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Substance, Nature, and Human Personhood

by John Wildman

What is a person? The answer to this foundational question may seem intuitive at the first glance. Many would respond, without much thought, that a person is a human being. However, proponents of empirical functionalist philosophy contend that personhood is based on the ability to perform certain actions in actual, not potential, form. They would therefore claim that some members of species *homo sapiens* may not actually be persons (Singer, 1985). To understand when personhood begins, it is first necessary to understand what a person is. This paper will apply the Aristotelian concepts of substance and nature to define person, and then argue for the ontological personalist view that personhood begins at conception (Palazzani, 1994).

Substance is a philosophical word that denotes the intrinsic quality of some objects that makes them more than the sum of their parts. Philosophers contrast substances with “property things,” which are defined *by* their parts (Sullivan, 2003, p. 19). A Trek 1000 SL road bike is an example of a property thing. If someone were to exchange the handlebars, cranks, wheels, and seat for lighter carbon fiber parts, it would no longer be a Trek 1000. This bike is defined by its parts. However, this is not the case for a human being. Removing the arm, leg, and kidney of a certain human named Joe and replacing them with other functioning parts from different individuals does not change Joe’s substance (Sullivan, 2003). Joe is still Joe. Joe’s essence does not change if his component parts change. Proponents of ontological personalism call this “continuity of existence” (Young, 1994, p. 3).

Substance differentiates between humans and property things, but it still does not answer the question “Are all humans persons?” Substance, as defined above, also includes pet dogs, laboratory mice, and many other entities that have continuity of existence. To move beyond this

broad term “substance” and into the essence of personhood, one must consider Aristotle’s idea of “nature.” Young defines nature as “the intrinsic principle of operation by which a being acts in a way proper to its kind” (1994, p. 2). Nature defines a substance and differentiates it from other types of substances.

Human nature defines the qualities that characterize human beings who have fully realized their intrinsic potential, such as rationality and self-awareness. Human nature is personhood (Palazzani, 1994). This view differs from empirical functionalism by basing personhood in substance. Nature is the quality or qualities a substance intrinsically possesses. Young logically states that “a person is not a quality; persons have qualities. Qualities have nothing, they are had” (1994, p. 3). Substance and its nature seem help to explain continuity of existence.

Empirical functionalists such as Peter Singer and Michael Tooley also endorse a similar concept, called “continuing selves” (Singer, 1985, p. 121). According to Singer, continuing selves possess self-awareness, and are also aware of the past and the future. This idea is necessary to explain, from a functionalist perspective, how humans can still have rights when they are not actively displaying their self-awareness, e.g., when they are asleep (Singer, 1985). This leads to the question, “What is the supporting structure for that continuing self?” Functionalists would likely respond that the brain’s neocortical function provides this structure. This response is difficult to absolutely refute, but it seems less tenable because it is somewhat circular- function supports function. In fact, Young contends that the continuing self actually refers to nature. In his compelling view, continuing self is not a function, but a property of the substance (1994).

Nature specifies the qualities humans possess because of whom they intrinsically are.

Humans are cognitive beings because that is their nature. “It is what humans are that determines what they do, not the other way around” (Young, 1994, p. 3). This idea is antithetical to functionalism, but it seems to be the logical conclusion if humans are indeed substances. Humans have the intrinsic potential to be rational, self-aware beings because of their nature (Palazzani, 1994).

This conceptual framework coherently answers the question “what is a person?” With “person” defined, it is now possible to examine when personhood begins. Logically, then, personhood begins when the substance begins. It seems reasonable that a substance would philosophically begin at its biological beginning (Young, 1994). To explore this proposition, it is necessary to understand the basics of what happens at the beginning of human life.

Human beings become biologically distinct entities at conception, specifically at the moment of syngamy. Syngamy occurs when the genomes of the mother and father come together to form a diploid human zygote. There is nothing prior to the zygote that could be considered a substance. At every subsequent moment after the zygote is first formed, there is a sense that it existed before that moment (Sullivan, 2003). Therefore, this unambiguous moment seems to be the most logical place to suggest the beginning of substance and thereby personhood.

Another reason for suggesting that human substance and nature begin at conception is that the developing conceptus only undergoes changes in location from that point onward. The zygote moves from the fallopian tube to the wall of the uterus. Later, the fetus moves from the uterus to the birth canal and out of the mother into the external world (Sullivan, 2003). Changes in an entity’s location do not seem to be logical grounds for the basis of substance formation. It would be absurd to claim that an individual who steps out of a room was not a substance until he or she emerged from that room. The substance is present regardless of the individual’s location.

Logical consistency suggests that this is also true for the human conceptus.

Some individuals argue against the conception view because the conceptus completely depends on the mother for its subsistence (Sullivan, 2003). This contention does not seem rationally compelling with regard to substance. Reason demonstrates that substance is not based on an entity's ability to care for itself. If Jane Doe experienced a debilitating accident that rendered her completely unable to feed herself, she would become dependent on another individual for her subsistence. However, even though she could not sustain herself, no one would claim that she lost her personhood by this occurrence. Claiming that a fetus does not have personhood until it is viable seems suspiciously similar to the absurd assertion above.

Other arguments against conception as the origin of personhood include physical appearance and the high mortality rate of zygotes prior to implantation in the uterine wall (Sullivan, 2003). These arguments can be addressed in a manner similar to that above. Appearance or mortality as the basis for personhood in adults would seem absurd. Diseases can cause great departure from the typical human appearance. Epidemics can ravish large areas and kill millions of people. In neither case do unprejudiced people claim that the victims are not human persons (Sullivan, 2003). It therefore seems logically inconsistent to suppose that these arguments somehow become viable when applied to the conceptus

Substance and nature appear to provide a logically cohesive argument for a conception view of personhood. Substance forms the foundation that supports the qualities of rationality, self-awareness, and continuity of existence. The conceptus "is not a possible person, but rather a possibly functioning actual person" by its very nature (Young, 1994, p. 4). Syngamy seems to be the most logical point of origin for the human substance. These points make a compelling case for the ontological personalist view that human personhood begins at conception.

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