social properties associated with personhood come in degrees and do not hang together in nature (e.g., an entity might be rational but not enjoy autonomy, and some creatures can comprehend language but cannot speak). When you designate something a person, you don't know anything else about its psychological characteristics; so the term is descriptively redundant. The set of properties roughly associated with our use of "person" is not going to help us decide borderline cases.

Hence, according to DeGrazia, if it cannot decide borderline cases and does not provide any information we didn't previously have, personhood is not a useful concept. Yet we can see how calling an animal a person can be descriptively useful once we understand that personhood is a "stereotype" concept: Like other social and psychological categories, the category of person consists of a set of connected but not fully overlapping properties that individuals have to various degrees. As social psychologists have long noted (and often bemoaned), humans think in terms of stereotypes: We categorize others and make inferences about their likely behavior and attitudes based on how we stereotype them. What is a stereotype? For a neutral definition, we can rely on Ashmore and Del Boca (1981; 21): "a stereotype is a set of beliefs about the personal attributes of a social group." We can understand a social group to include women, men, blacks, whites, *and* persons, because these are all groups that we generalize over. Like other stereotypes, personhood allows us to make predictions about the behavior of members, explain their behavior, and coordinate with them.

With stereotypes, every member of the group need not share all the properties nor have them all to the same degree. It is nonetheless useful, warranted, and rational to use stereotypes in social interactions — so long as they are accurate (Jussim 2012). Men commit more murders than women, Japanese are more collectivist than Germans, and the hippy girl is more likely to be vegetarian than the US presidential candidates. Stereotypes, as cluster concepts, can be met by individuals to various degrees. The inability to deduce group membership of a borderline instance does not undermine their usefulness. Consider the current debates about how to categorize transgender people: That debate does not diminish the usefulness of the concept of woman or man.

When I meet the anarchist girl for lunch, I'm not going to assume she will want to go out for sushi; I'll ask her if she eats meat, or suggest the local vegan restaurant just in case. Considering their personhood shifts the way we think about an individual; it makes us more cautious about how we treat them because they might have more of the personhood stereotypes than the ones we already take them to have. Rocks are almost certainly not persons, so I'm not going to spend time wondering if they are rational, value their existence, or have free will, and I'm not going to worry about whether chiseling them may be harmful. But if I categorize rocks and robins as non-persons, that lack of concern becomes the default for both entities. On the other hand, if I categorize robins

as persons, then I change the default and respond to robins as though they might possibly be rational, enjoy social relations, and value their existence. I will be more likely to consider what might be the impact of my actions on all that.

Ascribing personhood switches the ethical burden of proof, because enjoying moral status is part of the person stereotype. Considering animals as persons forces us to confront the possibility that we cannot treat animals in some ways. When we finally find the SETI radio signal from faraway aliens, we will understand the signalers as persons rather than as potential snack. Since stereotypes do not entail that all members of the group have a particular property, we cannot infer from the fact that an individual is a person that they ought to be treated in a particular way. The only moral guidance the designation provides is to induce us to look before we act, to weigh moral considerations rather than assume they are not there.

Our stereotypes are rich and varied, allowing us to engage with the complexity of our world. Understanding the personhood of the other minds on our planet requires an adequate definition of person as well as scientific and philosophical research on the distribution of psychological properties in different species. Rowlands's argument that having reflective self-awareness is co-extensive with having experience is one piece of this much larger puzzle.

References

- Ashmore, R. D., & Del Boca, F. K. (1981). Conceptual Approaches to Stereotypes and Stereotyping. In D. L. Hamilton (Ed.), *Cognitive Processes in Stereotyping and Intergroup Behavior* (pp. 1-31). London: Psychology Press.
- Chan, S., & Harris, J. (2011). Human Animals and Nonhuman Persons. In T. Beauchamp & R. Frey (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Animal Ethics* (pp. 304-331). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- DeGrazia, D. (1997). Great Apes, Dolphins, and the Concept of Personhood. *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, 35(3), 301–320.
- DeGrazia, D. (2007). On the Question of Personhood Beyond *Homo Sapiens*. In P. Singer (Ed.), *Defense of Animals: The Second Wave* (pp. 40-53). Oxford: Blackwell.
- Frankfurt, H. (1971). Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person. *Journal of Philosophy*, 68, 829-839.
- Jussim, L. (2012). *Social Perception and Social Reality: Why Accuracy Dominates Bias and Self-Fulfilling Prophecy* (1 edition). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Locke, J. (1690). *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1961).
- Monso, S. (2016). [The Moral Dimension of Pre-Reflective Self-Awareness](#). *Animal Sentience* 2016.121.
- Rowlands, M. (2016a). [Are Animals Persons?](#) *Animal Sentience* 2016.101.
- Rowlands, M. (2016b) [Consciousness and the Unity of Mind](#). *Animal Sentience* 2016.144.
- Strawson, P. F. (1959). *Individuals* (p. 104). London: Methuen.
- Varner, G. E. (2012). *Personhood, Ethics, and Animal Cognition: Situating Animals in Hare's Two Level Utilitarianism*. New York: Oxford University Press.