



Brainism

‘We are not our brains; we are embodied persons.’

I RECEIVED A THOUGHTFUL e-mail message recently from a late 1980's graduate of a Jesuit university. He is “strongly pro-life,” armed with 27 hours of philosophy and theology requirements to boot, and is at loggerheads with some pro-choice friends who hold the position that there is “a distinction between a human life and a human person.”

His quandary is part of a growing movement—philosophical, ethical and rhetorical—that has as its theme that not all living humans are persons. It sometimes takes the form of an argument: If A does not have certain brain activities, A is not a person. In an article in the quarterly philosophical journal *The Monist* in 1973, for example, the philosopher Mary Ann Warren claimed that consciousness of external and internal events, reasoning, self-motivated activity, communication and self-concepts were central to the concept of personhood. In a later “Postscript on Infanticide,” she acknowledged that infants, like fetuses, while “genetically” human, are not persons. Thus, killing a fetus or newborn (and one might extend the application to profoundly brain-damaged or handicapped humans) would not be killing a person.

A recent formulation of this position appeared in a telling letter published by *The New York Times* on June 23. The writer, Peter Singer, is professor of bioethics at Princeton University. Singer considers it a mistake to think that the question whether human life starts at conception is a crucial moral issue. “Even the earliest embryo conceived of human parents is alive and a member of *Homo sapiens*, and that is enough in the eyes of

many to make it a living human being.” Obviously. If it is alive and a member of our species, it is a living human being. And Singer knows this is obvious. That is why he continues: “The crucial moral question is not when human life begins, but when human life reaches the point at which it merits protection.” Thus, in a book co-authored with Helga Kuhse, Singer suggested that 28 days after birth an infant might have the same right to live as others—even though, by his own account, it would not be a person.

One could fill an entire library with books about the meaning of person, the mind-body problem and human identity. Many of the recent ones share a tendency, with Warren, Singer and Kuhse, to equate the human with a set of cognitive achievements. They share what I think is an over-simplified reading of John Locke's belief that a person is “a thinking, intelligent being, that has reason and reflection, that can consider itself as itself,” as the same over time and place.

I offer for your consideration only one competing account; but it is one that is strategic in the present debate.

A person is not a set of performances or activities, but a kind of being. What kind of being? See if the definition offered by Boethius and affirmed by Thomas Aquinas makes sense to you: an individual substance of a rational nature. My nature is what I am, not what I do. The things I do as a human person are possible only because I am the kind of being with the inherent powers or endowments of intellect and will (a rational nature).

This is not “speciesism.” There might be many other kinds of persons that are not human persons. Whoever has the personal endowments of rationality, or intellect and will, is a personal kind of being. Thus, God, angels, or other

extraterrestrials would be nonhuman persons. (Think: if you have to have a brain to be a person, where does that leave God?) What is special about human persons is that we are animal-persons, embodied persons. Part of the reality of being an animal-person is that we have an organic life that develops, thrives and diminishes over time. But our personhood is our “individual substance,” that unique animal, and it is present from the moment life begins. It is strange that people like Singer, who are so enamored of other animals, are part of the movement that represses our own animality.

If performing certain activities is what makes us a person, then indeed chimps and dogs are more “person-like” than human fetuses or even newborns. You can say the same thing of spiders and computers—the first being far more clever at providing for themselves and spinning webs than any stupid human baby; the latter being triumphantly superior to any dumb fetus in activities of calculation and translation.

But if being a person means that when I started to exist as a living being, I had endowments of intellect and will, even if they might never be exercised or expressed because of my body's lack of development, or trauma to it, or diminishment, then a newborn is a fragile, dependent, not very competent little person; and a profoundly brain-damaged friend is not a vegetable, but a wounded friend.

The formation and health of a brain is, of course, required for the embodied expression of our personal endowments. But you and I are not our brains. Brains are part of us, part of our personal animality. Our human personhood is not something that erupted from our brains the first time we started acting rationally. Nor is it something that was somehow stuck on to these bodies to which we are attached. It is the gift of being the kind of beings we are, endowed not only with brains like other animals, but with powers of intellect, open to all the truth there is to be known, and of will, open to all the good there is to be loved.

But that is something a “brainist” would not understand.

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