Personhood in the Age of Artificial Intelligence

Marvyn Bailly

Oregon State University

PHL 330

Dr. Youjin Kong

March 16, 2021

Philosophers have often pondered what makes humans unique from other animals on Earth, arriving on the fact that humans are rational beings with higher cognitive capabilities and possess empathy for others. However, with artificial intelligence on the rise, a new question comes forth, does this distinction between animals and humans also hold between humans and computers? To fully understand this question, I will begin by explaining how philosophers have differentiated humans and animals with the idea of personhood. Personhood has helped modern movements, such as animal rights, to gain ground by showing that humans should not receive different treatment solely based on their race but rather on specific capabilities posed by the species in question. These capabilities currently are defined as intelligence and empathy; I will show how future AI and modern algorithms can surpass these definitions. Thus, under the current definition of personhood, there is no line between humans and computers in the age of AI.

To understand the lack of distinction between humans and computers, the concept of personhood is vital. In everyday speech, the terms person and human are interchangeable, but the words have different meanings in philosophy and ethics. It is possible to have a person who is not a human and even a human who is not a person. The definition of a human is purely biological. A human is a Homosapien defined by their biological characteristics. In contrast, a person possesses moral characteristics that give them a higher moral standing and protection. The differentiation between humans and persons is seen in racism and sexism. A dominant group gives themselves personhood, thus giving themselves special treatment while reducing minorities to mere humans, allowing mistreatment of them. It is agreed that this type of behavior is unethical, so a formal definition of personhood is needed.

The dominant western definition of personhood is derived from intelligence and rationality. Marking back to Kant, who stated that the "fact that human beings can have the representation 'I' raises [them] infinitely above all other beings" (Kant [1798], 2010, p.236). To relate this to personhood, Kant believed that the cognitive ability to distinguish oneself in the world gave them personhood. He built upon this idea, saying that all rational beings, or persons, should treat each other persons as equals and not manipulate them. Therefore, his work and ideas gave persons physical and emotional protection from each other based on their intelligence. This idea of personhood continued to gain momentum in western philosophy and created a distinction between humans and animals. Since animals do not possess the same cognitive abilities as humans, they are not persons. Therefore, they do not require the same moral protection as humans. The intelligence definition of personhood has highlighted a unique ability that only humans possess on Earth. However, with computers, this is no longer unique to humans.

For thousands of years, humans have led the world in intelligence, but with the creation of computers and, more specifically, machine learning, this may no longer be the case. As Bostrom points out in his TED talk, a human's brain is constrained by biology (Bostrom, 2015). A biological neuron can fire around 250 times per second and propagates at only 100 meters per second. In contrast, a transistor works at one gigahertz, which is 1 billion times per second. Computers can also send signals at the speed of light. Another difference between a brain and a computer is the limitations of size; a brain is constrained to a skull while a computer has no limit. If intelligence is defined by speed and memory, computers have surpassed human intelligence.

However, perhaps intelligence is more than processing power; what if it can derive meaning and come up with new solutions and ideas. This is where machine learning comes into play. Machine learning gives computers the ability to learn and evolve their thinking, allowing

them to work alongside researchers. Kitano describes such an algorithm in his paper "Artificial Intelligence to Win the Nobel Prize and Beyond: Creating the Engine for Scientific Discovery" (Kitano, 2016). Kitano argues that algorithms, similar to IBM's Watson, can use machine learning and deep learning, two AI styles that draw upon massive data sets, to work alongside side scientists. He believes that such an algorithm can help make Noble prize-level scientific discoveries by finding answers and asking questions that humans may not have considered. Computer intelligence can process faster than humans, make discoveries in science, and possibly ask new scientific questions. Therefore, the intelligence definition of personhood includes computers, thus extending persons' rights and protection to intelligent machines. Nevertheless, what if personhood is defined by something other than rationality that computers can not possess.

A different approach to defining personhood focuses on the relationships built from care and empathy to others brought forth by the ability to relate to them. This definition's central ideas are derived from care ethics, which describes humans as social beings whose selfhood is created by their communities and relations. These communities and relations are brought together through care, which Tronto, a political scientist, defines to be "everything [humans] do, to continue repair and maintain our world so that we may live in it as well as possible" (Tronto and Jim du Bois. 2014). Tronto talks about how every human, from young to old, is a caregiver and receiver. Explaining how at the very least, humans take care of themselves. Relating care to personhood, every being capable of caring for themselves or others are persons. If this definition is given a rigid boundary, not all humans are persons if we consider mentally disabled humans.

When it comes to considering the personhood of a mentally disabled human, not only do they have a disadvantage in intelligence that may deem them as not a person, but a severely

disabled human may also be entirely dependent on another. Meaning that they are less caring than other humans, which could imply that they are not a person. Kittay, an American philosopher, and Pho, a physicist, expand on this topic in care ethics, talking about Kittay's disabled daughter (Kittay and Pho 2021). Kittay discusses how she realizes that care is more than just giving and receiving in interpersonal relationships but that care also exists on a larger scale. Pho states that "[c]are is no longer personal" but rather that "[c]are is political," considering how a leader needs to care for their people. How health, finical, and educational systems are created, be the government to care for others. Through this definition of care, personhood is broader, bringing together all humans in a society, regardless of their mental standing. However, what if an algorithm works for a care system, helping in operations and assisting the elderly.

By the relationship approach of personhood, a robot that cares for others or is involved in a caregiving institute would be given personhood. Santoni de Sio and Wynsberghe (2016) discuss "care robots," which they define to be "technological device[s] integrated into care practices to assist healthcare personal." Such robots currently exist, for example, daVinci's surgical robot that helps surgeons perform surgery with extreme precision or TUG's assistant robot that delivers sheets and medications throughout a hospital. Santoni de Sio and Wynsberghe continue to talk about how "care robots" could evolve to take care of the elderly. Algorithms could also be made to help decide what level of health care benefits an individual deserves, creating a society with a balanced and fair distribution of health care. These care robots possess a level of care that would allow them to be qualified as persons, meaning that they should receive moral protection.

Therefore, by both modern definitions of personhood, robots are persons. The modern distinction between humans and animals will no longer hold between humans and computers

since computers have the potential and current capabilities of both intelligence and relationships. This line between beings on Earth and personhood is becoming more critical with animal rights and artificial intelligence. If we decide to stay with the intelligence definition of personhood, robots must also be considered persons. If we decide to place robots in caregiver positions, then robots also gain personhood by the relationship definition of personhood. It is crucial to understand the difference between personhood and humans since humans may lose their superiority in intelligence and relations, bringing forth many ethical and legal problems when considering what kind of protection computers deserve. Although there is no line between humans and computers by these definitions, I believe that humans do possess something that makes them unique. We need to consider what this distinction is, what makes humans "truly human?" Only if we derive an answer for this question will humans' uniqueness not be lost in the age of artificial intelligence.

Bibliography

Bostrom, Nick. 2015, March. "What happens when our computers get smarter than we are? [Video]."*TED Conferences*. https://www.ted.com/talks/nick_bostrom_what_happens_when_our_computers_get_smarter_than_we_are

Kant, Immanuel. [1798] 2010. "Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View (1798)." In *Anthropology, History, and Education (Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant)*, edited by Robert Louden and Gunter Zoller, 227-429. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kitano, H. (2016). Artificial Intelligence to Win the Nobel Prize and Beyond: Creating the Engine for Scientific Discovery. *AI Magazine*, *37*(1), 39-49. https://doi.org/10.1609/aimag.v37i1.2642

Kittay, Eva Feder, and Kevin Pho. 2021, January 5. "Care is no longer personal. Care is political [Video]." *The Podcast by KevinMD*. https://youtu.be/JgAKyImRlto.

Santoni de Sio, F., & Van Wynsberghe, A. (2016, December). When should we use care robots? The nature-of-activities approach. Retrieved March 17, 2021, from https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/26547553

Tronto, Joan C, and Jim du Bois. 2014, July 15. "A Discussion of Care - Interview with Prof. Joan C Tronto [Video]."*Access Minnesota*. https://youtu.be/H-utAjZ_obc.