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Are All Humans Persons?

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Abstract

In this paper I propose a formal take on the question of whether all humans are persons, leaving aside the ethical aspects of the question which are usually given more attention. I define “all humans are persons” as a postulate of the form $\forall x(H(x) \rightarrow P(x))$ and attempt to prove it by \forall -introduction. I then evaluate this method in comparison with a more semantically-focused attempt to prove that “humans” and “persons” are logically equivalent or synonymous, as opposed to having a generalised conditional relationship. This paper concludes that due to the nature of the concepts of humanity and personhood, formal approaches to proving this postulate, despite being advantageous in some ways, will always fall short.

Whether all humans are persons, whether personhood is entailed by humanity and other such questions, are important legal and ethical concerns. There has been no shortage of writing on the matter from a moral perspective, not least because the quality of being a person is commonly associated with entitlement to additional rights under the law. The debate surrounding abortion is an obvious example of this association; the distinction between a human and a person has been used to justify abortion on the grounds that a foetus is a member of the former category but not the latter and hence does not have a distinct “right to life”, for instance by abortion provider Dr. Parker as quoted in *The Blaze*.¹

However, it seems that the moral implications of this question have consumed and taken over what would usually be a question of categorisation, of verifying whether a postulated logical equivalence holds. Leaving aside the matter of whether an

¹ Scanlon, Kate “Abortion provider: ‘A fetus is not a person; it’s a human entity’” *The Blaze*, Feb 8 2017

ethical statement has truth-value, an ethical treatment of the question of whether humans are persons arguably fails to reach the crux of the issue. Instead of being treated as a predicate with its own intrinsic definition, personhood is often established as a necessary and sufficient condition for the granting of other properties and rights to the elements of the domain for which the predicate *personhood* (henceforth *P*) is true. One legal text even describes personhood, rather explicitly, as “an *instrument* ... for claiming certain rights and privileges.”² [italics added]

As exemplified by the scenario involving abortion, one may argue that all humans are persons (or, conversely, that some humans are not persons) and implicitly mean that all humans are entitled to the rights attributed to persons, which is not equivalent to all humans *being* persons; it only shows that humans and persons have some rights in common. While the applicability of human rights is a valid discussion in its own right and one which social commentators will never tire of having, it does not get to the logical core of the question; that is, the nature of the postulate “all humans are persons” as a proposition. The aim of this essay is to take a different look at the question in the title, and to explore whether logical and linguistic reasoning can tackle the question of whether all humans are persons in a way in which the tired ethical debates surrounding the topic cannot.

The statement can be paraphrased as “for all x , humanity entails personhood” (where x is naturally a free variable) and symbolically represented as $\forall x (H(x) \rightarrow P(x))$. At first glance, this is a straightforward generalised conditional which can be proven the normal way. The general method for proving a generalised conditional, known as \forall -introduction, is to assume some instance of $H(x)$, prove $P(x)$, discharge the assumption and infer that $H(x) \rightarrow P(x)$ for arbitrary x and therefore for all x . Alternatively, it is not necessary to assume $H(x)$ because $\neg H(x) \rightarrow P(x)$, having a false antecedent, is trivially true.³ The proof would hence look something like the following:

- Let x be arbitrary.
- [Proof of $H(x) \rightarrow P(x)$]
- Since x is arbitrary, it can be inferred that $\forall x (H(x) \rightarrow P(x))$

This method can be used to prove generalised conditionals, given certain conditions. I shall use a fairly trivial set-theoretic example to illustrate this.

Example: Let A and B be sets. Prove that $A \cup B = A \rightarrow A \supseteq B$.⁴

- 1) $A \supseteq B \equiv \forall x(x \in B \rightarrow x \in A)$
- 2) $x \in B$ (assumption)
- 3) $A \cup B = A \rightarrow (x \in B \rightarrow x \in A)$
- 4) $\forall x(x \in B \rightarrow x \in A)$ (from 2 & 3)

² McHugh, James T. “What Is the Difference between a ‘Person’ and a ‘Human Being’ within the Law.” *The Review of Politics*, vol. 54, no. 3, 1992, pp. 445–461

³ Cohen, Marc S. “Methods of Proof for Quantifiers.” *Introduction to Logic Lecture 12*. University of Washington, Seattle.

⁴ The postulate for this proof is the contrapositive of a postulate on an example sheet from Stanford’s Introduction to Logic course, but the proof itself is the writer’s own.

Thus, by assuming that x is arbitrary and using the axioms of set theory (or first-order logic, depending on which language is being used), a set-theoretic statement which turned out to be equivalent to a generalised conditional is demonstrably provable. It should, however, now be rather obvious that a similar method would not work for the statement in the title of the essay. Such a method would have to proceed by proving that $H(x) \rightarrow P(x)$ and generalising the proof, and while it would be possible to generalise it by assuming that x is arbitrary (one would simply assume $x: H(x)$), there is no way to reach the conditional from this assumption.

In the example proof, it was quite evident that if x were an arbitrary element of B and the set A were defined as the union of A and B , x would also be an element of A , but the proof relied on “translating” the consequent ($A \supseteq B$) of the original conditional into a conditional in its own right and subsequently using the antecedent of the original conditional to prove the translated consequent with the help of the axioms of set theory (i.e. the definition of the union of two sets). This could not be done in the case of $\forall x(H(x) \rightarrow P(x))$, for two reasons.

The first of these is simply structural: the proof in the example contained an additional “building block” in the form of the definition of A as $A \cup B$, and an additional definition can make all the difference to the provability of a statement. The second concerns another component of a proof which can be used to deduce its results: axioms. The union of two sets is a clearly-defined concept in set theory which can be uncontroversially used as an axiom from which to derive other results; the same cannot be said of the notions of humanity and personhood, which have no axioms to bind them and may vary wildly depending on the context of their discussion and the background and political stance of whomever is interpreting them. Hence, one can conclude that although the statement in the title of this essay is in effect a generalised conditional and humanity and personhood, being attributes, could be defined as predicates, this statement is not logically provable due to the nature of the concepts it involves.

Another way of evaluating the statement “All humans are persons” is to take a more linguistic approach, inspired by how the meanings of and relations between words are analysed in semantics. To go about this, the statement could be interpreted in two different ways, each representing a side of a divide which, although it has blurred recently and some deny emphatically that it should exist, still runs through formal grammar: the divide between formal and functional linguistic theories. Formal approaches favour more abstract analyses focusing on structures (phonemes, morphemes, sentences and so on) in and of themselves, whereas functional ones emphasise how such structures are shaped by how they are used.⁵ Noting this theoretical distinction, one may rephrase the question in the title of this essay either as “Are ‘human’ and ‘person’ logically equivalent?” or as “Are ‘human’ and ‘person’ synonyms?”

Given the definition of two or more statements as logically equivalent if they have “the same truth-value in every model”⁶, it is tempting to conflate this concept with synonymy, which can also colloquially mean that two statements are interchangeable. To an extent, both concepts represent functional perspectives,

⁵ Coffin, Caroline, Donohue, Jim and North, Sarah. *Exploring English grammar: From formal to functional*. Routledge, 2013. 13.

⁶ Mendelson, Elliott. *Introduction to Mathematical Logic*. Springer US, 1987. 9.

since “model” in this context could be equivalent to “use” (in model theory, the term usually refers to the structure within which the axioms of a theory are applied). Therefore, while proofs of logical equivalency are most commonly written and justified using formal language, the requirement of a ‘model’ means that this does not invariably have to be the case. However, the notion of synonymy goes further; instead of merely being a formally provable relation of, crudely put, ‘sameness in all situations’, synonymy encompasses a wealth of stylistic and sociocultural subtleties and implications⁷, making a formal proof of synonymy impossible. Using the criteria of logical equivalence or synonymy appears to have its advantages over attempting to prove that all humans are persons through first-order logic or set theory. For one thing, it treats humanity and personhood as what they are: not abstract units, but *words*, bound just as much by the pragmatics of their use as by the grammatical and syntactical contexts in which they occur – even more so when synonymy is the chosen criterion. For another, no additional definitions or axioms are required to show that the terms ‘human’ and ‘person’ are logically equivalent or synonymous, because both of these attributes are (in this context) based on the use and the semantic characteristics of the terms rather than having the syntactical basis which a proof using formal language would have had.

Unfortunately, these criteria present us with their own problems. The statement “All humans are persons” is not a biconditional; although it entails that all humans are persons, it says nothing about whether all persons are humans, and therefore nothing about the equivalence or otherwise of the two predicates. Moreover, synonymy amounts to more than just “all *x* is *y*”; it is a narrower relation and implies an element of stylistic identity which is not implied by “all humans are persons.”⁸ All that is meant by “all humans are persons” is that everything which happens to be a human also happens to be a person; not any sort of tonal commonality between the words.

So it seems that neither logic nor semantic theory has helped to find a sound approach with which to prove or disprove that all humans are persons. A successful proof of this postulate must meet a number of demanding criteria: it must not be totally formal, so as not to ignore the subjective interpretations of “humanity” and “personhood” which make the terms so difficult to define, yet it must also preserve the status of the postulate as undeniably a generalised conditional. It may well be impossible to write any such proof, and so it is likely that the postulate is not decidable. If this experiment with logical and linguistic proof has shown one thing, it is that when there is no way to reason that a conditional or an equivalence is true, the result is a debate such as the one surrounding whether humanity entails personhood: one with no correct answer, ever more obfuscatory language, and the decision of whether to view all humans as persons left entirely up to subjective interpretation and the lurking influence of social mores.

⁷ Dowty, David R., Robert E. Wall, and Stanley Peters. *Introduction to Montague Semantics*. Springer Netherlands, 1981. 49.

⁸ Ibid.