

# THE PERSON IN AMERICA

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## I Persons and Personhood

Jacques Maritain begins *The Person and the Common Good*, with the following statement:

Among the truths of which contemporary thought stands in particular need and from which it could draw substantial profit is the doctrine of the distinction between individuality and personality.<sup>1</sup>

However, Maritain goes on to note:

The essential importance of this distinction is revealed in the principles of St. Thomas. Unfortunately a right understanding of it is difficult to achieve and requires an exercise of metaphysical insight to which the contemporary mind is hardly accustomed.<sup>2</sup>

Now, the concepts of “individuality” and “personhood” are certainly important in the contemporary American vocabulary. However, these notions—especially that of “personhood”—are rarely applied correctly, philosophically speaking. Indeed, the term *person* has become co-opted and corrupted in contemporary American public debate. Today, we find the terms *person* and “personhood” being given numerous social and political definitions that are influenced heavily by a naturalistic/reductionist view of reality. Contemporary political and ethical debates in America often revolve around questions of “personhood,” which is only “asserted” of an individual based upon certain criteria established by some group in power. However, even though we find the term “personhood” being applied in many different ways, I will argue that there is a metaphysical basis for the concept *person* that is grounded in human nature. This metaphysical basis for *person* provides an objective foundation upon which we can judge the

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<sup>1</sup> Jacques Maritain, *The Person and the Common Good* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1966), p.11.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

appropriateness of current debates regarding the "personhood" of certain individuals within society. Thus, when a prominent figure like Peter Singer claims that, "In regarding a newborn infant as not having the same right to life as a person, the cultures that practiced infanticide were on solid ground,"<sup>3</sup> we need not stand back and say, "Well, that's an opinion we must respect in the name of tolerance and pluralism." Instead, it can be argued that such an assertion is, in fact, wrong. The error here is one of applying a malformed and impoverished understanding of "personhood," which in turn results from a malformed and impoverished view of the human *person*.

The sad fact today is that many contemporary philosophers have lost sight of the reality behind the concept of "personhood." And, this is not an error to take lightly. As John Kavanaugh, S.J., notes in his recent book, *Who Count As Persons?*:

Underneath systems of racism, oppression, and sexual exploitation lie the fundamental dynamics of moral evil. Evil is a rejection of the truth of who and what we are as persons. It is a repression of the evidence that points to our truth. It is a denial of ethics itself, grounded in the reality of personhood.<sup>4</sup>

In this light, we see that the debate over the term *person* is not simply a matter of rhetoric. The dangers involved with allowing some members of society to determine who is a *person* and who is not are quite real, and jeopardize all of the vulnerable within a society. To respond to this particular evil that dwells within contemporary American culture, I will draw upon the insights of St. Thomas Aquinas and Jacques Maritain—two of the great defenders of the human *person*—in an effort to exemplify an authentic understanding of "personhood." I will also draw upon the work of Fr. Kavanaugh, and his more contemporary critique of American culture. In particular, I want to expand upon Kavanaugh's claim that:

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<sup>3</sup> Peter Singer, *Rethinking Life and Death* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995), p. 255.

<sup>4</sup> John Kavanaugh, S.J., *Who Count As Persons?* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2001), p. 107.

The fact that we are persons is why we experience the world ethically, why we inevitably feel moral outrage and make judgments about value—even though we might not be able to justify or rationalize our outrage. I argue that if we are going to take morality seriously, we must know what being a human person means, who counts as a person, and what the implications of personhood are.<sup>5</sup>

In the end, my goal is to reaffirm (echoing the words of Maritain):

...the personalism rooted in the doctrine of St. Thomas and to separate... a social philosophy centered in the dignity of the human person from every social philosophy centered in the primacy of the individual and the private good.<sup>6</sup>

I realize this is no small task. But it is my conviction that as long as we hold on to our common human experience, we can continue to assert the truth of authentic “personhood” in the face of contemporary relativism, naturalism, and reductionism, thereby protecting and promoting the dignity of each and every human *person*.

## II What is a Person?

Let us begin by examining the term *person* itself. What does the term literally mean? Our English term “person” has its roots in the Latin word, “*persona*”—which itself is a combination of the phrase “*per sonans*,” which means to “speak through,” or even to “sound through.” This Latin phrase is itself related to the older Greek phrase, “*pros opon*,” which means “see through and out” in reference to a mask. And so, this phrase is an allusion to the masks worn by the actors, or “*personas*,” represented in Greek plays. In discussing the etymology of the term *person* in his book, *Who Count As Persons?*, John Kavanaugh explains the connection here:

To be a person is to be an expressive animal, a self-creating drama, a center of action, a narrative becoming conscious of itself, revealing and yet concealed through the embodiment of

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<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 139.

<sup>6</sup>Jacques Maritain, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

mask. The mask is not a pretense—although it can be. It is a revelation, an expression, an externalization that is one with the actor.<sup>7</sup>

In sum, it is our ability to reveal ourselves to others—which, in turn, is only possible because we are self-aware that marks human beings as *persons*. This capacity for self-revelation is itself a part of our common, shared human nature.

For his own part, St. Thomas gives the following definition of *person* in the First Part of the *Summa Theologiae*, Question 29, Article 1, as he discusses the Trinity:

...in a more special and perfect way, the particular and individual are found in the rational substances which have dominion over their own actions; and which are not only made to act, like others; but which can act themselves; for actions belong to singulars. Therefore, also the individuals of the rational nature have a special name even among other substances; and this name is *person*.<sup>8</sup>

St. Thomas proceeds to clarify and nuance this definition, which is drawn in part from Aristotle and Boethius, throughout the remainder of his discussion on the Trinity. For example, St. Thomas explains that the human soul by itself is not properly referred to as a *person*; rather, in the case of human beings, the term *person* applies to human nature taken as a whole.<sup>9</sup> In Article 3 of this same question, St. Thomas refines his definition further: “*Person* signifies what is most perfect in all nature—that is, a subsistent individual of a rational nature.”<sup>10</sup>

In this third article, St. Thomas also goes on to give an account of the origins of the term *person*. In his reply to the second objection,

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<sup>7</sup> John Kavanaugh, *op. cit.*, p. 62.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* (cited hereafter as *ST*), I, q. 29, a. 1, literally translated by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province, Volume I (New York: Benzinger Brothers, 1947), p. 156.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, ad. 5; see, also, *ST*, I, q. 29, a.2, ad. 3 (p. 157), and a. 4 (p. 159).

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, a. 3 (p. 158).

Aquinas explains why it is proper to apply the term *person* to God, even though the term did not itself originate from Sacred Scripture:

Although this name *person* may not belong to God as regards the origin of the term, nevertheless it excellently belongs to God in its objective meaning. For as famous men were represented in comedies and tragedies, the name *person* was given to signify those who held high dignity. Hence, those who held high rank in the Church came to be called *persons*. Thence by some the definition of *person* is given as *hypostasis distinct by reason of dignity*. And because subsistence in a rational nature is of high dignity, therefore every individual of the rational nature is called a *person*. Now the dignity of the divine nature excels every other dignity; and thus the name *person* pre-eminently belongs to God.<sup>11</sup>

In this discussion, St. Thomas—recognizing the roots of the term *person* in the ancient tradition of Greek plays—reveals that all human beings are *persons* because of our common, shared, intellectual nature. This is a significant point, in that human society is still struggling to recognize this truth fully. Unfortunately today, not all human beings are considered *persons* in the metaphysical sense expressed in Thomas' definition. Nevertheless, the truth remains—even before the human intellect came to understand God as *person*, and before leaders of the Church were recognized as *persons*, and before other human beings were recognized as *persons* due to their subsistent, rational nature—all of these were indeed *persons* properly understood. This emphasizes that, in the Thomistic understanding, the term *person* is not simply the reflection of a social or political designation, but rather that *person* refers to a metaphysical reality that exists independently of whether or not that reality is recognized in the social or political order.

Now, what exactly is the metaphysical reality referred to here? The rational nature of a human being. As Maritain explains in *The Person and the Common Good*:

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, ad. 2.

...such are the two metaphysical aspects of the human being, individuality and personality, together with their proper ontological features. However evident it may seem, in order to avoid misunderstandings and nonsense, we must emphasize that they are not two separate things. There is not in me one reality, called my individual, and another reality, called my person. One and the same reality is, in a certain sense an individual, and, in another sense, a person. Our whole being is an individual by reason of that in us which derives from matter, and a person by reason of that in us which derives from spirit.<sup>12</sup>

Here Maritain emphasizes the Thomistic insight that human beings are *persons* in the totality of our being—physical and spiritual. In more contemporary terms, Kavanaugh argues that:

To speak of a human as a personal nature is to refer to the fact of embodiment. The human cannot be reduced to some rigid or fixed model of nature. A human—paradoxically because of the “natural” endowment of self-consciousness—transcends any attempt to fully constrain human behavior. We humans, as personal animals, share an “open” nature because “what” we are is the kind of being endowed with distinguishing capacities of *self-conscious* embodiment whereby we are freed from any inflexible or determined “playing out” of our natural drives. We are not “owned by” our built-in capacities because one of our capacities is an endowment wherein we can own ourselves.<sup>13</sup>

What we need to pay special attention to is this notion of an “endowment,” and what this means in terms of a being’s nature. Everything that exists has an essence or nature. It is this essence or nature that makes a thing what it is. The essence of a thing is discovered by observing its activities and function (as Aristotle noted). However—and this is the crucial point—once we have discovered the essence of a particular “kind” of thing, the intellect recognizes that every individual of the same “kind” will possess that same essence,

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<sup>12</sup> Jacques Maritain, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

<sup>13</sup> John Kavanaugh, *op. cit.*, p. 66.

even if it does not exhibit all of the activities of its essence. A baby eagle that has yet to fly is still every bit as much an eagle as its mother—the fact that the baby eagle has yet to exhibit flight itself does not make it any less an eagle. Nor would it be appropriate to say that the baby is only “potentially” an eagle, and that it will only become an eagle once it can actually fly. Rather, we say that the baby eagle possesses the endowment or capacity for flight. The absence of an expression of a being’s endowments does not mean those endowments themselves are absent. They are present in the being’s nature. This is what makes this argument metaphysical: an endowment refers to a reality that penetrates deeper than what is empirically observable.

Indeed, the whole “potentiality” argument today regarding the human *person* is based on fallacious reasoning. Consider, for example, arguments favoring embryonic stem cell research. One of the arguments used in support of such research is that a zygote, blastocyst, and embryo represent only “potential” human life. But contemporary embryology tells us that this is not the case. While a zygote, blastocyst, or embryo may potentially one day be an astronaut, a musician, or a future President of the United States, what it IS is quite clear—it is ACTUAL human life. Further, while it is true that an actual being also possesses many future possibilities, those possibilities must relate to *real* potencies within the being in question. What this means, practically speaking, is that if someone wants to say that a human zygote is only “potential” human life, then that zygote must also at the same time have the potency to become something else entirely—which contemporary genetics points out is untrue. In fact, from the very moment of fertilization, a human is distinguishable from a pig, a cow, and even from a chimpanzee—which we are told bears less than a 5% genetic difference from a human being. And so, it is inappropriate to refer to any zygote as “potential” human life, as if it could become something else.

Part of the error in thinking that a fertilized human ovum is only “potentially” human life rests upon the mistaken notion that human development goes through “ontological” stages – that is, stages in which the being is actually changed when it passes through. Embryologists point out that while terms like zygote, embryo, and fetus have become convenient for discussing the progress of human

development, they do not refer to what could be called actual stages of development except in an artificial sense. Our growing knowledge of genetics, fostered by the Human Genome Project, affirms that human development is a continuum—not a series of stages.<sup>14</sup> Nor is this simply a case of favoring one set of characteristics for “personhood” over another, as some have suggested.<sup>15</sup> A fertilized ovum coming from human gametes is at its very moment of fertilization something actual—and what it IS, is actual human life. It is “human” because of its human genetic material, and it is “life” because it is a *self-developing* entity.<sup>16</sup> And, when we add the metaphysical insight that human nature includes the endowment for rationality, then we can see that a human being—even in its most immature stages—is also a *person*.

Thus, when we speak of human nature, we are not referring to a merely static reality that can be equated with what is empirically evident. Rather, human nature must be understood in a dynamic sense, in that human nature contains all of the endowments and capacities of

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<sup>14</sup> For two key examples, see Lee M. Silver, *Remaking Eden: Cloning and Beyond in a Brave New World*, (New York: Avon Books, 1997), or Ronan O'Rahilly and Fabiola Muller, *Human Embryology & Teratology*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (New York: Wiley-Liss, 2001).

<sup>15</sup> Jane English, “Abortion and the Concept of a Person,” in *Biomedical Ethics*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, edited by Mappes and Zembaty (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1991), p. 447.

<sup>16</sup> The issue of *self-development* is crucial to understand, as it clarifies the confusion that some people raise regarding human gametes considered individually. Some try to argue that if one claims that the fertilized ovum is called “human life,” then we must also call a human sperm or a human egg “human life” as well, since sperm and eggs are “alive” and they are “human.” And so they try to reduce the argument that a fertilized ovum is “human life” to absurdity. But their approach fails, for the simple reason that sperm and eggs by themselves are not *self-developing*. Unless a complete genetic code is actuated within an ovum (either through natural reproduction, *in vitro* fertilization, or one of the various cloning techniques), there will be no new human entity or being. But once a complete genetic code is actuated, a new, *self-developing* entity begins to unfold. To put this in philosophical terms, at fertilization a substantial change takes place and a new being begins to exist.

human beings in general, even though all of those capacities may not be fully actuated within a particular, individual human being. Kavanaugh eloquently summarizes this point when he writes:

One is either a human person or not a human person. A human person is an unfolding reality, a historical being in which personal endowments make possible the emergence of activities, among which are knowing, loving, and choosing freely. Many humans never “fulfill” their potentials, whether through a lack of maturation or opportunity. Many others can no longer fulfill their potential because of trauma to or aging of the human body. They are still persons, however, even though unfulfilled or injured.<sup>17</sup>

In sum, what makes a human being a *person* is the human essence itself, not how that human essence is exhibited to others.

### III The Contemporary Error—The Fallacy of “Personhood”

In light of the previous understanding of the human *person*, the contemporary errors that arise in discussions and debates over human “personhood” are more easily recognized. Consider, for example, the rhetoric of “personhood” that has arisen in the current debates over abortion. It is commonly asserted by pro-choice advocates that a zygote, an embryo, or a fetus is not a *person*, and therefore abortion remains the sole decision of a pregnant woman. Since no other *person* is involved, abortion becomes solely her choice. Now, the reason that it is argued that a zygote, an embryo, or a fetus is not a *person* is because zygotes, embryos, and fetuses do not exhibit the characteristics of “personhood.” But what are the characteristics of “personhood”? One can find a number of different “lists” regarding what constitutes “personhood,” but one helpful illustration is found in Mary Anne Warren’s pivotal pro-abortion piece, “On the Moral and Legal Status of Abortion.” In this often cited and anthologized article, Warren offers these criteria:

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<sup>17</sup> John Kavanaugh, *op. cit.*, p. 69.

I suggest that the traits which are most central to the concept of personhood, or humanity in the moral sense, are, very roughly, the following:

1) Consciousness (of objects and events external and/or internal to the being), and in particular the capacity to feel pain;

2) Reasoning (the *developed* capacity to solve new and relatively complex problems;

3) Self-motivated activity (activity which is relatively independent of either genetic or direct external control);

4) The capacity to communicate, by whatever means, messages of an indefinite variety of types, that is, not just with an indefinite number of possible contents, but on indefinitely many possible topics;

5) The presence of self-concepts, and self-awareness, either individual or racial, or both.<sup>18</sup>

After offering some qualifying remarks about this list, Warren draws the following conclusion:

Now if (1)-(5) are indeed the primary criteria of personhood, then it is clear that genetic humanity is neither necessary nor sufficient for establishing that an entity is a person. Some human beings are not people, and there may well be people who are not human beings. A man or woman whose consciousness has been permanently obliterated but who remains alive is a human being which is no longer a person; defective human beings, with no appreciable mental capacity, are not and presumably never will be people; and a fetus is a human being which is not yet a person, and which therefore cannot coherently be said to have full moral rights.<sup>19</sup>

The implications of Warren's position are clear—if one does not, cannot, or

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<sup>18</sup> Mary Anne Warren, "On the Moral and Legal Status of Abortion," in *Biomedical Ethics*, p. 440; emphasis added.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

no longer can exhibit the characteristics of “personhood,” then one is not a *person*.

To make this even clearer, we can turn to a later piece of Warren’s, “The Moral Significance of Birth,” in which she adds:

Women are already persons in the usual, nonlegal sense—already thinking, self-aware, fully social beings—and fetuses are not. Regardless of whether we stress the intrinsic properties of persons, or the social and relational dimensions of personhood, this distinction remains. Even sentient fetuses do not yet have either the cognitive capacities or the richly interactive social involvements typical of persons.<sup>20</sup>

Forget the obvious fact that we are talking about human beings, who are of the same “kind” as we, and with whom we share a common rational nature—Warren asserts that if you do not act like a *person* then you are not a *person*. A review of pro-choice arguments that have been presented since *Roe v. Wade* in 1973 would show that Warren’s argument is typical, and thus serves as an apt illustration of the emphasis on “personhood” as the determining factor for who does and does not count as a *person*.

In a slightly different, although still related, vein, Peter Singer uses a similar line of argument in his discussions of contemporary ethics. In his book, *Practical Ethics*, Singer addresses the permissibility of killing human beings based upon whether or not the being in question possesses these same characteristics of “personhood.” Singer argues that:

...the fact that a being is a human being, in the sense of a member of the species *Homo sapiens*, is not relevant to the wrongness of killing it; it is, rather, characteristics like rationality, autonomy, and self-consciousness that make a difference. Infants lack these characteristics. Killing them, therefore, cannot be equated with killing normal human beings, or any other self-conscious beings. This conclusion is not limited

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<sup>20</sup> Mary Anne Warren, “The Moral Significance of Birth,” in *Bioethics, Justice, & Health Care*, eds. Wanda Teays and Laura M. Purdy (Belmont, California: Wadsworth, 2001), p. 480.

to infants who, because of irreversible intellectual disabilities, will never be rational, self-conscious beings. We saw in our discussion of abortion that the potential of a fetus to become a rational, self-conscious being cannot count against killing it at a stage when it lacks these characteristics—not, that is, unless we are also prepared to count the value of rational self-conscious life as a reason against contraception and celibacy. No infant-disabled or not—has as strong a claim to life as beings capable of seeing themselves as distinct entities, existing over time.<sup>21</sup>

Even though Singer himself does not specifically argue in this passage that fetuses and newborns are not *persons*, he still employs what have become the basic characteristics of “personhood”—rationality, autonomy, and self-consciousness. His argument for the permissibility of killing the unborn or the newborn originates with the claim that infants and fetuses lack these characteristics of “personhood.” But the key point of emphasis is that Singer, as Warren, asserts that both the unborn and the newborn lack the characteristics of “personhood” for the simple reason that fetuses and infants do not *exhibit* those characteristics.

As we compare the claims of Warren, Singer, and the many others who seek to deny “personhood” of the weak and vulnerable within human society, with the Thomistic understanding of the human *person*, we can begin to identify the lack of metaphysical insight within contemporary American social, political, and ethical debates. Various forces within society could be identified as causing this lack—naturalism, materialism, empiricism, reductionism, and so on. But my purpose here is only to point out the error itself. Those who would deny “personhood” of the unborn, the comatose, and the near death, have replaced the reality of the human *person* with the concept of “personhood.” In turn, they view the concept of “personhood” only from their naturalistic, empirical perspective of reality, and simply refuse to consider that there may be more to reality than “matter” and “sense data.” To counter this, Kavanaugh argues that:

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<sup>21</sup> Peter Singer, excerpted from *Practical Ethics*, 2nd Edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 1993.  
<http://www.petersingerlinks.com/taking/.htm>.

Human infants do not become persons when they start thinking they are persons. Thinking is just one stage of personal development, made possible by the capacity to do so. A woman in a sixteen-year coma does not cease being a human person and then suddenly have her personhood stuck back on when she revives. She was never in a vegetative "state." She was in the state of being a human person, endowed with human capacities and yet so massively damaged in the cortex that many of these capacities could not be exercised, few of them could be revealed, and for a while none could be externally acknowledged by others. What she regains upon revival are the organic conditions required for the embodied self-expression of these capacities.<sup>22</sup>

Every human being, by virtue of our shared, rational nature, is a *person*. The reality of our humanness is present, even when it is not externally revealed. But when this reality is not evident, the burden does not fall on the underdeveloped or damaged human being to prove its worth, but rather upon us to use reason to penetrate into the reality that lies before us in the unborn, the comatose, and the near death.

Indeed, I believe that the line of reasoning used by thinkers such as Warren and Singer is nothing more than a highly stylized version of the "straw-man" fallacy. After all, concepts do not just pop out of thin air. Human ideas are not innate. Rather, human knowledge is derived from our encounter with the real world. In this case, our concept of "personhood" is drawn from our experience of *persons* within the world. From the particular, individual beings we have encountered in our lived experience, we derive an idea of "personhood." However, as we explained earlier, our knowledge is not limited to particulars, but rather reflects an understanding of things in the world as "kinds" and "types." And so, one "kind" of thing that the idea *person* correlates with is a human being. This means that our understanding of "personhood" is drawn from our knowledge and experience of all human beings—including the unborn, comatose, and near death. To turn around and apply the concept of "personhood" in a manner that excludes some members of the human race strips the very idea of "personhood" of its

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<sup>22</sup> John Kavanaugh, *op. cit.*, pp. 67-68.

metaphysical basis—thus, our “straw man.” Limiting the criteria of “personhood” ultimately to what can be exhibited, and therefore empirically validated, simply leaves no way to include human beings who are either still in their development or who have been damaged in some fashion. The concept is too narrow to include the fullness of the reality. In sum, if someone asserts criteria for “personhood” that will not include all human beings, then that notion is malformed and incomplete.

Now we must not gloss too quickly over these concerns raised by the notion of “personhood” and its restrictive applications. During the debates leading up to the Civil War in this country, it was consistently argued by proponents of slavery that the Africans were not fully *persons*. Male slaves could be counted as part of the census by Southern States, but not as representing a whole man. Yet, if a slave could escape to the North, or become free in some other manner, then he suddenly became a *person* and could become an American citizen. This fact illustrates the arbitrary manner in which “personhood” is assigned by various social groups. It is worth noting that at the same time male slaves could be partially counted in the population during a census as part of determining representation in the legislatures, women and children—both African and American—did not count at all. Throughout human history, women and children have not been fully treated as *persons*. It would also serve us well to reflect upon the atrocities committed by the Nazis upon the Jewish people during the Holocaust. The Nazi propaganda machine focused upon physical attributes of Jews that they argued were signs of genetic inferiority. The goal of Nazi propaganda was to argue that the Jews were dispensable because they were not full *persons*.

And so, given that to the naked eye Africans were much more similar to Americans, and Jews much more similar to Germans, and women much more similar to men, than the unborn, the comatose, the deformed and defective are to you and I, the risk of depersonalizing human beings who do not empirically look and act like us is great. Indeed, the greater the empirical differences, the easier it seems to be to exclude others as *persons*. If one carefully examines the rhetoric behind these and other similar arguments, one finds that the notion of “personhood” is most often applied in a manner that is designed to do

just that—exclude certain individuals or groups from the larger group. Such exclusion marks those not deemed *persons* as vulnerable to the whims and desires of the larger group. Kavanaugh points out the serious dangers of this reductionist attitude towards the human *person* when he writes:

To negate personhood, to deny its reality, to repress its moral truth, is the foundational negation of all ethics. To reduce men and women to the condition of replaceable and expendable objects is to deny their reality and to deny the foundation of the ethical impulse. It is the primary ethical negation. It is the primary ethical rejection. Thus, the positive formulation of the primary law of all ethical behavior is this: Affirm the reality of personal existence. Less abstractly, it requires the love of persons and the love of personal existence, for all love is the affirmation of the truth of the beloved as being good.

The negative formulation is this: Do not treat persons as non-persons. Do not reduce persons to the status of an object.<sup>23</sup>

In the end, we may not be able to change the opinions of thinkers such as Warren and Singer, and others who share their empirical, naturalistic bent. Indeed, it is the contemporary disposition towards naturalism and empiricism that prevents many from seeing the metaphysical reality of the human *person*. However, that does not mean that we must simply accept their reductionist view of “personhood.” Instead, we must continually assert the truth of what a human *person* is, and of who count as *persons*.

#### IV Conclusion: The Person in America

The title of this paper is “The Person in America.” That is why my comments have been restricted specifically to American social and ethical debates. But there is another reason why I specified “America” in this discussion, and it relates to Jacques Maritain’s own feelings towards America as expressed in his *Reflections on America*. Maritain’s “reflections” on America can be described quite simply as “hopeful” and “optimistic.” Maritain saw in America the promise of greatness—

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 108.

not as a superpower, or as an economic giant, but primarily as a genuinely human community. He tells us, "America is the only country in the world where the vital importance of the sense of human fellowship is recognized in such a basic manner by the nation as a whole."<sup>24</sup> As such, America should provide fertile ground for establishing the true *common good* of humanity, with its emphasis on democracy and human fellowship. Indeed, as Maritain notes at the end of *The Person and the Common Good*:

In the final analysis, the relation of the individual to society must not be conceived after the atomistic and mechanistic pattern of bourgeois individualism which destroys the organic social totality, or after the biological and animal pattern of the statist or racist totalitarian conception which swallows up the person, here reduced to a mere histological element of Behemoth or Leviathan, in the body of the state, or after the biological and industrial pattern of the Communistic conception which ordains the entire person, like a worker in the great human hive, to the proper work of the social whole. The relation of the individual to society must be conceived after an irreducibly human and specifically ethiosocial pattern, that is, personalist and communalist at the same time; the organization to be accomplished is one of liberties.<sup>25</sup>

America, as the land of liberty, is the ideal place to establish an authentic human society that fully respects the human *person* as a being of inherent dignity and worth. And, to a certain extent, I would agree that America is the best refuge for the human *person*. I would agree that in America *persons* are given the widest range of rights and liberties in the world, and that the dignity of *persons* is supported at all levels of American society. The problem, however, is that Americans have failed to recognize exactly who count as *persons*.

Our own *Constitution* notes that life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness are *inalienable* rights—that is, rights that cannot be taken

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<sup>24</sup> Jacques Maritain, *Reflections on America* (New York: Image Books, 1964), p. 42.

<sup>25</sup> Jacques Maritain, *The Person and the Common Good*, pp.101-02.

from anyone. And yet we can find many examples of the failures within American society—both in our past as well as our present—in which these *inalienable* rights are indeed denied to certain human beings. However, I think that the crucial point to be emphasized here is that denying the *inalienable* rights of various marginalized members of our society, as well as failing to recognize that all human beings are *persons* and deserve to be treated as such, is a violation of the spirit and principles of America. I would echo the words of Maritain in his *Reflections on America* when he decries the evil of racism and the horrific acts that it leads to in American society. Of these evil actions that damage American life, Maritain notes, “They are a plague on it, and they are incompatible with its spirit, the sense of human fellowship inherent in its people, and the very tenets in which living together is founded here.”<sup>26</sup> Later, Maritain adds:

...what we witness when we consider in a general way the race question in America, is the spectacle of a nation which struggles doggedly against itself, or, more accurately, against large segments of its own people, against a certain legacy of evil in its own mores, and against the demons of the human heart—in order to free itself of abuses which are repellent to its own spirit, and to raise its entire practical behavior to the level of the tenets and principles in which it believes and in the strength of which it was born.<sup>27</sup>

I believe that these words continue to ring true today regarding those in American society who would exclude the unborn, the newborn, the damaged, and the near death from consideration as *persons*. The exclusion of some members of our society surely flies in the face of what America, as the land of inclusion, stands for. These errors must continue to be repudiated, and America’s promise renewed.

I close with these words of John Kavanaugh, S.J., who vividly reminds us of what is at stake here:

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<sup>26</sup> Jacques Maritain, *Reflections on America*, p. 33.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.

In the recovery of personal existence, consequently, one final habit of life recommends itself: to expose our hearts and intellects to the "damaged," the "handicapped," the "defective," and the "avoided." They may reveal to us the deepest truths of our being and the inadequacy of all our philosophies. In avoiding the wounded we may well be avoiding the truth. For what is defective in them serves to remind us of the contingency that is one with our frail embodiment as persons. What we lose by ignoring them may be nothing less than the power of our humanity to call forth and bestow love.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> John Kavanaugh, *op. cit.*, p. 158.