

3 Persons

Introduction

The concept of persons has been the focus of considerable philosophical attention in recent years. Interest has focused on two linked questions which we are going to tackle separately in this chapter; the first concerns what it is to be a person; and the second what makes an individual the *same* person at different times. These questions have links with issues discussed at A2 in Moral Philosophy (Unit 3) including rights and responsibilities, and in particular in applied ethics and the discussions of the moral difficulties surrounding euthanasia, abortion and our treatment of non-human animals. There are also important connections with the concept of personal autonomy explored in the AS Tolerance module (Unit 2) and with issues in Political Philosophy (Unit 3) studied at A2, in particular the determination of human nature and the concept of rights. The issues explored here are also particularly pertinent to the discussion of the nature of the mind, self and consciousness in Descartes' *Meditations* (Unit 4), which are further explored in the Philosophy of Mind (Unit 3) both of which can also be studied at A2.

What are the characteristics of personhood?

To begin reflecting on the first of our questions have a go at the thinking exercise below.

ACTIVITY What is a 'person'?

Consider the following individuals and decide whether you think they are persons. For the purposes of the exercise, don't concern yourself with whether the individuals actually exist or not. Rather, simply ask yourself whether – if they did exist – they would be persons. Once you have answered, reflect on why you answered as you did. What is it that makes some individuals persons and others not?

- 1 Your best friend
- 2 A cave dwelling Neanderthal
- 3 A new-born baby
- 4 A chimpanzee in the zoo

- 5 Your pet dog
- 6 A talking parrot
- 7 Mr Spock from *Star Trek*
- 8 CP30 from *Star Wars*
- 9 Your mobile phone
- 10 God

What do we mean by a person?

What exactly is a person? How are persons to be distinguished from other kinds of being? This is not simply a question of how we happen to use the word 'person', but rather of how we ought to. So we are asking which individuals can be included within the group of beings we typically call persons and why. What are the important characteristics of personhood which someone needs to have in order to be deemed a person?

Probably the most obvious answer is that a person is a member of a particular species, namely *homo sapiens*, and this gives us an initial definition to consider:

'A person is a human being.'

This definition has some initial plausibility. After all, it is likely that all of the persons you know are humans, and that all the humans you know are persons. And if you found that, in the activity above, all and only the human beings counted as persons, then it will seem reasonable for you to hold that they are indeed the same things. Let us suppose for the moment that this is indeed the case. Would this settle the matter? Does this mean that a person can be defined as a human being?

Perhaps rather surprisingly, there are good reasons to think that it does not. Even if it is true that, as a matter of fact, all humans are persons and all persons are humans, this still wouldn't establish that the two terms 'person' and 'human being' have the same *meaning*.

To see this, consider that all apes that walk upright have opposable thumbs, and all apes with opposable thumbs walk upright; but, despite this, the expressions 'ape that walks upright' and 'ape with opposable thumbs' clearly have different meanings. This example shows that different terms can *refer* to the same things without having the same *meaning*, and this means that our concept of a person can be different from our concept of a human being even though, as a matter of fact, the two terms may refer to the same group of individuals.