

Meaning of Persons

By
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"Stop, look and listen for the person before you rush to judgment"

Introduction

- The subject "The Meaning of Persons" has broad implications and comes into play in many areas of our lives.
- Debates on the "beginning of life" (personhood initiatives) and "end of life" (Terri Schiavo case) issues focus on what it means to be a person and how you define personhood.
- In everyday situations, the question is: in medicine, are we treating patients as persons or as a case or procedure; in business, are we treating costumers as persons or as a sale or commission; as employers, are we treating employees with respect and fairness; in law, are we treating clients as persons or as a billable hour or contingency fee; in education, are we treating students as persons or as a number or grade?
- In our communities, do we show respect for the dignity of all people we encounter especially those who are different, and do we provide compassionate care where it is needed?
- In order to address these questions, we should give some thought to what it means to be a "person" and how do you define personhood.
- Seven resources are used to build a concept of what it means to be a "person".

Biblical "Imago Dei"

- Every person is made in the "image of God".
("God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them." Gen 1: 27)
- Biblical definition for the unique nature, status, and worth of all human beings as created and loved by God.

- Scripture is not specific about what constitutes the “image of God”, when initiated, where located, what attributes characterize it.
- It implies that man possesses certain attributes that are gifts from God:
 - Self-consciousness - self-awareness.
 - Reasoning Power - ability to think rationally.
 - Moral Sense - ability to know right and wrong.

("Personality involves the above three things... any being that can say to himself: "I am, I ought, I will," is made in the image of God." Albertus Peters, Notes on Genesis.)
 - Spiritual Dimension - innate desire to know God.

("You have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in you." Augustine of Hippo, Prayer.)
 - Free Will - freedom to choose.

("God gave man free- will, and he respects that free-will... not even he can interfere with it." William Barkley, D S B.)
- Its presence requires that man be a "morally responsible personality". (Albertus Peters, Notes on Genesis.)
- Its presence allows man to have a relationship with God and for us to be subjects of God's divine love. (Augustine of Hippo, Prayer.)
- Sin has distorted the "image", but it does not diminish its worth or deny its sacredness.
- Dignity:
 - We have a "derived dignity" because we are created and loved by God and marked with his "image".
 - We have a "conditional dignity" because sin has distorted the "image".
- Sacredness:
 - "Sanctity of Life" evokes awe and respect for human life, but it does not equate to the "infinite value" of each moment of life.

- It is not our duty to keep or be kept alive as long as possible but rather not to kill.
- Therefore, all mankind is dignified with a unique nature, status, and worth, but we are not divine.

Rene' Descartes (1596 - 1650)

- Father of modern philosophy
- A "Renaissance Man" who helped usher in the modern age of the 17th century (The Enlightenment) from the medieval age.
- The "person" is defined by his/her reasoning power – ability to think rationally.
- "Cogito, ergo sum" - "I think, therefore I am".
- The mind is the essential self; the body is not a part of the "person".
- The "person" exists as a thinking being but has no physical being.
- Cartesian Dualism: The world consists of two basic substances - spirit and matter.
 - The mind, as spirit, is the essential self and counts as the "person".
 - The body, as matter, is an object to be measured and mastered and is not part of the "person".

Joseph Fletcher (1905 - 1991)

- Father of Modern Bioethics.
- Books: Morals and Medicine (1954)
Situation Ethics (1966)
- Medicine should be more attentive to the patient as a "person".
 - Who counts as a "person"?
 - What does "respect for persons" require?
- The "person" is found in the human capacities for:
 - Self-consciousness (self-awareness) - "I am".
 - Self-determination (personal autonomy) - "I will".

- **Dualism:**
 - The "person" belongs to the realm of mind and spirit.
 - The body, regarded as something other than person, belongs to the realm of nature.
- **Reductionism:**
 - The "person" is reduced to the capacity for thinking and choosing.
- **Professional commitment to fidelity and integrity in a relationship - truthfulness, trustworthiness, faithfulness:**
 - Respect for persons.
 - Informed consent.
 - Patient's rights.
- **Advocate for:**
 - **Personal Autonomy** - The patient's absolute right to determine what is in their best interest based on their situation at the exclusion of other universal ethical principles (situation ethics).
 - **Setting aside the application of traditional rules of right and wrong (The Tao) as compelling in life altering decisions.**

Paul Ramsey (1913 - 1988)

- **Christian Theologian and Ethicist.**
- **Book: The Patient as Person (1970).**
- **"Persons are embodied souls" - not merely mind, nor merely body.**
- **Mind and body are holistic integrated components of the embodied self and cannot be separated.**
- **The body counts and may not be reduced to something other than "person".**
- **The "person" cannot be reduced just to capacities for thinking and choosing.**
- **The human organism as a whole is sacred and is to be respected.**

Paul Tournier (1897 - 1986)

- Swiss Christian Physician.
- Book: The Meaning of Persons (1957).
- “Persons” are complex beings made up of many images (lamina), like layers of an onion or rings of a tree.
- "Personage"
 - The appearance of the person as revealed by the perceived images he or she presents.
- The true person pure and unvarnished will always escape us.
- Doubtless only God knows the real person.
- "Personage" and person are linked together, yet they remain distinct.
- One can approach persons only through the images they portray which can conceal as well as reveal.

Richard McCormick (1922 - 2000)

- Jesuit Moral Theologian and Professor of Christian Ethics
- "Sociality" - We are interdependent social creatures.
- Our embodied selves are linked to others.
- We are not meant to be self-centered and self-serving.
- We are "persons-in-relation" constantly giving and receiving, not solitary individuals.
- Our very being is defined by our web of human relations.
- We are social human beings with social responsibilities, and we are expected to contribute to the common good of others.

Allen Verhey

- Christian Theologian and Medical Ethicist
- Book: Reading the Bible in the Strange World of Medicine (2003).
- Every person is an “embodied soul or ensouled body” with a name, an identity, and a personal story.

- The Bible contains no theoretical account of the "person", or just the body, or just the soul.
- Scripture takes an all-inclusive holistic approach to the meaning of persons.
- We should always focus on real persons and their personal stories with their distinct circumstances and specific needs.
- Rejects Dualism: The Bible points toward an understanding of the human person as a psychosomatic unit as both flesh and soul.
- Rejects Reductionism: A person cannot simply be reduced to the capacities for thinking and choosing, or to a biological category.

Summary: "Meaning of Persons"

- Every person is marked with God's image and loved by God. (Imago Dei)
- Every person is capable of having a special relationship with God, which requires us to be morally responsible people. (Augustine and Peters)
- Every person is a complex being made up of many images (lamina). (Tournier)
- Every person has the ability to think and choose, but these are not the only components of personhood. (Descartes and Fletcher)
- Every person is an embodied soul with a name, an identity, and a personal story. (Ramsey and Verhey)
- Every person has communal relationships and responsibilities which involve mutually giving and receiving. (McCormick)
- Every person is dignified with a unique nature, status, and worth.

Personal Encounters with Others

- Stop, look and listen for the person before you rush to judgment.
- Identify with the person who is seeking your attention.

- **Focus on their personal story, distinct circumstances and specific needs.**
- **Show respect for the person.**
- **Provide compassionate care when needed.**

Conclusion: "Respect for Persons"

- **Requires respect for their personhood as an embodied soul in community with a name, an identity and a personal story.**
- **Respect for their: 1) Dignity, 2) Sexuality, 3) Diversity, 4) Equality, 5) Sociality, 6) Freedom, 7) Religious faith, 8) Physical, emotional, and mental needs.**

