The characteristics associated with personhood

The syllabus lists eight characteristics associated with personhood. I have arranged them, roughly, from the simplest to the most complex – in other words, the later characteristics usually depend on the earlier ones.

There is one traditionally very important characteristic that the syllabus does not mention, viz. possessing a soul. The idea of a ‘soul’ has had many religious and philosophical interpretations. The central idea, for our purposes, is that the soul is something can exist separately from the body, e.g. it can continue living after the body dies. It is a traditional Christian doctrine that the fundamental difference between human beings and everything else (e.g. animals and machines), and what makes human beings persons, is that they have a soul, and nothing else does.

But if we don’t have souls, would that mean that we aren’t persons? No – we are persons whether or not it is true that we have souls. So we can talk about what characterises being a person without referring to souls.

ONE WHO IS EMBODIED, ONE TO WHOM WE ASCRIBE MENTAL AND PHYSICAL CHARACTERISTICS

A person is not just a body, but also has a mind. Rocks and plants aren’t persons because they have no mental characteristics – they don’t think and they aren’t conscious. Persons feel pain, they have beliefs about the world.

We intuitively think that each consciousness is individual; for example, each experiences the world from a particular ‘perspective’, and no two perspectives are the same. First, no two conscious creatures are in exactly the same place at the same time, so one can see what the other can’t, and so on. They literally experience the world from different (spatial) perspectives. Second, we each have our own ‘take’ on or interpretation of what we experience. We have different beliefs, desires, values, and plans, which gives us each a unique ‘perspective’ on the world in a metaphorical sense.

Could something that didn’t have a body be a person? For example, if we have souls, and our souls can exist without our bodies, then we might think that being a person doesn’t mean being embodied, but having a soul. However, we standardly attribute physical properties to persons. For example, how heavy are you? If you are a soul, the answer is that you don’t weigh anything (your body weighs…)! Do you have eyes? Not if you are a soul. There are also many activities which persons engage in which, again, they couldn’t if they were souls. For example, writing a cheque – this involves both thought (about words and numbers) and physical movements.
POSSESSING A NETWORK OF BELIEFS

Having a perspective involves experiencing the world in a particular way, e.g. from where one is located. Beliefs represent how the world is. (Or at least, that is their purposes; false beliefs fail in this way, and true beliefs succeed.) In having a belief, we believe the world is one way rather than some other way.

We don’t form or have beliefs individually, but in ‘networks’. Once you are able to form one belief, then there are many others you are able to form as well. For example, if you believe ‘there is food’, then you have other beliefs about what counts as ‘food’ and what does not.

Some philosophers have thought that a creature can possess mental characteristics without being able to form beliefs. For example, if a creature’s experience of the world is very simple, perhaps we just say that it reacts to stimuli. We reason with beliefs. If a creature doesn’t reason, but just reacts, perhaps talk of ‘beliefs’ is misleading.

RATIONALITY

Basic rationality

One of the most basic forms of reasoning is drawing inferences between beliefs. If you believe that mashed potato is food, and that this (in front of you) is mashed potato, then you will believe that this is food. An even simpler case: you believe this is red; so you believe that it is not yellow. There is a close connection between having beliefs and being able to reason with them – what it is to have a particular belief is partly defined by the other beliefs that you infer from it.

Means-end reasoning uses beliefs and desires, and is expressed in action. You want something, e.g. you are thirsty, so you want water (your end). You have beliefs about the world, e.g. about where to find water. You put the two together, so now you want to go where the water is. You have other beliefs about where you are now, and how to get to the water from here. So you work out a route – this is your means to your end.

A stronger sense of rationality

A stronger sense of rationality involves being able to evaluate our beliefs and desires. For this, we need to have the ability to imagine having different beliefs and desires from the ones one has. For example, if we wonder whether a belief is false, and set about testing it, we must be able to imagine having a different, true belief. When evaluating desires, we weigh that desire against others, we wonder what we really want and what we should want.

A SOCIAL BEING, ONE WHOSE SENSE OF SELF EMERGES IN AND IS CREATED THROUGH RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHERS

We might call a ‘self’ any creature with a perspective on the world, particularly if it is able to bring together beliefs and desires to act in specific ways. But having a perspective isn’t enough for a sense of self. After all, what one experiences is the world, not oneself. To have a sense of self involves being aware of the distinction between the world and oneself. The most basic expression of this is being aware that one’s body is distinct from anything else, a merely biological sense of oneself.

A stronger, social sense of oneself emerges in relation to others who are also selves. This sense of oneself is not just a sense of one’s body, but a sense of having certain
relationships with particular others. For example, many social creatures have a ‘leader’, who is dominant and to whom others submit. Or again, many social creatures form special bonds with their family members. These relationships are the basis for a sense the individual may have of being the particular being it is, expressed in the way it interacts with others in the group.

SELF-AWARENESS AND AWARENESS OF ONESELF AS A CONTINUING SUBJECT OF EXPERIENCE

The sense of self just discussed is a ‘weak’ sense of self. It is unclear whether it is a genuine form of awareness of oneself as a self. This requires more. First, it requires some conception of one’s experience as experience. Second, it requires a sense of having a past and a future. Looking forward to a pleasant experience and fearing pain both express the idea that one might have certain experiences in the future. In this anticipation of experiences, there is the minimal sense of having an awareness of the continuation of experiences through time.

However, this ability to have some conception of one’s experience is not yet an ability to think about oneself as the subject of experiences. The term ‘self-awareness’ captures this. In self-awareness, a creature is aware of itself as a self. It is able to think about itself as something that has experiences. This is partly expressed in the ability to identify one’s body in a mirror, which involves the thought ‘that (in the mirror) is me’. This thought requires the ability to put together the subjective sense of oneself ‘from the inside’ – me – with a ‘public’ idea of oneself ‘from the outside’ – that (in the mirror).

Developing self-awareness requires a sense of other selves that are distinct from oneself. It is an awareness of having a particular perspective on the world, and that there are others. You must have the concept of a self, a subject of experience, of which oneself is just one example. In self-awareness, one also becomes aware of the fact that each self is individual.

A LANGUAGE USER, ABLE TO COMMUNICATE MEANINGS

Many people think that animals can have beliefs and desires. For example, a dog, seeing its master pick up its leash, runs to the front door excitedly and starts barking. It believes it is going for a walk. Again, the dog wanders over to the cupboard where its food is and whines. It wants food.

However, some beliefs are only possible if the believer can use language. For example, a dog can’t believe that its master will take it for a walk next Thursday. Days of the week only make sense if we have a language with the concept of days of the week. So fewer creatures are language users than are believers.

A language requires a community of language users. Only social creatures can have a language. However, not all social creatures have language, and we can argue that babies start to develop a sense of self before they acquire language. So fewer creatures are language users than are social beings.

Some non-human animals communicate by the use of signs – does this ever amount to a language? Many philosophers argue it does not. The hallmark of a language is that the signs – words (or, in sign language, gestures) – are conventional. The link between the sign,
e.g. the word ‘dog’, and what it is a sign for, a dog, is completely arbitrary. Shouting out in pain is, by contrast, a natural sign that something hurts. Most of the gestures, facial expressions and sounds used by animals to communicate are natural signs, so they wouldn’t count as a language.

We could argue, however, that they do communicate meanings, such as ‘danger’, ‘food’, ‘stay away’. Of course, we have to use language to say what these meanings are!

The use of a language makes a huge difference to the type of life a creature leads and to its mental characteristics. Language greatly extends our ability to reason and our ability to think about the past, the future, and anything we aren’t experiencing now. It completely changes our lives with others, as we are able to communicate about a much wider range of topics. If we didn’t have language, we could at best express our immediate desires and beliefs – what we want now and how we believe the world is now.

A creature with a language is a very different kind of self than a creature without language, which is why possessing a language has been thought to be a distinguishing characteristic of being a person.

**BEING REFLECTIVE ABOUT ONE’S EXPERIENCES, FEELINGS AND MOTIVES AS WELL AS THOSE OF OTHERS**

Reflection involves more than just a preference of one type of experience to another. Dogs get restless, and when they do, they prefer exercise – this is not reflection. Part of being reflective about one’s experiences involves being able to identify them and to imagine having different ones. And this involves self-awareness as discussed above. It almost certainly also requires language. Without language, picking out and identifying, comparing, and evaluating one’s experiences is not possible.

This is all the more certain for motives. Thinking about motives is more than just being able to anticipate what a creature will do. Lions can anticipate that antelope will run when chased, but they can’t think that they run from fear or in order to save their lives. In coming to the idea of why a creature does something, we form some idea of a pattern in its life. Even the simplest motive, such as hunger, can express itself in many different actions. Without language, thinking about motives at all is unlikely to be possible.

Our ability to identify our own experiences, feelings and motives is not separate from our ability to identify others’. In the case of experiences, ‘joint attention’ is very important. A baby learns that it is looking at a table by being told by an adult; the baby can see that the adult is looking at the table. They are both looking at the same thing, which the adult calls the table. So in learning to identify its experience – seeing a table – the baby also learns to identify the adult’s experience.

Feelings have an ‘inner’ and an ‘outer’ aspect. Learning what it is one feels involves coordinating the two, e.g. the feeling of anger and the behaviour that expresses anger. Without an adult to identify the feeling from the behaviour, the child would not grasp the concept of anger and use it to identify its feelings.
CREATIVITY, AUTONOMY AND/OR INDIVIDUALITY, ONE WHO SHAPES THEMSELVES THROUGH CHOICES, GOALS, ACTIONS AND REACTIONS

The syllabus joins this and the next characteristic, but they are worth separating. The first part emphasises psychological capacities, the second part emphasises the moral implications of having such capacities.

This characteristic takes the idea of reflectiveness further. Once we can imagine having different feelings and motives, we are able to imagine different futures and different ways to be. In other words, we can start to make choices about the kind of self, or person, we want to be. We can adopt goals to aim for and choose the actions that will help us reach those goals.

The way in which one evaluates one’s experiences, feelings and motives expresses not just preferences, but alters and shapes oneself, so that one becomes a particular sort of person. This process of self-development is a creative one; because we can imagine different ways to be, we have a certain freedom in developing one way or another.

Autonomy is the idea of acting on ‘rules’ one gives oneself. We adopt goals and ways of behaving, including moral goals and behaviour. When one does this not according to the expectations and values of others, but as an expression of one’s own values, this expresses one’s individuality all the more.

ONE WHO IS RESPONSIBLE, ACCOUNTABLE AND POSSESSES RIGHTS IN VIRTUE OF THIS

A creature that can’t imagine having alternative motives will simply act on the motives it has. There is nothing else it can do, and so it cannot be praised or blamed. Autonomous creatures can make choices according to their values, and so are responsible for their choices. Because they are self-aware, they understand that they would do things differently if they chose to.

Our choices can affect other people in good or bad ways. Because we are responsible for what we choose to do, we are accountable to other people for the effects of our actions on them. Accountability is the idea that we cannot treat other people any way we choose, but that we should be able to justify what we do to them. If we cannot, then we can be blamed.

Being autonomous is of great importance to an autonomous creature; it is how it shapes itself. But autonomy can be undermined or diminished by how one is treated, e.g. through coercion. Autonomy, then, needs to be protected against interference by other people. A right gives this protection, but also leads to accountability, as others have rights too.