

Defining Human Life
Dr. Paul J. Hoehner
Harvey Fellow in Theology, Ethics and Culture
The University of Virginia
Charlottesville, Virginia

Part 1- April 20, 2008
Christ the Redeemer Presbyterian Church

- J.A. Robertson, “The Scientists’ Right to Research: A Constitutional Analysis, *Southern California Law Review*, 1978, p. 1278.
 - “Science is not an unmitigated blessing. It is expensive, and its discoveries, like the tree of knowledge in Eden, expand man’s capacity for evil as well as good. More knowledge is not a good in itself, nor is it necessarily productive of net good. Society, as the provider of the resources, the bearer of the costs, and the reaper of the benefits, has an overriding interest in the consequences of science, hence an interest in the direction and the routes that research takes.”

- What is Man?
 - **Old Bioethics**
 - **Issues:** Abortion, Euthanasia
 - **Questions:** When does human life begin? End?
 - **New Bioethics**
 - **Issues:** Cloning, Stem Cells, Genetic Engineering, Altered Developmental Trajectories
 - **Question:** What is a human being?
 - **Theological/Moral Definition**
 - What is man’s relationship to God, World, and Others?
 - What was man created for? What is man’s *telos*?
 - **Biological/Natural Definition**

- *Outline*
 - *Two “modern” definitions of man*
 - *Developmentalist*
 - *Substantialist*
 - Both are based on modern “dualisms”
 - An alternative definition
 - Application to modern bioethics questions

- What is that which confers identity of being (*ousia*) over time and change?
 - “An oak tree is not the same as an acorn, and we don’t treat them the same way. A medical student is a potential neurosurgeon, but he is not

going to be able to go and operate on a brain tumor.” –David Magnus, Stanford University (*Sacramento Bee*, February 23, 2006)

- Next to the ridicule of denying an evident truth, is that of taking much pains to defend it.
–David Hume
- Two “Modern” Views
 - Functionalism or Developmentalism
 - Distinguishes between an organism belonging to the species *Homo sapiens* (the biological component, i.e. human life) and a human *person* (human being)
 - *Personhood* is defined by the expression of certain developmental and relational characteristics
 - *Personhood* is what confers moral status
- Ronald Cole-Turner “Beyond the impasse over the embryo,” in *God and the Embryo* (Georgetown University Press, 2003)
 - *Let us freely admit here that the line drawn at fourteen days after fertilization is nothing more than a line that is drawn on nature, not one that is found in nature ...Being able to explain why the line is at fourteen days and not ten or twenty, however, is not the same as justifying the line in the first place, and all we seem to be able to do is explain the line without giving it the sort of defense that we would like.*
 - *“None of these transitions in the life of the early embryo, even taken together, are ontologically sufficient to justify the claim that we find here a threshold between “not yet one of us” and “one of us,” much less between mere cells and a human person.*
 - *This admission does not mean that there is no significance in this line, merely that its significance lies, first of all, in its social and political usefulness ...the social value of the line is not that it is a finding of biology, much less a conclusion of metaphysics or moral theology, but that it is an international point of agreement around which harmonized policies might be formed.”*
- Joseph Fletcher, “Indicators of Humanhood: A Tentative Profile of Man” *Hastings Center Report* (1974) 4(6):4-7
 - *Apart from neocortical function “the person is non-existent.”*
 - Self-awareness
 - Self-control (lacking which, one has a life “about on a par with a paramecium”)
 - Control of existence (“to the degree that a man lacks control he is not responsible, and to be irresponsible is to be sub-personal”)
 - *“Personhood” arguments in current bioethics debates on end-of-life issues*
 - *“Intermediate” moral status granted to embryos based on what they someday may become*
- *Personhood as a means for exclusion*

“If we are interested merely in our own subjective benefit, we need only seek sufficient social power to ensure the current, arbitrary definition of human includes no qualifications that exclude ourselves. If we are interested in justice, however, we must make sure the definition contains no qualifications that exclude any human being.” –Jay Sappington

- Leon Kass *U.S. News & World Report*, April 4, 2005
“There is a kind of condescension toward the views of the general public [and] a very real danger that what constitutes meaningful life among the intellectual elite will be imposed on people as the only standard by which the value of human life is measured.”
- Unthinkable to...the unexceptional
 - Human Personhood confers Value
 - Loss of Value (a subjective, arbitrary, socially defined, “quality of life”) disqualifies one from “personhood”
 - The living human organism (non-person) may be disposed of (killed) for purely utilitarian or social reasons
 - *“Thousands of ethicists and bioethicists, as they are called, professionally guide the unthinkable on its passage through the debatable on its way to becoming the justifiable, until it is finally established as the unexceptional.”*
 Rev. Richard Neuhaus, *First Things*

- Structure-Function Dualism

Function (Form)
Structure

- Structure-Function Dualism

A quality added to “being”

“The principle is simple. It relies on qualitative considerations: when, and only when, there is the capacity for organic (bodily) and mental function present together in a single human entity is there a living human being.”

-Robert Veatch

- Dualisms in History
 - Platonism: The body as the “prison house” of the immortal soul
 - Aristotle: Matter and form
 - Origin (c.185-c.254): eidoj (“*eidōs*”) “the unchanging form of the body” (cf. Augustine’s *terra animata*)
 - Hylomorphism: Body and substantial form (soul; organizing principle)
 - Scholastics: Ensoulment arguments
 - Descartes: *Cogito ergo sum* (*mind-brain*)
- The Idolatry of Dualistic Anthropologies
 To point to some specific moment in this history at which point we have personhood is to assume the ability to extricate ourselves from the bodily nature

of history and “to suppose that in such a moment we are rather like God, no longer having our personal presence in the body.” - Gilbert Meilaender *Body, Soul and Bioethics* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), p. 49

Or, in our arrogance, we may even want to exceed God, who, after all, assumed a human body as the incarnate Word, to be present in this world. - Edwin C. Hui *At the Beginning of Life, Dilemmas in Theological Bioethics* (InterVarsity Press, 2002)

- Two “Modern” Views
 - Substantialism
 - Human beings and human persons are equivalent (stress on the biological)
 - Underscores the important truth that the moral worth of all persons is conferred by their nature as human beings
 - A living organism possessing a human genome defines a human person (life begins at fertilization)
 - “*If you are conceived by human parents, you are human.*”
--John Noonan, “An almost absolute value in history,” in *The Morality of Abortion* (Harvard University Press, 1970)
 - Emphasizes continuity, the “something” that endures over time
- Problems with Substantialism
 - Equally “dualistic” in presupposition
 - Reductionistic
 - The “gene” becomes the new “substantial form”
 - “Information” is the modern equivalent of “*eidōs*”
 - Materialistic (uniperspectival)
 - Anti-teleological (passive)
 - A-temporal (static)
 - Anti-relational
- Cartesian “Substance”
 - “That which exists by itself, that which needs nothing else but itself to exist.”
 - An “unchanging” substratum and primary ground of all attributes
 - “Relations” are ontologically secondary to and subordinate to “substance”
- Problems Inherent with Any Dualistic Definition
 - There can be no interaction explainable between these two separate “substances” (and hence generally rejected by philosophers who proposed them)
 - Dualisms will always collapse into either rationalist (functional) or empiricist (structural) definitions
- Does the Bible speak in terms of “body-soul” dualism?
 - Genesis 2:7
 - vp,n< *nephēs* “being” “soul” (LXX)
 - Man is not given a “soul” but becomes a ensouled-body or embodied-soul (monism)

- A human being is a bio-psycho-spiritual unity
- Do we read Scripture read through the lens of Enlightenment dualisms or in terms of it's own anthropology?

- Biblical Scholarship
 - “*The Old and New Testament do not define the human person in essentialist but above all in relational terms...within the family of humans brought into being by Yahweh and in relation to the God who gives life-giving breath*”
 - Joel Green “What does it mean to be human,” in *From Cells to Souls and Beyond* (Eerdmans, 2004)
 - Relational
 - Dependence/interdependence
 - A person is one’s behavior
 - (disposition defines “being”)
- Church History
 - Dichotomy/Trichotomy and Christological heresies
 - Aristotle/Aquinas
 - Form and matter unity
 - Relational
 - Dynamic
 - W. Norris Clarke, S.J. “*to be real is to be a dyadic synthesis of substance and relation; it is to be substance-in-relation*”

Structure – Function

- Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758)
 - A dynamic network of dispositional forces and habits
 - Edwards against the materialists
 - “Of Atoms” (*Works* 6:235)
 - Dispositional Ontology
 - Laws (habits) are ontologically prior to the objects and events in the world
- Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758)
 - “No matter is, in the most proper sense, matter”
 - “Substance” is not the owner of properties, but the doer of deeds
 - Dispositions (habits and laws) are not merely secondary qualities of “being,” but form the very structure of being itself.
- “Dispositions”
 - Philosophy of mind, philosophy of science
 - Disposition: habit, *habitus*, tendency, propensity, principle, temper, innate disposition, powers, internal principle of motion and change, self-organization and self-directed development, active potentiality, behavior, causal powers, secondary qualities
 - A disposition is a property whose instantiation entails that the thing which has the property would change, or bring about some change, under certain conditions.
 - T.Crane (Ed.) *Dispositions: A Debate* (Routledge, 1996) p. 1
 - A law, that such actions upon such occasions should be exerted

- Law and Habit (Disposition)
 - Definition: “All habits [are] a law that God has fixed, that such actions upon such occasions should be exerted.”

$$\Psi_{1s} = \Pi^{-0.5} \{Z/a_0\}^{1.5} e^{-\sigma}$$

(for the electron only in the ground state)

- Dispositional Ontology vs Dualism
 - Aristotle
 - Aquinas
 - John Calvin
 - Francis Turretin
 - Jonathan Edwards
 - Jonathan Henry Nevin
 - Richard Niebuhr
- Dispositional Ontology
 - An abiding principle of being
 - Things do not have dispositions but are dispositions
 - Not accidents or secondary qualities
 - Realistic (as opposed to nominalistic)
 - Not mere custom or regularity of events, but an ontologically abiding power that possesses a mode of realness even when it is not in exercise
 - Actual (not a *mere* possibility of manifestation)
 - Independence (independent of its manifestation)