

Philosophy on Humanity

ROGER WERTHEIMER*

People often disagree about how a person should act. Yet they agree that whether a person should perform some act depends upon what kinds of things are affected by the act and how those things are affected. For most of us, whether and how an inanimate thing is affected is generally not *in itself* a consideration; we think such effects provide reasons for acting (or refraining) only insofar as they relate to effects on something else such as a human being (e.g., the agent or the object's owner). But, for most of us, the beneficial and harmful effects of a person's act on a human being are *in themselves* relevant considerations; we regard an act's harming some human being (the agent or others) as itself a reason for a person to refrain from the act. That is, we accord an inanimate thing a *dependent moral status*, and a human being an *independent moral status*. The moral status of animals is controversial, but most people believe that, whether independent or not, an animal's moral status is *inferior* to a human being's. Though an act's having harmful effects on an animal may itself be a reason for refraining from the act, the reason is of a lower order than the reason provided by an act's having an equivalently harmful effect on a human being.¹

The Standard Belief

Let us call the kind of moral status most people ascribe to human beings *human (moral) status*. The term refers to a kind of independent and superior consideration to be accorded an entity, not to the kind of entity to be accorded the consideration, so it is not a definitional truth that human beings have human status. But most people believe that being human has *moral cachet*: viz., a human being has human status in

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virtue of being a human being (and thus each human being has human status). Call this the *Standard Belief*. That most people accept it is an empirical fact.

Though establishing this fact requires the services of social science, we are already familiar with a sufficiency of evidence, enough to remove most doubts on the matter without further surveys by removing confusions about the data. Among the best batches of data we have is what people say and do and feel regarding the issue of the morality of abortion. Presumably it's common knowledge that few people do or would say: "What difference does it make whether a fetus is a human being? What's that got to do with the morality of abortion?" People disagree over whether and when abortions are morally objectionable primarily, if not solely, because they disagree over whether and when a fetus is a human being. The other pertinent facts are not much disputed (e.g., facts about the other properties of fetuses and facts about the consequences of aborting and not aborting). So too with the pertinent moral principles: while people may disagree somewhat about what overriding considerations may legitimate killing a human being, most people believe that killing a human being is in principle wrong and that, if a fetus is a full-fledged human being, it may be destroyed only for those reasons that justify destroying any other human being.² The very structure of this familiar controversy evidences a shared assumption: the Standard Belief.

That structure and thus its value as evidence here may be challenged. Pro-abortionists often insist that the dispute is due, not to differing beliefs about the humanness of the fetus, but to an allegiance to some consideration anti-abortionists deny or deemphasize, such as the mother's rights regarding her own body and welfare. That insistence, however sincere, is rarely reliable testimony. Usually, whatever the alleged moral consideration, it applies in two conceivable cases differing only in that the victim is a fetus in one case and a week- or year- or ten-year-old child in the other. And if, as is usual, the pro-abortionist judges the cases differently—if, for example, he would sanction a mother's destroying her fetus solely because it threatens her with an emotional or economic breakdown, while he balks at her exterminating her week-old (or year- or ten-year-old) offspring for the sole same reason—then usually that is good reason for presuming that his beliefs about abortion depend upon his beliefs about the differences between fetuses and children. And usually it can be shown, and (what is not the same thing) often the pro-abortionist will come to admit that the morally relevant difference for him is that children are human beings and fetuses are not. Sometimes he will first maintain that some other difference (e.g., independent existence) is the morally relevant

one, but when he imagines a child similar to a fetus in the alleged relevant respect (e.g., an incubated infant), usually he continues to condone annihilation of the fetus but not the child. And further inquiry usually reveals that his alleged relevant respect actually operates as (part of) his reason for calling a child, but not a fetus, a human being.

But now, there are no simple or foolproof procedures for determining what someone believes; they all require a knack, skill, and sensitivity for their application, and none is infallible. And not just because people may lie or be self-deceived. The difficulties are those involved in explaining a phenomenon, for to ascribe a belief to someone is to explain certain facts about him, to make sense of certain patterns in his behavior (including, but not confined to, his speech behavior). What even the most intelligent and sincere of persons *claims* to accept as moral principles usually turns out to be a hodgepodge of rules inconsistent with each other and with his own considered judgments on particular cases. Sometimes we may say he holds contradictory beliefs; other times that what he *really* believes is what he would agree to after proper reflection that clears away confusion or what explains the largest and/or most significant aspects of his behavior. No doubt the criteria for "proper" reflection and for explanatory power are problematic. And so too the distinction between what someone presently believes and what he will agree to on the basis of his present beliefs is difficult to draw and apply if only because attempts to determine what someone believes (e.g., by his reflecting on contrasting cases) may alter his beliefs. Still, there is a clear enough sense in which, whatever else they may believe, most people accept the Standard Belief. That belief is here ascribed to them, not primarily because it matches their reports of their belief on the matter, but because it provides the best account of why they believe that all humans and no animals have human status and why their arguments over abortion and many other issues take the form they do, and so on. (The "and so on" refers to numerous and diverse facts, only some of which will get mentioned.)

Again, to ascribe a belief is to explain. Whether or not the ascription is made *on the basis of* the person's behavior (self-ascribed beliefs generally are not), the ascription must be testable against the person's behavior for it to be able to explain and make sense of that behavior. Now, to explain the actions of a creature in terms of its beliefs (desires and the like) is to explain them as the actions of a rational (or at least intelligent) creature—and to do that one must presuppose a theory of rationality. For a person's behavior is evidence of some belief only given the assumption that he has certain conative and affective struc-

tures and capacities (e.g., certain desires) and also certain information-gathering (perception) and storage (memory) structures and capacities as well as certain physical structures and capacities for action. It is also evidence that the world in which he acts has certain physical structures and capacities. But even given this background of facts, his behavior is evidence only within a theory of rational behavior, a system of principles that state what someone would be believing, given the background assumptions, if he behaves in certain ways. Those principles are principles of rational thought and action. So what and how we do think is determinable only by assuming principles about what and how we ought to think. For that matter, determining any of the background facts or any fact at all presupposes the same assumption: an understanding of the physical world requires an understanding of our mental structures and capacities if only because without the latter one cannot discriminate appearance from reality, the self from the not-self.

The Factunorm Principle

Now a theory of rationality serves two functions. Its principles may be regarded as statements of natural laws with which to describe, predict, and explain the behavior of an entity given certain background conditions and the assumption that the entity is a rational creature (i.e., an entity operating in accordance with those laws). The same principles may be regarded as norms which a rational creature can conform to or violate and by which his activity can be assessed for its rationality. We may "assume" that we are rational (that we can and sometimes do act in conformity with rational principles) if only because we cannot do otherwise: to doubt or deny that oneself is rational is as self-defeating as doubting or denying that oneself exists, for in the very act of doubting or denying, one evidences the contrary. Now, a theory explains what is evidence for the theory, and what is explained by the theory is evidence for the theory. Thus, what and how we do think is evidence for the principles of rationality, what and how we ought to think. This itself is a methodological principle of rationality; call it the *Factunorm Principle*. We are (implicitly) accepting the Factunorm Principle whenever we try to determine what or how we ought to think. For we must, in that very attempt, think. And unless we can think that what and how we do think there is correct—and thus is evidence for what and how we ought to think—we cannot determine what or how we ought to think. Of course, we are fallible; sometimes we are mistaken in what or how we think. But that does not undermine the Factunorm

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Principle, for it is itself something we learn only by thinking and accepting that principle. And if we can learn of our mistakes we can learn from our mistakes, and thus, by thinking and accepting the Factunorm Principle, we can alter and improve what and how we think, gradually approximating what and how we ought to think. That capacity is the essence of rationality. One essential step in this process is learning that oneself is not special in this regard, that what and how anyone thinks may be evidence for what and how anyone ought to think. Another step is learning that what and how we think in certain circumstances is not much evidence for what and how we ought to think: As a part and prerequisite of the total learning process we continuously develop, refine, and apply an elaborate variety of criteria for evaluating the evidentiary value of the process and products of thought and thus for identifying those we have the best reason to trust and that are most likely to be correct (e.g., the person is mature, sane, calm, sober, of at least normal intelligence, possessed of the requisite subsidiary information, without relevant biases, etc.). Thus, when we speak here of common belief or what most people believe, we attend only to those beliefs we cannot find suspect for some relevant defect in the personal history of the belief. And we speak of what *most* people believe just because we have also learned that in disagreements between two groups of persons similar in the other relevant respects, the judgment of the larger group is more likely to be correct; however, while uncertainty increases as the difference in size diminishes, unanimity does not supply certainty. Any such belief, no matter how many people believe it, could be mistaken; and even if something is a necessary truth, we do not necessarily believe it. What and how we do think is *evidence* for rational principles, but a rational principle is not true *because* of what and how we think. A rational principle isn't true in virtue of anything: there neither need be, nor is, nor can be, any *foundation* for rational principles.³

Put it this way. The goal of philosophy is, as Socrates said, self-knowledge. For philosophy is, in essence, rationality reasoning about rationality. It is the process and product of creatures who are their own paradigms of rationality exercising the very capacities for which they deem themselves rational in the attempt to chart the processes and products of the proper exercise of those capacities. But philosophy is not introspective psychology; it is a normative science. The self that the self seeks to know is not, *per se*, the actual self but the ideal self, the ideally rational self, for it seeks to know how it ought to act (e.g., think); how it does act is of interest only insofar as that bears upon how it ought to act. But the self that seeks to know is, ineluctably, the actual self, and its experiences are, ineluctably, its actual experiences, and the only

objects it can experience are, ineluctably, the phenomena of the actual self and the rest of the actual world. The ideal self, the norms defining the ideal self, and the norms of rationality, are not possible objects of experience. The problem of self-knowledge, then, is not just whether and how the actual self can identify the ideal self using only the resources of the actual world but also whether and how the actual self can identify the actual self or anything in the actual or ideal world when information is available only insofar as the operations of the actual self accord with the operations of the ideal self—and when the actual self, in all its operations is fallible. So if the existence of the ideal self is understood on the model of the existence of the actual self, if rational principles need a foundation in some independent reality, than all true knowledge would be impossible short of some metaphysical-mystical leap. Since there need be no such foundation, knowledge of rational principles is (in principle) attainable through a dialectical process within and between actual selves over time. For, after all, what we are searching for is only an understanding of our search.

Moral Philosophy and the Standard Belief

All this—the Factunorm Principle and the rest plus more that could be said—is but an elaboration of two “assumptions”: we are rational, and it is rational to believe what is believed by rational persons. Of course, not every philosopher acknowledges the Factunorm Principle, let alone the rest of the foregoing. But many have expressed acceptance of that principle, particularly those intent on developing a substantive moral theory, a system of norms of rationality regarding moral matters. By their conscious practice and often by explicit statement, most such philosophers acknowledge that a reason for thinking that some moral belief implied by a theory is true (false) is that the belief is accepted (rejected) by most people. Certainly for most of the most important moral philosophers, conformity with common belief is a test and a touchstone if not the bedrock of moral theory. This is an empirical fact easily established; the texts are public and unequivocal.

That fact, taken with the fact that the Standard Belief is a common belief, might suggest that most if not all philosophers accept the Standard Belief. Yet the fact is they all reject it.⁴

The ineluctable question then is: Why do philosophers deny the Standard Belief?

The answer is hard to come by because the question has gone unasked. Philosophers don't explain their denial, for they hardly ever express it; it lies implicit in and entailed by what they do say. Mostly

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they don't discuss the Standard Belief at all or even demonstrate any awareness of its existence.

The answer is hard to come by as well because objections to the Standard Belief are hard to come by. I know of but two complaints that have ever been raised. One is that the belief that humans have a unique inherent value or dignity is *hubris* and nonsense. The other is that the belief that being a member of the human race is morally relevant is like the belief that being a member of the Aryan race is morally relevant. Both of those claims are true. The trouble is, no one has troubled himself to explain precisely how either of those claims constitutes an objection to the Standard Belief. If it's not obvious now that there is some trouble here, an explanation is forthcoming.

In any case, even if there exists an effective refutation of the Standard Belief, there exists no reason to think such a refutation has motivated philosophers to reject that belief. And even if it has, still, philosophical and common belief do collide here on a most fundamental moral issue, and we need to understand how that fact has passed unnoticed instead of being, as it should be, a philosophical *cause célèbre*. Philosophers must in general suppose either that their theories imply or are at least consistent with the Standard Belief or that in denying the Standard Belief they conform with common belief. Either or both possibilities must be regularly realized, for otherwise it seems inexplicable that the Standard Belief is routinely rejected with nary a word about it or with words betraying no cognizance of its centrality in common belief. These two possibilities come to much the same, for the mistakes in both cases share the same cause, a mistaken or misapplied methodology that throws doubt on the philosophers' conceptions of what the common belief is, on how their theories contrast with it, and, at the same time, on the truth of what these theories affirm.

Let us begin by clarifying the contrast between philosophical and common belief. And let us first remove a verbal similarity that masks a substantive difference, for many a philosopher has *said* (in so many words) that being human has moral cachet. But what he *means* is that being a *person* has moral cachet, that a human being has human status only because and insofar as a human being is a person. By contrast, most people believe a person has human status if the person is a human being.

The term 'human being' is correctly applied to all and only the members of our biological species. That specification is informative but incomplete without criteria for species membership. Being of human parents conceived is a partial criterion; it is explainable without circularity by referring to paradigm cases, but it provides neither a necessary condition (for, e.g., it excludes the original species members) nor a

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sufficient condition (for, e.g., it includes human terata whom we regard not as human beings but as some unfortunate kinds of mutants). But then, the abortion argument supplies sufficient evidence that no neat set of necessary and sufficient conditions for being human is generally agreed upon—which is to say there is no such set. For reasons not discussable here, it would be extraordinary if there were such a set of conditions. But disputes about what a human being is or which things are human beings do not indicate the existence of any linguistic divergences; on the contrary, such disputes require for their intelligibility that the disputants mean the same thing by the term 'human being'.

In common speech 'person' has various meanings; often it seems freely interchangeable if not synonymous with 'human being' or at least applicable to all human beings though perhaps not only human beings (gods are called persons). But in philosophy 'person' is a theoretical term defined differently in different subspecialties (e.g., ethics, philosophy of mind) and by different theories within each subspecialty. Moral theories generally intend it to be interchangeable with some term like 'entity having human status'. It may be defined by that term, thereby presenting the problem of determining which (ostensibly nonethical) properties are necessary and sufficient for having that status, or it may be defined by some set of (ostensibly nonethical) properties and then the problem is to determine whether those properties are necessary and sufficient for having that status. The two tactics come to the same. Theories differ over what the essential properties of persons are, but usually they select one or more cognitive or affective capacities such as rationality or sentience or a free will or a sense of justice—but never humanness. However, though 'person' is defined without reference to human beings, since a normal adult human being is the natural paradigm of both a person and a human being, philosophers follow the common practice of freely interchanging 'human being' and 'person'.

The conflict over the Standard Belief is also obscured by significant agreements on which things have human status. Most philosophers grant that no animal has human status (and thus that no property possessed by an animal has moral cachet or that animals do not possess such a property in sufficient degree) and that most human beings and certainly all normal adults have human status. Indeed, many theories seem intended to accord human status to all and (among known things) only human beings. But whatever their intent, none succeeds. They fail in different ways and for different reasons. Most make too stringent a requirement; typically they hold that only some developed (exercisable) capacity has moral cachet, thereby excluding humans whose al-

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legedly relevant capacities are undeveloped, deformed, or defunct. When the requirement is reduced to the possession of the original, native capacity alone, still humans with the relevant congenital defects are left out. And here the requirement may be too weak as well as too strong, for normal "infrahuman" fetuses⁵ may qualify while congenital defective adults do not. In other theories the requirement is just too weak, for while every human may qualify, some animals and/or "infrahuman" fetuses qualify as well as and sometimes better than some humans. Here, though the moral status of every human may be independent, it is not superior to that of some nonhuman beings. The reverse of this occurs in theories that first account for the moral status of some primary group (usually normal adults) and then admit the rest of the race through their relations (e.g., affectional bonds) to members of the primary group; every plausible suggested relation makes the moral status of the secondary group dependent upon the primary group (e.g., the effects of an act on the interests of an infant get considered only because and insofar as the affections of his parents and other normal adults are affected by effects on his interests). Moreover, with many of the suggested relations, members of the primary group could be so related to a nonhuman thing, thereby fitting it for the secondary group.

We need not examine individually each of the many theories (each with its own minor variations) to conclude that each fails to accord human status to all and only human beings. We need only reflect upon the gross disparities between various human beings and upon the close resemblances between some animals (or "infrahuman" fetuses) and some human beings to see that no property, not even a complex disjunct property, is possessed by all humans and no animals (or "infrahuman" fetuses) and is plausibly thought to have moral cachet. No property, that is, other than being human.⁶

More importantly, all this is ultimately beside the point, for the opposition over what has moral cachet is not itself and does not entail an opposition over which things have human status. The latter conflicts are unavoidable while the former persists. The Standard Belief is consistent with virtually any traditional theory's position regarding which particular things have human status; one need only claim, as many have tried to, that the entity in question—be it fetus, congenital idiot, or whatever—is not (or is) a human being. (The plausibility of the claim may vary from case to case [and audience to audience] but the forms of argument employed are remarkably constant: e.g., fetuses are likened to parts of their mothers, mongoloids to terata, the permanently comatose to vegetables, slaves to animals, etc.) The Standard Belief is a general principle, and disagreements on principles are

evidenced not so much by disagreements over judgments on particular cases ("verdicts") as by differing forms of reasoning employed in reaching those verdicts. Divergencies in verdicts attract more attention because of their more obvious practical import. But it is of more subtle and profound importance that, when arguing about abortion, euthanasia (without consent), infanticide, racial discrimination, and many, many other issues, nonphilosophers find it natural or necessary to claim on one basis or another that the creature in question is (or is not) a human being so that they can then conclude that the creature should (or need not) be regarded and treated as befits one with human status. Philosophers may reach similar verdicts by ascribing moral cachet to some property roughly coextensive with being human, and, since that property may sometimes be relevant in arguments over the humanness of a creature, they may employ similar bases in reaching those verdicts. Still, philosophers employ those bases differently, for *their* arguments bypass the issue of the creature's humanness as essentially irrelevant. Understandably, a philosopher might misconstrue this situation supposing either that his theory entails the Standard Belief and thereby conforms to common belief or that it conforms to common belief while denying the Standard Belief. But actually all such theories entail competitors to the Standard Belief and thereby reject common belief. In fine, a theory lacking the Standard Belief is comparable, not to a theory that would punish arsonists more severely than murderers, but to one that determines whom to punish and how severely without employing the notion of desert at all.

Principles and Verdicts

Traditional philosophers are liable to be misled about such matters because they practice a curious kind of doublethink: while regarding the verdicts of common belief as data against which to test their theories, they have not treated the principles of common belief as an independent form of evidence. Theorists have been concerned to formulate principles which, when taken with the facts of any situation, generate the same conclusion a competent moral judge would reach when faced with the same facts, but beyond this they have displayed little concern over whether their principles reflect the reasoning by which a competent moral judge reaches his conclusions. At minimum, theorists rarely mention the relevant evidence, so there's little reason to think they have been moved by it or have even noticed it.

This practice is indefensible. The philosopher cannot, with consistency, respect our verdicts without respecting our operative principles,

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our forms of reasoning. For, first our verdicts include judgments about people's motives and characters as well as about their actions and institutions; and if as I assume, a moral theory is meant to provide us with a system of reasons we could employ when deciding how to act, then those reasons must be measured against our verdicts regarding a man's motivation and character and thus regarding his principles as well as against the verdicts on the actions directed by those motivating principles. Secondly and more directly, it makes no sense to regard our verdicts as data for testing putative rational principles unless one takes those verdicts to be the output of the operation of rational principles. Any plausible reason *for* accepting our verdicts as evidence for or *against* presumed norms will rely on those verdicts being evidence of rational norms.

No doubt, unless a difference in principles is *possible, determinable,* and *important* independently of differences in the verdicts they imply, none of this matters.⁷ Such a difference is as possible as extensional equivalence with intensional dissimilarity. The difference can be of the form: 'In situation A, do X' versus 'In situation B, do Y' where A and B regularly coincide; or 'In situation A, do X' versus 'In situation A, do Y' where doing X and doing Y regularly coincide. Besides, the implied verdicts of different principles would count as the same for the purpose of a moral theory as long as their differences were marginal as judged by the considerations bearing on the assessment of the theory: e.g., the divergencies were restricted to fact situations possible only in a world quite unlike ours in very general respects or to fact situations for which no one verdict is firmly and confidently accepted by most people.

Now I have already said that a difference in principles is evidenced, independently of any difference in verdicts, by a difference in the forms of reasoning employed in reaching the verdicts. This difference will seem unimportant if one takes it to consist solely in that people with different principles are disposed to utter different sound patterns when justifying their verdicts. But surely that can't be the whole difference, for if it were there would cease to be any difference in the meanings of the different utterances. Surely, even if we were certain someone would invariably do the right thing though always for the wrong reasons, we would still care what his reasons were, and we could still consider them the wrong reasons. Or rather, to turn this around, in an important respect a person can't do the right thing for the wrong reason, for *what* someone is doing depends not just on his bodily movements in the physical world but also on the intentions, motives, and reasons with which he acts—what he takes himself to be doing—and thus on the concepts and principles with which he explains and

justifies his behavior. The acts motivated by different principles may satisfy the same verdicts and be physically the same while the nature and character of the conduct—what act is performed—may differ just in virtue of the acts' being motivated by different principles. Our principles define our acts as well as direct them; they change the meaning of the movements we make as well as moving us to make changes in our movements.

This difference in the meaning of the movements is not made manifest in the movements themselves. Rather, for persons to have different principles is, in essence, for them to regard different facts as relevant to their own and other people's lives and conduct or for them to regard the facts as relevant in different ways. This is not (necessarily) a difference in the facts or verdicts the persons can be brought to believe or deny, but rather in what they *are naturally disposed* to and *actually do* believe and deny. The difference is in the items and aspects of their world they notice, attend to, consider, in what and how they perceive, think about, understand.⁸ And those differences are as much a cause as a consequence of differences in what persons care about, are interested in, appreciate, and desire, in what and how they love and fear. Such differences are manifested directly and indirectly (via their bearing on motivation and intention) as differences in behavior, much of which is left unregulated by any of a person's principles.

So the conduct evidencing acceptance of a principle need not be conduct in accordance with the principles. That most people believe that being human has moral cachet is revealed not just by the way they argue about issues such as abortion. It is reflected as well in the fact that they perceive, regard, and identify themselves and each other principally and essentially, not as accords with any of the prime philosophical categories, but as human beings. Of course, we do not always so identify ourselves, for the properties of a thing that serve to identify it vary with the purposes for which the identification is made and thus also with the background of beliefs with which it is made. However, the beliefs involved here are rational beliefs and the purposes are not the special purposes we happen to have on special occasions but the general purposes we have in virtue of being rational and thus being capable of self-identification and requiring it. Our reasons for identifying ourselves as human beings are our reasons for accepting the Standard Belief.

A Notion of Human Status

As a step toward understanding this, let us take as a rough statement of a notion of human status the dictum, G: You₁ are to do unto

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others_a as you₂ would have others_b do unto you₃. The dictum is addressed to you₁, any rational agent, because, like any rational principle, G is addressed and applies to all and only those who can listen and apply it—rational agents. So too, the others_b are all the other rational agents, and when G is addressed to any of them, you₁ are one of the others_b. However, while you₁=you₂=you₃, neither you₂ nor you₃ need be rational agents; you₂ need only be what might be called a subjunctively rational creature. So too the others_a need not be rational agents; they need include all but not only the others_b. The others_a comprise the class of those with human status; or, rather, they plus yourself₃ comprise that class. The question of what has moral cachet is the question of how the others_a are to be identified. To ask it is to ask what it would be rational for you₂ to identify yourself₃ as so that you₃ are among the others_a when G is addressed to any of the others_b. That is, it would be rational for you₁ to accept and act upon G only if you₂ filled in G by identifying the others_a in such a way that you₃ could not be excluded from the others_a when the others_b act upon G. And for that very reason it would be irrational for you₁ to accept any of the philosophical alternatives to the Standard Belief because, although you₁ are rational, you₁ are not necessarily rational and so you₃ could become or have been nonrational. Any of your₁ cognitive or affective capacities could become or could have been different without altering your₁ identity, so the individual whose interests are your₁ own could remain constant while those principles would not require the consideration of his (=your₃) interests. By contrast, being human is an essential property of anything possessing it. You₁ could not be or have been other than a human being and still be identifiable as you₃.⁹ The Standard Belief is a common belief because it enables all and only those known creatures to whom G can be addressed to rationally accept G, for it ensures that each and every one of them has a rational claim to the consideration of his or her interests throughout his or her lifetime.¹⁰

Various aspects of all this need further attention. Consider first the paradigmatic moral question: How would you like (or have liked) it if somebody did (or had done) that to you? The applicability of that question and the arguments employing it is as broad and as narrow as the criteria for personal identity; the question and arguments can make sense in all and only those situations in which you could still be you. That is to say, among other things, that a rational principle is a law-like generalization and thus must be interpretable as sustaining subjunctive and contrary to fact conditionals. This helps explain what might otherwise seem odd—that in assessing the rationality of the Standard Belief and its alternatives, *what you could have been but no longer can become is just as relevant as what you presently are and what you still can become*.¹¹

Next consider the prime argument of the anti-abortionists. Its power derives from the fact that any human being is identifiable as the same entity as far back as the zygote and no further. Its weakness is that while the zygote is undeniably the same entity as the later adult, it no more follows that the zygote is the same human being than it follows that the still later corpse is the same human being. When and how to date the inception and demise of the human being as distinct from the human body is a further question, and as things stand the question regarding inception has no correct answer. Yet it may seem that since you have interests in protecting your body come what may or might have been, it would be rational for you to replace the Standard Belief with a principle identifying yourself in terms of your body—e.g., being of woman conceived has moral cachet. After all, that too is an essential property of yourself, and how would you like it if someone had blinded you for life by wounding you while in the womb? To this the pro-abortionist can properly reply that, first, while *you* have interests regarding your body, your body and its parts have no interest of their own, and in its earliest stages a fetus is only a body and not a self at all; *it* doesn't have any interests, so if that body is destroyed before any self is formed, no one's interests need be harmed. Second, even in the later stages when the fetus seems undeniably a creature—even here where the anti-abortionist's argument is unquestionably compelling—though there may some sort of self with interests of its own, that self is not a human self and is not identical with the self of the eventual human being;¹² so if the fetal creature is destroyed before it becomes a human being, no human being's interests need be harmed. And to someone who insists on saying that in destroying a fetal body or fetal creature one is harming the interests of a *potential* human being, suffice it to reply that you₂ have no good reason to accord human status to nonexistent human beings, however potential they may be, because one thing you₂ could never be identical with is anything that never exists. (N.B., such "entities" are not made of the same stuff as *future* human beings.) The structure of this whole argument is highlighted by the contrast between destroying a fetal body or creature and "merely" damaging one, thereby damaging a later human being. For the true anti-abortionist the former is clearly the more serious crime; for the pro-abortionist the latter is. For both, as the aptness of the pro-abortionist's rejoinders reveal, the logic of their positions requires the Standard Belief.

Next consider the moral status of animals. Though each of us is essentially a primate, an animal, and a living thing, none of us is a nonhuman thing and neither is any other known rational creature. Doubtless some animals are quite clever and can act for a reason, but

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none is rational, none is among the others, who can accept and act upon a rational principle like G. That might seem beside the point, since though they may never master a few cute cognitive tricks many humans never do either, and the interests and sufferings of animals are as real as ours. To this it should be said that to suffer, even to suffer a harm at the hands of another, is not ipso facto to suffer a wrong. More, to deny animals human status is not to deny them every substantial moral status, though precisely what the proper status is for each kind of thing is an enormous and enormously difficult question that may have no complete answer. In any case, since none of them can accord human status to any of them, let alone to us, and since none of us is one of them, none of us can have the reason to treat them as we are to treat ourselves that we have for treating ourselves that way. This is not sheer selfishness on our part, for, be it noted, if the argument for the Standard Belief goes through, it does so whatever our desires and interests may be as long as we have some at all (and that we do is presupposed by our being rational creatures.) Obviously, insofar as the interests of animals move our sympathies we have reason to protect them, but even if we were carried away to fulfill their interests as fully as our own, that wouldn't sustain an independent moral status for them.¹³

But now, suppose we could and did sharpen the wits of a gnu in a zoo enough so that it sued for its emancipation with as much eloquence as you please. Would we be obliged to manumit it? And every other gnu too? Nice questions these.¹⁴ But let us avoid them for now except to note that the Standard Belief affirms only that being human is sufficient for having human status and thus that no property inessential for being human is necessary. The Standard Belief does not deny that being human is not necessary or that some other properties may be sufficient. Common belief does affirm both of these claims, but it does so in a complex way contrary to philosophical convictions. For example, whatever may be true of our gnu, we would probably think it proper to accept as moral equals extraterrestrial travelers who, except for their origins, differed from human beings no more than Tibetans differ from Teutons. On the other hand, it's far from clear that we would feel constrained to accord moral equality to a realization of the typical sci-fi monster—an argute fifteen-and-a-half-foot purple praying mantis oozing goo from every orifice—but our responses to such stories suggest that we might well not, especially if the creature has substantial hominivorous or sadistic impulses, which, after all, are compatible with the philosophers' pet properties. However, the realm of imagination is a treacherous place to investigate the structures of common belief: beliefs about what people's beliefs are regarding some

conjecture are usually conjectures, and frequently people have no belief regarding the conjecture. Far better to look into the hard data history richly supplies, especially that regarding racial discrimination.

Egalitarian and Racist Beliefs

We need to look there anyway since it may seem objectionable that our account is tantamount to a justification of racism. For the fact that humanness is an essential property does not distinguish the Standard Belief from other principles that pick out essential properties defining natural kinds to which we belong. We have explained why principles that would place us in more inclusive kinds than humanity (e.g., primates, animals, living things) won't do, but we have yet to object to principles that place us in more exclusive kinds. Clearly, the progenitors you have are the only ones you could have had, and for all that has been said so far, you could identify yourself by your race, tribe, clan, ancestral line, or family. And just as clearly, people throughout history have done precisely that, have lived by the correlative moral principles, and have thereby lived in a variety of complex caste systems.

But let us be clear here. It's hardly an objection that our account justifies principles such as: being an Aryan (or an Apache or a McFarland) has moral cachet. After all, each such principle happens to be true, for they are all implied by the Standard Belief and they are *all* mutually compatible. The Standard Belief is only the most general expression of these, its "corollaries." What is objectionable is the distinctively racist or caste belief that Aryans (or whatever) are a *superior* kind of creature, that they have an inherent *value* or *worth* lacked by non-Aryans, and that in virtue of this *difference in value* Aryans are entitled to accord full human status to themselves and to deny it to non-Aryans. But there is no *logical* connection between this distinctively racist belief and the Standard Belief or its corollaries. There is, however, a connection made through the *psychodynamics of rationality*, and we shall come to that. But let us first recognize that it is anything but an objection that our account uncovers the rational structures underlying and motivating racism and caste systems and that it helps explain the pervasive power of the fact of lineage, of common blood, of membership in a family, ancestral line, clan, tribe or race. Egalitarians engaged in counteracting the evils of caste systems may require a rhetoric that derogates those systems by explaining them as products of rank irrationality unalloyed with any elements of rationality other than that guiding the crassest self-interest. But a philosopher is untrue to his trade when he uses the excuse of the political ideologue to

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explain away those complex social forms with all the wisdom of a village atheist. His overeager egalitarianism serves no one, least of all himself, for by failing in his proper study he thereby risks irrelevance.¹⁵ He also risks—to put it kindly—unintended irony when he helps himself to such metaphors as “the family of man” or “the brotherhood of man” while defending principles that would drain those slogans of all rhetorical force.¹⁶ The literature of philosophy is rife with such ironies. Perhaps the supreme irony is that egalitarian philosophers who reject the Standard Belief and all racist beliefs happily embrace the claim that human beings have an inherent value and dignity. Yet that claim stands to the Standard Belief in precisely the same relation as racist beliefs stand to the corollaries of the Standard Belief, and it is just as false and ultimately incoherent as those racist beliefs.

NOTES

1. Reasons may differ in kind and degree, and most of us think the superiority of our moral status involves both sorts of differences. Aside from those who attribute some supranatural feature to an animal (e.g., sacredness or the possession of a human soul), even vegetarians and antivivisectionists generally acknowledge not only that we may require a *greater* sacrifice from a person to prevent harm to a human being than to prevent an equivalent harm to an animal, but also that an animal *may*, but a human being *may not*, be destroyed when he is unable and others are unwilling to care for him. (In any case, a human's having a superior status is compatible with, e.g., the propriety of rescuing a drowning pet poodle instead of a drowning Adolph Hitler, since a thing's moral status is not the only morally relevant fact about it.) Since the particular form of the superiority of the moral status accorded human beings will not be at issue here, it need not be specified.

2. A fuller treatment of these and related matters touched upon herein appears in my “Understanding the Abortion Argument,” in *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1, no. 1 (Fall 1971): pp. 67–95.

3. Apparently a failure to appreciate this has led many philosophers to deny the Factunorm Principle for fear that it entailed subjectivism or relativism and thereby required an inappropriate foundation for rational principles. On this, see my *The Significance of Sense* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1972), pp. 160–72. The main thrust of that work is to show that if the Factunorm Principle is applicable for any rational principle it applies to moral principles as well.

4. Anyway, all (save one) that I know of. But different philosophers reject it in different ways, some by accepting (explicitly or implicitly) some incompatible alternative, some by denying (explicitly or implicitly) that it and its alternatives could be genuinely true or false.

5. An “infrahuman” fetus (a human fetus that is not [yet] a human being) might have a moral status comparable to an animal's, independent but inferior

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to a human being's. For many people, a human fetus has, in virtue of being a *human* fetus, an independent status superior to any animal's, yet, in virtue of being a human *fetus*, its status is inferior to a human being's.

6. This claim has a class of pseudo-exceptions, *species-normal properties*: a property (indirectly) attributable to every member of a natural kind if it is (directly) attributable to any normal member of that kind. It is fully proper to say that human beings are, e.g., rational bipeds, albeit some things properly called human beings can't reason or have one or three legs due to congenital malformation or subsequent deformation. A mongoloid, no matter how idiotic, is still a human being, and, in the species-normal sense, a rational creature. A natural kind (species) is specifiable by the properties of its normal members without regarding its abnormal members. (More specifically, unless developmental stage properties are intended, the species-normal properties are the properties of the normal *mature* members: e.g., humans have thirty-two teeth.) Whatever the importance of the conceptual machinery operating here (and it may be considerable), clearly a theory cannot match common belief by appealing to species-normal properties while denying the Standard Belief, since the predication of, e.g., rationality to certain human beings is based solely on their being human.

7. But then, if none of this matters, one might wonder what is at stake in the competition between rival traditional theories, for the arguments in their debates have generally been concerned at bottom only with how the implied verdicts of each theory compare with those of common belief. Any contrasts there may be on that score are controversial, with each side claiming coincidence with common belief. And if, as is rarely denied, the area of coincident verdicts is vastly greater than that of potential clash, a reputedly high-minded and deep-seated struggle would start to smack of petty wrangling.

8. So too for the philosopher: his acceptance of his theoretically derived principles (moral and extramoral) expresses itself in what he notices, attends to, etc., in his data, common belief. Yet actually philosophers virtually never bother to look at other people's beliefs anyway, in spite of their acknowledging common belief as evidence. Instead they look into their own heads, presumably on the assumption that their own considered judgments are as trustworthy as anyone's, so they have no need to look further—a dubious assumption since what is there to be seen may well be their philosophical theory or its effects in their beliefs. (Many philosophers liken philosophy to psychotherapy, but few have learned caution from the fact that patients in therapy often unconsciously manufacture symptoms to fit their therapist's diagnosis.) A more plausible assumption is that their own beliefs are no more and (for the reason just given) perhaps somewhat less trustworthy than the beliefs of other competent moral judges. Unfortunately, whether a philosopher looks at his own or at other people's beliefs, he is likely to look at them through the filter of his theory. And as psychologists tell us, look as you may, what you see is largely determined by what you believe and are thus prepared to see. To be sure, the alterations of the theorist's beliefs and perceptions may be an improvement, not a perversion, and it is possible to determine which they are. But it's not easy. Nor is it easy to be cognizant of such alterations—and this may help explain why philosophers don't notice the conflict of their theories with common belief.

9. For the nonce, a complete elucidation and defense of the essential-accidental distinction is not essential. For one thing, it suffices here that, in an unproblematic sense, it is less possible for you to be or have been other than

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human than it is for you to be or have been other than rational or the like. For another thing, Saul Kripke has personally assured me that being human is an essential property.

10. An instructive pseudo-exception. Some cultures have cast out some of their members (e.g., the insane), denying them human status on the ground that they were possessed by demons. The logic of the explanation requires that the outcast was no longer himself, no longer a human being, and that this transformation was effected by supernatural powers.

11. More generally, this feature of rational principles explains why, for human beings unlike animals, the facts and possibilities of the past can be reasons for acting just as well as the facts and possibilities of the present and future can. A failure to appreciate this vitiates many a moral theory: utilitarianism's inability to make sense of punishment is only the most obvious example. A rational creature cannot live by consequences alone, and no creature can have an adequate comprehension of consequences or control his conduct by such comprehension without being rational.

12. The pro-abortionist's position can be only as plausible as this premise is.

13. Perhaps nothing said here can persuade the unpersuaded, since none of it is likely to dispel the pervasive and profound misconceptions about the very nature of morality that likely underlie their dissatisfaction. Let me here just give warning—however blunt and crabbed it may be—that morality, if it is to make any sense at all, can be only an aspect of rationality and neither a presupposition nor a consequence of it. Our moral principles are among our means of understanding our world, ourselves, and their relations. So our moral status is not something any of us deserve in consequence of some splendid trait, talent, or achievement. It's not a prized position of rights, privileges, and powers awarded for excellence in some cosmic competition. Nor is it a first-class citizenship in a community created for and confined to the protection and promotion of our interests. We are "entitled" to our moral status and animals to theirs only in the sense that we are entitled to our human nature and they to theirs.

14. Beliefs in transmigratory selves raise similar yet importantly different issues, because unlike the above, they do not suppose a change in the behavior of the beast or its physical (e.g., brain) structure. It is not clear whether such beliefs suppose or require that your self could be other than a human self.

15. Recently at least two philosophers have published defenses of abortion that allow as how infanticide is also at worst imprudent. Query: Will their essays create anything comparable to the public outrage generated by the now infamous work of Jensen and Herrnstein? Not bloody likely. Why not, for their assault on the conscience and intellect of civilized people is surely no less brutal and blundering? Well, without discounting numerable other salient differences, part of the answer is that Jansen and Herrnstein are social scientists, and, for good reasons and bad alike, we listen when social scientists, even those of minor distinction, speak out on matters touching upon public policy. Their counterparts in philosophy are not invited onto the stage. (It was eras ago, back when philosophers and social scientists were the same men, that the counsels of philosophers were sought and paid for.) Why is this? Just look at a typical philosophical performance: Abortion, an issue inspiring no unanimity among any random class of persons (as is evidenced by the turbulent condition of laws on the matter), that issue provides the occasion for a blithe dismissal of a prohibition endorsed by a monolithic consensus and enforced by every present

Western legal system. Once again a philosopher has thrown the baby out with the bath water (and the very premeditation of the performance only deepens the onlooker's despair); and once again, having walked upon the stage, the philosopher turns his back to his audience (and then walks off, for he has no responsibilities for what follows). And then, when the crowd remains unmoved except to laughter and derision, the philosopher deems it benighted. But the explanation of the crowd's response is not what the philosopher says, but *that* he says it. At least since Socrates philosophers have been regarded with hostile suspicion or amused contempt. They are not listened to because they do not listen. That may be an instance of a psychological law, but here the point is also that philosophers are not listened to because what they say is not worth listening to, and it is not because they do not listen (to anyone but themselves) and so they are in no position to speak (to anyone but themselves).

16. Probably the least discussed and most badly treated matter in the literature of moral philosophy is the one that matters most in most people's lives: familial relationships. That's not surprising since that literature lacks a theory that could say much about those matters that would be both interesting and true. The familiar philosophical models for understanding or justifying the special regard we accord familial relations are inadequate to the task. That regard must be treated as a phenomenon of rationality, for we don't take imprinting quite as well as ducks do, and neither do we have the mechanisms by which lost lambs are reunited with their mothers. Our natural family has a hold on us whoever brings us up, and we find out who our real relations are by being *told*. (It helps here to imagine your reaction if one fine day an elderly and utterly strange gentleman approached you with unimpeachable evidence that he is your real father.) But neither are our relatives like ordinary benefactors, business partners, or friends; the special regard goes beyond reciprocity, love, or likeness—as often as not, those things are lacking, and even when present they can't explain the special regard for natural parents as opposed to adopted, foster, or stepparents. Let us admit that a family forms a small (exogamous) caste system. It can be understood and justified in terms of the special role the family has in determining an individual's identity. We identify with our relations, not (or not just) because we are akin to them but because we are a kin to them. I, personally, am largely unmoved by the fact that the human race has got itself onto the moon or that blacks dominate in my favorite sports, but I can't imagine what it would be like to be immune to pride or embarrassment at the achievements and antics of those in my immediate family. (That is no sign of logical impossibility; it goes deeper than that, for there are logical impossibilities I can imagine.)

