

# Human Personhood: An Analysis and Definition

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## INTRODUCTION

ONE OF THE gravest issues of our day concerns the nature of human personhood. What is a person? What is a human person? Which individuals may rightly be included within or without the category of human person? And, on what basis can these determinations be justified?

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an individual or a grouping of individuals (e.g., fetuses, PVS patients) is considered on this ques-

tion, one invokes a set of functional criteria for personhood and evaluates whether, or to what degree, those functions are manifest. Those individuals manifesting some certain minimal expression of the relevant functions are judged to be persons; those failing to meet the stated criteria are judged to be non-persons.

Second, others argue some variation of what may be called an *essentialist model* for discerning the personhood of individuals. Here, one judges that it is the inherent nature or essence of the human being that grounds the individual's personhood, regardless of whether or not any number of normal human functionings may actually be manifest. Personhood is grounded, then, not on the actual expression of distinctive human functionings but on the essence of the human person whose nature possesses a natural capacity for the full range of such human expressions.<sup>1</sup>

Having offered a brief overview of the competing models in this debate, we wish now to proceed to examine more closely some representative proposals from leading advocates of each model. On assessment of these respective approaches, it will be argued that the functionalist model fails while

the essentialist model succeeds in providing legitimate basis for defining human personhood.

## FUNCTIONALIST MODEL OF HUMAN PERSONHOOD

A leading advocate of the functionalist model is Joseph Fletcher. His early articles of 1972 and 1974<sup>2</sup> defined the terms of the debate over personhood in ways in which many have found appealing and persuasive. In the earlier article, Fletcher itemizes fifteen positive and five negative propositions<sup>3</sup> which, together, are meant to provide a basis for critical, rational determination of individuals' personhood. He proposes these without any ranking of importance and simply affirms in each case some minimal level of functioning that must be present for the individual rightly to be considered a person. A sampling of how he offers these criteria is instructive. Regarding his criterion of "minimal intelligence," he writes,

Any individual of the species *homo sapiens* who falls below the I.Q. 40-mark in a standard Stanford-Binet test, amplified if you like by other tests, is questionably a person; below the 20-mark, not a person. *Homo* is indeed *sapiens*, in order to be *homo*. The *ratio*, in another turn of speech, is what makes a person of the *vita*. Mere biological life, before minimal intelligence is achieved or after it is lost irretrievably, is without personal status.<sup>4</sup>

Or consider how Fletcher describes the criterion of "self-control":

If an individual is not only not controllable by others (unless by force) but not controllable by the individual himself or herself, a low level of life is reached about on a par with a paramecium. If the condition cannot be rectified medically, so that means-ends behavior is out of the question, the individual is not a person—not ethically, and certainly not in the eyes of the law—just as a fetus is not legally a person.<sup>5</sup>

A pattern is evident throughout Fletcher's discussion. He proposes some characteristic of fully-formed human life and suggests a minimal level of its expression as necessary for human personhood. What he never suggests, however, is any rational basis by which he determines which characteristics become criteria or what guides his judgment of the minimal levels necessary for personhood to be properly grounded. One is left to wonder from where this list of fifteen positive and five negative criteria arose.

Fletcher's second article, two years later, only exacerbates these questions. Now, instead of twenty criteria we are given a list of four traits which, in response to critics of his earlier article, he proposes as "contenders" for "the singular *esse* of humanness."<sup>6</sup> Of these four—neocortical function, self-consciousness, relational ability, and happiness—it becomes clear that there is one which is most basic. Neocortical functioning is, for Fletcher, "the key to humanness, the essential trait, the human *sine qua non*."<sup>7</sup> He writes further,

The point is that without the synthesizing function of the cerebral cortex (without thought or mind), whether before it is present or with its end, the person is nonexistent no matter how much the individual's brain stem and mid-brain may continue to provide feelings and regulate autonomic physical functions. To be truly *Homo sapiens* we must be sapient, however minimally. Only this trait or capability is necessary to *all* of the other traits which go into the fullness of humanness. Therefore this indicator, neocortical function, is the first-order requirement and the key to the definition of a human being.<sup>8</sup>

What commends neocortical function most strongly, for Fletcher, is both its basicality and its universality. "The non-neocortical theories (or paraneocortical) fall because they do not account for all cases," he writes. In contrast, the neocortical criterion "necessarily covers all other criteria, because they are by definition impossible criteria

when neocortical function is gone.”<sup>9</sup>

Evidently, the irony of this claim escapes Fletcher’s notice. While he asserts that the criterion of neocortical functioning covers “all cases,” in fact this criterion, *a priori*, precludes innumerable cases (e.g., a human embryo, PVS patient) which others in the debate argue, on other grounds, must be included. More will be said of this problem below, but for the moment it is important to register the question-begging nature of Fletcher’s proposal, despite his confident assertions to the contrary.

Another earlier article in the recent literature on personhood which has had significant influence is Mary Anne Warren’s, “On the Moral and Legal Status of Abortion.”<sup>10</sup> Warren affirms what many in the pro-choice movement would deny, viz., that “it is not possible to produce a satisfactory defense of a woman’s right to obtain an abortion without showing that a fetus is not a human being, in the morally relevant sense of the term.”<sup>11</sup> Then, in a manner similar to Fletcher, Warren proposes five criteria which must be fulfilled for an individual to be judged rightly and morally<sup>12</sup> to possess personhood: consciousness, reasoning, self-motivated activity, the capacity to communicate, and the presence of self-concepts and self-awareness.<sup>13</sup> Having asserted her five criteria, Warren comments,

All we need to claim, to demonstrate that a fetus is not a person, is that any being which satisfies *none* of (1) - (5) [i.e., her five criteria of personhood] is certainly not a person. I consider this claim to be so obvious that I think anyone who denied it, and claimed that a being which satisfied none of (1) - (5) was a person all the same, would thereby demonstrate that he had no notion at all of what a person is—perhaps because he had confused the concept of a person with that of genetic humanity.<sup>14</sup>

Obviously, then, much hinges on the correctness of these personhood establishing criteria. By

employing them, millions of individuals on the edges of life and others with severe injury may be judged non-persons and as such be devoid of the moral rights attaching to persons alone. On what, then, does Warren found her case for these critical five criteria? In the introductory paragraph of her article, she writes that “it is possible to show that, on the basis of *intuitions* which we may expect even the opponents of abortion to share, a fetus is not a person, and hence not the sort of entity to which it is proper to ascribe full moral rights.”<sup>15</sup> In short, her case rests on personal intuitions, which intuitions she is confident are widely, if not universally, shared.

One further proposal may be helpful in illustrating the trajectory of the functionalist model in assessing individual personhood. In their widely-read volume, *Should the Baby Live?*, Helga Kuhse and Peter Singer<sup>16</sup> propose that one of the major deficiencies of Fletcher’s proposal is that he assumed (in a way in which Warren does not) that true humanhood and true personhood overlap. That is, Fletcher assumes that membership in the species *Homo sapiens* is necessary for personhood, although clearly it is not, in itself, sufficient for personhood. Kuhse and Singer dispute this assumption arguing that personhood criteria stand independent of a consideration of an individual’s species membership. Lest we be found guilty of “speciesism,” we must apply functionalist criteria to any individual, human or animal, and predicate personhood with its attending moral implications of all who qualify. In a chapter in which they critique and reject the “sanctity of life doctrine,” Kuhse and Singer write,

Obviously there are gradations between the normal members of different species. Equally obviously, there are gradations within species, and especially within the human species. There is no clear-cut distinction between humans and other animals in respect of capacities like self-awareness, a sense of the past and future, or rationality. Instead there is an overlap: the best-

endowed non-human animals rank well above those members of our species whose capacities are most limited.

Since the boundary of our species does not run in tandem with the possession of the morally significant capacities, the species boundary cannot be used as the basis for important moral distinctions....

Now we can see what is wrong with the traditional principle of the sanctity of human life. Those who hold this principle invariably take "human" in the strictly biological sense. They include within the scope of the principle all members of the species *Homo sapiens* and no members of any other species. The principle is "speciesist"; it is indefensible for the same reason that racism or sexism are indefensible. Those who hold the principle are giving great weight to something which is morally irrelevant—the species to which the being belongs.<sup>17</sup>

Here we have, then, a straight-forward application of functionalist criteria on the basis of whether or not relevant functions, *per se*, obtain, irrespective of the kind or species of individual one is considering. With only brief reflection, it is apparent that an application of this proposal would confer the moral rights of personhood on many chimpanzees, gorillas, and perhaps even pigs, cows, and chickens,<sup>18</sup> whereas *all* human fetuses and newborns and many other humans would thereby be denied such rights. In responding to the concern that infanticide may follow in the wake of their proposal, with chilling detachment Kuhse and Singer respond,

Unlike many other forms of homicide, infanticide carried out by parents or with their consent poses no threat to anyone in the community who is capable of grasping what is happening. This fact goes a long way towards accounting for the equanimity with which many other cultures have accepted it.... Infanticide threatens none of us, for once we are aware of it, we are not infants.<sup>19</sup>

Obviously, this notion, viz., that legalized killing of others "threatens none of us" so long as it is the "us" who writes the rules by which "we" are morally exempt from such treatment, is an idea which has been invoked often throughout history to justify all manner of injustice, cruelty, and murder toward undesirable others. And here it is applied to those who are among the weakest and most defenseless in society. The potential applications of this principle boggle one's mind.

In all this, it is important to see that what underlies Kuhse's and Singer's proposal is precisely the same basic idea underlying Fletcher's and Warren's, viz., that personhood is rightly defined in a manner in which *I as a person* see as fitting. In other words, it goes without saying that *I* who make this proposal qualify as a person. So, the personhood-determining question becomes: what is it about *me and my capabilities* that must be present also in others for them, likewise, to be judged persons? The functionalist model of personhood works uniformly in this manner. The only difference between the Fletcher proposal and the Kuhse/Singer proposal is that the former considers *functions true of me* which are found also in other *Homo sapiens*, whereas the latter considers *functions true of me* found in any individuals, regardless of their species' membership.

## **ESSENTIALIST MODEL OF HUMAN PERSONHOOD**

In contrast to the functionalist model depicted above, many are arguing that an individual's personhood attaches not to variable functional capabilities but to the kind of essence one is, whose nature is rational, volitional, spiritual, etc., and hence, personal. The point here is not that these qualities necessarily find expression by the individual but that one possesses a nature whose natural kind is, in fact, personal. Our focus here will be on select representative advocates of the essentialist model providing an overview of some of the main objections to the functionalist model and reasons for adopting an essentialist

view of human personhood.

The status of the human embryo is a particularly important question for many who deny the functionalist model for human personhood. Obviously, if functionalist criteria are applied, human embryos must be ruled non-persons. Granted, in most cases they may be valued as potential persons and so offered guarded and respectful treatment.<sup>20</sup> But persons, they are not, and the legal and moral value attached to persons, they lack.

Teresa Iglesias addresses the question, “What kind of being is the human embryo?”<sup>21</sup> by probing, what she calls, “the true *ontological status*” of the human embryo.<sup>22</sup> She states her concern and conviction at the outset,

Is the human embryo a mere conglomeration of molecules and cells, “human embryonic material”? Is the human embryo a living human being but not a human person? Is the embryo a living human being and a human person? My conviction is that the human embryo is a human person, a being of human nature with an eternal destiny.... [I]f I do not know what kind of being the human embryo is, neither will I know how I should act towards it. If I do not know for certain what the human embryo really is, then I cannot know what is its proper value and hence the moral claims it has upon me. It is clear that we need to know what things are as a necessary condition for knowing how we should treat them and the kind of respect owing to them.<sup>23</sup>

For Iglesias, the key concept in enabling a determination of the ontological status of the embryo is that of “ontological wholeness.” The essential unity of a whole organism does not reside in any one of its parts. Even though certain of its parts may be necessary to its existence (e.g., the brain is necessary for human life), no part or partial collection of parts is sufficient to produce the entity’s wholeness. What is distinctive about an organism ontologically is the primacy of the whole over the parts. Iglesias writes,

The living being is generated as a whole, it develops and sustains itself as a whole, and it dies as a whole. The living organism manifests itself to be a whole by its unified organic constitution and powers of self-growth, self-organization, self-preservation, self-fulfillment, even self-healing. We indeed observe the living organism to come into being as a living whole, to move and function as a whole, to grow as a whole, to die as a whole.... The true primacy is that of the whole, of the living unit and its organisation: it is an ontological primacy over all the parts either considered singly or as a totality. The brain and all the other parts or organs develop in harmony with each other manifesting at every state the unified organic activity of the whole. The unity and power of the whole determines—and is prior to—the form and function of the parts.<sup>24</sup>

What the human embryo and human adult have in common, then, is the presence of the ontological unity of their respective organic wholeness. Of neither can you rightly say it is merely a collection of cells. In both cases, there is an obvious and demonstrable organic wholeness which accounts for all current and potential functionings of the organism. It is precisely the organic wholeness of the embryo which defines its ontological status as a human being and human person. “All the potentialities which one needs if one is to acquire the mental and spiritual activities of the human person are inextricably bound up with the embryo’s potential to develop all organs including the brain; in this sense the human conceptus is “organically complete,” nothing can be added to it.”<sup>25</sup> Continuity of development, which is the out-working of the organizational and organic unity of embryonic life, demonstrates the presence of an ontology which is fully human and fully personal.

In similar fashion, Agneta Sutton argues her case for an essentialist model of human personhood.<sup>26</sup> She begins by noting the radically different notions of personhood found in Boethius and Locke, respectively. Boethius’s classic definition

of a person as *naturae rationalis individua substantia* (an individual substance of a rational nature) suggests two individually necessary and jointly sufficient criteria for establishing personhood: a demonstrable individuality and the possession of a certain kind of nature, viz., a rational nature. Thus, we have in this classical definition an essentialist understanding of personhood. Locke, on the other hand, defined personhood functionally, pointing to presently manifestable abilities and states of mind as indicators of an individual's personhood. For Locke, a person is a "thinking intelligent being, that has reason and reflection, and can consider itself as itself, the same thinking thing, and of those personal abilities which are associated with consciousness and self-consciousness."<sup>27</sup>

Sutton argues that because of the variability of actual functioning, one can never properly define personhood in Lockean fashion. The Boethian approach takes priority because it focuses on the nature of the individual in question, regardless of whether or not certain functions may be presently manifest. That is, because functions flow out of nature, not the reverse, it makes sense to define personhood on what has priority, namely, one's intrinsic nature.

Two questions regarding the embryo must be answered. First, is the early human embryo an individual organism? Here, Sutton disputes the contentions of those who would deny the individuality of the embryo on the basis of the supposed undifferentiated and plenipotential character of the early embryo's cells. It is commonly argued, she notes, that since some of the cells of the early embryo become placental rather than fetal tissue, individuation, strictly speaking, cannot be said to have occurred. And, more significantly, the possibility of monozygotic twinning, prior to the appearance of the primitive streak, provides the strongest evidence that there is no continuous individual life until after that stage has past. Concerning these contentions, Sutton denies the view that the cells of the very early embryo are totally undifferentiated and argues, instead, that there is

a functional unity and teleological directedness towards the formation of the fetus immediately after fertilization. She writes,

From the time cell-division begins, the different cells develop together in synchronised harmony as integral parts of one organism. And their development as a functional whole is teleologically orientated and so is guided by an inherent principle of life, of what Aristotle calls a soul. For the early cells could never have reached the primitive streak state if they had not been programmed to do so and to do so in unison as a functional whole. The primitive streak stage is neither the beginning nor the end of the functional unity of the organism. It is but one of the many stages of the continuous teleologically orientated development of the embryo.<sup>28</sup>

Further, even the fact that early differentiating of embryonic cells is partly directed towards the formation of the placenta does not dispute the organic unity of the embryo. This is clear in that the embryo, by an "inherent self-organizing principle of life," is able to direct the differentiation of cells as it does to support and advance its own development.<sup>29</sup> The clearest explanation of the data, then, supports the notion that there is one individual at the point of conception, an individual in the form of an early embryo possessing a nature inherently disposed to develop and grow.

Second, does the early embryo possess a rational nature? According to Sutton, it is evident that there is present from the zygote and early embryo to the fetus and baby a teleologically oriented developmental power which directs the organism's stages of growth. Because this developmental power is inherent within the organism at every stage, it stands to reason that the same kind of nature exists throughout. "It would therefore appear," she writes, "that the zygote, the fetus, the baby, the child and the adult must share the same kind of nature, a nature determined by an inherent teleological principle of life which governs the

formation and development of the organism.”<sup>30</sup>

What, then, would Sutton say about the Lockean functional capabilities that seem intuitively to describe human personhood as we experience normal and fully-developed human life? After all, most people would agree that there is something significant about manifesting certain rational abilities and powers of self-determination, etc. Are these not defining characteristics of human personhood? Sutton argues that these actual manifestations of functional capabilities cannot define personhood, lest we preclude infants, comatose individuals, and perhaps even sleeping individuals from personhood. Rather, it must be the nature that underlies these and other such functional capabilities which defines one’s personhood. If the nature is present, the individual is a person; manifestation of the functional capabilities of that nature is a relative matter in which some may express more or less, or higher or lower functioning than others. But possession of the nature itself is not relative, but absolute; either one has such a nature or one does not. With clarity and insight, Sutton writes,

Adult human beings normally possess exercisable abilities such as self-consciousness and rationality. These abilities are manifestations of their rational nature. But the possession of inherent abilities which were not always present must have originated from a capacity to develop these abilities which was inherent in the individual’s nature from the outset. Otherwise the present abilities would have sprung from nothing and so would be inexplicable. *Ex nihilo nihil*: out of nothing nothing can come. That is to say, a being possessing abilities associated with rationality must always have possessed a nature inherent in which was a radical capacity to develop such abilities. It must therefore be concluded that the human zygote which develops into a fetus, an infant and eventually an adult person possessing manifestable abilities associated with rationality, possessed from the very beginning a radical capacity to

develop those rational abilities. Moreover, since this radical capacity is a capacity to develop rational abilities, the nature in which it resides must be understood as a rational nature. This nature possesses an inherent potential to manifest precisely those abilities which are associated with rationality. Thus the nature of the zygote, of the early embryo, of the fetus and of the infant must be understood as a rational nature.<sup>31</sup>

In other words, to account for human life in its full adult expression, it is clear that every adult functional capability extends out of a nature whose inherent, natural capacity it is to function in these ways. To make sense of our adult existence, then, we must see any and all capacities in their mature expression as having been developed from what was true of us (i.e., what it is our nature to be) from the very outset. Inherent in the nature of a person, then, is a radical capacity to manifest personal characteristics, even though the extent to which these characteristics may actually be manifest may vary greatly.

A final representative of the essentialist model of human personhood, Kirkland Young, describes the two broad and competing approaches to the question of defining personhood as the functionalist and natural kind views, respectively.<sup>32</sup> In the functionalist view, personhood is acquired by a human being at some particular point at which a sufficiently developed expression of personhood-defining characteristics is evident. Young finds this approach unsatisfying, first and foremost, because underlying any and every functional capacity is an abiding substance which gives rise to such capacities. Even when those functions are not expressed, or if they were never to be expressed, there may be present, nonetheless, a substance of a particular “natural kind” whose nature it is to be a human substance. “Natural kind,” he writes, “being more basic than function, should be considered more decisive in the determination of personhood.”<sup>33</sup>

Beyond this, Young finds the functionalist view

wanting. The concept of personal identity (i.e., the same person existing through time) is difficult to account for on a functionalist model of personhood. If personhood attaches to functions, and if functions may come and go, or some cease altogether, then what do we say of the person who performs certain functions but then stops? When the functions stop, so does the person, it would seem. Or, thinking from the other direction, on the functionalist account we would have “no reason why, for example, we could not say that a different person comes into existence every time that function operates.”<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, Young cites the inherent subjectivity of the functionalist model as a weakness. On what basis do we arrive at the particular personhood-bestowing criteria that we do? Who is to say which ones belong on the list and what minimal level of expression is needed to qualify one as a person?

Applying the priority of nature (or natural kind) over function to the question of the status of the zygote, Young observes,

Agents act according to their nature/natural kind. Thus, fish become fish, and not trees. It is in the proper concept of nature or natural kind that the right understanding of rationality is to be found. “To be human is to be rational,” as the people who place rationality as the *sine qua non* of personhood remind us. However, what is not recognized by such functionalists is that the zygote is properly described as a rational being, because that is the type of fundamental being that all humans, at whatever stage, are. It is what humans are that determines what they do, not the other way around.... Given that the individuality of the offspring (and thus its substance) is admitted to begin at conception, the human entity with its nature is present in its totality at conception. Only its development is necessary. Thus, this view holds that human zygotes and embryos are not different in kind from a fully developed human. Therefore, the respect due them is the same. Even if certain of the zygote’s or embryo’s

powers are muted or interfered within the course of its development, its nature continues to exist.<sup>35</sup>

Twinning is taken up by Young as a feature of reality, so it is claimed, which cannot be accounted for adequately within his model. If, prior to implantation, an embryo can develop in any of several ways, including into twins, it cannot be said to be an individual. But if not an individual, then how can one claim rightly the embryo possesses the nature of a person? According to Young, the question here concerns how many individuals may be present, not whether any individuals at all might be there. He writes,

The argument, then, is that because each cell could develop into a person, we should not treat the four-cell mass with the respect that we treat a person. This position is open to disagreement. It seems close to a statement of the nature that since we do not know whether one or four persons are present, we are within our rights in treating what is before us as if there were no persons present.<sup>36</sup>

Still, there needs to be some reason for thinking that a human nature is present in the embryo, even when twinning may still occur. Most telling in this regard is the fact that however the embryo develops, it does so by an internal mechanism of development rather than from some external source of direction. That is, the growth and specific individuation of the embryo is the outworking of the intrinsic nature possessed from the point of conception. Because the organizing principle is from within, not from without, that in itself evidences the presence of a nature which, if allowed to develop normally, has the potential to become a fully functioning human being. The only reasonable conclusion to draw, then, is that the embryo possesses a human nature. A final statement by Young, brings the issue into focus:

As the embryo plays itself out, we will be able to

measure certain aspects of it and we may wish to note several landmarks of development. But it has always been one and only one entity in continuous development, variously visible to us by the level of our technology, but one in which there is always continuity; an individuate form from the moment of fertilization. The entity's unity is still properly found in the kind of being that it is, in its essence. Therein lies its personhood.<sup>37</sup>

### **ANALYSIS OF COMPETING MODELS OF HUMAN PERSONHOOD**

It is abundantly clear from the above representative descriptions of the functionalist and essentialist models of human personhood that very different bases are offered for founding the personhood of individuals and strikingly different implications follow from each model, respectively. Although some criticisms and points of assessment have been suggested already, it seems warranted to consider more systematically certain aspects of the proposals before us.

*The ad hoc and subjective nature of the functionalist model.* Clearly one of the main criticisms regularly and rightly made of the functionalist model is its inherent subjectivity. It is interesting to note that those properly understood as persons, on this model, turn out to be individuals basically like the ones proposing the criteria for personhood. That is, it is rational, self-conscious, self-directed, volitional, relational individuals who propose rationality, self-consciousness, self-directedness, volitionality, and relationality as criteria for personhood. In short, individuals like me (in ways I specify) are persons; those unlike me (according to the characteristics I have selected as significant) are not.

There are two main problems with this approach. First, there is no objective, rational, and absolute ground upon which one may appeal to just one or a set of functional criteria as the basis for assessing the personhood or non-personhood of any given individual. Part of the evidence

for this assessment may be seen in the fact that functionalists do not agree themselves on which criteria are correct, how many ought to be on the list, and to what degree they must be manifest for one to qualify as a person. Granted that *something* must constitute one as a person, it seems as though appeal to some list or other of manifest functions is hopelessly incapable of succeeding in doing just this. In principle, we could have as many lists of person-defining characteristics as there are proponents whose subjective intuitions suggest to them what ought to be included on those lists.

Second, because it is always "individuals like me" who are persons, and because the relevant features that constitute ones "like me" are the result of subjective assessment, it is easy to see the devastating abuse such a principle could inflict upon vast portions of the human population. In fact, this is already the case, argues the essentialist, as it pertains to the unborn. To the extent that legalized abortion depends on a functionalist view of persons, the result is the killing of millions of those who, on essentialist grounds, are fully human beings and human persons. But what is currently happening in the abortion industry could easily be extended to other segments of the population. There is no reason, in principle, given functionalist criteria for personhood, why newborns deserve treatment any different than that accorded to fetuses. Furthermore, what is to keep some political or medical or judicial social engineer from defining personhood (individuals *like me*, that is) in a way in which inferior or troublesome or unproductive segments of the human population are denied their legal standing in society?

*The impossibility of a consistent application of the functionalist model.* One irony of the functionalist model is that while it rejects an essentialist basis for human personhood, it must appeal at points to just such an essentialist basis if it is to avoid preposterous results. Were one to take the functionalist model seriously, one would seek

for evidence of *present and manifest functioning* of certain specified capabilities as the basis for determining a subject's personhood. And if one found the absence of present and manifest functioning of these specified capabilities, one would be obligated to conclude the non-personhood of the individual.

But what happens in the case of a comatose patient? Functionalists are reluctant to conclude in such cases that, despite the absence of such present and manifest person-defining functions that the patient is a non-person. Mary Anne Warren, for example, in discussing her five criteria for personhood, comments, "Some human beings are not people, and there may well be people who are not human beings. A man or woman whose consciousness has been *permanently* obliterated but who remains alive is a human being which is no longer a person."<sup>38</sup> Presumably, what Warren would say of a comatose patient who, after say several months, regains consciousness and other indications of personhood functioning, is that, in such a case, he continued to be a person. This is implied by the qualifying word "*permanently*" in the statement above. But if this is the case, on what grounds can we say that a comatose patient, during an episode of unconsciousness, is a person? On functionalist grounds, there simply is no basis. To do so, the functionalist must draw on the currency of the essentialist who argues that the patient's personhood remains, owing to *who he is*, despite the fact that some physical malfunction has blocked the present and manifest expression of his intrinsic nature. That his nature persists through the coma is evident by the fact that when he regains consciousness, he maintains personal identity with who he was prior to his comatose state. On functionalists grounds strictly, one must conclude that the *moment* that present and manifest functioning of person-defining capabilities are absent, the person has ceased to exist. Either personhood is defined by functions or by essence, and if by functions, personhood ceases when the relevant functions cease. Functionalists who

would urge ongoing personal care and treatment of such comatose patients betray the failure of their model to account adequately for what even they sense must be the case.

*The place for and validity of functionalist criteria.* Clearly, one of the strengths of the functionalist model is that, generally, aspects of human life are selected which most people would agree make human existence morally significant. Most, if not all, would agree that a level of conscious self-reflection, the ability for self-determination, the experience of personal relationships, acts of love and forgiveness, promise-keeping, worship and self-sacrifice have something to do with the heart of what it means to be a human person. And so, for some, the notion that, say, an embryo is a person *in just the same sense* in which I am a person seems counter intuitive at best and simply contrary to fact at worst. That is, it seems to us that these functions which we have identified as particularly human types of functioning are so important to our sense of human identity that to talk of one being fully a person when *none* of those morally significant functions obtains seems at least odd and perhaps misguided.

Before attempting to resolve this tension, permit me first to aggravate it further by reminding us of a common way in which theologians discuss what it is to be made as humans in the image of God. Robert Saucy's discussion on the image of God may be used illustratively here. In a section entitled, "The Biblical Meaning of Mankind 'in the Image of God,'" Saucy identifies the following "different aspects which comprise the image of God in man": a being of relationships, the endowments of personality, self-conscious rationality, self-determination or freedom, a moral nature, and original righteousness.<sup>39</sup> As one examines this list, it is immediately apparent that some of the same functional characteristics cited by a Joseph Fletcher or a Mary Anne Warren are found here. That is, the kinds of characteristics that functionalists say comprise personhood a theologian may say comprise the image of God. And obvi-

ously, the theologian, in a manner similar to the functionalist, has selected these characteristics from a sense of their importance to the experience of a full human life as God created it to be lived.

But then, what are we to say of the embryo, the fetus, or the PVS patient? If one lacks, say self-conscious rationality or is incapable at present of expressing oneself as a being of relationships, does one lack the image of God? Strictly speaking, if these qualities comprise the image of God yet these qualities are lacking, it seems there is no choice but to deny of one so lacking the status of bearing the image of God.

To his credit, Saucy avoids this problem and suggests, in the process, a resolution to the tension we feel so deeply on this issue. In his discussion of humans as beings of relationships, Saucy makes the point that whereas most historical discussion on the image of God focused on man's rational and moral capacities, he supports the notion that relationships humans have with God, others, and nature more centrally depict what it is to live as the image of God. Yet, to avoid the possible misunderstanding that actual relationships (i.e., present and manifest relationships) must be enacted for one to be in the image of God, he writes,

Having said this, however, it is also clear that the existential dynamic of relationships are not by themselves definitive of the image of God or what it means to be human. Existential relationships are the expression of a prior existing self which possesses the endowments or capacities for active existence. Thus while the full expression of the image of God in humanity includes relationships, these are grounded in and are the expression of the ontological being of human person. The image thus involves an essential human nature which includes the attributes of existence entailing relationships. These may not be fully developed, but they are nonetheless endowments of the essence of humanity in the image of God even in their potentiality. A person may not be fully expressing the concept of the

image while asleep, but he is as such still fully human. So also those who have not yet fully developed their relational capacities, such as infants or the mentally retarded, as well as those who have lost these abilities through accident or old age are still human beings in the image of God. In the final sense, it must be acknowledged that no fallen human fully lives out existentially the meaning of the image.<sup>40</sup>

These are wise words, I believe, and they help chart the way past the horns of this dilemma. Clearly we sense two conflicting intuitions simultaneously. First, we sense that there is something highly significant about the functional capabilities pointed to by theologians discussing what it means to be made in the image of God or by medical ethicists who attempt to describe those defining characteristics of human life which make it, more than anything else, fully human. And yet, we realize that we are more than our functions, and that there are many cases when an individual's functioning falters or fails that there is still reason to consider the individual a person deserving of treatment and respect. So, on the one hand we uphold such functional characteristics as supremely important, yet on the other hand we admit we can account for human worth apart from them.

Another contemporary evangelical understanding of human personhood and the image of God, while problematic, is also instructive. Richard Lints expresses his dissatisfaction with both the functionalist and essentialist approaches to human personhood and argues instead for a relational understanding of personhood extending more from the Trinity. He writes,

I take the recent revisioning of theological anthropology after a Trinitarian model to successfully suggest that neither essentialist nor functionalist accounts adequately capture the larger context of personhood as centrally defined by its relations-in-community. The

very relational identity of the triune God is reflected in the created order most especially in the creation of persons-in-relation. To be more precise, humanness is a function of “being-in-relation,” rather than of an individual who is in possession of certain qualities or functions and who derivatively enters in relations with other individuals. The relationality of personhood means that persons are not actually persons outside of relations.<sup>41</sup>

Unlike Saucy, quoted above, Lints does not further qualify this understanding of personhood requiring relationality in consideration of what this means for those human individuals not in relationship with others, in any meaningful understanding of the term “relationship.” Ironically, while Lints rejects functionalist criteria for personhood, as he rejects essentialism, his own proposal ends up being a version of the functionalist model of understanding human personhood. To say that “persons are not actually persons outside of relations” could easily and legitimately, given this understanding, be invoked to say of embryos and PVS patients that they lack the requisite characteristic for being considered truly persons. Saucy is to be commended for taking greater care to distinguish between the *expressions* of full personhood, which Lints rightly would suggest to include centrally the reality of persons-in-relationship, from the *essence* of that person or the “prior existing self” with natural capacities entailing its full personhood, regardless of whether or to what degree these capacities find actual expression. But Lints is right to point out the crucial role of relationality in the full expression of personhood. So, we see again the need, on the one hand, to acknowledge the legitimacy of functional characteristics of persons as supremely important, yet on the other hand we also insist that can account for human worth and genuine human personhood apart from them. How can we have it both ways together?

The only satisfying resolution to this quandry, I

believe, is by establishing, as the essentialist model does, the priority of essence over function. More simply, *who we are* is more basic to our identity than *what we do*. This is true both because what we do may vary greatly (i.e., we may grow and develop in certain ways and while diminishing or ceasing to function in others) and because the things that we do are *always*, as Saucy puts it, “grounded in and are the expression of the ontological being of human person.” As such, we may celebrate the host of functional characteristics which reflect a fully-developed human life. These truly are significant as our self-reflection and outward observations make so abundantly clear. And yet, we realize that each and every one of these celebrated functions is owing to something more basic. It is only because we are human beings *by nature* that such qualities of life are made possible. Human personhood, then, attaches at root to our natures as human beings, whose natures are so constituted, in the normal course of events, to give expression to a multitude of joyous human experiences.

### **COMPLEMENTARY AND DEPENDENT DEFINITIONS OF HUMAN PERSONHOOD**

I conclude by offering definitions of two important senses of personhood. By employing these distinct senses of human personhood, and by understanding the logical and dependent relations between them, I hope that greater clarity and precision may be gained in the ways in which we both conceive and articulate these important concepts. First, *essential personhood* may be understood as the primary, fundamental, and first-order status of personhood which, as such, is more basic than any other kind of personhood and grounds any other sense of personhood. Essential personhood is rightly attributable to any living member of the species *Homo sapiens* who, as such, possesses an inherent rational nature (à la Boethius), whose nature grounds, governs and guides each aspect of the full range of human experiences and expressions that are appropriate to its natural kind. Sec-

ond, *expressive personhood* may be understood as the secondary, dependent and second-order status of personhood which, as such, is grounded fully in one's essential personhood and is given rise only out of the human nature that constitutes one's essential personhood. Expressive personhood is rightly attributable to any living member of the species *Homo sapiens* whose inherent rational nature gives rise to given expressions or functions appropriate to that nature and expressive of its natural kind.

Because essential personhood is more basic and may stand independent of expressive personhood while expressive personhood is always dependent upon and extends out of essential personhood, *one's status as a human person must rightly attach ultimately and only, then, to whether or not one possesses essential personhood*. Clearly, there is a natural desire for greater, fuller, and more profound expressions of that essential personhood through the range of human functionings of one's expressive personhood. But since who we are, in the end, is not grounded in these expressions but in the essence that comprises our human nature, human personhood, with the obligations and respect that adhere to it, is rightly attributable to all who possess essential personhood.<sup>42</sup>

#### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>For a brief but helpful historical survey of concepts of human personhood, see Peter Hicks, "One or Two? A Historical Survey of an Aspect of Personhood," in *Evangelical Quarterly* 77, no. 1 (January 2005): 35-45. And for a Christian discussion of the question of personhood particularly related to prenatal life, see Bob Smietana, "When Does Personhood Begin? And What Difference does it Make?" in *Christianity Today*, July 2004, 24-28.

<sup>2</sup>Joseph Fletcher, "Indicators of Humanhood: A Tentative Profile of Man," *The Hastings Center Report* 2, no. 5 (November 1972): 1-4.; and Joseph F. Fletcher, "Four Indicators of Humanhood—The Enquiry Matures," *The Hastings Center Report* 4, no. 6 (December 1974): 4-7.

<sup>3</sup>In Fletcher, "Indicators of Humanhood," his fifteen positive criteria for human personhood are as follows: (1) minimal intelligence, (2) self-awareness, (3) self-control, (4) a sense of time, (5) a sense of futurity, (6) a sense of the past, (7) the capability to relate to others, (8) concern for others, (9) communication, (10) control of existence, (11) curiosity, (12) change and changeability, (13) balance of rationality and feeling, (14) idiosyncrasy, and (15) neocortical function. Fletcher's five negative criteria are (1) man is not non- or anti-artificial, (2) man is not essentially parental, (3) man is not essentially sexual, (4) man is not a bundle of rights, and (5) man is not a worshiper.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 1.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 1-2.

<sup>6</sup>Fletcher, "Four Indicators," 4.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 6.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 8.

<sup>10</sup>Mary Anne Warren, "On the Moral and Legal Status of Abortion," *The Monist* 57 No. 1 (January 1973): 43-61.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 43.

<sup>12</sup>See, ibid., 53-54, where Warren distinguishes two senses of "human": the genetic sense in which any and every member of the species *Homo sapiens* is human, and the moral sense in which an individual member of the species *Homo sapiens* is rightly judged to be "a full-fledged member of the moral community." For Warren, personhood, which implies the possession of moral rights, attaches only to humans in the morally relevant sense of the term.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 55.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 56.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 43 (italics added).

<sup>16</sup>Helga Kuhse and Peter Singer, *Should the Baby Live? The Problem of Handicapped Infants* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1985).

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., 122-23.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., 122.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., 138.

<sup>20</sup>See Warren, "On the Moral and Legal Status of Abortion," 59: "There may well be something immoral, and not just imprudent, about wantonly destroying

potential people, when doing so isn't necessary to protect anyone's rights. But even if a potential person does have some *prima facie* right to life, such a right could not possibly outweigh the right of a woman to obtain an abortion, since the rights of any actual person invariably outweigh those of any potential person, whenever the two conflict." For similar lines of argument, see, e.g., Richard A. McCormick, "Who or What is the Preembryo?" *Kennedy Institute of Ethics Journal* 1 (1991) 12-13; and Lisa Sowle Cahill, "The Embryo and the Fetus: New Moral Contexts," *Theological Studies* 54, no. 1 (March 1993): 128-32.

<sup>21</sup>Teresa Iglesias, "What Kind of Being is the Human Embryo?" in *Embryos and Ethics: The Warnock Report in Debate* (ed. Nigel M. de S. Cameron; Edinburgh: Rutherford House, 1987) 58-73. For more extended discussion of personhood and related issues, see Iglesias, *IVF and Justice* (London: Linacre Centre, 1990).

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 58.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., 59-60.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., 65-66.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., 69. Iglesias continues by arguing that neither twinning nor recombination rightly threaten this concept of the organic wholeness of the embryo. Although there can be a fragmentation in parts of living beings (including human embryos), there is neither a fusion nor a splitting of living beings taken as total wholes; hence the integrity of embryonic organic wholeness and the human personhood this entails remains in place (*ibid.*, 69-71).

<sup>26</sup>Agneta Sutton, "Arguments for Abortion of Abnormal Fetuses and the Moral Status of the Developing Embryo," *Ethics & Medicine* 6, no. 1 (1990): 5-10.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., 5.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., 6.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., 8.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid.

<sup>32</sup>Kirkland Young, "The Zygote, The Embryo, and Personhood: An Attempt at Conceptual Clarification," *Ethics & Medicine* 10, no. 1 (1994): 2-7.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., 2.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., 3-4.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., 6.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid.

<sup>38</sup>Warren, "On the Moral and Legal Status of Abortion," 56 (italics added).

<sup>39</sup>Robert L. Saucy, "Theology of Human Nature," in *Christian Perspectives on Being Human: A Multidisciplinary Approach to Integration* (ed. J. P. Moreland and David M. Ciocchi; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993) 24-29.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., 26.

<sup>41</sup>Richard Lints, "Imaging and Idolatry: The Sociality of Personhood in the Canon," in *Personal Identity in Theological Perspective* (ed. Richard Lints, Michael S. Horton, and Mark R. Talbot; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 206-07. For another evangelical discussion of personhood which finds the biblical notion of personhood necessarily to require a broader relational understanding of persons, see Max Turner, "Approaching 'Personhood' in the New Testament, with Special Reference to Ephesians," in *Evangelical Quarterly* 77, no. 3 (July 2005): 211-33.

<sup>42</sup>I wish to extend to Mr. Oren Martin my thanks for his assistance with research and editing of this article.