

Race and Human Personhood

There are a lot of different kinds of dogs: Great Danes, Poodles...and Pugs. (Pugs, by the way, are the world's awesomest dog in my opinion). But Pugs are just as much a dog as a Great Dane – even though the Dane is so much larger. So – is the Dane MORE of a dog than the Pug? Well, the Great Dane may be a larger animal, but it does not have more of the essence of what it means to be a dog than the Pug. “Dog-ness,” the essence of what it means to be a dog, is not a measurement like weight, it is something a creature either has or does not have. Dog-ness is found in both Great Danes and Pugs.

How do we know this?

In the first place, there are specific characteristics that any five-year-old person can recognize as “dog-ness.” We can tell just by looking that both Great Danes and Pugs are the same kind of organism, regardless of size or fur differences. The Bible says in Genesis 1:25, “God made the beasts of the earth after their kind, and the cattle after their kind, and everything that creeps on the ground after its kind.”¹ The Creator designed creatures to multiply abundantly – but only after their kind. In other words, dogs do not become any other creature over time. They have wide variation but only after their kind.

Scientifically, we could look at the DNA of these creatures and determine that while there is great variation in size and color, the main structure of the code is the same. In fact, while the mechanics might be a challenge, all dogs can breed with one another and produce fertile offspring because they share this basic DNA pattern. The DNA of the dog-kind is clear.

So - a dog is a dog because it belongs to a certain specific kind, a kind we can recognize by DNA. Dogs have an essence of “dog-ness” and their DNA plays this essence out into the real world in many different ways. But this means that no one dog has more “dog-ness” than any other. They are all of the same kind.

Human beings are same. We are a specific kind of organism. In Genesis 1: 27 it says, “God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.” So – like animals and plants, human beings were created as a specific kind. In addition, from the very first two human beings all other human beings descend. This means, “He has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth...”²

We also have a DNA code that is recognizable and unique from all other life-forms. There is variation within our kind too – some taller, shorter, different shades of skin, more or less hair – but the basic code, the basic DNA structure is the same. All human beings can get together and produce fertile offspring and since we all come from Adam and Eve we are all directly related.

All human beings also have an essence. We all share “human-ness.” We share what it means to be human and this is not something that can be measured like height, it is something a creature either has or does not have. “Human-ness” is found in every variation of humans.

¹ Unless otherwise stated, all references are to the New American Standard Bible.

² Acts 17: 26, New King James Version.

Race, on the other hand, is a made-up checklist. One person can decide “X” is “Y” race, but another may believe “Y” is really “X.” Everyone can make up whatever checklist anyone wants. This means any checklist anyone makes is arbitrary, that is, just offhand or random and inconsistent. Those sorts of lists are irrational and without foundation because anyone can choose nearly any trait to create a group.

What this means, in short, is that too many people identify by race instead of by KIND.

Worse, some people believe that one race has more value than another – one race somehow has a greater property of “personhood” than another. Philosophers Patrick Lee and Robert George call this “a status-conferring intrinsic property” (Lee & George, *Talking Point*, 305). That means, some property or characteristic supposedly gives greater status or value, but Lee and George point out that figuring out what that property IS cannot be decided rationally.

For example: One person may believe that a darker skin (or lighter) gives a human being more value – that is, a darker (or lighter) variety of human being supposedly has more “personhood.” But if every human being is descended from Adam and Eve, and all human beings are conceived and born the same way, then no one person can have more of a human essence than any other.

Now a scientific minded person may try to argue that a particular trait is what makes a human – well, human! For example, one scientist may argue that self-consciousness is the property that makes a human a true person. But another scientist may argue that IQ is the property that makes a human into a true person.

But why choose skin color or self-consciousness or IQ? Why not eye-color? Or fingernail length? Or how many freckles are on the forehead? Or a thousand other different things that vary from one human to another?

If one group believes skin color makes a human more of a person than IQ, that would be arbitrary (a decision without any good reason) because neither IQ nor skin color are the ONLY properties that individual humans possess. In fact, skin color cannot really be measured and varies wildly, IQ grows and changes over time and self-consciousness might not even be detectable in babies or people in comas or even people who are simply asleep.

As another example, consider about what Michael Sandel, a philosopher and law professor at Harvard university thinks. He believes that a human is not fully human until such a time that enough cells are added to it to make it a true human being. A human embryo, in his view, is not fully human for this reason. That is a lot like certain racists who believe LESS dark pigment cells in the skin makes a person more human or, at least, a greater person. These ideas mean that human “personhood” is all about a certain number or kind of cells...

So – how many cells? How many of which kind? Skin cells? Brain cells? Who gets to decide?

But – imagine adding grains of sands together to make a “heap” of sand. Now...it is true...If you deny that adding grains of sands will eventually produce something DIFFERENT than just individual grains that WOULD be a mistake in reasoning (this is what we call the Sorites Fallacy). A heap of sand is different than a single grain of sand.

But that does not apply to humans - because how can anyone decide “what is a heap of sand” in the first place? After all, a “heap” of sand in one person’s view could be three grains of sand...but another person might think a “heap” is three million grains...and still another “knows” a true heap of sand is at least three hundred million grains of sand. Obviously - the NUMBER of grains cannot decide the issue – because all three of the examples I just gave can be considered a “heap.”

In the same way, a human is not more or less human based on the number of cells one has. If that were so, then tall people would be more human than short people...or amputees would be less human...or babies...or people with less dark skin cells...and so on.

The truth is, if human essence is decided by any group of accidental properties (such as consciousness, mental capacity, size, shape or number of cells, number of light or dark skin cells), that means humans are just the sum of their individual parts.

But who decides which parts?

If “human-ness” and “personhood” are not real things – if we are not a real KIND - then it follows that humans who lack some cells (such as amputees) or have some genetic difference (such as Down syndrome humans) would ‘not all (be) members of the same strict natural kind.’¹ Why? Because each human has a slightly different cellular makeup.

But does anyone really think a person with six fingers on each hand is more human than the majority who only have five? Is a person less human because of a missing leg? The answer must be NO or else anyone, anywhere – anyone with power or in a majority – can decide any property makes one group less human or less of a person than another.

THAT is irrational. That is arbitrary...and that is what racism is.

The truth is humans are of only ONE kind. No grouping of any accidental property makes any one group of humans more or less true persons. This is true because a kind has an essence that spreads throughout all those of that kind. As philosopher David Oderberg says, a kind “permeates the entirety of the substance that possesses it.” (Oderberg, 70)

Human beings have a wide variation of cells – some have more of one kind of cell than another. Some humans have more cells with melanin (pigment) than others. And human beings are also in a constant state of cellular change from fertilization to infant, to child, to adolescent, to mature adult and into the elderly stage. But the KIND of organism – the essence - remains the same regardless of the number or types of cells a human possesses. This is so because the addition or deletion of any number of cells does not change the kind of organism. It therefore follows that to deny human dignity, personhood or inherent human rights to any human being is irrational – not to mention ungodly and unbiblical.

David S. Oderberg, *Routledge Studies in Contemporary Philosophy*, vol. 11, *Real Essentialism* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 13.

Robert P. George & Patrick Lee, Embryonic human persons. *European Molecular Biology Organization*, Vol. 10, No. 4. 2009.

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