

## PERSONHOOD



What does it mean to be a 'person'? We all think we know the answer, but philosophers and ethicists have debated the idea for decades. Today's understanding is complex and stands in sharp contrast to a biblical understanding of what it means to be a person.



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**P**ersonhood is a concept in philosophy that proposes that to be fully worthy of all the benefits of society, mere membership of the human race is insufficient.<sup>1</sup> One must be a *person* as well as a human. In fact, for many thinkers, being human is not even a necessary characteristic, let alone a sufficient one. They propose that some animals have a better claim to the rights of personhood than do some humans.<sup>2</sup>

Primary among these contested rights is the right to life. Vulnerable to losing these rights are those at the very earliest stages of their human journey and those nearing its end. To many people, it seems incontrovertible that the human zygote (fertilised egg), though in possession of its own unique human DNA, should not count as a person. However, if this is so, at what point between the moment of fertilisation and fully-formed adulthood might personhood be attained?

In this *File* we will look at some of the ways philosophers and ethicists have tried to answer this question, and examine their limitations and the assumptions underpinning them. We will also consider how to think biblically and Christianly about personhood, and think about how we can defend these arguments with groups who disagree with us.

### how could we know who is a person?

The idea that the word 'person' means something distinct from 'human' dates back at least to John Locke in 1694. He defined a person as '*a thinking intelligent Being, that has reason and reflection, and can consider*

*itself as itself, the same thinking thing in different times and places*'.<sup>3</sup> It seems highly unlikely that a newborn could meet these criteria – and they could never express that to us even if they did. (This raises the question of how we would know when a being had obtained personhood by this measure. Is it when they can consider themselves a rational, continuing, thinking being, or when they can *tell* us that they do? We will look further at this later.)

But where did Locke's definition come from? It is impossible to be certain, but it seems likely that he formed it through observation rather than, say, through divine revelation. He observed the world around him and the kinds of humans that he saw and, applying his understanding of the world to his observations, he formed a conclusion.

In a webinar for the International Christian Medical and Dental Association (ICMDA), Dr Vinod Shah identifies this kind of meaning-making as 'anthropocentric' as opposed to 'revealed' through Scripture.<sup>4</sup> Anthropocentric definitions of personhood can be scientific, sociological, or philosophical, but they all begin with what we can observe about humankind.

Following Locke, many definitions of personhood rest fully or in part on a concept of self-awareness and reason.<sup>5</sup>

Others start at the other end of the problem. Their position is that the question of personhood can be resolved by

understanding the issue of harm. They want to consider, '*Can this individual be said to be harmed by having their life ended?*' If so, then that is the necessary and sufficient criterion for personhood. Many of these thinkers hold that in order to be harmed, an individual must be self-aware – must *know* that he or she is experiencing a harmful event. For example, Alberto Giubilini and Francesca Minerva state:

*We take 'person' to mean an individual who is capable of attributing to her own existence some (at least) basic value such that being deprived of this existence represents a loss to her.*<sup>6</sup>

one must be a person as well as a human. In fact...being human is not even a necessary characteristic

This at least provides some rationale for *why* self-awareness should be the morally significant characteristic in decisions about who counts as a person.

Peter Singer is perhaps the most famous proponent of the 'harm' argument, using it as his core argument in his *Practical Ethics*.<sup>7</sup> He states that, '*the most plausible arguments for attributing a*

*right to life to a being apply only if there is some awareness of oneself as a being existing over time, or as a continuing mental self*'.<sup>8</sup>

He makes it clear that he strongly supports abortion, particularly for fetuses in whom a disability or life-limiting condition is detected (he cites haemophilia and Down syndrome as conditions which are not severe enough to make life objectively '*not worth living*' for the child, but which the

◀ parents may still find sufficiently concerning to consider aborting the fetus and seeking to conceive a 'replacement' child).<sup>9</sup> Since the fetus cannot, in his view, be self-aware or have any hope or desire to continue living, he considers that there is no intrinsic reason not to terminate their life. They cannot, themselves, be harmed by being killed.

Singer then follows his line of argument further to its logical conclusion that 'birth does not mark a morally significant dividing line'.<sup>10</sup>

*I cannot see how one could defend the view that fetuses may be 'replaced' before birth, but infants may not be...Self-consciousness, which could provide a basis for holding that it is wrong to kill one being and replace it with another, is not to be found in either the fetus or the newborn infant... killing a disabled infant is not morally equivalent to killing a person.*<sup>11</sup>

## weaknesses of anthropocentric definitions

If we are to accept this position – that a person is one who would be harmed if their life was ended, and that in order to be thus harmed, they must have at least some basic level of self-awareness – the obvious question that presents itself is 'when does an infant become self-aware?' And the obvious answer is, 'we don't know'.

Singer notes that even children as old as two or three have difficulty comprehending the idea of their own existence and the potential future ending of that existence. However, he decides to err on the side of caution and suggests that, 'there should be at least some circumstances in which a full legal right to life comes into force...a short time after birth – perhaps a month'.<sup>12</sup> He offers no explanation for why this is an appropriate cut-off point, and it is an area of unusual inconsistency in his writing. He elsewhere insists that self-consciousness is the only relevant moral ground and dismisses the 'distinctively Christian attitude' that informs the modern Western tendency to place a high value on the lives of infants.<sup>13</sup> Yet, in accepting that there should be an appropriate 'safety margin'

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to ensure we do not accidentally end the lives of beings who are self-aware but lack the language to communicate the fact, he takes an inexplicably conservative stance.

Other obvious questions also arise, such as whether someone in a coma or minimally conscious state should retain the personhood they have previously enjoyed, or whether they lost it on losing consciousness. And if the latter, do you and I lose our claims to personhood every time we fall asleep, or go under general anaesthetic? And what about those with severe cognitive disabilities? Are they persons? Is the position different if they were born with the disability or developed it as a result of a catastrophic injury?

A further weakness of the prevailing philosophical stance is its individualistic nature. It is based on the person's understanding of themselves in the world and makes no reference to their relationship to others. Although some philosophers, such

as Mary Ann Warren and Peter Singer, agree that it might be wrong to kill an infant if this would cause harm or distress to others (their parents, for instance), few have any concept that the infant being part of the human community is a morally significant factor in this.

The Bible, on the other hand, sees us as deeply relational beings. We were created by the three-person

godhead, 'in our image, in our likeness', (Genesis 1:26) and thus we were created by persons to be in relationship with persons. We are all interrelated and interdependent beings.

## a theological perspective

These points form two of the eight characteristics that describe aspects of what it is to be a person, as put forward by theologian Louis Janssens:

**1. A subject:** A biblical understanding of personhood starts with the acknowledgement that human beings exist as creatures who are under the rule of God their creator. They are subjects of his authority.

**2. An embodied subject:** As subjects, human beings are also defined by having a human body.

**3. Part of the material world:** The first chapters of Genesis place humankind firmly within the created world.

**4. Inter-relational with other persons:** In Genesis, God recognises that Adam is insufficient on his own and creates a companion, Eve.

**5. An interdependent social being:** Personhood expresses itself in the way that we relate as social beings. When on earth, Jesus showed us an interdependent concept of relationship.

**6. Historical:** Individual people exist within a historical framework.

**7. Equal but unique:** Each person has equal rights, yet we are not all the same.

**8. Called to know and worship God:** One feature of a person is their ability to know and respond to God.<sup>14</sup>

These form a helpful framework for building a Christian understanding of personhood. In 1 Corinthians 12, the Apostle Paul describes Christians as all being part of one body. Not only do our capacities and competencies not matter, but we are all equally needed and valued (v18). God sees no difference in value between individual humans based on their capacities or competencies. Any weaknesses or deficiencies we see in ourselves or others are not accidents or flaws, according to Paul. They are part of God's design.

In fact, if he does differentiate, it is in precisely the opposite direction to what we might think:

*The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I don't need you!' And the head cannot say to the feet, 'I don't need you!' On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honourable we treat with special honour. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has put the body together, giving greater honour to the*

*parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other.*  
(1 Corinthians 12:21-25)

Those members of society that philosophers deem dispensable, disposable, or replaceable, God treats with special honour. He declares them *indispensable* – vital to the thriving of the whole.

To the charge that this privileges our species over others, regardless of capacity or contribution, we can only agree – but need not find this problematic. In the Genesis account, God takes pains to emphasise the uniqueness of humans. Only Adam was made in the image of God (Genesis 1:26-27), then given life by the breath of God (Genesis 2:7). God wanted to give us the understanding that we were created different from everything else. Distinct. Special. We were commanded to rule over all of creation (Genesis 1:26-28). Our specialness does not give us licence to cause harm or suffering to other species, but neither does it leave any scope to afford members of other species access to the rights and privileges of humans, whatever their capacities.

Where does personhood begin, then, for the Christian believer? Is it at the point of fertilisation or implantation? Perhaps, as was believed for centuries, it is at the ‘quickening’ – the time when the baby begins to move

inside the womb. Or maybe it is at the point when the child takes their first breath?

Each of these is an arbitrary point in the development of a human life. Fertilisation is the only decisive moment at which a new human comes into being. There is, then, a continuity from fertilisation all the way through to adulthood. All a fetus needs to reach it is time and nurture. (Sometimes, of course, a fertilised egg splits and two embryos implant, becoming identical twins. These individuals have identical DNA, although they may develop genetic mutations in the womb.

In a laboratory context, cloning a human or ‘growing’ one from synthetic material bypasses the fertilisation stage, but in any scenario, there is a point at which a new individual is formed.) Any point after this is arbitrary and based on discernible characteristics and capacities. It is no different from basing it on an ability to express an understanding of oneself as a rational being existing in time and space with a desire to go on existing. For the Christian, then, fertilisation seems the logical point we must settle on.

Dr Vinod Shah points out that the Bible teaches something yet more radical than this.<sup>15</sup> In the first verses of Jeremiah, the prophet reports that God told him, ‘*Before I formed you in the womb I knew you.*’ (Jeremiah 1:5) In Psalm 139:16, David

famously says to the Lord, ‘*Your eyes saw my unformed body; all the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.*’ In case we are tempted to think that these are isolated examples, relating only to these two extraordinary men of God, Paul tells the believers in Ephesus that God ‘*chose us in [Christ] before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight.*’ (Ephesians 1:4) We were each known, individually, as persons, before the foundation of the world. The sperm and egg fusing were only one moment in our story – and nowhere near its beginning. ‘*Personhood,*’ says Dr Shah, ‘*starts in the mind of God.*’

### understanding the ground we are standing on

Of course, those outside Christianity reject this line of reasoning. It is based on faith or revelation from Scripture, both of which are considered inadmissible as evidence.

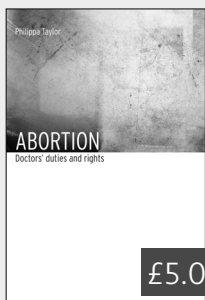
To respond to such a criticism, it is necessary to recognise that nobody stands nowhere – everyone has a set of assumptions that are the foundations they build their theories on. The concept that scientific method is the way to discover truth is a philosophical belief, perhaps even a statement of faith. The idea that rationality is the defining feature of personhood is also a faith position. It is held by rational beings who naturally believe that their perspective is the correct one. But on what grounds has that been determined? It seems so obvious, especially to people who value the work of the mind, that it is hard to

## fertilisation is the only decisive moment at which a new human comes into being

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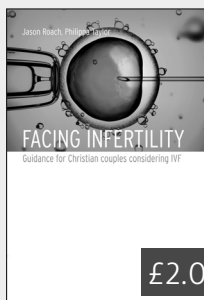
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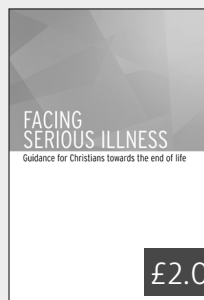
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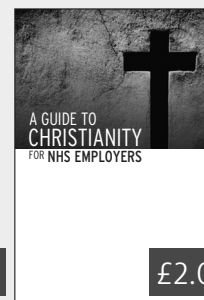
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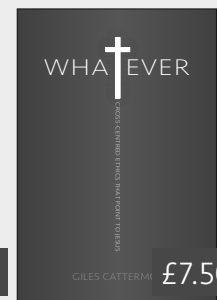
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- ◀ realise – let alone help someone else realise – that it is a statement of faith.

We are unlikely to be able to convince a non-believer that personhood is inherent in all humans and absent from all non-humans, regardless of capacity, based on its origin in the mind of God. Probably the most we can do, when talking to friends and colleagues about it, is to help them recognise that their position – like those of all philosophers – is based on some core assumptions.

Peter Singer is perhaps the clearest example of this. It seems obvious to him that a fetus has no interest in living, and therefore cannot be harmed by being killed (though they may be harmed if they suffer in the process).<sup>16</sup> He has taken this and other observations and intuitions about the world and tried to formulate a definition of personhood that fits around them, ensuring that it rules out certain types of beings, and rules others in. His very fuzzy answer to the question of when in early childhood personhood begins suggests that he intuitively wants to grant personhood to toddlers but cannot find a way to do so without also including fetuses.

Daniel Dennett admits that personhood is a difficult concept to define, and in fact reveals that he expects the definition to be something we can discover, not something philosophers should decide:

*One might well hope that such an important concept, applied and denied so confidently, would have clearly formulatable necessary and sufficient conditions for ascription, but if it does, we have not yet discovered them.*<sup>17</sup>

Is Dennett verging on saying that personhood is something which must be revealed? He ought to be, because otherwise all he is able to say is ‘you are a person if I say you are’. And indeed, this is all any philosopher working on anthropocentric grounds is able to say. The position of the Christian, on the other hand, is that, ‘you are a person if God – the creator of the universe and of you – says you are’. Either might be equally hard to swallow, but being able to demonstrate that philosophers disagree on the necessary and sufficient conditions, and essentially each must end up making their own judgement call, may give open-minded interlocutors sufficient cause to question the assumptions underpinning their own position. ■

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