

21A.01 - How Culture Works

Personhood Essay

One relatively recent phenomenon of Western society is the broad application of individuality. In the political sphere, individual rights are granted to entities of the natural world; in the market, a flurry of branding ties together consumerism and specificity; in the scientific realm, precise nomenclature gives every living organism a well-defined identity; and even in something as commonplace as the morning news, tropical storms are given names every fall as they swirl across the cooling seas. Clearly, if something can be considered as an isolated entity, it is, and is then given its own identity within the mass consciousness. But how exactly can this happen? How can identity -- a concept long-associated with human personhood, be stretched and cast upon a wide range of non-human persons? In this essay, I will evaluate the notion of human personhood, and examine the degree to which its application can be flexible.

The anthropologist Mauss, when evaluating personhood's origins, notes that many ancient cultures did not associate personhood with distinctness -- these cultures considered a person to be a manifestation of different entities and values, unique but not able to exist outside of external constructs. It was not until the Romans, Mauss maintains, that the modern concept of a person being an independent entity was truly embraced. This is apparent in the very legal system of the Romans, where all law fell into one of three categories: *personae*, *res*, or *actiones*. These divisions of law betray the Roman viewpoint of classifying the world, that everything is either a person, a thing, or an action. And so, what could a person be, except for an entity that bridges the static label of thing with the abstract label of action? Mauss goes on to examine the ways in which the legal category of *personae* evolved in Roman history, further embodying the concept of identity mentioned so often in my introduction. Rights were established around the claim of each individual to their family name, and restrictions were

placed upon claiming an external forename for oneself (and in doing so, claiming an external identity). And so, to the Romans, a person was a distinct individual, an entity carrying it and only its associations, an entity that was neither a thing nor an action yet was intrinsically tied to each.

Due to the vast Roman influence on Western law and thought, the modern notion of personhood varies little from the Roman definition: a person is an individual, and all the extras that come with that label. Yet, even though personhood and all the 'extras' associated with it stem directly from a human-centric notion of identity and individuality, non-human beings can have elements of personhood placed upon them. One example of this transference of personhood can be found in a recent class reading, discussing the concept of a totalitarian dog. In the 1930's, the Soviet Union implemented a widespread, state-controlled program for breeding and training dogs with military usefulness. For any given dog belonging to this program, its birth, upbringing, training, and in some cases, death, were tied directly to the state. From a liberal Western perspective, it can be easy to view these animals as either members or victims of a totalitarian regime -- after all, what part of these animals' lives didn't the state touch? The first stance stands on shaky ground as is -- dogs certainly do not share the allegiance to political system that their masters do. But the second stance is even far more dubious: that these animals would prefer to take part in a free, liberal society. Dogs certainly do not have a preference of whether the human society in which they are immersed is planned or free, or of any other aspect of human society outside of their direct treatment. So why do notions of these dogs being anything other than mere dogs come so easily? The answer lies in how readily we transfer human personhood to non-human pets. As objects of our affection, dwelling within human houses and living with human families, considering a dog to be a member of a human family is no large step at all. And with this identity of human kin comes human traits of loyalty and love and belonging. And so, trait by trait, the human-like personhood of a non-human dog begins to fully materialize, to the point that it would not seem out of the question for the dog to have its own preferences about inherently human problems like planned economies.

As we have just seen, it is relatively easy for human personhood to be applied to non-human organisms existing within a human world. But what about other organisms? Organisms lacking emotion or sentience, organisms that would certainly never be imagined as part of a nuclear family? Let us now consider mushrooms, specifically the interpretation of mushrooms that the anthropologist Tsing holds: that mushrooms are representative of human conditions. Fungi were there as sustenance for early foraging humans. When humankind turned agrarian and began depending on cereal grains, Tsing explains, fungi showed themselves once again, this time as an enemy of monocropping and dwindling genetic diversity. When imperialism reared its head in human society, with states flexing their power across vast swaths of the globe, fungi were once again there, dry-rotting British ships who had picked up the particular species South Asian conquest. When this imperialistic conquest led to the dependency of the Irish on potatoes for sustenance, fungi once again emerged, this time in the form of potato blight. A million people died and another two million were displaced, as fungi filled in the gaps created by human destruction. When humans conquered the skies with aeroplanes, fungi were there yet again, parasitically thriving in aircraft fuel lines. As we see time and time again, humans act, and fungi respond -- or do they? Tsing builds a compelling narrative, interweaving the histories of humans and fungi with each other in a complex and structural way. This braiding together of species' histories results in an emergent property of personification -- fungi, once the history of their interplay with humanity is evaluated, seem to take on a will of their own and become an independent actor, an entity to which personhood is applied. Incredibly, the flexible nature of personhood allows non-sentient cellular organisms to receive properties that are anything but intrinsic.

And so, the application of human personhood to any non-human organism, no matter how alien, no longer seems inconceivable. But what about non-living objects? For this, I have a personal anecdote. At the field trip for my MIT class earlier this year, some friends and I won a small stuffed animal by playing a carnival game. From the moment we received his (even how,

personifying this stuffed animal comes so naturally) cute (objectively of course) form, we immediately sought to give him that which is most central to human personhood: a name. Having settled on Jerry (or Gerry, depending on who you ask -- it was a stuffed gerbil so the name seemed to fit), we proceeded to ensure that he had a good view of the day's festivities, perched in the front pocket of my shirt. Jerry got a seat in between us on the bus ride home, and was even tucked in for bed when we made it back to campus late that night. And that was just the beginning of the transformation of one small plush gerbil to the human-like figure of Jerry. One of my classes this semester deals with furniture design, and I have had to construct several small-scale mockups of my design. When considering the scale for these mockups, my mind immediately went to Jerry, and how fitting it would be to give him a little throne from which to observe his world. So now, Jerry has two small chairs, always placed so he can see what's going on.

This anecdote, humorous as it may be, illustrates the ease with which human persons transfer elements of their personhood to non-human entities in the world around them. Looking back to the Roman law of *personae*, *res*, *actiones*, we see that our liberal-Western-societal-upbringing predispositions us to cast an entity onto one of those three categories. If the entity doesn't fit the cold objectivity of a *res*, it becomes incredibly easy to at least partially cast it as a *persona*. And so, viewed through the lense of this realization, the tendency of modern society to give every and anything an identity is anything but incongruous -- or at least that's what Jerry would tell you.

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