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# Homo sapiens - the Human Animal: A Rebuttal to Kuhse and Singer

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# *Homo sapiens* - the Human Animal: A Rebuttal to Kuhse and Singer

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> *Those who hold this principle [the sanctity of life] are giving great weight to something that is morally irrelevant – the species to which the being belongs (Kuhse & Singer, 1985, p. 123).*

Helga Kuhse and Peter Singer have argued against the long-held doctrine of the sanctity of life. They do so in the midst of a discussion of mankind, the image of God, and morality. Their conclusions on the matter rank man within the animal kingdom, but without special status or privilege. Placing mankind at a high moral level, they claim, is "speciesist" and is committing a philosophical faux pas as indefensible as racism or sexism. Are the authors correct in their assertion that human beings have no higher moral value than animals?

Kuhse and Singer first assert that the principle called the sanctity of life is really just the sanctity of human life, and that this distinction can only be based in biology. Evidence for their claim lies in their recognition that the genetic code for a human being is still present in even the most deformed infants and that the infant is still *Homo sapiens*. The authors also understandably find faults in lists of characteristics used to define humanhood. They comment on Joseph Fletcher's list, which includes self-awareness, self-control, a sense of placement in time, and social capacities (Fletcher, 1972), as well as Michael Tooley's list, which includes the idea of a continuing self (Tooley, 1972).

The fault lies, claim Kuhse and Singer, in creating a prescription or list of traits needed for a creature to be a human. There are obvious medical cases of some human beings who lack reason, self-awareness, and a sense of their placement in time, yet society is conflicted about whether or not these individuals have lost their personhood. In other words, claim the authors, the line defining humanhood is not drawn on the criteria of Fletcher or Tooley, but is blurred. Kuhse and Singer believe, for example, that because newborns cannot exhibit such qualities, they should rank lower in personhood than some animals, who rank lower in personhood than human adults, thereby creating a *gradient* of personhood.

Kuhse and Singer then apply their religious sentiments to their philosophies and discuss the image of God. They state that those who believe that man was created in God's image do have a reason for distinguishing between man and animal, but they continue to claim that the line between human persons and animals is on a scale of degrees. The result of this way of thinking is the thought that some animals are more in God's image than newborn babies. They recognize that those who believe in the Genesis account of creation would have with this assertion, but ask why God would prefer man over all other creatures. The fact that the answer would not satisfy unbelievers perhaps mirrors their own dissatisfaction in the responses they have received. When viewed without the lens of Scripture, it seems a logical question to ask.

The response of the philosophers is this:

> The principle of the sanctity of human life is a legacy of the days when religion was the accepted source of all ethical wisdom . . . Now that religion is no longer accepted as the moral source of authority in public life, however, the principle has been removed from the framework from which it developed. We are just discovering that without this framework, it cannot stand up (Kuhse and Singer, 1985, pg. 125).

Kuhse and Singer openly proclaim that the sanctity of life principle is longer a valid, defendable belief outside of religion. In this conclusion, they are very much in error.

Indeed, the Bible provides valuable evidence of man's authority over creation. Genesis 1:16-28 depicts God's creation of man with the intent of giving him rule over life on Earth. The psalmist David also poetically describes the position God assigned to men in Psalm 8:5-8, specifically stating that man is above animals. Scriptural quotations are not enough for Kuhse and Singer, however, who claim that such views "cannot rationally be defended."

It is understandable that Kuhse and Singer would blur the line between humans and animals based on Tooley and Fletcher's lists, but make assumptions that cannot be proven. In one case, they assume that because Washoe, the first monkey taught sign language, identified itself in a mirror, it portrayed self-awareness. Self-recognition, however, does not indicate self-awareness. There is no proof that this animal is able to think about

itself, reflect on its actions, and make judgments about itself or its actions. Similarly, they also describe a situation in which a monkey was able to display a sense of the future by waiting for a dominant monkey to leave the area before it acted in a certain way. The authors could have chosen a myriad of examples to portray this characteristic in the animal kingdom, but all can be answered in the same way – instinct controls animal behavior. A monkey's natural sense of placement in a family group can easily be accounted for by instinct, as could any other situation in which an animal acts in a self-preserving way.

Why does this not apply to humans? The answer is that they are able to attribute value to their actions. Humans may judge actions as moral or immoral, ethical and unethical; they can deliberate, plan, and evaluate an action, circumstance, or even other individuals. Humans are also capable of acting against their instincts and judgments, and are able to knowingly make decisions deemed poor or wrong.

The overarching mistake of Singer and Kuhse is that they hold to empirical functionalism – a view that depicts personhood as a sum of characteristics. To them, a human is the end of an equation of parts. By doing this, they ignore the continuity of personhood over time, despite changes in mental or physical function. If a human loses a limb, some mental capacity due to disease or trauma, or even consciousness, she is still considered the same person as before the loss of function. Even in death, there is an identity and reverence for humans from their former identity. This continuation of a specific identity, as labeled by ontological personalists, indicates something inherent in this business of personhood that gives value to humans. Animals do have some sense of continuity in that they are the same creature from conception to death, but in their death and life, there is still not the same reverence given to them as to human beings, Beckwith has said that personhood is "grounded in the essential nature of humanness, and because human beings are persons that maintain identity through time from the moment they come into existence, it follows that the unborn are human persons of great worth because they possess that nature as long as they exist (Beckwith, 2001). The difference

of respect between species is not just something biological, but something ontological and inherently present in humans that is not there in animals.

Kuhse and Singer attempt to show that human life should be valued no more than animals and that trying to esteem humans cannot be based on reason. Reason, however, can be used to reveal the flaws of their assertions and can even lead to the observation that some attributes are undeniably human and only human. These distinct characteristics do not compile into a list of prerequisites for humanness, but rather give a line of separation between animals and man. This distinction also needs to be removed from the lofty ideals in discussion and given application because, as Rae has observed, the viewpoint of empirical functionalism is filtering into hospitals, into the legal system, and into everyday life. It is of utmost importance to regard mankind in its God-given rank, lest it descend to just another animal species without any special value, significance, or purpose.

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