In defence of the world's most dangerous idea

Ottawa *Citizen*, Tuesday 24 August 2010
Reprinted in the Vancouver *Sun*, Friday 27 August 2010

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Margaret Somerville says the world's most dangerous idea is that there is nothing special about being human ("Preserving humanity," 19 August). I've long been a keen advocate of that very idea. I think the world would be a much better place were more people to accept it.

Let's first be clear about Somerville's idea, that there *is* something special about being human. To be human is to be member of the species *Homo sapiens* or, perhaps, the genus *Homo*. Somerville tells us that all humans—that is, all members of this species—are persons, and no member of any other species is a person. Persons, and only persons, possess dignity and, thereby, deserve respect. In practice, this means that humans must be treated in certain ways and must not be treated in certain other ways.

So, while its being a nuisance may properly be a reason to kill a fly, say, or a beaver or coyote, it is no reason to kill a human. (That one may kill a coyote does not, of course, as Somerville would be the first to insist, imply that one may kill it cruelly.)

The idea Somerville rejects and calls dangerous is that what should matter in ethics are not things like species membership but, rather, certain qualities that individual animals have or lack. On this list I would put such things as ability to experience pleasure and pain, ability to be aware of its environment, ability to feel emotions, ability to be conscious of its awareness of its environment and its feelings (self-consciousness), and ability to make and execute plans, and to revise them according to their success or failure (rationality).

For example, that it would hurt some individual animal to set a fire in the woods would be a reason not to set that fire. That it would interfere with that animal's plans would be another reason not to set it. (Of course, these reasons not to set a fire might be outweighed by reasons to set it.)

What is central to this view is the idea of how things are going for an individual animal, and how things would be going for that animal. To discover what is ethically salient in a situation, we ask how the interests of those involved would be affected. Would the action manifest disrespect for anyone, human or not? Would it make anyone, human or not, worse off from their own perspective? If the answer to either of these questions is "yes," we have a reason not to pursue that course of action. Individual animals that have no perspective fall out of consideration, except indirectly via their relations to animals that do have a perspective, whatever species they might belong to.

Now Somerville is right—on this view, species membership, being human, is irrelevant. There are some humans (embryos, permanently comatose adults) for whom considerations of respect cannot be salient, for these individuals lack self-consciousness, and there are animals who aren't human (adult chimpanzees, adult dolphins) for whom considerations of respect might well be salient. Not all humans are persons (no humans are persons all their lives, for we all begin as embryos), and, perhaps, some non-humans are persons.

On anyone's account, Somerville's included, sentience, consciousness, and self-consciousness are important. But what is the argument that humanity is also important, if not indeed supremely important? Why think the distinction human/non-human should figure in our thinking about what to do and how to treat each other?

An argument many thinkers endorse begins with the thought that all humans have a human nature, the same human nature, and that only humans have this nature. Human nature, we're told, is rational nature. In some individual humans, this rational nature is fully expressed in actually existing capacities to suffer, think, feel, reflect, plan, and so on. In others, most human foetuses, for instance, these capacities exist potentially. In other humans, the irreversibly comatose, for instance, or infants lacking a forebrain, these capacities don't exist either actually or potentially. And yet foetuses, comatose adults, and anencephalic infants possess a rational nature, no less than any other human, in virtue of belonging to a species of animal the essence of which is rationality. Or so the humans-are-special argument goes.

Now the main problem with this argument is the obscurity of the idea of an essence, and then of the claim that species of animals have essences. That the vast majority of humans have been rational animals for most of their lives is clear. That this fact implies that there exists a normatively significant quality, called humanity, is not at all clear, let alone that this quality is had even by those humans who don't possess feeling or rationality. The thought that an anencephalic infant is in essence a rational animal possessing dignity in virtue of her being human is simply mystifying.

So if we dismiss the idea that the lives of humans have value in virtue of being human lives and instead treat individuals according to the ethically salient characteristics they in fact possess, are we in danger of treating children badly, or the elderly, or drug addicts, or the mentally ill? Well, only if we fail to notice that they think and feel, that things matter to them, that things can go well or badly for them each from his or her own perspective. But it's obvious that things can go well or badly for impetuous kids, for the bed-ridden elderly, for strung-out junkies, for the bipolar. Why suppose that people who value sentience, consciousness, self-consciousness, and rationality, rather than membership in the species *Homo sapiens*, would fail to see the obvious?