Human Life Endangered at the Edges

A common designation for certain contemporary groups of disenfranchised persons is the term "marginalized." In most contexts, this expression refers to "minority" groups—be they black, Hispanic, poor, illegal immigrants, women, homosexuals, etc. The "minority" term does not exclusively refer to absolute numbers of people in that particular group, rather, it seems that is minority in the sense of not possessing enough power to resist effectively the majority. As the minority class learns to gain access to the levers of power, yesterday's minority becomes today's majority. One can think of unions who were once struggling to gain just wages and working conditions for the down-trodden working class. Tomorrow, the senior citizens may acquire power through their collective strength. What is at issue here is how certain classes of humans have become or are becoming marginalized and how these shifts subsequently affect health-care allocation decisions. Unborn, unseen infants are deprived of life because of not being considered persons. Elderly comatose or incompetent patients appear to lose their personal status and treated as non-persons. Why?

A part of the explanation is to be found in the fuzzy notions some have about the concept of person. The definition of person eludes ordinary scientific and philosophical analysis because the person as such is at once both terribly visible and yet invisible to scientific scrutiny. It is visible because of the body which is its outward expression; it is invisible because of the non-material component (the human spiritual soul) which is not directly perceived by human senses or the instruments of science.

The Two Worlds of the Human Person

Because the human person exists in two worlds, it remains a mystery; yet not one which entirely escapes human study and reflection. Clearly, the human person—that which we denominate as "I," "you," "she," or "he"—is material in some way. We do say my body, my leg, my brain. Yet saying my body is not parallel to saying my house or my car. These latter are distinct from me, while my body is not. It seems to be part of me. I experience the physical world through my body's senses—sight, auditory, touch, taste, etc.

In addition to the body through which I experience the outer world as well as my body itself, I also experience an inner life, a self-awareness and the power of self-determination: I choose, I decide, I reflect. True, at times I may feel less free than at others; there seems to be some inner constraints on my freedom. Yet these are generally not coercive except in some cases of serious addictive behavior where my freedom in certain activities is reduced to varying degrees. This inner life, self-consciousness and self-reflection, are an expression of the non-material principle of the human person.

To appreciate more fully what it means to be a person, we need to see what an adult person is and does. We know a thing by observing what it does; function follows, and is reflective of, being. An adult person, given the opportunity and context to develop the skills, speaks and writes in a syntactical language; designs bridges; paints portraits; writes poetry and prose; records and writes personal and societal histories; composes operas, symphonies, and ballads; theories about the origin, destiny, and nature of the universe; debates about God's existence; and worships Him in a variety of ways. One can find all these activities, to varying degrees, among adult humans, but one cannot find them among any infra-human animals. (A chimpanzee, for example, can be trained by a human to manipulate symbols to communicate with humans but in a non-syntactical way. Analysis of such behavior does not reveal anything beyond a high grade imitation.)

A Reverse Chronology

If, then, we reverse individual human development and go backwards in time, we note that the skills and activities observable in the adult human gradually become extinguished. The ten-year old is not able to do many of the activities he did at thirty years of age. That same individual at four can speak to some extent, but most of the adult skills are not yet visible (apart from a genius like Mozart). At birth the individual exhibits none of those skills—except the fundamental one of living.

In spite of these decreasing and disappearing skills, most people would not call a one-year old child a non-person. Taking the life of an one-year old would be murder—ethically and legally. It is not the activities observable in the full adult which constitute the individual human being as a person, rather the individual is a person at birth (and before) and gradually develops the particular skills to be manifested later. The person is actual from the beginning but, by virtue of being a person, has the capacity or potentiality to develop and actualize certain skills. To be a person is an all or none reality. An individual is or is not a person. However, a person is endowed with powers that need time and bodily development and the proper psychosocial environment for proper activation and expression. In brief, a human person is a living individual member of the species, Homo sapiens sapiens. A being is a member of the human species because it is an organism which is generated by the union of a woman's oocyte (egg) with a man's spermatozoon (sperm or germ cell). Biologically, it is characterized by being a whole organism possessing a human

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It is important to note that the body-soul description of the human person is certainly different, but in no way is it in opposition to modern sciences' descriptions at the physiological, biochemical, and subatomic level of all matter. These two descriptions are different conceptualizations of the same natural reality. Any chemical and physical description of matter and function at the tangible level, whether these are detected directly by our natural senses or by extension of those senses using mechanical, optical, and electronic instrumentation, is limited to the methods of research. It is similar to smashing an old clock, examining the parts, and seeking to put the parts together. A "naive" person seeing the isolated parts would find it very difficult to determine how they fitted together and that the instrument's function was to measure intervals of time (as duration).

For a similar reason, one cannot expect to understand what a human person is by solely looking at the anatomical, physiological, biochemical, and subatomic structures which make up the living human body/person. Such a study will provide some information about the structure and function of the person as body, but it will not reveal the non-material principle of the person. One must look at what the adult person does (as we have seen above) and, by rational analysis, realize that these acts which are truly distinctive of adult human beings can only be accounted for by an ability to form universalized and abstract concepts. Even if the body (esp. senses and brain) is required by way of receiving input and expressing output as well as for the initial processing, this ability must be rooted in a non-material principle.

The Profoundly Retarded or Senile Person

The profoundly retarded person (IQ of 20 or below), contrary to Joseph Fletcher's suggested profile for human personhood, is a person. Why? Because he fulfills the necessary requirements: a whole, living organism of the human species, albeit profoundly handicapped. Given a supportive environment, the individual will learn a few words, be able to be spoon fed, smile and laugh, and respond affectionately. Damage to the body, especially to the brain and to the some of the senses, e.g., sight, may severely limit the ability to receive input as well as to express output. Furthermore, the information processing centers of the brain are so damaged that cognitive (and affective) activities are markedly hampered. All these limitations notwithstanding, such an individual human being is a person with all his basic moral rights intact.

Similarly, persons who have suffered stroke, head injury, or other mentally disabling conditions are not to be classified as nonpersons. Even if they no longer function on most levels as a person, they are still members of the human race. Merely because their mental activities (and consequently most voluntary acts) are rapidly diminishing or are gone, their personhood is not thereby destroyed.

A competent adult who is anesthetized or is sleeping is not doing much by way of conscious deliberative activity. Of course, we know from experience that upon wakening and becoming conscious the individual will once again display various activities characteristic of the competent adult human being. Such human individuals during sleep or coma have not lost their basic right to life, dignity, and respect; they were made in the image of God and retain that image even if its manifestation as associated with the competent adult is not present.

Human beings at the edges—at the very beginning of life or at the end—may not exhibit those characteristics ordinarily associated with a fully competent adult. Nonetheless such an individual is a human person vested with all the basic moral rights because these rights flow precisely from being a human person and not from the ability to speak, write, or make free choices.