

# The Interim

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Curriculum Supplement For Schools

The *Interim Plus* is a periodical dedicated to educational matters and specifically designed to assist teachers in integrating relevant life issues in their lesson planning.

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Contents:



Another glorious school year has begun and with it comes this year's first edition of our modest learning resource, known as *The Interim Plus*. This free service began in 2001, and the initial issue dealt with stem cell research and its pros and cons vis à human health and human dignity.

The original purpose of the service was to provide overburdened teachers with teaching/learning materials that they might integrate into their own lesson planning, if interested. Over the years the topics have ranged from a study of political and economic systems to issues associated with climate change, from literary satire to scientific/technological breakthroughs, and from social media to religious and philosophical reflections. For a full list of topics please visit *The In-*

*terim* newspaper's website and click on the icon for *The Interim Plus*, <http://www.theinterim.com/interim-plus/>.

Please note that the Father Ted Colleton Scholarship is offered for the 17th year. Sponsored by Niagara Region Right to Life, the program is open to students studying (or being homeschooled) at the grade 11 or 12 level in a Canadian high school. Up to three prizes (\$1500, \$800 and \$500 respectively) are awarded to the contest winners. The program requires candidates to write an original essay of 1200 words as part of their full application package. The theme for this year reads as follows:

***You are a child in the prenatal stage of development. Are all current biomedical/technological breakthroughs helpful in advancing your right to life as a preborn human being?***

The deadline for submission is December 3, 2018. Results will be announced by February 1, 2019. We encourage teachers and counsellors to promote the scholarship/essay contest in their classrooms and schools.

The main topic for this September issue of *The Interim Plus* revolves around the most basic of questions, what is a human being and what is a person? So much in our society depends on the answers to these important questions. The reality is that how we treat one another helps to determine what we truly are and who we are capable of being. If we get the answer wrong, we can cause irreparable harm to innocent human beings. Big, timeless ideas inevitably inform our understanding of the issues that occupy our culture today, whether these be economic, social, religious, political or philosophical in nature.



Note: A hearty thank you is extended to Peter Naus for his contribution in researching the topic while a summer intern at the offices of *The Interim*.

## The Philosophy of Personhood

A flash introduction is available in the following 9 minute video - *Crash Course Philosophy Video #21 Personhood* recommended by our intern and summarized by him in the paragraphs that follow. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FmTsS5xFA6k&list=PL8dPuuaLjXtNgK6MZucdYldNkMybYIHKR&index=9//>



The lecturer, Hank Green, attempts to define the term personhood according to various criteria. Some of them make sense and some are flawed, depending on the very basic definition of what is meant to be human. Of equal importance is who decides? The lawyer? The scientist? The theologian? Everyday man or woman? This can result in contradictory viewpoints such that fictional beings can be “persons” but actual human beings could be considered “non-persons”. Whose definition should we accept? Is there a universal definition?

If for example, a human being is nothing more than a complex organism with certain qualities but not possessing something called the soul, then the origin, development and ultimate meaning of that “life” is purely material.

### Introduction of Important Criteria and their Flaws in Understanding the Concept of Personhood

While some believe that a person does not always mean a human being, in the secular philosophical term, a **person** is a being who is part of our moral community and deserving of moral consideration. To a philosopher, a human is a biological term, while a person is a moral term. Some philosophers think that certain non-human beings deserve to be persons and certain human beings do not deserve to be persons.

In *Hank Green’s Crash Course* video on personhood he asks, “Is Superman a person?” We should recognize that Superman is not a real being because he does not exist except in fiction. We also have no proof that aliens from another planet do exist so using Superman as an analogy is not truthful. Hank starts his argument on personhood by arguing that Superman seems to be a person by the way he acts and talks. While Superman is not a human being, no one wants to deny Superman personhood. Hank argues that just because Superman is not human does not mean that he is not a person. Superman is not different from many human persons in any moral way. Hank goes on to say that there are many non-humans who might qualify for personhood such as Superman, artificial intelligences like WALL-E, or non-human animals like the ape Koko. Is it possible to be a person and yet not human? Is it possible to be human and yet not a person? What qualities or abilities must one possess to be a part of our moral community, to be deserving of our moral consideration, and gain the status of personhood? What is it that distinguishes a human being and a human person from all those other beings and animals? These are major questions in the philosophy of personhood today.



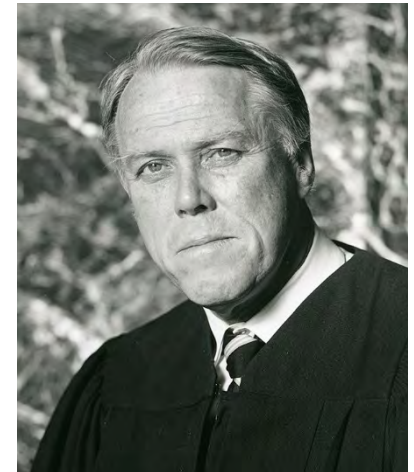
Many philosophers use the philosophy of personhood to deny rights to human beings in the circumstances of abortion, euthanasia or the death penalty. Arguments and counter arguments are used to explain why our actions are morally acceptable or unacceptable. We should care about personhood because the human being is valuable and has a purpose in the world we live

in. We should also care about personhood because we have laws that concern us in society. Thus, we have a responsibility to know philosophy for the purpose of defending the human person at all stages of life.

## Criteria of personhood

Hank Green states five major philosophical criteria that are used to define personhood. They are genetic, cognitive, social, sentience, and the gradient criteria.

The **genetic criterion** states that you are a person if you have human DNA and that you are not a person if you do not have such DNA. This criterion was introduced by American philosopher **John Noonan** (1926–2017). Hank states one major issue with the genetic criterion: that all of the cells in our bodies have human DNA. Every day, thousands of these cells die, but individual cell death is not the end of the human being, and not the end of the human person per se. Many say that a human fetus is just a clump of cells not yet formed into a recognizable human being and certainly not yet a human person and they try to justify abortion by saying that the fetus has no more value than any other clump of cells. Scientifically, the clump of cells that make up a human fetus have a specific purpose to grow into an independent human being with different organs, opinions, likes and dislikes. Each of the cells that make up our bodies have a purpose and most instances of cell death occur for a purpose. An example of purposeful cell death is that your old skin cells have to die for new skin cells to replace them. Removing or trying to kill a cancerous tumor is very different from killing a human fetus because removing a cancerous tumour will save the human being whereas killing a fetus destroys a human being. While the genetic criterion is vague and flawed, the interest of protecting human life because it has value is morally the right idea. The genetic criterion needs to state more clearly why being a human is valuable.

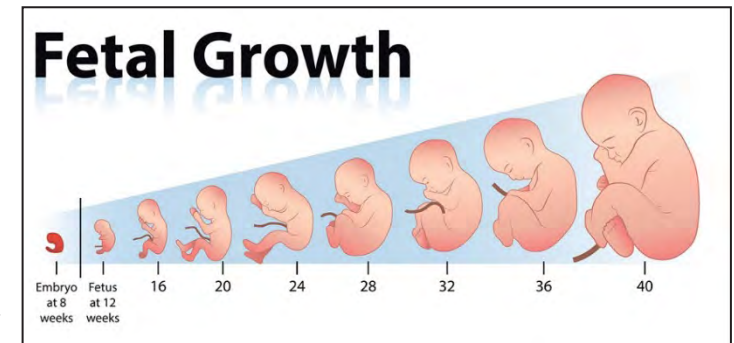


American philosopher  
John Noonan

The **cognitive criterion** states the elements of personhood consist of 1. Consciousness, 2. Reasoning, 3. Self Motivated Activity, 4. Capacity to Communicate and 5.

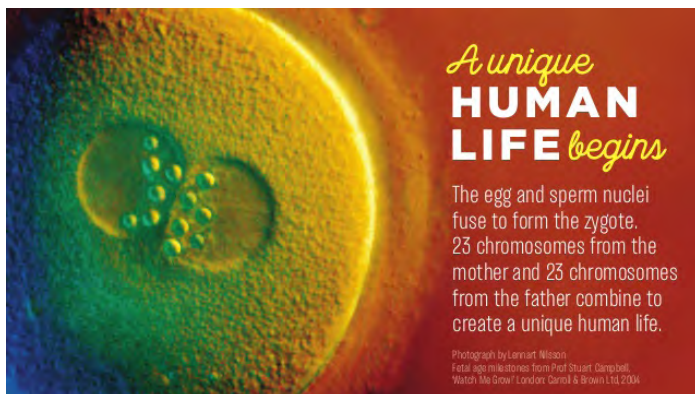
Self-Awareness. The cognitive criterion was introduced by American philosopher **Mary Ann Warren** (1946 - 2010). This theory does not give personhood to human fetuses or young babies since most babies do not meet aspects of the criterion like being self aware until after they are at least eighteen months old. The cognitive criterion also denies personhood to people in *persistent vegetative states (PVS)* or people in a coma. Others would disagree, instead believing that people in *PVS* are still valuable as human beings and are still human persons and thus should not be killed. The life of these people still has dignity and value. There is still hope that they may recover.

While a fetus may not be able to meet any of the cognitive criterion at her pre-natal stage, (although there is evidence that suggests otherwise in terms of her ability to react to music for example, heard while in the womb stage) normal, natural development will allow her to grow into a person with certain quality of life. In fact, the human fetus already has a quality of life because it is being cared for by the mother. The fetus has the job of growing until it can learn and become a member of society as a child, teenager, and adult, thus enjoying, suffering or experiencing all the vagaries of fortune that the human condition entails. One should not try to justify



killing something that is such a special human being at a totally innocent and extremely vulnerable stage of development.

The **social criterion** states that you become a person when society recognizes you as a person. This is not a just, scientific or philosophical answer because it does not grant personhood to people who are fully rational, conscious, capable of communication, possess self-awareness and self-motivation. Should society determine whether a being has personhood or whether they can deny it or take it away? Hank says, "Some people think personhood is a right. A sort of ticket to the moral



community that you forfeit when you violate the laws of society in a major way.”

In this case, capital punishment becomes a hotly debated issue. Is executing someone found guilty of certain crimes become morally inexcusable because we as a society are less morally sound if we kill someone because they killed someone else? Perhaps capital punishment is wrong because it kills another human being who still has value to society even if they harmed society. Even the worst offender can be safely put away in prison and thus keep society free from further harm.

**The sentient criterion** states that you must be able to feel pain or pleasure to be a person. This criterion was introduced by **Peter Singer** (b. 1946). It is wrong to cause unnecessary pain to anything that can feel pain, but if it cannot feel pain we do no harm by excluding it from the group of beings that matter. But if this sentence is changed to, “It is wrong to cause unnecessary pain to anything that can feel pain but if **you** cannot feel pain we do no harm by excluding **you** from the group of beings that matter.” How would Singer react to that? Language is so important in philosophy.



One of the dangers of this criterion means that if no one cares about you, you are no longer a person. The value of a person thus is totally dependent on external factors, being wanted, being liked, being popular, being of use, able to enjoy pleasure however that is defined. But many people who commit suicide think that no one loves them or cares for them. Most people, despite the new law governing euthanasia and assisted suicide in Canada, still believe that suicide is wrong because human life is valuable. Just because a person is suffering does not mean she does not deserve help or cannot get help to alleviate that suffering. A human being does not cease being a human person worthy of compassion and deserving of palliative

care rather than being abandoned to loneliness and despair and shunted aside or actually assisted in putting an end to their life. Euthanasia is a slippery slope indeed. Because it has been legalized does not make it morally justifiable.

**The gradient criterion** states that personhood comes in degrees and you can be more or less of a person. The idea behind this line of thinking is that various factors like age, level of contribution to society, talents possessed, level of education, marital status, range and nature of activities engaged in, etc. combine to make different individuals full persons to a higher or lesser degree depending on where they lie along this ever changing continuum. According to this criterion one could enjoy a high degree and later on fall into a lesser degree of personhood or perhaps lose it altogether. The gradient criterion is flawed because all human beings are created equal. Since certain human beings cannot be more equal than others, certain persons cannot be more of a person than others. Does one have less personhood because of race? Does one have less personhood because of their sex, male or female? The fact that all people are not treated equally in society or under the law does not negate the fact that objectively speaking all are created equal in dignity and therefore should enjoy equal treatment in law. Some thinkers try to use the gradient criterion to justify abortion by arguing that the mother has more personhood (and more rights) than a human fetus and her personhood (and rights) rules over the personhood of the pre-born child.

## **The law in Canada**

In Canada, all humans have the right to life, liberty and security as a legal right protected in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms section 7, “Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of the person, and the right not to be deprived thereof except in accordance of fundamental justice.” Notice how this make no mention of human rights and is rather vague. What does “everyone” include? Who is excluded? We need to protect human beings because of their value and importance in society. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights makes a similar mention in section 3, “Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of the person.” However, reality across this planet strongly suggests that human life is not being protected equally or effectively around the world. Canada is no exception. Some would argue that Canada in fact goes out of its way to make it more difficult for developing nations to treat their peoples fairly by combing promises or offers of aid to their willingness to introduce abortion rights in their society.

**Truth** is what is in accordance with facts or reality. If it does not respect facts and reality can it be truth and can it demand our assent to laws based on untruthful claims? Personhood is important because we have a respon-

sibility to stand for the innate value of the human being regardless of their situation. In Canada, all human beings have the right to life, liberty, and security under Section 7 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. This is a human right and does not depend on whether or not a human fetus, an elderly or disabled citizen, or a criminal is considered a person in law or by the authorities. All these people are part of our moral community and deserve the right to life, liberty and security.



“Man is a person in the unity of his body and his spirit. The body can never be reduced to mere matter: it is a spiritualized body, just as man’s spirit is so closely united to the body that he can be described as an embodied spirit.” – St. Pope John Paul II *Theology of the Body*

<https://www.lifesitenews.com/blogs/the-shockingly-bloody-history-of-legal-personhood> // Life Site Article on the Pro-Choice stance for personhood

[https://www.lifesitenews.com/news/canadian-mp-i-will-fight-for-rights-of-the-unborn-as-long-as-i-have-breath?utm\\_source=LifeSiteNews.com+Daily+Newsletter&utm\\_campaign=1fa71553da-LifeSiteNews.com+US+Headlines+09+18+2012&utm\\_medium=email](https://www.lifesitenews.com/news/canadian-mp-i-will-fight-for-rights-of-the-unborn-as-long-as-i-have-breath?utm_source=LifeSiteNews.com+Daily+Newsletter&utm_campaign=1fa71553da-LifeSiteNews.com+US+Headlines+09+18+2012&utm_medium=email) // Canadian MP who fought for rights of

Pre-born children against the personhood arguments

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PbNYOyPRpgg> // Ben Shapiro on Abortion the sentience criterion

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1A\\_CAKYt3GY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1A_CAKYt3GY) // Crash Course What is philosophy?

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XarO3VoNwmc> // What is the value of a life? Supplemental philosophical problems

<https://people.howstuffworks.com/personhood.htm> // Elementary article on personhood and life issues

<http://rintintin.colorado.edu/~vancecd/phil3160/persons.pdf> // Mary Warren perspective on personhood and legal abortion

[http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_p-vi\\_enc\\_25071968\\_humanae-vitae.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_25071968_humanae-vitae.html) // *humanae vitae*

[https://stmarys-waco.org/documents/2016/9/theology\\_of\\_the\\_body.pdf](https://stmarys-waco.org/documents/2016/9/theology_of_the_body.pdf) // *theology of the body*

[https://www.amnesty.ca/our-work/issues/international-human-rights-principles?gclid=EAlaIqobChM12573iJrj3AIVyrbACh3FDwVWEAAYASAAEgJYUfD\\_BwE](https://www.amnesty.ca/our-work/issues/international-human-rights-principles?gclid=EAlaIqobChM12573iJrj3AIVyrbACh3FDwVWEAAYASAAEgJYUfD_BwE) // Universal Declaration of Human Rights that does not protect humans only persons.

<https://www.macleans.ca/politics/ottawa/dont-accept-any-law-that-says-some-human-beings-are-not-human-beings/> Statement by MP Steven Woodworth in Parliament, 2012 to introduce a motion to study the concept of personhood in Canadian law.

<https://torontosun.com/2012/04/30/clearly-human-life-begins-before-birth/wcm/5aaae653-b831-47f1-af33-30f2c89bcd2d> A concise argument criticizing fear of politicians to take on any discussion of “personhood”.

For a fuller study of the concept of human being and human person have students read the following articles. The articles have been slightly redacted/modified to render them more readable and make them more concise. As well some items have been highlighted to help guide students in their reading of the material.

Teachers may want to divide the class into groups and assign a different article to each of 4 groups in the class. The groups could have 5-6 members depending on the total number of students in the class. The groups can share their group responsibilities by adopting different roles - recorder, reporter, composer, writer, etc. Each group presents an oral/visual report and distributes a brief written summary (four paragraphs, half a page) of their findings/conclusions. They could also frame additional questions to the ones included below that they find relevant and insightful. Those questions ought to be answered by the whole class as part of a general class discussion.

Another class activity would have the criteria regarding personhood debated by opposing groups. Format can be determined by time allotment and discussion among the groups themselves.

Here are four articles dealing with the definition of person and human being.

## A TWO OPPOSING VERSIONS – CLASSICAL VS MODERN SECULAR

*St. Thomas Aquinas saw man as a “rationalis naturae individuala substantia” (S.th.I, 29, 1, 1ob): an individual rational being. (a man)..In the classical concept, man is a subject formed by the soul and the body in substantial union with each other. This core substance, humanness is something that is stable (unchanging) and absolute. His “personhood” refers to*

*the dignity of the human being, deriving from the soul, and created in the image of God. It is by virtue of the soul that the human individual has an absolute, unique, unrepeatable and irreplaceable value.*

*Every human being has a right (that no one gives him, by the way) to life, to thinking and living according to conscience, etc. All these “qualities” are innate to the human individual, indeed, they are attributes of his very essence, and he possesses them from conception to death, and even after death in certain religions. The “person” therefore really refers to the unique dignity of human nature that is in every individual.*

*But according to the modern secular concept of man, he is not a substance, but rather an epiphenomenon of being, simply a random event of the flow of nature, a manifestation of being, a consequence of evolution. He shows that he is a person by where he chooses to live, what he chooses to do and how he relates to others. In scientific terms man is simply classified as the genus “homo” and is part of the primate world, a branch of the ape line.*

*“Homo sapiens” refers to that primate who is human, but still not fully conscious of himself. “Homo sapiens sapiens” is man in the exact sense of the term, a being who is conscious of himself. When a child is born, he is “only” a homo sapiens, because in fact he lacks responsibility or consciousness of his own self. Only when he demonstrates to have consciousness and existential responsibility, which is the capacity for full self-determination, does he become and is considered homo sapiens sapiens: that is a person.*

*Hence the concept of a person - in a certain secular culture - is linked to man’s ability to demonstrate the conscience and responsibility of his acting as a man. Consequently, it is understood that in the concept of a person there are neither fetuses, nor children, nor disabled, nor the old, nor the sick nor those who show they are not self-sufficient in their entirety, able to determine for themselves the meaning of their life. Man in this line is therefore identified with his conscience and consciousness, an activity, an operation, which is always directed towards something other than itself. The person therefore identifies himself with this conscious activity. So if there is no such activity there is no person.*

*These two ways of understanding the person, the first as a quality of man, the second as man’s activity, are antithetical and tear apart our social life.*

[translated from the Italian found at <https://www.toscanaoggi.it/Rubriche/Risponde-il-teologo/Il-concetto-di-persona-secondo-la-Chiesa>

## **B Expressed in a Different Way**

In fact, disagreements about personhood lie at the heart of many current bioethical debates, including those involving stem cell manipulation, prenatal screening, medical infanticide, the persistent vegetative state, dementia and psychiatric illness.

For Peter Singer a person is a being who has a capacity for enjoyable experiences, for interacting with others and for having preferences about continued life. For John Harris a person is any being who is capable of valuing their own life.

Once this kind of definition is accepted, there are a number of logical implications. Firstly, it is immediately obvious that in order to be regarded as a person, you must have an advanced level of brain function. In fact, you must have a completely developed and normally functioning cerebral cortex. Secondly, there must be a significant group of human beings who are non-persons. These include fetuses, newborn babies and infants who lack self-awareness, and a large group of children and adults with congenital brain abnormalities, severe brain injury, dementia and major psychiatric illnesses.

Thirdly, there are many non-human beings on the planet who meet the criteria of persons. These include at least chimpanzees, gorillas, monkeys and dolphins, but may also include dogs, pigs and many other mammals. In fact it has even been argued that within the foreseeable future some supercomputers may meet the criteria to be regarded as persons.

By this definition and its corollaries, according to these thinkers, those who meet the criteria of persons have moral rights and privileges. They deserve to be protected from those who would injure or kill them. They should be allowed to exercise their own choices or autonomy as much as possible. But the same rights and privileges do not extend to non-persons. Peter Singer puts it like this, ‘only a person can want to go on living, or have



**Australian moral philosopher  
Peter Singer**

plans for the future, because only a person can understand the possibility of a future existence for herself or himself. This means that to end the lives of people against their will is different from ending the lives of beings who are not people...killing a person against his or her will is a much more serious wrong than killing a being who is not a person.’[1] In other words killing a chimpanzee is a much greater moral evil than killing a newborn baby or an adult with Alzheimer’s disease.

When people respond with incredulity, Singer argues that to make moral distinctions on the basis of species is to be guilty of a new crime, ‘speciesism’. Instead we should make moral distinctions on the basis of ‘ethically relevant characteristics’, such as the ability to choose and value your own life.

Of course there are major logical problems with this kind of definition of personhood. In effect, Singer has replaced one form of discrimination with another. Instead of discriminating on the basis of species, he is now arguing that we should discriminate on the grounds of cortical function. In fact if we are into name-calling we could call him a ‘corticalist’. But why should corticalism be preferable to speciesism? Of course Singer may wish to argue that cortical functioning is ‘ethically relevant’ whereas species membership is not. But this is an arbitrary distinction that is hard to defend on entirely logical grounds. Why should the functioning of a 5mm layer of neurones be the central and only moral discriminating feature between beings? On purely logical grounds species membership is a more coherent and fundamental basis for making ethical distinctions between beings.

Personhood as defined above is a remarkably fragile and contingent property. At the moment as you read this article you can be regarded as a person. But if, when you walk out of your door, a brick falls on your head leading to cortical damage, you are no longer a person. Of course if, following rehabilitation, your cortical function recovers, then you will become a person again. Can something so fundamental as personhood be so fragile? On Singer’s definition it is not at all clear if a human being who is anaesthetised, comatose, intoxicated, delirious, psychotically confused or merely asleep remains a person. If a burglar came into your room at night and killed you painlessly in your sleep, would they have committed a crime? Singer and colleagues answer this challenge by arguing that personhood is only lost if consciousness is permanently lost, but why on logical grounds should this be so? Suppose I suffer severe brain injury but have the prospect of gradual recovery to normal consciousness over the next ten years. Am I a person in the intervening period? If someone kills me in my unconscious state are they guilty of the serious crime of killing a person or the less serious crime of killing a non-person?

At the heart of this secular philosophical perspective is the idea that you earn the right to be called a person by what you can do, by demonstrating that your brain is functioning adequately, by thinking and choosing. So how do we respond as Christians? What does it mean to be a person in the light of the Christian revelation? As we shall see, in the history of philosophy, the very idea of a person comes directly out of a Christian understanding of what it means to be a human being. It is necessary to look briefly at some rather abstract theological history, but I hope it will become plain how it is relevant to the modern debate.

The original Greek word for person (prosopon) means literally ‘the face’, but in ancient Greek it also referred to the mask that actors used to represent the character they were playing in the theatre. In Greek and Roman thinking what mattered about an individual was the face they showed to the world, the role they played in society. We have retained this meaning when we refer to someone’s ‘persona’. It is the public face they show to the world.



It is interesting that this is how the word is used in the Greek New Testament. At several points God is described as one who shows no favouritism. The literal Greek says that he is not a respecter of persons, meaning that he is not influenced by our external and social role.[2]

However in Hebrews 1:3 the Son is described as the exact representation of God’s person and a different word is used, hypostasis, which literally means ‘what lies under’. The early church fathers, as they reflected on the nature of the Godhead and the meaning of the Trinity, fastened on this word hypostasis to describe the three persons of the Trinity. God’s ultimate being (what ‘lay under’ his activity), was in the form of persons - persons giving themselves to one another in love. And as human beings are made in God’s image, we too are created as persons. We reflect God’s nature in our personhood; we are created to give ourselves to God and to others in love.

Just as the three persons of the Trinity are individually unique, yet give themselves continually in love, so each human person is

unique, yet made for relationship with others. Personhood is not something we can have in isolation - in Christian thinking it is a relational concept. Descartes came up with the famous statement, 'I think, therefore I am'. It's a definition that led ultimately to the modern concepts of Singer and Harris. By contrast we might suggest an alternative Christian version, 'You love me, therefore I am'. My being comes not from my rational abilities but from the fact that I am known and loved - first of all by God himself, and secondly by other human beings. This is why the experience of rejection and isolation can be so psychologically devastating, and why children who have never experienced love and acceptance fail to develop into normal healthy adults. But even if I am rejected by other humans, I am still a person. Ultimately my personhood rests on the fact that God called me into existence and that he continues to know and love me.[3]

The idea of a person as hypostasis, derived from the Christian theology of the Trinity, gradually entered Western philosophy and remained of central importance up to the present century. Humanism took on essentially the same understanding of the human person, although its theological basis was conveniently forgotten. It is only recently that the basic concept has been derided and challenged by a number of philosophers, including Singer and colleagues.

### Doing or being?

For Peter Singer my personhood depends on what I can do, on the functioning of my cerebral cortex. But in Christian thinking my personhood rests on who I am, on the fact that God has called me into existence, and continues to know and love me. Human beings do not need to earn the right to be treated as godlike beings. Our dignity is intrinsic, in the stuff of our being, in the way God has made us and the way he knows and loves us.



This Christian understanding of personhood is much more permanent, more resilient, than the secular one. As we saw, to Peter Singer your personhood might disappear at any moment if your cortex starts to malfunction. But in Christian thinking, whatever happens to you in the future, whatever disease or accident may befall your central nervous system, even if you are struck down by dementia or enter a persistent vegetative state, you will still be you: a unique and wonderful person known and loved by God. It is God's love that preserves our identity throughout the whole of our lifetime - whatever tragic and unexpected events may befall us - and on into eternity. And even when we were in our mother's womb, God

was loving us and calling us into existence. As the theologian Gilbert Meilander put it, 'He was with us in the womb, as he will be with us in the tomb'.[4]

So what are the practical implications for medical ethics of this rather abstract theology? It's a huge topic and I can only point out a few headlines. Firstly, in Christian thinking my moral value and significance does not depend on the vagaries of my CNS function, but on my creation in God's image. Human beings are godlike beings. We are lovingly designed by our Creator to reflect his character and nature. Only human beings, in all the vast array of life on planet Earth, have this privilege and responsibility. Hence we are to treat all human beings, however tragically incapacitated, with wonder, reverence and respect. We are called to protect all human beings from abuse, from manipulation and from any who would deliberately end their life. We cannot rate some lives as more worthwhile, more valuable than others. The malformed baby, the Alzheimer's sufferer, the unwanted fetus, and the person with terminal motor neurone disease; all have lives of unique significance and value, all are known and loved by God. This does not mean that we have an absolute duty to provide every possible treatment, or to continue life-supporting treatment in every case. Sometimes it is right to withhold or withdraw medical treatment that is burdensome and can bring no lasting benefit. But this is not because we estimate one life as less valuable or less morally significant than another. Each human being deserves our wonder, respect and compassionate care.

Secondly, whereas the law does not recognise personhood until the moment of birth, Christian thinking points to the moral significance of the unborn fetus. As illustrated so powerfully in Psalm 139, God is involved with us even in the intrauterine environment. And although we cannot ultimately know in what sense God has a relationship with an embryo (and thoughtful Christians continue to differ on this issue),[5] it seems to me that we must treat even a microscopic human embryo as a unique and precious being whom God is calling into existence. And if this is right then we cannot destroy one human life to provide embryonic stem cells for the benefit



of another human life.

Thirdly, as far as we know, of all the species on the planet only Homo sapiens is made in God's image and hence only human beings can be called persons. Although we are called to treat not only chimpanzees and dolphins but all sentient beings with care, as befits beings made by God, we cannot value their lives as equal to those of humans. As Christians we must plead guilty to the charge of speciesism, because our God is speciesist!

Finally, as we saw, there is no such thing as an isolated human person, and therefore we cannot take ethical decisions as though human beings are isolated entities. In Christian thinking we are all bound together in bonds of duty and care. We are meant to be a burden to one another. In fact our lives are meant to be ones of 'mutual burdensomeness'! We come into the world totally dependent on the love and care of others, we go through a stage of life when we care for others, and most of us will end our lives totally dependent on the love and care of others. This is part of what it means to be a person. So even if a patient with a terminal illness feels that their own life is worthless and requests the right to be killed, we cannot agree. The intentional killing of one person damages all of us, because we are all locked together in community. And by contrast when we show compassion and love for the weakest and most pathetic members of our society, we are expressing an essential element of our humanity. This is the way we demonstrate God's image. This is the way he has made us to be.

## Conclusion

What does it mean to be a person? As I've tried to demonstrate it's not just a question of academic philosophy. As Christian medics we are called to demonstrate the reality of what we believe. It is by our behaviour, by our compassionate caring, by our sensitivity and respect for the dignity of every patient, the helpless, the confused, the malformed, the unborn and the disabled, that we can really provide the answer.

## References

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## Further reading

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## C What Makes a Person a Person?

By Sandra Glahn

"A person's a person, no matter how small."

Dr. Seuss got it right.

So what makes someone a person?

"A person's a person, no matter how small."

Dr. Seuss got it right.

So what makes someone a person?

How we answer this question can mean life or death for a lot of people. Why? Because with personhood comes entitlement to rights and civil protection. Those who advocate placing maternal rights above the rights of unborn babies often say that what makes someone a person is that he or she has "function." That is, personhood means having the ability to do or function in some way. To these individuals I am a person because I am able to think, to respond to stimuli, to feel, to reason (okay, more or less).



The ramifications in the abortionist's office are enormous. Lacking the ability to reason, the "developing mass of tissue" in the mother's womb is considered a non-person and thus has no rights. The rights of the "true" person—the mother—take precedence. It's a clever argument. And it's also effective as evidenced by its use to justify about 1.2 million abortions per year in the U.S. alone and 100,000 in Canada per year.

Peter Singer, a philosophy professor at Princeton, carries the personhood-as-function view to its logical extreme when he states that a parent's rights take precedence over those of his or her infant who, by virtue of being not yet fully mature, is unable to function. Singer concludes that it would be ethical for a parent to take the life of the baby, since it isn't a person—as "it" lacks conscious awareness of self, which is, in Singer's view, essential to personhood.

My cats are self-aware. They can feel emotion—as is evidenced by their purring when I scratch their heads. And I believe they love, though I could make a much stronger case for animals loving by pointing to a pet who greets me at the door, tail wagging. (My cats just glance over and move on.) Still, my cats do seem to care in their own independent kitty way.

Whatever functional criteria one comes up with for personhood—be it self-awareness, ability to create, feel, or love—some member of the animal kingdom can match it. This clouds the personhood definition—especially since a few chimps have learned some sign language and can now "communicate." Clearly function is not what makes us what we are.

We could argue that what gives us personhood is our very existence. But an amoeba exists. Does it thus have rights? Though some have argued that it does, the answer is no.

What makes us persons is that we are human beings. I am a person because I am, and I am *human*. What makes me a person is not what I do. "I" have existed from the one-cell zygote stage. Imagining ourselves in the point of view of a zygote, we could rightfully say, "I don't think yet, but I exist and I bear the image of God—therefore, I am."

Viewing ourselves this way is fully compatible with the statement in Genesis about humanity being made in God's image (Gen. 1:27).

Humans are persons worthy of respect by virtue of the fact that we are created human, not because of anything we do. From the zygote to the incapacitated and everything in between, human beings are persons because we "are," and we have human DNA. We do not lose our humanity or our personhood when we have diminished or absent function.

This truth has ramifications in the embryonic stem-cell lab, in the abortion clinic, and in the hospice.

A. W. Tozer said that what we think about God is the most important thing about us; C.S. Lewis quite disagreed. He believed, instead, that what God thinks of us is the most important thing about us. When we consider what makes us human persons, it would appear that Lewis got it right. Even if a human never has enough capacity to think about God, he or she is still the object of God's unique creation and care, possessing personhood.

God made the animals, but He didn't make them in His image. So regardless of size, if we bear God's image, we are precious in a way that the animals are not. A human person's a person—no matter how small.

<https://bible.org/article/what-makes-person-person>

## D What is the difference between a person and a human?

By Darrin Blankenship (September 30, 2014)

I think about this question frequently because I feel very strongly that much of the evil in the world today rises out of this question, as I will try to demonstrate. I have come to consider that there are two fundamental ways to attack this idea: internally and externally.

First the internal: am I a person? It might seem silly, but read about philosophical zombies and come back to it later. I believe that I am a person because I think. More specifically: I am aware that I am thinking. I may be unaware of the mechanics underlying my thought, the firing of neurons, the wash and flow of neurotransmitters and hormones, but I am quite certain of this internal voice I possess that allows me to talk to myself and question the mental processes that result in the actions, experiences, and opinions that make up me. Moreover, I am able to (perhaps imperfectly) express that internal mental state to others.

There are other ways, aside from communication, that I can use to determine your personhood.

I can observe you. I can watch what you do and make hypotheses about your actions that let me guess at your internal mental processes. If I can identify sufficiently with what I see, I can guess that you think and possess awareness like I do.

...When Europeans came to the new world, they encountered other humans with different ways of life, different methods of communication, different experiences of the world around them. We know how that went. I don't think anyone actually sat down and reasoned out "these aren't people" like I've laid out above, rather it was a conclusion that (wrongly) was reached intuitively.

I think that anywhere you see racism, sexism, slavery, rape or other injustice, you are, in some level, seeing a fundamental denial of personhood by an aggressor or oppressor. We're getting better about it, I think, I hope, but slowly. We've still got a long way to go.

And there's more, like very salient question: when does personhood begin? Is it at conception? I say no because there is yet no mechanism present for thought or awareness. Is it at birth? Perhaps not. Babies may think, but I seriously doubt they are aware in the way an adult is. I'm very uncomfortable saying that because of the potential horrors that can follow that line of reasoning, but I think it does bear on the question.

Where does personhood end? Is a human with no demonstrable ability for awareness a person, for example someone in the end stages of dementia or a traumatic brain injury patient? Using the definition above, no. And please believe me, I'm as horrified by that idea as I hope you are.

If we assume that thought and awareness arises out of the proper (or at least normative) function of our cognitive machinery (i.e. our brain) is a human with significant impairment of that machinery, either through injury or an accident of development, a person? I contend that anyone who uses the word "retard" in reference to another human doesn't think so (and is a horrible person).

Is a human whose world view is potentially threatening to mine a person? We see other humans assert the negative on that every single day (denying personhood for our enemies is practically a requirement for war).

We're not there yet, but I think we might be some day (maybe soon): given an entity that thinks and asserts that it is aware, despite any other biological similarity to me, can I accept that is a person? This question extends



to hard AI, augmented human intelligence, human consciousness replicated non-biologically (i.e. uploading), and non-human organisms that display intelligence but for whom we are (currently) otherwise unable to conclusively infer awareness.

These are serious problems with this answer, problems that make me (and I hope you) very uncomfortable, and yet they are consequences of an answer based upon a cognitive premise. And cognition is a very common starting place from which people attempt to tackle this very question. Despite my distaste, I'm not sure there is a better answer that can be drawn, at least from science.

Which is a long, meandering route to say maybe we have the possibility of another definition: what if a person is an individual whom you would automatically treat in the manner that you assume you deserve to be treated, without question or reservation? In other words: what if being a person depends on your acceptance of others,

rather than your judgement of them?

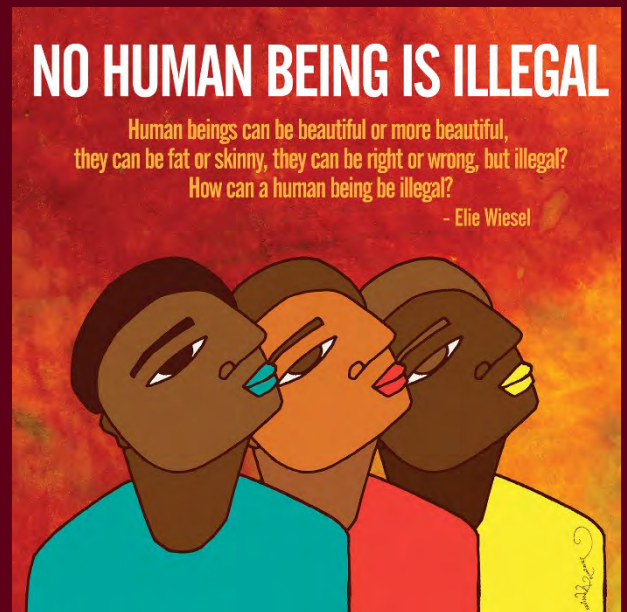
I'm not finished with this question, though for the moment I've run out of ways to (imperfectly) voice my thoughts about it. I'm not convinced that we can ever be finished with this question, nor should we be.

<https://www.quora.com/What-is-the-difference-between-a-person-and-a-human>

[http://www.mind.ilstu.edu/curriculum/what\\_is\\_a\\_person/what\\_is\\_a\\_person.php](http://www.mind.ilstu.edu/curriculum/what_is_a_person/what_is_a_person.php)

### Questions for discussion, debate and reflection

1. Of the four articles, which provide the clearest definition of personhood?
2. How do the definitions converge [agree] and how to they disagree?
3. What is the most important difference between the definitions?
4. Which properties do you think are individually necessary and jointly sufficient for being a person?
5. What is personhood to you? What makes you a person? Why is personhood so important?
6. Is there agreement on human "exceptionality"? What does human exceptionality suggest?
7. Identify some of the issues around the notion of personhood.
8. Of these, which are extremely controversial? Why?
9. Can non-human beings be considered "persons"? Why or why not?
10. Consider the different philosophical criterions for personhood and analyze each and point out why they are flawed?
11. Consider our laws in Canada pertaining to stem cell research, in vitro fertilization, euthanasia, abortion, use of drugs, incarceration, immigration, racism, pornography, gender equality, right to vote, how do they apply to the personhood argument? How have these changed over time?
12. What ultimately determines the value of the human being? His nature or his activity?
13. Are there contradictions between the various laws and actions that government takes or permits, based on your understanding of personhood?
14. Does the Canadian criminal code need to reflect modern science in its definition of personhood?



### Videos for further exploration of the topic

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gycb0SAkF2M> presents argument for giving robots and artificial intelligence personhood, entities with rights. Actually his conclusion may indeed be one of the worst things in the world.

[https://www.ted.com/talks/steven\\_wise\\_chimps\\_have\\_feelings\\_and\\_thoughts\\_they\\_should\\_also\\_have\\_rights](https://www.ted.com/talks/steven_wise_chimps_have_feelings_and_thoughts_they_should_also_have_rights) Makes the case for granting rights to animals.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p7RD3G5qn\\_k](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p7RD3G5qn_k) Presents the concept in the context of abortion issue