

Not Humans, Still People: How Inhumanity Interacts with Personhood

By Goratrix *bani* Tremere and Chaiya Askari-Vykos

Text in red is Goratrix (he/him). Text in purple is Chaiya (he/him).

Introduction

Greetings, assembled people and creatures of Othercon. Welcome. My name is Goratrix *bani* Tremere. You may know me from previous panels, you may not. I am the co-host of the Draconic Wizard Workshop system, and a vampire. Additionally, I have a dragon archetrole. As you may expect, my relationship with humanity is quite complicated—my relationship with personhood, however, is not. That is what this panel is about—and to discuss it, I am joined by one of my lovely partners.

Hi! I'm Chaiya Askari-Vykos, co-host of the Treehouse system. I'm a vampire, Goratrix's boyfriend, and a part-time dragon. My relationship with my humanity is fairly straightforward – for a vampire, that is – but my dragon kintype makes my relationship with personhood a bit more complicated than I ever expected it would.

We wanted to do this panel together to explore personhood and to disconnect it from being equivalent to humanity. As you can tell, we both have complex relationships with humanity, both due to our vampirism and our draconity, so we've had lots of cause to think about it. There has also been an uptick of those not wanting to be referred to as "people" due to not wishing to be connected to being human, and even requests for dehumanization, and we thought it best to deconstruct what personhood is and what it can mean to those of us familiar with being nonhuman and/or alterhuman. After all, most people consider personhood strictly in the context of humanity—but those of us who do not strictly experience *only* humanity have an advantage when considering personhood in many contexts and from multiple angles.

We want to discuss how species identity, both human and nonhuman, interacts with personhood. We want to discuss non-person identities and how they interact with each of us

being people. We also want to discuss what it means to be a different *kind* of person in an identity, how that interacts with your present personhood, and how being *inhuman* in an identity (especially a species or individual with morals and tendencies that most humans find repulsive or unacceptable) can teach us much about personhood and how to perceive ourselves in our present lives.

What is a Person?

So to make sense of any of what we're aiming to talk about, we need to establish what a person *is*. Everyone probably has their own definition of a person, but according to the Oxford dictionary (which is what Google uses to provide definitions), a person is "a human being regarded as an individual". Now, yes, all humans are people, that's not in question, but here at Othercon, where many people *aren't* human, we know that's not the most inclusive of definitions. The Wikipedia definition is a bit more broad, stating that a person is "a being who has certain capacities or attributes such as reason, morality, consciousness or self-consciousness", but I think that the key here is consciousness. Consciousness is defined as "awareness by the mind of itself and the world", which doesn't require the person to be human – or have a physical brain, if that's not where you keep your mind. This allows personhood to include humans, vampires, dragons, computers, and anything else that can think, "am I a person?"

Separate from personhood is humanity. Now, you're probably thinking, "Chaiya, you just said that. We get it, person doesn't mean human." I did say that! But when I say humanity, I don't mean human. As a vampire, I have to consider the difference, because biologically speaking, I'm *not* human. I was human, once; I was born human, and I lived half my life as one, but I'm not human now. A human is, among other things, a diurnal omnivore, which I'm definitely not. But I usually still *feel* like a human, for what that's worth, and I view morality through a – mostly – human lens, regardless of what I physically am. For vampires – at least, the kind of

vampire / am – humanity is not inherent. It's something you choose that you have to maintain. It's a set of morals, a code of ethics; one that I still follow, though not as strictly as some would like me to. Because of this, I still have my humanity – but my humanity is not what makes me a person.

Essentially, a person is a being that can make *choices*. Yes, certainly, a moth or bird can choose which direction to fly or look for food, but I mean thoughtful choices with a concept of cause-and-effect. A person can look at information and assess what is most likely to get them the result they want, and choose it, then look back later and determine whether or not that was the correct decision. A person's choices can come with morality, while a nonperson's cannot. Your average dog biting someone is a morally neutral action—after all, they are a dog, and their understanding of morality is limited. However, your average *person* biting someone is typically an action with moral ramifications. Perhaps it isn't—perhaps it's in self-defense. Or perhaps it was in response to minor annoyance, and may be interpreted accordingly based on your own moral views. One could say that a person is partially defined by their capacity for good and evil—I personally reject both concepts, as in my mind, morality is nothing more than differences in prioritization, but I will discuss that in greater detail later on.

Furthermore, a person can *create*. Whether that be thoughts, art, concepts, tools, writing, abstract communication—people *make* things. Many non-people make things, as well, but is that not what makes humans look at some animals and call them “more intelligent” than others? Are elephants and corvids not regarded as “more intelligent” than mice because of complex reasoning skills and ability to use—or, in some cases, make—tools?

As a result of all of this, *you are a person*. I reject the concept of being able to remove it from oneself as one would a label—certainly, if you specifically ask me not to call you a person, I will follow your wishes, as that is only right. However, I do not think that insisting that you are not a person, in a desperate attempt to avoid humanity, is the right choice. You can think, you can choose, you can reason, you can create, you can weigh your moral options. Rejecting your

humanity is fine—whether that be rejecting *being* human, or, as Chaiya discussed, rejecting the approximate moral structure of most humans. Rejecting your *personhood*, however, has pitfalls.

Rejection of personhood, and the similar-but-different dehumanizing of the self, are things that I've seen pretty frequently in the alterhuman community. Therians, dragonkin, objectkin, and more – rejecting not only their humanity, but being a person at all. And it makes sense! Most of us here have a complicated relationship with being human, whether it's just being a different kind of human, or being something else entirely. And personhood, while different, has been so closely woven with being human that they seem synonymous. It's easy to tie them together and throw away the whole damn tangle. Cut away the strings, and you're completely divorced from humanity. I'll admit, I understand the appeal.

My dragon-self isn't human, and it's not a person, either. During strong shifts, I don't *feel* like a person. The things that usually make me feel like a person – complex emotions and thought, consideration of and compassion for others, strong interests outside of the most basic instinctive desires – are significantly dulled. My headmate, Niko, a komodo dragon therian, experiences the same thing. On occasion, when someone else is in the front to take the lead, they've even experimented with temporarily *giving up* higher thought, letting go of acting like a person at all. It can be so freeing, to not *have* to be a person! But it *is* temporary. It's not a state that can be maintained forever, and they wouldn't want it to be, because they enjoy their personhood and what it grants them. And even if they *didn't*, personhood isn't something you can just give up for good, and it's certainly not something that you want to *lose*.

Human history has countless examples of groups being denied personhood, and I'd bet that most intelligent species who have ever experienced conflict can say the same. Denial of personhood is a *weapon*, a malicious othering that's used to silence and even kill those it's turned against. It's something we see every day – racism, religious persecution, sexism, and queerphobia leading to injustices that range from wage gaps to genocide. It is the denial that we are intelligent, that we feel pain, that we have worth, that we deserve to *live*. It is something that

should be feared, not coveted. It's not something that you can choose, it's chosen for you – and it is never with your best interest in mind. So, by all means, embrace your moments of not feeling like a person – but be grateful that you are one, and for what a gift it is. Be grateful for what it gives you, and what it protects you from.

And, just as importantly – be wary of denying personhood to others. Sometimes, in distancing yourself from something, you see it as less-than. Too complex or too simple to be worth your time or your respect. Maybe it just doesn't make sense to you, or you find it unpleasant. When we distance ourselves from typical humanity, it can be easy to fall into viewing humans as lesser. **They aren't.** They're people with thoughts and feelings and inherent worth – just like us. We don't have to understand or even like them, but we cannot lose sight of their personhood. The pieces that make up a person – pieces that all of us have – are things that we share with all humans; and that is worthy of respect.

Kinds of People

Now that we have well and truly defined what a person is and why you should consider yourself one, let us ask ourselves: what can being nonhuman teach us about personhood? I would like to raise that we have already learned something essential: it has already taught us that personhood is not the same as humanity, and that the concept of a person can exist wholly independently of being human. It is, frequently, a human-centric word and definition, due to the only people that many humans are aware of *being* human, but as you well know, others are out there, in us.

What else can we learn? Let us first look at other people while seeking answers. Many of us here are fictives or have a 'type of some description that is a nonhuman person—elves, vampires, aliens, some dragons, and many, many others. These people may live in complex societies, or may live largely alone—but they are *people*, with their own cultures and moral structures, their own ideals and arts and histories.

I think one thing we can learn from this is acceptance for other cultures. Not only those from other worlds, but those in the world we live in now. If you spend your time getting to understand, say, your dragon hearttype, where the cultural expectations may look *very* different than what you are used to (collecting gold, terrorizing mortals, fancy flying, interesting dances, whatever it may be), then it is easier to meet a human from an unfamiliar culture that may be more similar to the one that you have grown up in in this life than the one that you have been exploring and learning about through noemata. Indeed, we may learn to accept each other more easily as well—is it not easier to accept a vampire whose nighttime society encourages nightly murder and manipulation when you are used to your own backstabbing alien culture that comes to you in flashes when you meditate? Do you not have some compassion for the situation that they come from, and some understanding that some behavior is not entirely their fault?

I would raise this again, as well: to me, arguments over differing morality are nothing more than differences in prioritization. Perhaps your friend's orcish culture values honor and proving oneself in battle more than they value the lives of other cultures, and perhaps your elvish one values life above all else and would find this kind of behavior barbaric. *Neither is better than the other*, neither is objectively *right*, and both believe that they are doing what is good and right by upholding their cultural moral values in the face of opposition. Is there not something to learn here when you discuss this with someone whose alterhuman identity is very different from yours?

I believe that having a connection to a nonhuman, but still a person, identity, allows one to get a better perspective on the culture in which one was raised. Perhaps less valuable for fictives, but valuable for those who are their headmates, this lets you look critically at your own culture and moral values and ask, why? Why is this what I value? Why is this what we do? You can learn much about yourself and the people around you by comparing and contrasting cultures, and this gives us a fairly unique perspective by allowing us to compare whatever

culture we have been physically born into to whatever culture has been provided to you to compare via your identity.

Finally, nonhumanity can teach us much about *instinct*. How much time in the alterhuman and nonhuman communities are spent talking about nonhuman instincts? Growling, flexing claws, flaring wings, snorting, pawing at the ground, stalking squirrels? Yet these do not have to derive from nonperson sources—how many dragons have a prey drive? How many vampires bare their teeth and snarl? Nonhuman instincts do not take your personhood away. They do not make it any less a part of you, or any less valuable. This can make you aware of how you differ from a human, but it can also bring attention to what a *human's* instincts are, as you either have them despite your nonhuman identity, or lack them and must either mimic them to fit in or accept that humans will see you as unusual.

However, this awareness of instincts can also derive from a nonperson source. A wolf still has a prey drive, a cat still hisses, a bird may still be driven to dive and snatch up a rabbit. Nonperson 'types have much to teach us, as well—both about instinct, and about where the line between person and nonperson may be drawn.

As someone with multiple sets of instincts spanning the three categories of human, nonhuman, and nonperson, I can honestly say that a lot of them overlap. If you are a being that needs to consume nourishment, you probably have an instinctive drive to find food, and you have that in common with every other beast that needs to eat. The specifics differ widely enough to have subtypes, of course – herbivores don't typically have prey drives, after all – but at the heart of it, it's the same instinct. All facets of my identity come with a chase instinct, and despite the differences, they all feel just about the same in the moment. The still-human part of me, the omnivore, is just as able and willing to hunt as the carnivorous dragon and the sanguivorous vampire.

The key difference between my person and nonperson instincts lies in my *ability* to think about them. Two of these sets stem from a thinking, feeling being – the instincts can usually be

tempered or worked around, if I want to, and if I give into them in an inappropriate situation, I stop and think about it afterwards. After all, just because something is instinctive doesn't mean that it's the right move. If I give into my instinct to chase down a surrendered and fleeing opponent because I now recognize them as prey, that's wrong of me, even though it feels like I need to. Baring my fangs and hissing at someone isn't polite, no matter how annoying I think they are. My human instinct to explore and indulge my curiosity is fairly harmless – until I get caught trespassing. These are all instincts that make up the most basic parts of how I interact with the world, but they don't rule me.

My nonperson instincts, on the other hand, are what drive my dragon-self. There's no questioning whether it's the best time to act on them, it simply *does*. It hunts what it wants to, whenever it wants to. There's no care about if the fish it's about to catch is heading towards its breeding grounds and would be better eaten later, after it has taken part in making sure that there will be more fish to eat next year. It doesn't think about whether something else will take offense to it snooping around in their territory, and wouldn't care if they did – it's not a very territorial beast, dragon-me. It moves around too much to give a shit about my-space-versus-your-space. Its instincts aren't something it ever wonders about, ever contemplates fighting, and it doesn't really *need* to. There's nothing beyond those instincts for it to worry about, even if it could. Neither set of instincts is better or worse than the other, but they're certainly different.

The Vampirism Example

I believe it may be best, from this point, to discuss what can be learned from being nonhuman in the case of specific and easily comparable examples. Chaiya and I are both vampires, and we interpret that identity very differently and have learned much about personhood from both our own experiences and from hearing about each other's.

I, myself, do not identify as human anymore. On the night when I transformed myself and the rest of the Tremere leadership into vampires during a ritual, I ceased to be human and became *vampire* instead. I had been sinking deeper and deeper into a kind of inhuman anger and depression, a rage and self-hatred, for many years. It was an emotional metamorphosis that reached its pinnacle when I became a vampire, and with the anger that was directed at me for the ritual for years after. I left my being human—and indeed, every scrap of humanity I could get away from me—behind, and embraced (if you'll pardon the pun) the vampiric lifestyle. It suited me better, given that I had become prone to distrust, suspicion, and paranoia, and had little interest in doing feel-good things for people and far more in gathering power to protect myself and those I considered my subordinates from future harm.

Do you understand? I became *nonhuman* and *inhuman* in one single stroke. The name of this panel is no mistake; I am interested in how nonhumanity interacts with personhood, but so too am I interested in *inhumanity*, sets of behavior that are nonhuman or even *antithetical* to humanity. I ceased to be human because I did not want to be human anymore, and physically, I had become something else, which granted me an escape. I did not like the way I had been treated by the humans around me, and I did not know what to make of that behavior. It got worse, *inhuman*, over time, once we were vampires, but then, I could understand it. All of a sudden, it clicked, and I could defend myself from it by turning away from humanity, re-prioritizing my moral structure, and becoming someone who will defend my underlings because it is my responsibility, but who cares little for the suffering of unaffiliated people. They are not my responsibility; why bother?

(This stance is one that has broken down somewhat since I came into the system, hence my series of panels intended to help people. My reasons for wanting to do this I can only speculate at.)

And yet, and yet, my personhood has never once been in question. I turned my back on my own humanity, because I became a creature, a predator of the night, something that defends

its own and ignores the needs of all else. And yet, I am still a person. Once upon a time, I would have defined personhood in a very human-centric way—and, indeed, I do not believe that I thought once about my personhood outside of my humanity until I had thrown the latter away almost completely. But my nonhumanity does not change that I am a thinking, feeling person, one able to make moral decisions and weigh my options. And, perhaps even more important, neither does my *inhumanity*, my rejection of myself-as-human (although I am no misanthrope, do not misunderstand me) as well as most moral prioritizations that your average human finds permissible. I have no conscience, only conviction, but that does not remove my personhood. I have been called *beast* and *monster* and *devil* in source, but despite that, despite all of my deeds (I *am* a villain, after all), despite my morality and my convictions and my strange, twisted loyalties, *I am a person*, and that is more complex than I ever could have believed in my youth.

My experience with vampirism was very different. My life as a human was pretty good – everything was falling into place, even if it wasn't entirely there yet. I was a completely mundane PhD student, no connection to the supernatural whatsoever. Before I was Embraced, I never would've even entertained the thought of *actual vampires*. And then, one night, I woke up as a monster. I was completely removed from my human life, both physically and mentally. I was taught to give into the instincts of this new, dangerous predator I'd been turned into – an animal that only wanted to hunt the very people I'd once belonged to. I became a weapon, and that hunger was honed to a fine point to be used against others – and against myself. It was easy, then, to stop feeling like a person.

I pulled myself together, eventually. Built and rebuilt the drive to run away, again and again. And I *did it*. I got out. There was no one to wield me against the world, anymore. I could be my own person. But I had no idea how to mesh who I'd been with who I became. I couldn't go back to my old life, and didn't *have* a life as a vampire, outside of the one I'd just left. So I drifted. I killed for cash, because that was all I knew how to do – I looked for contracts and bounties for the scummiest vampires I could take on, because if I had to be a weapon then I

was at least going to turn myself against people I *wanted* to kill. People who used their powers for manipulation, and torment, and careless murder. And that gave me something to latch onto, something to ground myself with: I didn't have to be a monster, not the way they were. I *could* be, if I wasn't careful, but I could control myself. I could fight the instincts, fight the hunger. I could be better than what I was cursed to be.

It wasn't until several years after that, when I'd finally found a place to belong, found people I could be comfortable with, people I could love, that it clicked: there was never any monster. The thing I spent so long suppressing was just a cornered animal, scared and hungry and lashing out at anything that came too close. There was nothing *wrong with me*, nothing that being Embraced had fundamentally ruined, nothing that I had to make up for. The actions I've taken and the choices I've made over the years changed me, of course – the experiences I've had shaped me just as much as they would any human. But those experiences don't *define* me. I can decide what I want for myself, and make the changes necessary to achieve it. It's *my choice*. And what I've chosen is humanity.

Humanity isn't for everyone, and what it means varies person-to-person; but for me, the humanity I've decided to keep means compassion and understanding. It means putting the least amount of hurt into the world that I can reasonably manage. It means helping others when I can, *because* I can. Humanity is the path that I believe will lead me to do the best that I can for my world – and even if I slip, I know I can keep coming back to it. I haven't lost it, and I won't let it be taken from me – because it's *my choice*.

Different, Not Worse

To follow that up, I wish to emphasize something that I feel we mostly know, but I cannot leave unsaid. Being inhuman or nonhuman is *not* better or worse than *being human*. Being both is not better or worse than being only one. Being something other than human is morally neutral; having a different set of moral priorities than most humans you know *is not inherently*

wrong. Perhaps they may view it as so; but we can only ever judge ourselves by our own standards, not anyone else's. And remember: you do the best you can with the information you have in the circumstances you are in. People rarely do something they consider wrong for what they believe to be the wrong reasons. And simply *being* is *not* wrong. *Being* is *never* wrong. Please remember this.

Conclusion

Humanity has never been the end-all and be-all of personhood. No matter where humans think personhood ends – nor where some of us in the alterhuman community think it does. Personhood *does* include us, inherently; we don't have to meet their standards of humanity to rightfully claim what is part of us. We don't have to conform to some rigid little mold, with all of our differences neatly tucked away and hidden, for fear of being *not-people*. We don't have to throw ourselves as far away from personhood as we can stand just to validate those differences. We *deserve* to still call ourselves people, to claim what gifts that provides, without having to sacrifice what makes us who we are. Inhumanity has a place in personhood. Animality has a place in personhood. Differences in the way we experience this world, the way we experience ourselves, *does not* take away our personhood. And we shouldn't let it. Our personhood – and all of the different ways we can *be* within it – is not something others can take from us. It's not something we can give up. And we shouldn't feel like we have to. We should hold on to this beautiful thing we share that lets us even consider how amazingly different we all are.

And now, we transition from the lecture section of this panel to the Q&A. Please put all questions into the panel questions chat—if you put them in the regular panel chat, we will not see nor answer them. If your question is for a particular one of us, please lead your question with the correct name. We will do our best to answer all questions, but, please, remember that

you are in front of a large audience and on a recording that will go up on YouTube. Please do not ask complex personal questions—you are exposing your personal details to many, many people, and we cannot hope to answer very personal questions with little context on the spot at a panel. If you would like our advice in a one-on-one format, shoot one of us a message about it privately after the Q&A.