

Self-consciousness—a necessary condition of personhood

Whether Koko the gorilla possesses it and How the MSR test fails to prove it

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Koko, a female western lowland gorilla, is probably one of the most controversial entity debated in terms of personhood. Specifically speaking, a key issue of rendering Koko as a person is whether she possesses self-consciousness, a necessary condition of personhood. Although some may argue that Koko does not have it, I myself would definitely regard her as a fully self-conscious being.

Without a clear-cut definition of the terminology we cannot have a meaningful discussion. Self-consciousness is separated into two distinct categories: the basic one refers to the ability to recognize oneself as an individual different from the environment and other individuals; the elaborate one refers to the capacity of reflecting upon oneself's own thoughts and feelings.

Self-consciousness as a necessary condition of personhood may incur harsh refutations. If we trace the implications of this definition, we will find that some human beings inevitably fall out of the realm of personhood, while some animals with high cognitive ability are included into the concept of *person*. Then some religious believers will definitely argue that because human beings were created by God, while animals were not, personhood should only be granted to human beings. Also, some human rights activists will claim that *a human being is inherently entitled some basic rights as a person simply because she or he is a human being*. Since no human being should be excluded from these basic rights, which are inherently bounded with personhood, no human being should be excluded from being person.

However, if we examine these claims deliberatively, we could find that by defining personhood as a quality automatically granted to every human, we are actually protecting the advantages of human beings **as a species** over other species, while avoiding exploring the true meaning of being a person **from a completely objective perspective**. Yet it is so hard to remain objective because we ourselves are all part of the species of human beings. It would be much easier if we could imagine ourselves

as *Gods* (I use the word *God* here to represent a truly objective being) devoid of prejudice, standing aside from the civilization, pondering only over the truth.

Till then everything will become crystal clear: if mentally disordered, unselfconscious human beings are still considered as persons and granted basic rights, serious problems will arise. Since they couldn't critically reflect upon their own mental activities, immoral thoughts could not be rectified and harmful behaviors might be conducted. If, for instance, an unselfconscious human cannot critically assess his own primitive sex impulse, he would be very likely to conduct sexual assaults in the future, thus violating the basic rights of other persons, because he doesn't even realize this is an improper and immoral thought. He would just follow the natural impulse and do what the genes tell him to do. In a word, he is no different from an animal with low cognitive ability, lacking the capacity to adjust his thoughts and behaviors in a proper way. Then if he cannot properly exercise those rights that come together with personhood, how could we, in an objective and logical sense, grant him that quality?

Therefore, considering the catastrophic consequences of granting personhood to unselfconscious being, we need to include self-consciousness into the necessary conditions of being a person. After all, physiological similarities between the considered entity and the human being shouldn't be one of the conditions (no matter necessary or sufficient) of personhood—**psychological capabilities** are the ones that truly matter.

After exploring self-consciousness as a necessary condition of personhood, let's talk about the basic form of it. The main piece of evidence that the opposite side brought up about this issue is that gorillas failed the mirror self-recognition (MSR) test, which is often considered as the Litmus test of self-consciousness. Although Koko reportedly passed the MSR test, opposers stated that Koko only got through it without the use of anaesthetic, a way of removing virtually, olfactory and tactile cues of the mark essential to the MSR test to make sure that every bit of information obtained by the being is through the use of the mirror.

However, several issues in this argument should be addressed critically:

- whether Koko actually failed the MSR test;
- whether the MSR test successfully demonstrated the being's self-consciousness; and
- whether there exists a better standard to test a being's self-consciousness.

As for the first one, we all know the traditional procedure of conducting the MSR test is that:

- the being is firstly exposed to a mirror to see if there is any indication of self-recognition;

- with a mark added to the distracted (usually anaesthetized) being, the being's physical appearance is altered in such a way that the being can only detect it with the presence of a mirror;
- once marked, the being is exposed to the mirror again.

If the being shows evidences of touching the mark while looking in the mirror, it is considered to be self-conscious. However, in the case of Koko, Francine Patterson and Wendy Gordon, researchers conducting the MSR test to Koko, altered the procedure for ethical reasons so that Koko would not be anesthetized. They exposed Koko to a mirror five times, during which *her brow was wiped with a warm, damp and pink washcloth*. In one of these five times the washcloth was *dipped in paint of the same colour*. It was reported that during those four times when Koko was not marked, she touched the target area with an average frequency. However, during the time she was marked, she touched the target area 47 times more frequently than usual only with the help of a mirror.

Now the opposite side may argue that the paint can be detected by Koko's senses of smell, touch and taste, thus violating the key precondition of a normal MSR test: the marking process should go unnoticed. However, we can see from the whole process that the MSR test given to Koko satisfies this condition, otherwise Koko would frequently touch that target area even without the aid of a mirror. Then why shouldn't we accept this altered MSR test? Also, human child conducting this test, instead of being anaesthetized, is often marked surreptitiously when he/she is distracted. If human child can be acknowledged to possess self-consciousness without being anaesthetized in the MSR test, why cannot Koko? Therefore, we could surely conclude from the above that Koko the gorilla should be considered as a being passing the MSR test.

But is the MSR test a good indicator of a being's self-consciousness? If we take a close look at the definition of self-consciousness, we will find that the basic level is the ability to recognize oneself as an individual different from the environment and other individuals. The whole assumption behind the MSR test is that the ability to recognize oneself **in the mirror** demonstrates the ability to recognize oneself different from others. However, why would we need to introduce a mirror, a thing exclusively used by human being, to test a non-human creature's ability to self-recognize?

It turns out that by using the mirror, the MSR test builds the test of altering a being's appearance directly upon the being's ability to distinguish between its image and another being of similar appearance in the mirror. This unnecessary prerequisite excludes beings who cannot meet the requirement but can actually pass the altering test, the part where their abilities to self-recognize are truly examined. The reason why I address this precondition is that gorilla lives in a social structure called troops, consisting of only one adult male, multiple adult females and their offsprings. Therefore, as soon as a male gorilla becomes adult, it probably would not get many chances to see other male gorillas of similar appearance. Although I do not have hard evidences that the gorillas reported failing the MSR test are all males, it accounts for at

least half of the explanation why some gorillas failed the MSR test. Besides, the reason why some researchers reported Koko's failure of the MSR test may probably be that Koko was trained by human from the age of 1. She lacked the opportunity to see beings similar to her own appearance. It makes no sense to determine a being's self-consciousness by testing its ability to recognize itself from a being of similar appearance if it doesn't typically have a chance to see that kind of similar beings. In other words, the being must be very familiar with its own image and the images of other similar beings in order to pass the MSR test. That's why, for say, human child reportedly passed the MSR test successfully and why dogs and gorillas failed: they are either unfamiliar with their own images or with their conspecifics' images. Truly some intelligent critters can figure out their own images even without seeing them in the past, that criteria should only be taken into consideration in the realm of intelligence instead of self-consciousness. After all, we should only focus on one variable in one test, *ceteris paribus*.

In order to tackle this problem, I would simply remove the mirror and design a experiment in which the being is marked surreptitiously on part of itself that it can see by its own eyes. The being must first realize that the mark is not part of itself before it touches more frequently on the target area. By removing that nonessential precondition of recognizing oneself from beings of similar appearance, this test is way less complicated than the MSR test but can tell way more accurately about the being's self-consciousness.

Apart from the MSR test, there is actually a far better indicator of Koko's self-consciousness - the use of language, a compelling way to examine the being's elaborate form of self-consciousness. According to the same research conducted by Francine Patterson and Wendy Gordon, *Koko talks about her feelings, using words like 'happy', 'sad', 'afraid', 'enjoy', 'eager', 'frustrate', 'mad' and, quite frequently, 'love'*. This clearly demonstrates Koko's ability of expressing her own feelings, emotions and inner states. Moreover, *she can talk about what happens when one dies, but she becomes fidgety and uncomfortable when asked to discuss her own death or the death of her companions*. Therefore, Koko can critically reflect upon her inner state: whether it feels right to think about something inappropriate and whether or not she should avoid thinking about it. With the presence of language, a powerful indicator for a being's self-consciousness, it is unreasonable to use a far less convincing MSR test to determine Koko's self-consciousness.

To sum up, Koko the gorilla, from my perspective, is a self-conscious being because she passed the altered the MSR test and she showed her awareness and reflection of her inner state by language. This conclusion could be extended to any gorilla with proper trainings, even the whole species of gorilla, for Koko has demonstrated the potential that every gorilla could achieve not only in self-consciousness, but also, more importantly, in personhood. I sincerely hope that the above discussions could shed light on further investigations of Koko the gorilla's personhood.