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What does it mean to be one of us?

(Commentary to Jan Bransen: Educatability)

In his intriguing article, Bransen poses a number of questions, including the following:

1. “[W]hat makes us different from other animals?” (p 2)
2. “What does it mean to be *one of us*?” (p 3)
3. “[W]hat would justify our assumption of the participant’s point of view to one another and not to other creatures such as young children, pets, primates, etc.?” (p 4)
4. “[W]hy would we limit this attempt [to determine who should be addressed as participants, as one of us] to exemplars of *Homo sapiens*? Why not give a voice to the apes, or our pets, or our domestic robots?” (p 4)
- 5.

Bransen takes the first question to pose “the problem of man’s uniqueness,” and his ultimate aim is to dissolve that problem. His method of dissolving it is by way of a detailed answer to the second question, which is the most fundamental. I want to show that Bransen’s answer to the second question actually provides an answer to each of the other questions, and that instead of dissolving the problem of man’s uniqueness (posed by question #1), what he offers is really a straightforward solution—albeit a partly normative one. To see this, we must look beyond Bransen’s answer to the metaphysical presuppositions on which, I believe, it rests.

Bransen on Responsible Agency

Let me put in my own words what I take to be the structure of Bransen’s intriguing article. First, he poses the question: “[W]hat makes us different from other animals?” (p. 2) Reviewing the history of philosophical anthropology, Bransen argues that the sciences (e.g., Darwinian biology) provide no principled difference between “man and animal.” Bransen goes on to cast doubt on suggests that the extra-empirical resources that philosophers draw on confer no special authority to answer the question.

This negative result so far raises the question: *Is there a principled difference between “us” and nonhuman animals? If so, what is it?* To answer this question (the question of man’s uniqueness), Bransen turns to the more fundamental question: “What does it mean to be *one of us*?” This question can be asked only from a participant’s point of view, not from an observer’s. And he develops a fascinating answer to all four of the questions I reported at the beginning.

All four of the questions are answered in terms of the notion of responsible agency. It is responsible agency that determines what beings are participants, one of us. So, the basic question is what is responsible agency? Responsible agency is a response-dependent property. A response-dependent property is a property expressed by a concept whose content includes “a specific response by appropriate subjects in favorable circumstances.” That is, a response-dependent property is a property that entails facts about appropriately responding subjects in appropriate circumstances. One is responsible only if one it is appropriate for one to be held responsible. One can hold or be held responsible only when the appropriate normative conditions are satisfied. A chair, say, cannot be held responsible, even if it broke your window in a hurricane. The fact that responsible agency is governed by conditions of appropriateness indicates it, like other response-dependent properties, is normative.

What makes a being “one of us,” a “participant”, is our decision to treat the being as a responsible agent. Bransen understands responsible agency in a Strawsonian way: We naturally and inevitably have “reactive attitudes”—attitudes of resentment, praise and blame. And we have practices of holding others responsible. Bransen argues that to be responsible is to be included as a participant in the game of giving and asking for reasons, and thus to be subject and object of reactive attitudes.

To be a responsible agent is “a matter of *being treated* by an appropriately responding agent in favorable circumstances *as* a responsible agent.” Moreover, responsible agents are “engaged in reciprocal relations of holding one another responsible,” and are “committed to giv[ing] reasons for their reactive attitudes,” and

are “entitled to ask for reasons for the reactive attitudes of their fellow interlocutors.”

So, one “cannot be a responsible agent all by oneself,

but, most importantly,...one cannot discover that someone has the property of being a responsible agent other than by taking the other to be an addressee, i.e., by regarding oneself as entitled to one’s reactive attitudes to[ward] this other.” (p. 5)

To be one of us is to be treated as responsible and to be able to reciprocate. The circumstances under which it is appropriate to treat a being as responsible are those in which both the treater and the treatee are able to engage in the “deontic game of giving and asking for reasons.” So, responsible agency is a matter of our practices, of how we treat one another. If we call a being who is treated as responsible the “treatee,” and call a being who is treating someone else as responsible the “treater,” then by the condition of reciprocity, every appropriate treatee is a potential treater.

In sum, according to Bransen, the fundamental fact is that our practices hold each other responsible, and that actually to be responsible is nothing other than to be addressed as a participant, and hence to be treated as being responsible.

Answering the Questions

The answer to the second question is that we make an entity “one of us,” when we decide to treat him, her, or it, as a responsible agent, who engages in reciprocal relations of holding others responsible.

The answer to the third question is that what justifies our assumption of the participant’s point of view to one another and not to other creatures such as young children, pets, primates, etc. is that young children, pets, primates, etc. cannot participate in the game of giving and asking for reasons—a sine qua non of responsible agency.

The answer to the fourth question is that only members of the *Homo sapiens* species (as far as we know) meet the conditions for agency—again, the ability to participate in the game of giving and asking for reasons. Maybe someday, apes, pets or domestic robots would meet the conditions. If so, we should include such a being as one of us.

Now turn to the first question, the one that Bransen wants to dissolve: Bransen hopes that by teaching his view of responsible agency “we might produce a next generation of scientists who will understand that the

problem of man’s uniqueness is not a scientific, but an ill-conceived normative problem.” (p. 6) I agree that the problem of man’s uniqueness is not a scientific problem, and that it is partly normative; but I do not believe that it is ill-conceived. Nor do I think that Bransen’s account of moral responsibility shows it to be ill-conceived. From Bransen’s account, we can glean a straightforward answer to the question of what makes us different from the animals. To see this, we must consider what Bransen’s account entails.

What Bransen’s Account Entails

On Bransen’s account of responsible agency, whether or not a being is a responsible agent is not so much a matter of discovery, but of decision. Nevertheless, a decision to include a being as a responsible agent is not made “out of the blue” or in a vacuum. There are, as we have seen, conditions on responsible agency. Let me enumerate them: To be a responsible agent includes the following: (1) To be treated as responsible; (2) to engage in reciprocal relations of holding others responsible; (3) to be committed to giving reasons for one’s reactive attitudes; (4) to regard oneself as being entitled to asking for reasons for other people’s reactive attitudes; (5) to regard oneself as entitled to have reactive attitudes toward others.

These are substantive conditions, partly normative and partly empirical. Conditions (3) and (4) require that responsible agents are language-users able to give and ask for reasons. Therefore, only language-users can engage in the practices of holding people responsible. The requirement of reciprocity entails that only language-users can be “one of us.”

Not only must a responsible agent (or ‘one of us’) be able to give and ask for reasons, but conditions (3) – (5) explicitly require that the responsible agent have (what I have called) a ‘robust first-person perspective’. In our understanding of responsible agency, we cannot stop our inquiry when we come to practices; we must investigate what is required to be able to engage in such practices.

A Step Beyond

On my view, all and only persons have first-person perspectives essentially. We begin with rudimentary first-person perspectives (sentience, intentionality, ability to imitate) that we share with higher nonhuman animals. (Higher nonhuman animals, like dogs, cats and nonhu-

man primates, have rudimentary first-person perspectives contingently: they exist before they acquire first-person perspectives. But when a *human animal* acquires a rudimentary first-person perspective, a new being—a *person*—comes into existence, and the person has a first-person perspective essentially. First, a person has just a rudimentary first-person perspective; then, then as a toddler learns a language, she typically develops a robust first-person perspective. A robust first-person perspective is the ability to think of oneself as oneself, from the first person, without any name, demonstrative, or other third-person referring device. Evidence of a robust first-person perspective is the ability to assert: I believe I am getting a cold, or I wish that I were a movie star. Only persons who have robust first-person perspectives have the ability to think such thoughts.¹

Bransen is right that the “essentialism that is needed to spell out a principled distinction between exemplars of different kinds cannot simply be derived from empirical data.” (p. 3) But that does not imply that there is no principled distinction between persons and animals. The needed essentialism has a practical warrant: it is the best way to make sense of ourselves—with what we share with other animals (rudimentary first-person perspectives) and with what distinguishes us (robust first-person perspectives).

What distinguishes us from higher animals ontologically is that we persons have first-person perspectives (either rudimentary or robust) essentially; higher non-human animals have first-person perspectives (rudimentary only) contingently. Hence, we are not identical to the animals that constitute us—just as a statue is not identical to the piece of marble that constitutes it.

We are constituted by human animals, but not identical to the animals that constitute us.² We are essentially persons; we essentially have first-person perspectives. We persons do not come into existence until human fetuses are developed enough to be sentient and to have intentionality.

Bransen is right, I believe, that to be one of us is not just to be a member of the species, *Homo sapiens*. Not all members of the species are persons; those who have yet to develop, or have lost, first-person perspectives. A human animal that develops the ability to support a rudimentary first-person perspective typically goes on to develop a robust first-person perspective. And robust first-person perspectives are required, according to Bransen’s account, for responsible agency. A nonhuman animal that develops a rudimentary first-person perspective never goes on to develop a robust first-person perspective, never engages in giving and asking for reason. So, we have a principled reason not to include a non-human animal as one of us. (Nevertheless, we have duties toward higher nonhuman animals; they are sentient.)

Granted, the notions of rudimentary and robust first-person perspectives are not found in the sciences. What justifies me, a mere philosopher, in claiming to find something in reality, independently of our decisions, that distinguishes us persons from animals? I claim no special expertise, other than that I have thought carefully about these matters for years—as have many others. The justification of such distinctions, as well as of essentialism, lies in the extent to which they help make sense of what we want to understand. “The proof is in the pudding,” as the old saying has it. I believe that appeal to robust first-person perspectives illuminates the nature of moral, aesthetic, religious, and scientific practices. In particular, robust first-person perspectives make possible our practices of holding each other responsible—practices that Bransen has explained so well.

¹ I have developed this view—both the notion of rudimentary vs. robust first-person perspectives and the relation between persons and the animals that constitute them in detail. See, for example, Ch. 3 of *The Metaphysics of Everyday Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

² This whole discussion is very compressed. For details, see “Why Constitution is Not Identity,” *Journal of Philosophy*, 94 (1997):599–621 and *Persons and Bodies: A Constitution View* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). Other articles of relevance may be found on my webpage: <http://people.umass.edu/lrb/>