



Open Research
Archive

<https://research.stmarys.ac.uk/>

TITLE

Book review: The Nature of Human Persons: Metaphysics and Bioethics

AUTHOR

Playford, Richard C.

JOURNAL

The New Bioethics

DATE DEPOSITED

27 August 2021

This version available at

<https://research.stmarys.ac.uk/id/eprint/5047/>

COPYRIGHT AND REUSE

Open Research Archive makes this work available, in accordance with publisher policies, for research purposes.

VERSIONS

The version presented here may differ from the published version. For citation purposes, please consult the published version for pagination, volume/issue and date of publication.

Richard C. Playford

St Mary's University, Twickenham, UK

richard.playford@stmarys.ac.uk

ORCID: 0000-0003-3879-1357

The Nature of Human Persons: Metaphysics and Bioethics. By Jason T. Eberl. Pp. xvi+405. Notre Dame: Notre Dame Press. 2020. £62.00. ISBN: 978-0-268-10773-4.

This monograph rigorously argues for a Thomistic (after the 13th century theologian and philosopher St Thomas Aquinas) account of the human person. Each chapter addresses different stages of human existence, considering the metaphysical and philosophical issues arising from these. Dualist and materialist accounts are considered, and Eberl's Thomistic position is carefully elucidated. Eberl argues that the Thomistic account is as a *via media* between dualism and materialism, combining the strengths, whilst avoiding the weaknesses, of both camps.

Chapter One: 'What Am I?' sets the scene. The desiderata for an account of the human person are delineated and justified, and the reader is introduced to the distinct, but closely related, concepts of 'human being' and 'person'. Eberl outlines the many different ways these two terms are used and shows that whilst some thinkers will use them as synonyms, others will use them to refer to very different concepts. Ultimately, Eberl settles on the term human person to allow for the possibility of nonhuman persons. During this chapter, the outline of the rest of the book is laid out.

Chapter Two: 'This is Us' sets out Eberl's Thomistic account of the human person in broad strokes. Along the way, cerebral transplant thought experiments, in which one person's cerebrum is transplanted into a different person's body (I shall return to this topic later), and dicephalic twins are considered. Chapter Three: 'I Think, Therefore ...' introduces the reader to two contemporary alternative dualist accounts, substance dualism and emergent dualism, with Swinburne's substance dualism and Hasker's emergent dualism being used as quintessential representatives of each. Both views are considered and critiqued. Chapter Four: 'Thou Art Dust' introduces the reader to one reductive and three non-reductive materialist alternatives: animalism, constitutionalism, four-dimensionalism and the embodied mind theory. Olson's animalist approach is considered as a representative reductive physicalist account. Baker's constitutionalism, Hudson's four-dimensionalism and McMahan's embodied mind account are the three non-reductive materialist accounts considered. In the process of doing this, teletransporter thought experiments and their correct interpretation are also considered.

Chapter Five: Starting Out then applies these accounts to the beginning of human life and the various questions and issues raised therein. Eberl argues that his Thomistic account is superior based on the arguments of previous chapters. He shows how, according to his Thomistic account, a human person comes into existence at conception. In doing this, he also spends quite some time carefully engaging with other contemporary Thomists who believe

that a human person comes into existence at some point after conception and argues that their accounts are inadequate. He responds to several contemporary objections to his position including the difficulties raised by totipotency and the possibility and occasional occurrence of twinning.

Chapter Six: 'End of Line' considers the end of human life and how we can identify it. Eberl argues for a whole-brain criterion of death, according to which death is declared when the higher brain and brain stem irreversibly cease to function, and spends quite some time critiquing Thomistic thinkers who argue for a circulatory/respiratory criterion of death, according to which death is declared when all circulatory and respiratory functions have irreversibly ceased. In the process, real-world case studies are considered, as are decapitation thought experiments (in which a decapitated head is kept artificially alive through scientific intervention).

Chapter Seven: 'Is This All That I Am?' explores the possibility of postmortem existence. Eberl begins by examining whether the dualist and materialist positions allow for the possibility of a postmortem existence and, if so, in what form. He then applies his own account to the question and defends a traditional Christian/Catholic understanding of the afterlife according to which the soul subsists after death, potentially awaiting a bodily resurrection. He argues that human persons can exist in a disembodied state, but that such a state would be an impoverished existence and that a bodily resurrection is ultimately required to correct this. Eberl explores how we could exist in and experience such a state. He also carefully explores the numerical relationship between our pre-mortem and post resurrection bodies (i.e. is our post resurrection body the very same body as our pre-mortem bodies, or are they different bodies?), should such a resurrection occur. This chapter leaves important questions unanswered. In particular, the relationship between the brain and the mind is inadequately defined, and Eberl's assertion that a mind with mental states could exist without a brain is insufficiently defended, in my opinion.

Finally, Chapter Eight: 'Who Is My Sister or Brother?' applies these findings to two key questions in contemporary bioethics: abortion and the care of patients in a persistent vegetative state (PVS). On abortion, Eberl defends a broadly pro-life position while allowing for what he calls indirectly intended abortion when it will save the pregnant person's life. He justifies this using the principle of double effect. With regard to the care of patients in a PVS, Eberl allows for the withdrawal of artificial nutrition and hydration when there is no hope of recovery. This final chapter is a brief application to bioethics of the previous chapter's arguments. As a result, Eberl does not engage with many of the standard criticisms of these two positions, although this should not be held against the chapter given its modest goals.

Returning to Eberl's discussion of cerebral transplant thought experiments, the author believes that when person A's cerebrum is transplanted into person B's body that person A's personal identity travels with the cerebrum. However, this personal identity is limited to the cerebrum, so that, strictly speaking, B's body never becomes A's (new) body. He writes, "when A's cerebrum is attached to the rest of B's brain, A is conjoined to an already existing living organism. In essence, then, B's body has become a biological life-support system for A but is not, properly speaking, A's 'new body.' A's body is, and always will be until it irreversibly ceases functioning, A's cerebrum" (p. 51).

Eberl believes that when A's cerebrum is separated from the rest of A's body that A's body is reduced to that of the cerebrum whilst the rest of A's body ceases to belong to, or be a part of, A. In the same way that a severed arm ceases to be a proper part of the survivor's body, so does the rest of A's body cease to be a part of A's body. A's body now consists solely of a disconnected cerebrum. However, Eberl believes that when A's cerebrum is transplanted into B's body that B's body does not become A's, instead it merely becomes a life-support system for A (with A's body consisting solely of a cerebrum).

In these bizarre experiments it seems to me that from a metaphysical perspective (as opposed to a psychological, ethical or legal perspective) B's body would become A's body when A's cerebrum is transplanted over, contra Eberl who denies this. To see why, let us ask what would happen if the cerebrum were then re-implanted back into its original body having been implanted into a new body for a period of time. My intuition is that the re-implanted cerebrum in its original body would form a unified whole (i.e. that A's body would, once again, become A's body upon reimplantation as opposed to a mere 'life-support system'), and yet the situation is remarkably similar to when it is implanted into B's body. Presumably, when A's cerebrum is reimplanted back into its original body, the cerebrum-less body's identity is absorbed back into, or annihilated by, the identity of A's cerebrum to form a unified whole. After all, they are behaving like a unified whole with the body being controlled by the cerebrum and the cerebrum being supported by the body. If this is possible in the case of *reimplantation* then why not in the case of simple implantation, such as into B's body? The answer cannot simply be 'because the original body is the cerebrum's body, unlike the new body' because this simply begs the question. The reason why A's body is (or was) A's cerebrum's body, prior to this bizarre turn of events, is because they were a unified whole. As a result, this answer assumes that the original body, consisting of A's cerebrum and (the rest of) A's body, formed a unified whole, but that this is not the case when A's cerebrum is transplanted into B's body, which is precisely what we are trying to ascertain. It is much simpler to conclude that in the same way that A's reunited cerebrum and body form a unified whole so too does A's transplanted cerebrum form a unified whole with B's body, i.e. that B's body does become A's (new) body.

Much more could be said, and there is insufficient space here to develop these thoughts properly. Perhaps we might hold that A's body when separated from A's cerebrum continues to be (part of) A's body. Alternatively, we might argue that there is some relevant difference between A's cerebrum-less body and B's cerebrum-less body such that A's cerebrum can be united to A's cerebrum-less body in a way it can't be united to B's cerebrum-less body. Perhaps we might appeal to immunological factors (presumably B's body would attack A's cerebrum as a foreign body), but this raises difficult questions about those with autoimmune disorders. For example, if B's body's immune system attacking A's cerebrum shows that they are not a unified whole then perhaps this risks showing that those with autoimmune disorders are no longer unified wholes. This may or may not be desirable.

Eberl might respond by highlighting that all disease implies an absence of wholeness and thus, perhaps, it is not so problematic to say that people with autoimmune diseases are no longer unified wholes. I would respond to this in two ways, first, this seems to be a very strong claim that requires further defence. Second, even if there is an absence of wholeness in those with autoimmune disorders, we do not then conclude that whatever bit of them is being attacked by their immune system is no longer theirs. This is too much of a leap. Instead, we

simply conclude that their immune system is disordered in some way and that this is the source of the absence of wholeness. That said, perhaps this might be an interesting metaphysical interpretation of their condition. Either way, however, Eberl has not yet demonstrated that B's body's immune system attacking A's cerebrum shows that they are not a unified whole. More is needed.

Perhaps we might appeal to genetic factors (presumably B's body and A's body have different genetical profiles), but this raises difficult questions regarding genetic chimeras on the one hand, and identical twins on the other. Regarding genetic chimeras, if distinct genetic profiles demonstrate that B's body and A's cerebrum cannot form a unified whole then surely genetic chimeras, who have two or more distinct genetic profiles, cannot be unified wholes. This strikes me as absurd. Regarding twins, both cerebrums and both bodies would share the same genetic profile if we limited our mad experimentation solely to identical twins. As a result, the issue of disparate genetic profiles post implantation would not occur in these scenarios. Clearly this topic needs more discussion.

Overall, Eberl's book makes a valuable contribution to contemporary debates about the metaphysics of the human person. Eberl defends Thomism clearly and succinctly, whilst engaging in a rigorous and novel way with his philosophical opponents. He engages carefully with alternative contemporary theories thus demonstrating the plausibility of Thomism in contemporary debates. I would heartily recommend this book to both the Thomist and the non-Thomist. The Thomist will find a valuable ally in Eberl who can help them strengthen their own position, and the non-Thomist will, at the very least, see contemporary Thomism at its best.

Richard Playford

St Mary's University

Waldegrave Road, Twickenham, London, TW1 4SX.

richard.playford@stmarys.ac.uk

Word count of review: 1957