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## Personhood and Respect for Life

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# Personhood and Respect for Life

Vernon J. Bourke

The problem to be considered here centers on the question: What is a person? The way that we answer this question is very important in practical thinking, for all moral and legal problems involve persons. In particular, discussions of the morality of abortion require some definite view as to whether the fetus is in any sense a person. Indeed, we shall see that many contemporary issues concerning the right to live a full human life receive different solutions, depending on one's view of what a person is.

Many writers today, especially in the field of the social sciences, insist that human personality is something acquired in late infancy. They suggest that the human child comes to be a person when he begins to participate actively in his surrounding society. To be a person, in this sense, is to be engaged in socialization. This occurs, they say, at some point between the middle of the first year after birth and the end of the second year of infancy.

Who started this way of looking at the human person, I do not know. However, some writers adopting this position refer to the writings of the anthropologist Ashley Montagu. In one of his semi-popular books he mentioned how, "the Eskimos do not regard a baby as a complete human being until it is capable of sitting up."<sup>1</sup> At another place in the same book, Montagu apparently adopted the Eskimo view, for he now wrote that, "Human Nature is not what a man is born with, but what he becomes under the organizing influence of the socializing environment into which he is born."<sup>2</sup> In later writings Montagu has extended this social concept of the person to the domain of ethics.<sup>3</sup>

Now, what I propose to do is to examine this problem of the meaning of "person"—not in any argumentative way but in the serious hope of throwing some light on contemporary disagreements concerning abortion and associated problems. From the beginning, I should state frankly that I reject Montagu's meaning for person. It is not that I would deny the impact of society on the growth of individual personality. Rather obviously, environment, and especially the influence of other humans, is most important in the formation of the mature person. The point is, however, that man must not be reduced to a mere part of civil society.

What is at issue here is partly a verbal tangle. Personality originally meant that universal essence which is shared by all persons. With the development of modern social psychology (and surely this does not go back much more than a century), the term "personality" acquired a changed meaning. Today, psychological personality seems to signify that acquired complexus of attitudes, dispositions, habits and skills, which distinguishes one human individual in his overt relations with others. Thus,

John Wayne's well-known movie personality is his distinctive public image as an actor. It has little to do with what he may actually be in private. So too, we speak of a personality as attractive, or engaging, or offensive, and so on. This meaning is close to what older philosophers and psychologists called character. In any case, it is not personality in this rather superficial sense that I wish to discuss.

That is why, in the title of this paper, the term "personhood" is used rather than personality. We are concerned with the clarification of the practical meaning of personhood. We are trying to find out what a person really is.

In attacking this question, I shall make some use of the philosophy of Thomas Aquinas. But my aim is not to examine what he thought about the human person, historically, it is rather to investigate what his realistic thinking on man may contribute to this issue in the twentieth century. Aquinas was primarily interested in the theological significance of person, as the term is used in Christian discussion of the Trinity. However, he based his theory of personhood on a broad philosophical view of man and his world environment which makes of Thomistic anthropology a pertinent instrument for handling some of our problems in today's world.

Nor do I intend to ignore, in what follows, the two most important schools of contemporary philosophy: European phenomenology and British analytic philosophy. The phenomenological emphasis on the priority of consciousness and the prime value of self-assertion in the act of choice is tremendously important to a developed understanding of the status of the human person. It is no accident that many phenomenologists are also personalists. On the other hand, recent British ethical philosophy has more and more stressed the necessity of a well worked out psychology of moral agency. Miss Anscombe's thought is but one example in this field.<sup>4</sup> If we are to talk about what is right or good for a man to do, we must know something about what kind of actor man is. Moreover, to achieve any useful meaning for person in contemporary ethical discussions, we need to pay attention to how the term is ordinarily used. It is particularly in the area of practical inter-personal problems, whether viewed morally or legally, that everyday usage is important but frequently imprecise.

A standard dictionary used in college courses in English states that a person is: "a human being; a particular individual," and further that in law a person "is recognized as the subject of rights and duties."<sup>5</sup> Doubtless there are debatable features in this explanation but it does represent the way that the average informed speaker uses the term "person" today. We shall see that it is not very different from the signification that person has in Aquinas' philosophy.

The Thomistic meaning of person started with a definition that had been worked out seven centuries before Thomas Aquinas wrote by the Roman senator and scholar, Boethius. The Latin verb *personare* means to sound, or speak, through something. Hence, *persona* named the sort of mask used by some actors in ancient stage-plays. Boethius had studied formal logic and he defined person in terms of its genus and specific difference. A person, he decided, is "an individual substance of a ra-



tional nature.”<sup>6</sup> This means that, for Boethius, personhood required a being that is a complete member of its class, unified within itself and yet not part of another substance, and specifically distinguished by the possession of intelligence.

Aquinas rethought this Boethian definition in terms of a more realistic philosophy of being and of man.<sup>7</sup> First of all, Thomas insisted that a person is a really existing being, substantial in nature, and not a mere part or accident belonging to another being. While he knew that person may be used loosely in a symbolic sense, Aquinas stressed the fundamental notion that to be a person is to exist by one’s self and not to exist as part of another being. In one of his most mature statements on the term, Aquinas remarked: “not just any individual in the genus of substance, even though naturally endowed with rationality, has the meaning of a person—but only that which exists by itself.”<sup>8</sup>

The second major emphasis in Aquinas’ meaning of person falls on the specific difference, for there are many individually existing realities that are not persons. What makes an individual a person is his possession of rationality. Briefly this means that a person must be able to know in a special way and to will in a special way. So, at one point Aquinas says that, “action on the intellectual level is both action of the intellect and action of the will.”<sup>9</sup> Cognitively, to be rational is to be able to rise above the concrete materiality of objects of sense knowledge to form judgments as to the definitive meanings (*rationes*) of these objects on a level of thought that transcends the limitations of hunks of matter and spatio-temporal boundaries. A being that cannot think except in terms of this concrete body, here and now present, is not a person, for Aquinas. On the conative side, he held that a rational being must be capable of loving, desiring and actively seeking to embrace things that are known intellectually and valued for their univocal goodness.<sup>10</sup> In other words, a person, for Thomas Aquinas, must be able to understand and to use volitional freedom in a distinctive manner. This does not mean, however, that a person must always be actually understanding and willing. Descartes claimed that we must be thinking at every instant in our existence—but surely he was wrong.

There is at least one further aspect of personhood, in the view of Aquinas, that is important to moral and legal discussions. This is what recent philosophers call the autonomy of the human person. Each human being who has the full status of a moral agent is in control of at least some of his actions, by virtue of knowing them and initiating them from within himself. A moral agent cannot simply be the passive recipient of the activity of other agents.<sup>11</sup>

Does Aquinas also recognize the role that society plays in the development of the mature person? It is quite clear from his comments on the famous passage in the *Politics of Aristotle*, where man is called a *zoon politikon*, that he does.<sup>12</sup> Man is, indeed, a naturally sociable being and can only achieve full development of his person in the context of society. However, Aquinas does not admit that society produces human persons; rather, it is men that make society. Although human individuals are,

as it were, the parts of which society is constituted, nevertheless these parts are prior in being to society, viewed in the order of development.<sup>13</sup>

Oddly, there was a medieval story in Arabic about a child that grew up outside the influence of human society and achieved remarkable maturity in knowledge and virtue.<sup>14</sup> Yet even this solitary fictional character was made to seek out eventually the company of others. In any case, Thomas Aquinas agreed with Aristotle that in order to live well man must enjoy the society of his fellows. This is not at all the same thing as saying that socialization is what constitutes the person. Aquinas insists that the product of human procreation is a human person. As he expresses it with great precision:

Since coming into being (*fieri*) terminates in actually existing being, without qualification, an instance of becoming only occurs in the case of something that has subsistent being; and this sort of thing is a complete individual substance generically; and where it is of an intellectual nature, it is called a person . . .<sup>15</sup>

We may take it, then, that we know rather clearly what Thomas Aquinas thought that personhood meant. This was the view of a man who lived seven hundred years ago and who labored under the burden of a very imperfect knowledge of biological science. What does this have to do with the practical meaning of person today?

Actually this is two rather different questions. It is one thing to ask: how do we define or describe that class whose members are generally recognized as persons? A useful answer to this question would get to the universal meaning of personhood and would enable us to discriminate between persons and non-persons. This is the key question to consider with problems such as abortion, for advocates of abortion usually assume that the fetus is not a person, while opponents usually claim that it is.

The second question asks: what is a person, in the sense of what is distinctive of this individual person, when compared with all other persons? I hope you see that this is not the same query as the first. This second is not a class question: it does not seek for the universal characteristics of personhood but rather for the unique and peculiar features that constitute the identity of this one person. There is no general answer to this second question. It is the sort of problem that engrosses existential philosophers.<sup>16</sup> Its only answer is an assertion of the utterly private and unique existence and consciousness of each individual. There is only one Harry Truman and he is indefinable. Since much that is written about personal identity by phenomenologists falls under this second question, we do not find in their writings the solution to our first question.

Now let us take a simple common-language approach to our problem. When we say today that a certain racehorse is not a person but that his owner, Mrs. So-and-so, is a person, what do we mean? I think we intend to say that the owner is a human being capable of doing a number of things that the horse cannot do: things like

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making decisions on the basis of general information, voting in elections, giving instructions to others, assuming responsibility for debts, claiming a variety of rights, and so on. In most cases we can tell rather easily whether a given individual is a person or not.

Similarly, when we say that a fictitious character, like Little Abner, is not a real person but that his creator, Al Capp, is indeed a person, we know what we mean. Little Abner is not a real existent but simply the product of a fertile imagination. Mr. Capp is an existing individual in the class of human beings and, in spite of his lack of a good part of one leg, he is a complete human person. It is not organic wholeness that makes one a subsistent human individual but simply the fact that one really exists as a member of the human species.

In common language, then, personhood signifies a real existent that is not part of another more complete being—and that is possessed of the ability to make decisions, assume responsibilities, claim privileges, and so on. In his analytic consideration of moral agency, P. F. Strawson uses a different terminology to say much the same thing: "The concept of a person is the concept of a type of entity such that *both* predicates ascribing states of consciousness and predicates ascribing corporeal characteristics, a physical situation, etc., are equally applicable to a single individual of that single type."<sup>17</sup> In the ordinary course of events, we find that a common-language meaning of person is adequate for practical purposes.

However, suppose there is a country whose criminal laws permit the arraignment of a dog in court and his prosecution for a crime. This would amount to treating this dog as a legal person, as if he were *sui juris*, in complete charge of himself. It seems to me to be a rather ridiculous case. We all know that, while a dog may be thought by his master to have a certain "personality," actually the dog will not qualify as a person under our usual understanding of the word. If we punish a dog, it cannot be justified by charging that he is a moral agent; the only justification would be that punishment of the dog is a means of training him to act in patterns that we find suitable. We are the persons who make this value judgment.

Now let us turn to more difficult cases in which the common meaning of person is found to need greater precision. Suppose we consider, first of all, a man who is sound asleep. Is he a person, while sleeping? He is not at this moment making decisions and actively claiming his rights. Yet we assume the continuation of his individual identity and we would say that such an individual does not cease to be a person in those intervals in which he lapses into unconsciousness or semi-consciousness. If a sleeping man is killed, it is a case of homicide. The sleeper retains his personhood, even when he is not an active participant in his societal environment.

Next, consider a senile old lady. Suppose she is not able to talk coherently, unable to manage her affairs, unable to socialize, unable to defend herself, and unaware of possible dangers to her welfare. She is a burden on society. There are influential



people in the world today who would say that this old lady should be killed, for she does no good to herself or to others. They would say that that she is not a person. At a recent meeting, I heard a surgeon, the author of a book on professional ethics, assert that it would be a very ethical thing to put such an old lady out of her misery.

Now, I think that this is precisely the point at which we should take a stand in favor of the continuous reality of the human person. If we define personhood merely in terms of participation in one's social environment, then our senile old lady is not a person. She may nevermore use her intellect or will as a human being. But she may regain lucidity, even for a short time, she may show us that her personal identity endures and entitles her to moral consideration as the subject of moral rights. I could never be sure what is going on within her consciousness. We must assume that she remains a human person, as long as her life continues.

Think of the more problematic case of a ten-year old child who is malformed and has never showed any signs of intelligence. Is this a person? I think so, and I think any suggestion that such a defective human can be killed is quite immoral. My reason is this: even a poorly endowed child is the product of human generation and, while alive, is entitled to be treated as a member of the human species. Biologically, there is no other class in which the malformed child can be categorized. We must make the presumption that such a child is the bearer of a human life, that it has a human mind entrapped in a defective organism, that it would be able to use this mind if its organic disabilities could be removed. Medical science has already made some remarkable advances in the chemical treatment of some mental disorders. It is easier to treat the body than the mind but it is even easier to harm the mind through bodily mistreatment. Indeed, this is precisely the sort of case which cries for help from those who are concerned about the rights of the person who cannot defend himself.

Let us take a very different example. Suppose we encounter a visitor from a distant planet who looks like a dog but who talks, makes universal judgments, freely chooses between alternatives, and actually shares in the life of our human society. Would we consider this individual, in spite of his canine appearance, to be a person? My answer would be in the affirmative. He would have to be a living organic individual, and he would have to show intelligence and volition—if he did, I would call him a person.

Notice that I do not claim that such borderline cases of personhood are entitled to all the rights that would be ethically granted to the ordinary mature person. There is no point in claiming the right of free speech, for instance, for a person who is completely unable to express his thoughts and feelings. Or rather, I would put it this way: the person who cannot communicate with others retains the moral right to do so but the use of this right, under the circumstances, cannot be granted him. This, of course, is the traditional distinction between possession of a right and its

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exercise. As long as a person is alive, his right to live endures, unless this person forfeits it by acts of serious aggression on other persons. I would defend the right of every human person to continue in existence, as long as he is not the deliberate source of death or great harm to others.

In spite of the fact that one is either a person or not a person, there are different levels of personhood. The top level is that of the highly developed human person who is in full command of his powers of understanding and willing. Such a mature person is endowed with a number of moral rights in addition to his basic right to live. Such a person is in charge of himself, he actually uses his intelligence, he makes free choices, he is morally and legally responsible for his voluntary activities. He is not, of course, always actually doing these things. When he is intoxicated, or very sick, he is less than intelligent, not really a functioning member of society. Yet, even in semi-conscious conditions, the mature person retains his moral rights.

This suggests that there is a middle level of personhood, exemplified by people who are not fully conscious, who are emotionally unstable, who are not actually very intelligent, who are senile, or who are as yet in infancy and have not started to use their intelligence or will. There are thousands of such examples. The man who is properly committed to an insane institution, and who has little prospect of recovery, is a good example of this mid-level of personhood. He remains a human being and he certainly retains, in my opinion, the right to live. Yet he may not be able to claim or exercise much more in the way of human rights. Of course he has a right to be free from unnecessary pain or mutilation but these I regard as extensions of his right to live as a human person. On the other hand, I would hesitate to say that he has a right to marry and propagate his kind.

There is an even lower level of personhood which occurs in the case of the individual born of human parents but never able to use his intelligence. He is a person, in my view, but he is not a moral agent. There is no point in talking about the duties of such an individual. One may ask: would it not be better if the life of such a low-grade person were terminated painlessly? I can recognize the good intent of advocates of mercy-killing: there is no malice present. However, we should recognize that we make ethical generalizations, rules if you wish, to cover what should be done in most cases and under ordinary circumstances. Those comparatively rare cases, in which it is really difficult to know whether it is better for a person to continue to live or not, should not constitute the ground for a general ethical judgment. Rather our rule should be: "protect the life of all humans, except in those cases where self-defense requires killing." That society would be better without its defective members does not seem to me to be a strong enough justification for homicide.

Now let us briefly think over the problem of killing an unwanted human child at some point in its prenatal life. Is it a reasonable thing to permit or advocate abortion? Unfortunately it is easy to become emotional about this question. Some



thinkers focus on the situation of the mother and argue that she is really the only person concerned and so she should decide to terminate her pregnancy, if she so desires. Others claim that the state has the right to terminate pregnancies which would result in undesirable citizens. Still others say that there is no reason to get excited about an abortion, that it is just another surgical procedure to remove unwanted tissue.

On the other hand, there are people like myself who think that it is immoral to abort a viable fetus, simply because it is a person in the minimal sense that I have outlined above. Behind my view of abortion lies a total philosophy of reality and of man as a person which transcends, I think, narrow individual interests and religious bias. It is not because a certain Church condemns abortion that I disapprove of it. It is because I am philosophically convinced that the unborn child is a person, even though it has not as yet displayed its intelligence and will. We know that in the ordinary course of events it will do so. To the mother who claims that she is the only person to make this decision, I would say two things. First, she did not make this fetus herself, another person shared in the production, the father is also an interested person. Second, the fetus is a third person whose future is very much involved. We must assume that, in most cases, if the fetal person could be consulted he would vote to live. This I should claim, quite apart from any religious commitment that I may have. That is why I am just as much concerned for the abortion of little non-Catholics as I am about potentially Catholic children.

Of course there is an additional motivation for the believer in God and the realm of the spirit to oppose abortion. The theist is convinced that each human child has a soul that is undying. Even the fetus has a spiritual soul, in my judgment as a Christian. I know there is some hesitation in the history of theology about the precise time at which the fetus receives a rational soul. This results from a foolish adherence to an outmoded embryology. In terms of what little I know about modern embryology, there is no reason to assert that the fetus developing within a human mother is anything other than human from the first few days of its growth. I know no good reason why a Christian should deny that an unborn child has an immortal soul. The believing theist has this additional reason, then, for concern about the practice of abortion.

To the non-theist, who today is often called a humanist, I would add that, apart from the religious argument, there are important grounds for hesitating to kill any human being. While doubts and differences about the personhood of the fetus remain, it is the mark of a reasonable man to avoid advocating any practice, like abortion, that can too easily be abused. It is not a good argument, that if people cannot get legal abortions they will get illegal and dangerous ones. The fact that many people commit a certain crime does not make it good. It will improve the quality of our society, if all its members come to respect human life at all its levels. Even though not fully convinced that the fetus is a person, one knows that it is at least on the way to being a full member of society. By what right can we presume

to destroy a human offspring that is even in the course of becoming a complete person?

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## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> A. Montagu, *Man: His First Million Years*, Cleveland: World Publishing Co., 1957, p. 126.
- <sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 88.
- <sup>3</sup> See for instance his, *Life Before Birth*, New York: New American Library, 1964.
- <sup>4</sup> G.E.M. Anscombe, *Intention*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1957; plus two of her articles reprinted in *Ethics*, edited by Judith J. Thomson and Gerald Dworkin, New York: Harper & Row, 1968. See also: A. R. White (ed.), *The Philosophy of Action*, London: Oxford University Press, 1968; and Glenn Langford, *Human Action*, New York: Doubleday, 1971.
- <sup>5</sup> *Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, Springfield, Mass.: G. & C. Merriam Co., 1948, p. 741.
- <sup>6</sup> Boethius, *De persona et duabus naturis in Christo*, c. 3 (PL 64, 1343). Thomas Aquinas cites this standard definition frequently; see for instance: *Summa Theologiae*, I, 29, 4, c: "Persona enim in communi significat substantiam individuum rationalis naturae."
- <sup>7</sup> See: *In I Sententiarum*, q. 23, 1-3, and q. 25, 1; *Summa contra Gentiles*, IV, 38 and 43; *De potentia*, q. IX, art. 1-5; *S.T.*, I, qq. 27-30; and III, qq. 2, 3 and 17; and especially *De unione Verbi Incarnati*, art. 1 and 2.
- <sup>8</sup> *S.T.*, III, 2, 2, ad 3m; see the explanation of this in Joseph Owens, *An Elementary Christian Metaphysics*, Milwaukee: Bruce, 1963, pp. 152-154.
- <sup>9</sup> *S.T.*, I, 27, 3, c: "actio in intellectuali natura est actio intellectus et actio voluntatis."
- <sup>10</sup> *S.T.*, I, qq. 79 and 84-88 analyze the cognitive functions of understanding, while qq. 80-83 discuss the appetitive functions of willing.
- <sup>11</sup> Thus Thomas speaks of rational substances as those "quae habent dominium sui actus, et non solum aguntur sicut alia, sed per se agunt." *S.T.*, I, 29, 1, c.
- <sup>12</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Sententia libri Politicorum*, I, 2, commenting on *Politics*, 1253a2.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* "Sic igitur patet, quod totum est prius naturaliter quam partes materiae, quamvis partes sint priores ordine generationis. Sed singuli homines comparantur ad totam civitatem, sicut partes hominis ad hominem . . . Agit de institutione civitatis; concludens ex praemissis quod in omnibus hominibus est quidam naturalis impetus ad communitatem civitatis, sicut et ad virtutes."
- <sup>14</sup> One version of the story is Ibn Tufayl's, *Hayy ibn Yaqzan*, translated by Lenn Evan Goodman, New York: Twayne Publishers, 1972. This story is one of the sources of Dafoe's *Robinson Crusoe*.
- <sup>15</sup> *Summa contra Gentiles*, IV, 48: "Cum autem fieri terminetur ad esse simpliciter, eius est fieri quod habet esse subsistens: et huiusmodi est individuum completum in genere substantiae, quod quidem in natura intellectuali dicitur persona aut etiam hypostasis."
- <sup>16</sup> Thus Gabriel Marcel wrote beautifully about the unicity of the person but his insights are not very helpful with the problem of abortion. See his *Being and Having*, tran. Katherine Farrer, Boston: Beacon Press, 1951, pp. 47-56.
- <sup>17</sup> P. F. Strawson, *Individuals*, London: Methuen, 1959, pp. 101-102. Cf. Glenn Langford, *op. cit.*, pp. 61-80, for a more recent analytical study of the person.

