

Selves Like Us

In yesterday's lecture, I suggested that reflecting on the range of judgments and attitudes we form towards artists on the basis of their artworks encourages us to draw two vague but suggestive conclusions. First, I claimed, it supports the idea that the concept of responsibility, even after its sense is restricted to a relation that is more than merely causal, is not as unified or as clean a concept as much theorizing about the concept appears to assume. Second, I said, it brings to light the fact that what makes us distinctively human is conceived too narrowly if it is identified with the properties of practical rationality and self control that make us capable of specifically moral agency and responsibility. For the abilities to create and also to respond to art and beauty are parts of what make us distinctively human, but having these abilities neither assures nor requires the possession of the properties that make us morally responsible.

Today I want to expand on these conclusions, clarifying them and giving them more substance. As you will see, my reflections will raise more questions than they answer, both about how best to think about responsibility and about what it is to be human. My aim here is only to point out some directions in which the pursuit of answers to these questions might usefully proceed. I shall focus largely on the second topic – what makes us distinctively human. Before exploring the topic, though, I need to say more about what I take that question to mean and why it might be worthwhile to ask it.

The question has been around since philosophy began – as one would expect of a discipline that could fairly be characterized as aimed at understanding

ourselves and our relation to the world. Indeed, the question is equivalent to the question 'What is it to be among the selves that we embrace untheoretically when we say that philosophy aims at understanding 'ourselves'?' What is it, in other words, to be a self like us? As I mean to use it, the question is misunderstood if it is taken to be – that is, reduced to - a question of biology. When philosophers, and other (pardon the expression) humanists, ask about the distinctively human, they tend to be interested in an ethical, as opposed to a biological, notion. They are interested in a concept that has fundamental practical significance¹, that identifies individuals that we can relate to in certain especially rich and rewarding ways; beings with whom we can be in community. And we know that this is not a purely biological notion because we can imagine individuals who are not members of our species who clearly fit these roles. Winnie the Pooh, Peter Rabbit, Star Trek's Mr. Spock are all to some extent selves like us though not of our species. And, although membership in our species may link anyone to us in some ways, the very young, the severely brain damaged, and the seriously mentally ill are hardly paradigms of the 'selves like us' category that we are trying to grasp.²

In an attempt to pursue our question without courting confusion, some philosophers have used the term "person" to refer to what I am calling 'a self like us', specifically distinguishing the concept of a person from the biological notion of a human being. Thus, Locke, after introducing a thought experiment in which the

¹ Of course, medicine is practical, and questions of biology are relevant to that. But that is not the sort of relevance we are after.

² This is not to say that species-membership is utterly irrelevant to the non-biological category of the distinctively human. That is a question that I want to leave open, at least for now.

psychology of a prince comes to inhabit the body of a cobbler, suggests that although it would be a travesty of language to say of the transformed cobbler that he was the same *man* as the former prince, the important relation between the one and the other can be captured by referring to them as stages of the same *person*. A person, according to Locke, is “a thinking intelligent being that has reason and reflection and can consider itself as itself, the same thinking thing, in different times and places.” Peter Singer makes a similar distinction, using “person” to refer to a rational and self-conscious being.³ By keeping in mind the facts that persons, in this sense, need not be members of our species, and that members of our species need not be persons, Singer thinks that we can think more clearly about whether and why some individuals may have rights that others lack, and about whether and why some lives may be more valuable than others. But if some philosophers avoid the term “human” to refer to this non-biological notion, others continue to use it. Kant’s principle of humanity is clearly meant to apply, not to *homo sapiens*, but to those Singer would call persons. And, in “Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person,” Harry Frankfurt uses the terms “human” and “person” interchangeably, in accordance with stylistic grace.

To my ears, the term “person” when used philosophically, in a way that is self-consciously not equivalent to “human being,” refers especially to rational agents in keeping with Locke and Singer. In addition to the imaginary talking animals and extraterrestrials, it can (and sometimes does) refer to corporations and states.⁴

³ Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics*, Second Edition, p. 87

⁴ See Hobbes, and the law.

When people invoke the idea of the distinctively human, on the other hand, they often have something more than or different from rational agency in mind. And it would be most unusual for someone to think of Walmart or the European Union as a 'self like us.' Since my purpose is in any case to consider ways in which the identification of this ethical notion of humanity with rational agency falls short, I shall continue to use "humanity" in this non-biological way. I shall leave open for the moment how it relates to the term "person" as it is used in philosophy.

The concept of 'the distinctively human,' then, is a non-biological notion, equivalent to the notion of a "self like us," which I said is an ethical category, meant to be of fundamental practical significance. But *what* practical significance? I said that the concept identifies individuals that we can relate to in certain especially rich and rewarding ways, beings with whom we can be in community. But the notion of community is as imprecise and ambiguous as the term we are trying to pin down. Without a clearer statement of the purposes for which the concept is to be used, or of the particular practical and ethical questions it is to have a role in answering, the concept may seem so vague and elusive as to be questionably a concept at all; at best, one might think that the notion is too slippery to be a proper object of philosophical analysis. The problem may be even more obvious if we consider the term "selves like us" which I want to use interchangeably with "the distinctively human." For who is the "we" (the "us") this question hopes to characterize in an illuminating way? If we can answer this question from the start, it is doubtful that there is need of a philosophical investigation at all. But if we cannot answer the question, what exactly are we asking?

Along with these conceptual questions, and perhaps even more pressing, there are moral concerns about this project. For one might reasonably worry that the exploration of the category of the distinctively human will serve as a pretext for identifications of an in-group and an out-group, for treating one set of creatures as more important, worthier of respect and benefit, than another. Identifying this category with the category of “selves like us” makes explicit the fact that we are talking about a distinction between an Us and a Them. The worry is that such a distinction will inevitably support attitudes and practices that are unjustifiably discriminatory if not positively oppressive.

Both these concerns are legitimate, and my responses are unlikely to satisfy everyone. But the conceptual problem of trying to understand and illuminate a concept that we cannot clearly delineate at the beginning of the inquiry is a common one in philosophy and we can address it by means of the same methods we employ in our investigations of other questions. We begin with a term or a phrase that is used in common discourse, usually without any conscious sense that one is not exactly sure what one means by it; we try to articulate the meaning of the term – perhaps, we propose an analysis of it; and then we move back and forth, among intuitions, linguistic data, and theoretical thought, aiming to reach a reflective equilibrium between the proposal’s ability to capture most of the term’s pretheoretical applications and its ability to illuminate or justify its use in paradigmatic cases. Further, and despite the fact that the inquiry is expressed as the search for an illumination of an apparently single and unified concept, we need not assume that the result of the inquiry will support this initial presumption. The

concept may turn out to be a family resemblance concept, without clear boundaries, and concerning which different criteria may be salient in different contexts. Or, reflection may encourage us to associate the term with two (or more) distinct concepts, each roughly unified and closely enough related to the other as to allow the distinction to have gone unnoticed until subjected to philosophical scrutiny. The view that I alluded to in yesterday's lecture, that the concept of responsibility has two faces or two branches, may be an example of such an inquiry. And, by the end of today's lecture, one may come to wonder whether a similar and related pair of branches may capture importantly different clusters of aspects of the distinctively human.

What about the moral concern that any inquiry that takes seriously the idea of 'the distinctively human,' and that consequently looks to identify features that separate the indeterminate "us" from the anonymous "them" is liable to support morally objectionable practices and attitudes? Unquestionably, there is a historical basis for this concern. Appeals to the human have played a role in permitting ill treatment of other species, whether the term is used biologically or ethically, while in addition in the nonbiological case it has been called into service in the justification of treating some people as inferior to others – blacks and women, as well as the mentally impaired, have often been considered rationally defective, and consequently less than fully human despite their membership in the same species.

Insofar as one takes 'the distinctively human' to be a term with positive connotations, then, identifying something as distinctively human carries with it the danger that creatures who lack it will be unduly neglected, mistreated or oppressed.

But it seems to me that there is equal danger in avoiding the term, and any consequent inquiry into what it means. For the term, and a variety of equivalent expressions, are out there already, invoked in public as well as academic discourse more often than one might initially suppose, and the concept informs the way we think of ourselves in unconscious, subliminal ways. Since my own interest in the topic aims at combatting what seems to me an overly narrow and limited understanding of the term, we may hope that the inquiry into the concept will result in a more rather than a less inclusive attitude this time around.

Furthermore, we need not, and I believe we should not, identify the fact that a feature contributes to what makes us distinctively human with the thought that the feature is one that it is objectively valuable to have. We need not think that people – or humans – are special in the sense of being more important or more valuable than other creatures or things, more worthy of existence or concern from the point of view of the universe. Indeed, we need not think that “selves like us” are more worthy of existence and concern than other creatures even from our own point of view.

This is not incompatible, however, with using the term in a positive way (that is, in a way that attaches positive connotations to the distinctively human). The features that make us distinctively human, I have said, contribute to our ability to relate to each other in certain distinctively rich and rewarding ways. Presumably this is a good thing *for us* even if it is a matter of indifference to the universe, and we may prize these features of ourselves, as well as of the relationships they make possible, without thinking that others who lack them are inferior.

After all, we may prize our cultures without thinking that other cultures, or the people whose cultures they are, are worse; philosophers may prize their love of philosophy without thinking that those who have no interest in philosophy are mistaken or stupid. While these analogies – with culture and philosophy, that is – show the conceptual separability of prizing some trait in ourselves with judging it to be objectively better, they also serve as precaution. For we are all too familiar with atrocities performed in the name of something like cultural superiority, and there are still many philosophers who agree with Socrates that the unexamined life is not worth living. Against the tendencies of narrower identities to serve as pretexts for indifference and disdain for those outside one’s group, an interest in the distinctively human can have a softening influence, giving us a basis for making connection to others across the divisions that these other classifications set up. At the same time, the tendency to regard what we value in ourselves as things that make us uniquely valuable or special is a real one. One can only hope that to be forewarned is to be forearmed.

So let us proceed: What *does* contribute to what makes us distinctively human? What *is* involved in being ‘a self like us’? We may begin by noting and acknowledging the truth in what others have said. As I’ve mentioned, the dominant tradition in Western thought has emphasized our intelligence, and more particularly our capacity to reason. Given that the most obvious contrast class to the human is other animals⁵, this is not surprising, for we *are* smarter – I would say *much* smarter

⁵ (not to mention the fact that philosophers who engage in this inquiry probably identify with their intellects especially)

– than at least most other animals. We are not only conscious, we are self-conscious: we are aware of ourselves as individuals in a world with other individuals. And we are rational, and thus able to solve problems, and to compare and weigh alternative actions, to determine which option will best meet our goals. These features already serve to distinguish us dramatically from most animals, whose reactions to stimuli (at least so I imagine) are to a large extent hard-wired and inflexible. They see a fast-moving dark object and flick their tongues to grab it; they hear a certain noise and go rigid, ‘playing dead.’ A certain display leads to mating behavior; another to aggression. Animals whose behavior is fully governed in this way may have no thoughts beyond their perceptions; they make no choices – they just react.

But even animals that can solve problems, use tools and so on, are much less intellectually proficient than we are. As many have emphasized, our ability to use language is both reflective of and instrumental to a wealth of further intellectual abilities that divide us from other species. Being able to think abstractly and conceptualize possibilities allows us to engage in theoretical reasoning, to stand back, imaginatively, from how things are, and conceive of how they might be.

If contrasting ourselves with other animals makes our higher intelligence salient, however, consideration of other perhaps imaginary beings who share or even surpass our cognitive and conceptual faculties, makes us mindful of other features that may just as strongly distinguish ‘selves like us’ from others.

The kinds of beings I have in mind include gods (or God), extraterrestrials, and artificially intelligent machines. Fantasy and science fiction movies and books are full of such creatures – evidently we are fascinated by them. Some of the things

that differentiate us from such figures we may regard as weaknesses: We are sentient, opening us to the experience of pain as well as pleasure. We have appetites, which can lead us astray, causing us to act against our own interests as well as against the interests of others. We are mortal, fragile, fallible, and vulnerable.

We are also emotional creatures. Especially significant are our capacities for love and compassion. It is the absence of such dispositions that make some images of intelligent non-humans literally alien and terrifying. And when we see capacities for love or sympathy (or for dispositions resembling love and sympathy) in less intelligent species it makes us regard them as closer to being “selves like us” - closer, perhaps, than the cold but super-rational creatures of our imagination. In one especially moving account from the 19th century, a member of a shooting party recounts a scene that followed his group’s killing a female monkey, an event which provoked a great fuss from the monkey troop. “At length,” the author writes, [the leader of the monkeys] “came to the door of the tent, and finding threats of no avail, began a lamentable moaning, and by the most expressive gesture seemed to beg for the dead body. It was given to him; he took it sorrowfully in his arms and bore it away to his expecting companions. They who were witnesses to this extraordinary scene,” he continues, “resolved never again to fire at one of the monkey race.” Such scenes as this, we are told, repeatedly persuaded the people involved of the

'humanity' of the monkeys, leading them to remove monkeys from the category of quarry.⁶

Such cases are perhaps enough to conclude that selves like us must be both intelligent and emotional⁷. Both aspects together may be necessary to account for a further distinctive feature of us that philosophers like Harry Frankfurt, Gary Watson, and Christine Korsgaard have emphasized in recent years. Frankfurt famously noted that it is a distinctive feature of persons that they can stand back from their first-order desires and motives and ask whether they are desires and motives that they want to have and to act on. In other words, we have the ability to ask what sorts of people we want to be and what sorts of lives we want to live. We can identify with some aspects of ourselves and disclaim others; we can form ideals and aspire to them. Linked to this is the availability of a distinction between desires and values, between things we simply want and things we care about (where 'caring' is not simply a matter of wanting a great deal). It is hard to imagine that such distinctions and attitudes are available to any nonhuman animals (even relatively smart animals such as elephants and monkeys), and I attribute this to the limitations of their cognitive and conceptual capacities. But I cannot imagine gods or intelligent machines being prone to such distinctions and attitudes either – for without passions or emotions, what could lead to a discrepancy between desire and care?

⁶ from George J. Romanes, *Animal Intelligence*(London: Kegan Paul Trench, & Co., 1882), p.472, in turn quoting an account by James Forbes. Recounted to me in correspondence with Lorraine Daston.

⁷ We might say rational and animal, but I do not want to beg any questions about whether artificial intelligences might come to experience emotions.

Considering attributes and activities that we especially cherish in ourselves and that nonhumans don't seem to possess or be capable of allows us to approach the question in a different way. Yesterday, I pointed to our ability to make art for which we could be aesthetically responsible, as well as our abilities to appreciate art and beauty, as reflective of a soul or a self like us. We might also consider our capacity for humor, or indeed, for philosophy. One does not imagine or expect lower animals to have senses of humor or to be prone to philosophical speculation because we think or assume that animals lack the cognitive capacities for such things. But the fact that we do not typically imagine futuristic robots to exhibit these traits, nor know how one could program them to have or develop such features, may be even more revealing. (We have been able to program computers to play chess and even Go – but can we set them to solve the problem of free will? Perhaps even more interesting is the question of whether we can program computers that would come to wonder about the problem of free will on their own.) What is it about these sensitivities and dispositions that make the idea of finding them in (or building them into) artificial intelligences so unlikely and surprising?

Part of the answer may have to do with the fact that we often picture A.I. individuals as beings without sentience or emotion, for it is not clear whether beauty or humor could make sense to a purely cerebral being. Another, I suspect, has to do with the fact that when we build computers or artificially intelligent machines, we do so with specific functions in mind. We program them to solve problems, perform tasks. The reasoning we put into them is instrumental. And though I know that advanced machines are increasingly flexible – they teach

themselves, change their own programs, and are in some sense creative, it is my impression that these added abilities are still defined and shaped by their tendencies to aid in the achievement of more general predefined goals. Looking for and finding beauty and humor in the world, and asking and answering philosophical questions, however, are in a sense gratuitous. They can only serve a purpose for selves like us, who find such things gratifying for their own sakes. The sensitivities to beauty, to humor, to philosophy, and the abilities to create things that will reward such sensitivities, thus seem to highlight propensities of selves like us beyond the features that I named earlier. A being that can cultivate an interest in philosophy must be able to approach the world with a kind of noninstrumental curiosity if not a sense of wonder. To see beauty in the world or humor, one must have an eye (or an ear) for the interesting, the quirky, and so on – more basically, one must be the sort of being for which something's *being* more or less interesting, quirky, and so on, makes sense.

Thus, I am inclined to suggest that in order to be a self like us, one must have the capacity to be interested in things for their own sakes, and perhaps connected to this, a capacity to be curious, and to ask and pursue answers to open-ended questions (for example, questions about the meaning of life, or about how to live, or about the interpretation of *Hamlet*). The fact that I cannot imagine how to program a computer to have these capacities does not mean that it can't or won't someday be done – my point is rather that if it were done, it would bring machines significantly closer to candidacy for inclusion in the group of 'selves like us.'

But perhaps, in the interest of looking at the ways in which smart machines still lack features essential to being selves like us, I was too quick to dismiss the bonds we do and can have with lower animals. Elephants paint, after all; birds sing; bunnies play; and cats are said to be curious (sometimes fatally so). Is it possible that they do or can have the sorts of traits that we cherish in each other? It is instructive to think for a moment about what a sensitivity to beauty or humor for an animal – or for that matter, for a young child - can be. Of course, I don't really know. I am not an ethologist, and even if I were, it would not be obvious or uncontroversial what it would take for an animal's behaviors to constitute evidence of an aesthetic sensibility or of wit. But I do want to insist that an attraction to some visual shapes and forms as opposed to others, to red, curvy things for example, or even to pictures of kittens, does not a sensitivity to beauty make, nor does a bird that responds predictably to a particular three-note pattern have a degree, however, lowly, of musical appreciation. To be sure, one has to start somewhere, in the development of aesthetic sensibility, both in the evolution of our species and in the cultivation of our individual capacities, and it may well be that such attractions and their opposites form the foundation of our acquisition of aesthetic taste. An attraction to sweet things may be the beginning of the development of a culinary sensibility; the six year old boy who is sent into peals of laughter by every use of the word "toilet" or "breast" may be at an incipient stage of a developing sense of humor. But, as interesting as it is to notice a continuum between such simple attractions, repulsions, and sensitivities, and the possession of a mature wit or aesthetic taste, it is also important to recognize how great the distance is between the primitive

capacities at issue and their mature realization in normal human adults. For it is the developed forms, and the potential for development that we cherish in ourselves and each other. It is the developed forms that contribute to an individual's distinctive identity, that can provide a basis for admiration, respect, and relationship. To be capable of a developed form of humor, a philosophical turn of mind, an aesthetic taste, among other things, it appears that one needs a combination of intellectual faculties and some other dispositions, difficult to identify or pin down on their own, that motivate and open one up to certain sorts of discriminations and values. Lower animals appear to lack the intellectual faculties to the requisite degree; but the powers of reason that might make, say, an artificially intelligent individual capable of solving all sorts of pre-defined problems may also be insufficient to ensure that it is capable of developing in these recognizably human ways. Moreover, the kinds of intellectual capacities needed to combine with primitive capacities for interest, amusement and pleasure for the development of humor, taste, and so on, are not well captured if we identify intelligence (or intellectual capacity) with reason or rationality. I am not sure what faculties are involved in the acquisition of a developed sense of humor or aesthetic taste, but I would not be surprised if these faculties were not picked up by our standard IQ tests or by the SATs.

So far I have looked at attributes and activities that might be thought to be particularly demanding of our intellects, and this may give rise to a concern that my picture of the distinctively human looks troublingly like that of an academic philosopher.

By “selves like us”, a critic might suggest, I seem to have in mind “selves like me” – that is like Susan Wolf, nerdy, bourgeois, 60-something American female. I acknowledge a danger of that (as it seems to me, there is always a danger in philosophizing about the human condition that one will overgeneralize from one’s own case, or those in one’s immediate purview, projecting their faculties and interests onto the species as a whole). The only way to protect against that or correct it that I know of is to ask for help from others, e.g., from you. If my claims about what ‘we cherish’ strike you as idiosyncratic or narrow, please say so. If my views are elitist or provincial, show me how. Before we get to the Q & A, though, let me make a few remarks preemptively in my defense.

First, we should be careful not to over-intellectualize what counts as a developed and mature form of humor, or of taste or of philosophy. Though some humor is highly cerebral much is not. The physical comedy of, say Buster Keaton, or Steve Martin is as different from a rat’s disposition to laugh in pleasure when tickled, as that of Oscar Wilde and George Bernard Shaw. And the kind of impulse to create and to appreciate aesthetic experience should not be interpreted in a way that confines this to engagement with the high arts. The aesthetic impulse shows itself in craft, in fashion, even in the tattoo parlor, as it does in kitchens all over the world, and the music that is passed down from generation to generation in the hollers of Appalachia is as far from birdsong as the compositions performed by the New York Philharmonic. Nor are the quests for meaning and self-understanding that are the basis of the urge to philosophize restricted to the educated upper classes. Arguably, the religion and mythologies of ancient and indigenous cultures

are symptoms of it – and if not, they are surely symptoms of something distinctively human I have not yet named.

But, second, it is also instructive to consider activities that we are not even tempted to think of as particularly intellectual – for example, athletics. For although we do admire animals for their physical elegance and skills – the grace and swiftness of a gazelle or a cheetah, for example, the acrobatics of a squirrel leaping from windowsill to birdfeeder, or the mouth-eye coordination of a Frisbee-catching golden retriever, the kind of admiration we have for (human) athletes seems to me to be of a qualitatively different kind. In the case of team sports or competitive games, this is at least partly because of the complexity of the performances in question. To play basketball or tennis, one must take in kinds of information, make kinds of decisions, exercise kinds of judgment that other animals are incapable of. Moreover, such skills have to be learned – not only because they involve conventional rules but also because it requires training and ingenuity to be able to develop oneself beyond a certain point.⁸ Connected to this, perhaps, is another feature of distinctively human endeavors that we have not yet emphasized, namely, the capacity to struggle against one's natural tendencies, to push oneself beyond one's natural limits. Though animals can *be* persistent, they cannot *choose* to be. They cannot display determination; they cannot possess strength (or for that matter, weakness) of will. When we compare an Olympic swimmer to a fish, a world-class mountain climber to a yak, both the expertise and the determination

⁸ Thus, one must train and learn to pace oneself in order to finish a marathon or climb a high mountain.

required for their activities are different, making the activities *achievements* for the human actors in a way they cannot be for the animals.

When human beings paint or sing, climb mountains, or take walks, then, they are doing something significantly different from an elephant or a warbler, a mountain goat or a bear, whose behavior we might use the same phrase to describe. In each case, the humans' greater cognitive powers, their intelligence, invests the activity with a meaning it cannot have in the case of their animal counterparts, making it plausible for others to see in the humans' activities reflections or expressions of selves like us. But these cognitive powers are not easily grasped or described in ways that we can imagine programming into machines.

Journals and books and You-tube videos are full of stories that bring out and celebrate the wonderful and impressive abilities of nonhuman animals and machines. They tell us how smart some of these animals are, and how much new computers can do. But in some contexts it is important also that we consider what they cannot do – or at any rate, how different they are from us. Importantly, the differences in what these other sorts of individuals do (and can do) seem to be reflections of differences in what they are (and can be). In particular, I am inclined to say, they are not and cannot be selves. What I mean by that is that their psychologies (in the case of those that have psychologies) are not rich enough to give them individual variegated points of view of the kind we respond to as one subject to another. Thinking about the difference between what goes on when a human being paints a picture or composes a song and what goes on when an elephant or a machine does these things, it seems reasonable to think that in the

former case but not the latter, the individual is expressing something. There is, as I want to put it, a self behind the painting or the song, that is reflected in what the creator creates, and this rightly affects the way we see or hear the art as well as the way we relate to the artist. This is true, or at least so I argued yesterday, even if one is primarily or even exclusively interested, at the conscious level, in the art alone and not in its creator.

It seems to me that the same can be said of our attitudes towards and interest in sports. Sports fans might well think of themselves as not having any interest in the psychologies of the players. They do not typically care about the athletes' lives, their thoughts, their politics – they just want to see a good game. But would there be any interest in watching a game played by two teams of basketball-playing robots or a competition between two robotic golfers – and if so, would the kinds of interest one would have in these events be the same as they are in the human games? I assume that they would not be the same, and that this brings out that what we care about in sports is also deeply connected to the fact that the athletes who are engaging in them are selves like us, realizing their potentials in way that reflect their individual efforts and styles.

What is it, then, to be or to have, a self? I regret that I don't have a satisfying answer. My repeated suggestions to imaginatively contrast human activities with animal and robotic ones are offered as substitutes for an adequate characterization. I have said that to have a self involves having a rich and variegated point of view, but what I mean by a rich and variegated point of view still remains elusive. By rich and variegated, I do not simply mean fine-grained or complex; by a point of view, I do

not simply mean a spatio-temporal location from which a sensing individual perceives the world. (In these senses, an animal or an artificially intelligent machine clearly can have a rich and variegated point of view.) Rather, I mean something like a 'take' on the world, that involves evaluative assessments as well as physical discriminations, that sees objects, activities, goals, and so on as more or less worthwhile, interesting, or good. Moreover, it is part of the idea of a self that such evaluative discriminations are not blind or arbitrary, but are rather results of an active intelligence that synthesizes thoughts, experiences, perceptions, and desires, continually updating the self's point of view, so that it is in principle always subject to change.

Strictly speaking, it is possible for an individual to be (or possess) a self without being (or possessing) a self *like us*. For to be a self, as I am using the term, is to have a psychology that is rich enough to have what I am gesturing at when I talk about a variegated and evaluative take on the world, and it is in principle possible that an individual could have such a take but, because its perceptual mechanisms, its needs and wants and its emotional repertoire are so different from ours that its perspective is unintelligible to us. Extraterrestrials might have selves, but selves that are not like us in important respects, that would limit the kinds of relationships we could have with them to forms of mere cooperation or its opposite. And it seems conceptually possible that other species on our own planet or artificially intelligent machines could evolve or develop in such a way that they would come to have selves as well, that may or may not be similar enough to us for us to consider them selves

like us.⁹ Since my primary interest is in the idea of the distinctively human, however, I shall leave aside further speculation about selves who are not like us, at least for today.

I am inclined to say that selves, and only selves, can have characters, as opposed to mere collections of behavioral and psychological dispositions; that only selves can understand and appreciate things, as opposed to merely being in possession of facts; and that, consequently, only selves can have virtues and vices. Though I do not know how to prove such things, I hope they will be plausible when one thinks not only about how a chess-playing computer or a robotic basketball player differs from a human one, and how an elephant painter or a singing bird differs from a human artist, but also when one compares what it means when people say that lions are courageous, that lambs are gentle, and that crocodiles are mean, with what we mean when we attribute these qualities to individual people.

As I have said before, it does not really matter for my purposes whether the generalizations I have been making about animals and robots are literally true. It does not matter, that is, whether it is literally true that no animal or machine can be courageous in the way a human can be courageous, that no animal or machine can make a painting that could mean what a human can mean when she paints. For my point is not to insist that selves like us are restricted to members of our own species. My point is rather to call attention to what it is to have the qualities that we value in ourselves, so that we do not settle for overly crude descriptions of these things and

⁹ Wittgenstein's cryptic remark that "if a lion could speak, we wouldn't understand him," comes to mind here. I've never been sure what he meant by this, but if one takes it literally, one might wonder how he can be so sure.

thereby misunderstand or neglect things that we value. The reason for comparing a lion's courage to human courage is to understand what we mean by courage; the reason for comparing a chorus of birds to an a capella group is to understand what we mean by music; and more generally, the reason to compare humans to lower animals, machines, and other conceivable rational beings, is to understand what it is to be a self like us – that is, to be enough of a self and enough like us, to be a candidate for membership in a certain particularly rewarding kind of community, for “participation with others”, in P.F. Strawson's words, “in inter-personal human relationships.”

Aside from the intrinsic interest of such a project (which I hope is considerable), engaging in it may help us avoid certain errors. Against the background in particular of a history in which the association of humanity with rationality has been over-emphasized, attention to the ways in which rationality falls short and to the ways in which other features contribute to being a self like us may serve as a useful corrective. One place where the inquiry may have practical relevance is in the area of education, where the tendency, first (at least in the United States), to see education in purely instrumental terms, and second to so strongly favor training in the STEM¹⁰ disciplines over support for the arts and humanities may be linked to the unreflective association between our humanity, or our personhood, and our reason. Attention to this issue should also make a difference, I think, to many issues in philosophy and the social sciences. For the overemphasis on reason and rationality, and the corresponding under-emphasis on other features

¹⁰ STEM stands for science, technology, engineering, and mathematics.

of human psychology, have shaped not only our conception of what is distinctively human, but our analyses of many of the other features with which our humanity is associated – our analyses, for example, of intelligence, of creativity, of value, of character, and of responsibility.

To illustrate this last point, let me conclude by returning to the topic of responsibility to draw some connections between today's speculations and the discussion of that topic in yesterday's lecture. It is common in philosophy to think of responsible agency as a more or less unified property distinguishing some individuals from others. To be a responsible agent, it is tempting to say, is to be an individual whose relation to his actions (and omissions) is such as to make him an appropriate object of praise and blame, reward and punishment, gratitude and resentment. Responsible agency is frequently regarded as a mark of personhood, or of the distinctively human, and, although there is no consensus on sufficient conditions of responsible agency, there is general agreement that the powers of rational deliberation and self-control are at any rate necessary conditions.

In yesterday's lecture, however, I argued that reflecting on the relation between artists and their art, and on art-appreciators' relation to both, gave us reason to question both the clarity and the unity of the concept of responsibility. For it seemed to me that there was a sense in which one might regard an artist as aesthetically responsible for her art even if, due perhaps to mental illness or some other psychological impairment, she were not rational and self-controlled enough to be held responsible for following social norms. A person's art might move us or speak to us, as a communication from one subject to another, even if the person

were not fully responsible in a sense that made it appropriate to hold her accountable for her behavior. At the same time, I suggested, it is possible (even easy) to imagine an individual who is fully accountable for her behavior, but who is totally without the ability not only to create art but to respond to art. A fully morally accountable agent might entirely lack a sensitivity to art and beauty.

In the context of today's lecture, we might say that a sensitivity to beauty is just one example among many of the features that we humans possess and cherish in ourselves and one another that the powers of rational deliberative agency and self-control neither require nor assure. The capacities for empathy, for humor, for philosophy, the ability to develop an evaluative take on the world that is continually updated through the acquisition and integration of new experiences and thoughts, are all aspects that contribute to an individual's being "selves like us", potential participants in the kinds of interpersonal relationships and communities that are among the most rewarding and meaningful aspects of our lives. If being a responsible agent is supposed to put one in this class, then responsible agency requires something more or other than the powers of rational deliberation and self-control.

But those powers are distinctively important, and there are some contexts where they are overwhelmingly more important than any of these other possible features of individuals. It is those powers, in particular, that give us the ability to negotiate with each other, that allow us to formulate norms and follow them, that make it possible for us establish complex systems of enforcement, expectation, and trust – in short, that allow us to cooperate with each other, in ways on which

civilization – and according to some theories, morality - depends. And so it seems to me there is a reason to hold on to a concept that distinguishes individuals who have these powers from those who do not. Who fits into this category? Normal adult human beings, at least. But perhaps other rational beings as well, including possible aliens and certain sorts of non-normal adult human beings, such as sociopaths. And perhaps also organizations, such as corporations and states. The category I have in mind – the category of individuals who, according to the vocabulary I brought up yesterday, is the category of individuals who can reasonably be held accountable for things – is at least roughly the same as the class that Peter Singer and others would identify as “persons.”

The point of these lectures, then, is not to cast that category into doubt or to derogate the significance of rational deliberation as a feature of our identity. It is rather to warn against identifying being a “person” in this sense with being “a self like us,” a member of the broader and messier category to which one refers when one talks about what falls within the range of “the distinctively human.”

I announced at the beginning of my talk that this lecture would raise more questions than it would answer – and I hope that you think that I have made good on that claim if on nothing else. To the question What is the distinctively human? I have certainly not given an answer, nor even ruled out the possibility that we should at some point stop asking that question and pursue self-understanding in other terms. Still, it is better to know what we do not know and to be aware of what we have falsely assumed, than to carry on happy in the illusion that when we speak of

responsibility, of personhood, and of that which makes us distinctively human, we know what we are talking about.