

## **Chrtc 390 Module 2 Class Notes by Paul Flaman: Human Nature and Personhood: An Historical Overview**

(note: the PowerPoint slides for Module 2 summarize these. These class notes here also do not include an introduction to the class module for the actual class including related video links and so forth.)

### **Discussion Questions**

1. How have human beings understood themselves in the past with regard to their “nature” or essential “properties”?
2. How has the term “person” been understood and/or defined by various philosophers and Christian theologians? How would you define “person”?
3. What are some contemporary understandings of human nature and personhood?
4. How are understandings of human nature and personhood relevant to law and ethics?

### **An Historical Overview of Human Understandings of Human Nature and Personhood**

Today the question of personhood is very important because beings that are designated as persons have more dignity and rights than beings that are designated as things or as sub-personal. For example, in many legal systems today animals, and human embryos and foetuses, are not considered to be “legal persons”. They can be used and killed for the advantage of those that are deemed to be legal persons. Many of us accept the confinement, reproductive control over, experimentation on, and even killing of other living beings readily, while viewing the same acts as bearing enormous moral significance when done to other human beings or human persons. In Chapters 4 and 5 below we will consider the controversy surrounding the status of animals, and human embryos and foetuses, and whether or not these should be considered to be actually “persons”.

Historically, discrimination of persons versus non-persons did not only involve preborn human life, animals, plants and non-living “things.” There have also been forms of discrimination in a number of human cultures where some human beings, such as those of other races, slaves, and women were not considered to be persons in a legal sense and/or were considered to be beings with a lower nature having less dignity than human persons. Women, children, “savages,” those without property (serfs, villains, slaves, tenant farmers, etc.), while meriting greater moral significance than non-human living beings, were viewed primarily as property, to be “used” in whatever manner best suited the interests of those who were persons in the legal sense. Thus, historically, “personhood” has been associated with power.

Slavery is a human practice where one human being is subject to ownership by another human being. It was practiced among peoples of antiquity. Slavery was legally abolished in many countries during the 19th Century but unfortunately some forms of slavery continue to exist in our world. It can be noted that historically there were two forms of slavery: symbiotic and parasitic. With the first, master and slave virtuously worked together for their mutual good as human beings. With the second the slave was exploited for the private advantage and pleasure of the owner. This form involved inhumanity, brutality and vice in both masters and slaves.(C. Williams and C. Verlinden, NCE, vol. 13, 207-15)

Traditional Christianity has generally related personhood to God, the three divine Persons of Father, Son and Holy Spirit sharing one divine Being, and to human beings created in the image of God.(see, e.g., Mt 28:19; and Gen 1:26-27) All living human beings, regardless of their mental or physical state, have been considered persons, but not other forms of life on this planet including non-human animals. While traditional Christian theology has tended to equate “human being” and “person,” as we have seen this has not always been the case culturally and

legally. If one were simply to define a living “human being” as a “person,” then this begs the question: what, then, is a human being?

To justify limiting the conferral of personhood to human beings or only certain human beings, scholars and scientists have posited certain qualities as its hallmarks. This list of qualities has shifted over time, but has included such things as having: an immaterial soul, the ability to reason logically, consciousness, self-awareness, a “theory of mind,” the capacity to be a moral agent accountable for one’s freely chosen actions, and the capacity to be in a self-aware relationship with God. While we need to posit defining and distinguishing characteristics of persons, the process of doing so opens the questions: *Are* humans the only beings with these characteristics? Do all humans in fact have these characteristics? In other words, are all humans, and only humans, persons?

In this chapter we will consider a brief historical overview of human understandings of human nature and personhood. In the following chapters we will consider a number of more specific questions with regard to personhood in the light of some perspectives from neuroscience, philosophy and Christian theology.

## **The Bible and Christian Theology**

The Christian Bible in a variety of ways has much to say about God, human beings and our relationships with God and each other. The biblical themes of God’s creation, human sin and God’s redemption throw light on the mixture of good and evil in the present human condition, as well as God’s plan to save us from sin and its negative consequences, and the wonderful eternal destiny God wants for us. With regard to components of human nature one finds in English translations of the Bible a variety of terms such as flesh, blood, bones, body, soul, heart, mind and spirit. Together these terms show some appreciation of a multiplicity of dimensions in human experience. Nevertheless, in general biblical authors understand the human being as a

unified whole in relationship with others. In comparing parts of the Bible that were written earlier as compared to later one sees a number of developments of understanding, for example, related to the nature of God and the nature of human life after death. One needs to keep in mind that the various parts of the Bible were written over many centuries in a variety of contexts and so even the same Hebrew or Greek word can express more than one meaning. For example, the Hebrew word *nephesh* and the Greek word *psyche* may be translated as “soul” or “life” depending on the context. While the Bible is rich in material relevant to understanding God and human nature, one does not find within it a highly detailed or systematic anthropology and theology of the “person” per se.

Genesis 1:26-27 speaks of human beings, male and female, being created by God in his image and likeness. This text has been understood in a number of ways including: 1) human beings, who have a spiritual dimension and are capable of knowing (intellect) and loving (free will), are like (although not exactly the same) as God who is Spirit, all-knowing and all-loving; 2) God has given human beings a responsibility to subdue the rest of the created world as his ambassadors, reflecting his loving and wise providence; 3) men and women as co-creators with God the Creator are called to procreate new human life; and 4) God as Trinity is a profound communion of persons, of reciprocal self-giving and receiving love; human beings are called to be open to receiving this love, to be empowered to love each other in this way, and to grow in a communion of persons.(see, e.g., Flaman 2015, 57-67; John Paul II 1981; and Richard Clifford and Roland Murphy, “Genesis,” in NJBC, 2:4-5) The biblical teaching that human beings are created in the “image of God” has also been understood by many Jews and Christians to support the special dignity of all human beings as compared to other created beings on this earth.(cf. Ch. 4 below) It has often been applied to defend the sanctity and fundamental equality of every human being, regardless of his or her condition or stage of development. This excludes unfair

discrimination related to basic human rights on the basis of such things as sex, race, age, ability or disability.(see, e.g., Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 1974, n. 12; and John Paul II 1995)

The term “person” came into wider use in the first few centuries of Christianity related to understanding God as Trinity and the Incarnation. Christians followed the monotheism of the Jews, affirming that there is only one God, the Supreme Being. They, however, understood this one God to be a community of three distinct divine persons: the Father, the Son or Word of God, and the Holy Spirit (these terms are used in the New Testament—see, e.g., Mt 28:19 and Jn 1). With regard to the Incarnation, traditional orthodox Christianity believed that the Word became flesh (Jn 1:14), that the Second Person of the Trinity took on human nature and dwelt among us as a real historical human being, Jesus of Nazareth.

Jesus is both truly (fully) God and truly (fully) human. Jesus is one person, the Second Person of the Trinity, with two natures, a divine nature and a human nature. As a human being Jesus has a human body, soul, will, heart and mind. Not all of this terminology is found in the New Testament. In response to a number of heresies, such as Docetism which denied that Jesus had a real human body and Arianism which denied the true divinity of Jesus, the Church, as reflected in Councils such as Chalcedon, which took place in 451, used such terminology to clarify who Jesus really is.(see FEF 1970; and TCT) Christians have also understood Christ’s Church in a variety of ways such as the People of God and the Body of Christ. Not only the first description but also the latter analogy understands the Church as personal and not merely as an institution. Jesus Christ is the “head” of the Church and we human beings are called to be her members.(see, e.g., 1 Cor. 12) There is a solidarity between Christ and his members which constitutes a kind of “corporate personality.” The animating “soul” of this Body is the Holy Spirit.(see M.J. Dorenkemper, NCE, vol. 11, p. 150)

## Philosophy

The ancient Greek philosopher Plato, who lived from 426-347 B.C., is generally considered to be a dualist. He concluded that there was an immaterial world of “forms” that was more real than the material world. The human being was made up of an immaterial soul that was immortal and a material perishable body. In one analogy he speaks of the soul as a captain of the ship, that is, the body. He clearly understood the soul to be superior to the body. Some of Plato’s language and ideas, also via Platonism and Neoplatonism (cf. the Jewish philosopher Plotinus) had a significant influence on a number of early Christian thinkers including St. Augustine of Hippo. He lived from 354-430 A.D. and had a great and lasting influence on Western Christian theology, both Catholic and Protestant.

Another great ancient Greek philosopher, Aristotle, who lived from 384-322 B.C., was a remarkable observer and classifier. He defined man (*anthropos*, human being) as a “rational animal” (more is said about this in Ch. 4 below). He spoke of the soul (the principle of life) as the form of the body. This view is called hylemorphism. He generally is not called a dualist since his view highlights the profound unity of the human being. Aristotle had a great influence on Medieval Jewish, Christian and Muslim thought. His influence continues today.

Boethius, who lived from 480-524, was born in Rome. He was a philosopher and statesman who thought the pursuit of wisdom and the love of God is the true source of human happiness. Boethius defined person as “an individual substance of a rational nature.” This definition which uses Aristotelian categories basically means that a person is an undivided intellectual being. Boethius influenced medieval thought on this question.(see N.M. Haring, NCE, vol. 2, 454-7; and Geddes and Wallace, NCE, vol. 11, 146)

Thomas Aquinas, a great theologian and philosopher who lived from 1225-74 A.D., developed many of Aristotle’s ideas in a Christian context. He has had an enormous influence

on much subsequent Catholic thinking and official teaching (e.g., the study of Aquinas has been recommended by several popes and the Second Vatican Council), as well as some non-Catholic thinkers. A contemporary Protestant scholar André Ong says, "... for Thomas whatever is found in true perfection in the created world must be found in its highest expression in God. And the person who represents the highest perfection in the created world finds the highest expression in God."(44) Aquinas expanded on Boethius' definition of a person. For Aquinas "individual substance" becomes "a substance that is complete, subsists by itself, and is separated from others." The human person is a compound of a rational immaterial soul and a material body. Since in his view the human soul is only part of the nature of a human being, it is not a "complete" person. "Subsists by itself" means that "the person exists in himself and for himself, being the ultimate possessor of his nature and all its acts, and therefore is the ultimate subject of predication of all his attributes". For Aquinas the human nature of Jesus is not a person since it "does not exist by itself alone" but in the second Person of the Trinity.(Geddes and Wallace, NCE, vol. 11, 146-7; cf. W.A. Wallace, NCE, vol. 14, 13-28)

René Descartes, who lived from 1596-1650, was a French philosopher and a Catholic. By using doubt he tried to establish truths that are certain such as that one exists. His saying *cogito ergo sum*, meaning "I think, therefore, I am," is well known. He also tried to establish the truth that God exists and a sound metaphysics. Descartes is considered a dualist. He understood the human soul to be the immaterial, conscious and thinking part of the human being, with some innate ideas. He understood the human body to be a kind of machine made of matter. In his view the soul interacts with the body through part of the brain, the Pineal gland. Much modern philosophy attempts to dissolve or solve problems he raised.(see Descartes; and L.J. Beck, NCE, vol. 4, 677-83)

John Locke, who lived from 1632-1704, was a British philosopher and a Protestant Christian. He is known as the founder of empiricism. Influenced by Descartes, Locke was a dualist. He identified the person with consciousness, a view that is held by some contemporary authors such as Mary Ann Warren. Locke considered ideas to be objects of the mind. He rejected the view that we have innate ideas. For him experience is an important source of knowledge. Since we human beings exist and are intelligent, capable of love, and persons, who had a beginning, there must be an eternal cause that is also intelligent, capable of love and personal. Locke, therefore, concluded that a personal loving God exists. One critique of Locke is that he had difficulty escaping subjectivism and idealism. Our basic experience is of things not ideas.(H.R. Klocker, NCE, vol. 8, 744-6)

David Hume, who lived from 1711-1776, was a Scottish philosopher and empiricist who thought that experience is the only source of human knowledge. He promoted the experimental method also with regard to the science of human subjects. Sceptical of unperceivable, metaphysical entities, he denied the reality of substance, the permanent essence of things. Hume attacked the spiritual-substance solution, that there is a unique self which each person is, to the problem of the unity of the person. He considered substance and self as invented metaphysical fantasies. For him a person is nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions in a constant state of change. In his view, change destroys identity and belief in personal identity is erroneous. His was not a world of persons and things but transitory atomic events. One critique of Hume is that he neglected all the permanent and enduring data of human experience.(E.A. Sillem, NCE, vol. 7, 200-2)

Jeremy Bentham, an English philosopher and legal theorist, lived from 1748-1832. He developed utilitarianism, the view that one should seek the greatest happiness for the greatest number. He used the hedonistic criterion of balancing pleasure over pain to judge individual acts



and laws. One criticism of his view is that it lacks any notion of good more ultimate than the quantity of pleasure.(R.L. Cunningham, NCE, vol. 2, 285-6)

Immanuel Kant, who lived from 1724-1804, was a German philosopher who was born in Prussia. He was raised in a traditional Lutheran family. Kant was influenced by rationalism and empiricism. He developed his transcendental method to try to create a synthesis between sense knowledge and intellectual knowledge, between human theoretical and practical activity. Kant distinguished phenomena and noumena (things in themselves). He is influential in ethics including his view that the person as a subject is an end and never to be treated as a mere means. According to his categorical imperative, you ought to act always “in such a way that the maxims of your will could function as the basis of a universal law of action.” A Thomist critique is that this “separates the ‘ought’ of morality from the objective order of being.”(Paul Bolkovac in Brugger and Baker, 50-51) Also, for Kant the human intellect only reaches the world of ideas and loses its proper intrinsic ordination to being. Aquinas speaks of the intellect’s grasp of being by intuition.(J.B. Lotz, NCE, vol. 8, 119-24)

Hegel, another German philosopher, lived from 1770-1831. He is known as an idealist who saw reality as Absolute Mind or Spirit which manifested itself in history. With regard to this he speaks of a dialectic: a thesis (one view) provokes an antithesis (an opposing view) which leads to a synthesis (a unification) which becomes a new thesis, and so forth. The individual person is only a phase of this.(E. Coreth, NCE, vol. 6, 704-9)

Søren Kierkegaard (1813-55), a Danish philosopher, is known as the father of modern existentialism. In reaction to Hegel, he emphasized the importance of the existence of the individual person. He promoted the person achieving the fullness of existence by free decision and establishing oneself by faith in God. Although the human self is dependent on God, he

defined the “self as freedom, by which man becomes a self-constituting being.” He has been critiqued for his radical individualism.(L. Dupré, NCE, vol. 8, 165-7)

John Stuart Mill, an English philosopher, lived from 1806-73. One of the things he is known for is his utilitarianism in ethics including his view that the end justifies the means. According to utilitarianism one should act to realize the greatest good for the greatest number. Here good is understood as subjective satisfaction.(R.L. Cunningham, NCE, vol. 9, 630-2)

Karl Marx, a German political philosopher, lived from 1818-1883. His father converted from Judaism to Protestantism. With the collaboration of Engels, he developed Marxism, a combination of dialectical materialism and revolutionary socialism that aimed at overthrowing capitalism. He adapted Hegel’s dialectic to historical materialism and economics. His writings influenced the founding of a number of communist regimes in the Twentieth Century. In Marxism we find a form of utilitarianism which justifies using persons for the good of the State.(G.W. Gruenberg, NCE, vol. 9, 236-8)

Friedrick Nietzsche was a German philosopher who lived from 1844-1900. Although initially reared in a strictly Lutheran religious atmosphere he came to see ideas of God and absolute Truth as illusory human projections. He argued for the “death of God” and the enrichment of man in this-worldly existence. He combined this with biological and social Darwinism, proclaiming a will-to-power which would generate the “Superman”. He promoted that Christian “slave morality,” born of weaklings, be superseded by a “master morality” beyond good and evil. His philosophy fostered the rise of irrationalism, subjectivism, voluntarism, and a biologism based on a naturalistic life philosophy.(K.F. Reinhardt, NCE, vol. 10, 388-90)

Alfred North Whitehead, a British philosopher and mathematician, lived from 1861-1947. Influenced by science and evolutionary views, he considered all of reality including God to be interconnected and in a state of process, becoming (compare process philosophy and

theology). He considered God to be a finite actual reality within the world of actual finite realities (compare panentheism).(Whitehead; and W.E. Stokes, NCE, vol. 14, 704-6)

A philosophical movement of growing significance today is phenomenology. Some significant phenomenologist philosophers include Max Scheler (German, 1874-1928), Dietrich von Hildebrand (German, 1889-1977), and Karol Wojtyla (Polish, 1920-2005) who became Pope John Paul II in 1978. Phenomenologists generally do not accept the reductionism of empiricism but try to be open to all the phenomena or data of human experience including our experience of values, persons, love, interpersonal relationships, religious experience, God, and so forth. Von Hildebrand, for example, speaks of the mystery of the human person, and certain morally relevant values such as the dignity of the person, truth, justice, fidelity, self-giving love and the sacredness of life as givens to unprejudiced human experience. These values transcend one's immediate experience. For example, one's experience of the dignity of other human persons can vary in intensity and over time one can grow in appreciating this and other morally relevant values. Some people may be blind to such values due to factors such as a faulty education, for example, someone brought up to be a racist. Von Hildebrand concluded that these morally relevant values are ultimately rooted in God and who we are as persons created in God's image. We can understand that these values are good not only in the sense of being subjectively satisfying or meeting human needs but are good in themselves.

Another significant movement of philosophy that continues today is Thomism, named after the great 13<sup>th</sup> Century philosopher and theologian, Thomas Aquinas. Although there are a variety of Thomists including such authors as Jacques Maritain and Karl Rahner, Thomists including me generally think Thomas Aquinas developed a holistic and balanced philosophy and theology which can provide a foundation for incorporating valid insights from other philosophies past and present. More specifically, for example, Thomists would see Aquinas as providing a

solid philosophy of being and metaphysics into which the insights from more recent philosophies can be incorporated, while helping to correct various errors.

Karol Wojtyla (later Pope John Paul II) was a Thomist philosopher and theologian who among other things was an expert in the phenomenological method. In the light of human experience and reason, Wojtyla considers the human person to be the highest level of being in the visible universe. The person is a rational being with an inner spiritual life, concerned with truth and goodness, capable of communicating with God and having free will and self-determination. Human persons can choose and understand the ends for which they act; they can learn God's goals (supernatural ends) for themselves and freely cooperate with God. In line with a fundamental norm of personalism they should not use each other, that is, treat each other as mere means or instruments. Rather humans ought to respect each other's freedom, especially freedom of conscience. (1981, 22-28) Although utilitarian thinking is widespread, Wojtyla critiques it as really superficial. With utilitarianism pleasure is the end of action and everything else including persons is used as a means for pleasure. Wojtyla holds that this is contrary to a proper love for persons. True love for persons unites persons whereas with utilitarianism persons egotistically use each other for pleasure. Love affirms the primary value of the person and subordinates and integrates secondary values of the person (e.g., human capacities) and values external to persons (e.g., the value of things, plants and animals) to the primary value of the human person and God.(1981, 34-44)

Related to the focus on the person and personhood in this book, we should also briefly say something about personalism, a type of philosophy and/or theology which emphasizes the centrality of persons. Leading personalist thinkers include Dietrich von Hildebrand and Karol Wojtyla (see above), as well as authors such as John Henry Newman, Jacques Maritain, and John Crosby. Personalism developed in reaction to materialism, idealism, determinism and

reductionism. For example, “whereas some of the followers of Charles Darwin tended to integrate man into the rest of nature so completely that he ultimately lost his distinctive spiritual character, personalists stressed the value of man [the concrete human being] as a person, a moral self, with freedom, dignity, and responsibility.” Personalism also developed in response to views (e.g., Hegelianism and Marxism) where the worth and identity of the individual person was diminished or lost in collectivities such as the state. Personalists generally defend the authentic spiritual character, freedom, autonomy, uniqueness and great worth of the individual human person.(J.A. Mann/Eds., NCE, vol. 11, 152-3) I am a personalist who likes in particular the personalism of Dietrich von Hildebrand and Karol Wojtyla (who became Pope John Paul II) as well as their phenomenological approaches.

Another contemporary movement with relevance to personhood is feminism. Feminists generally promote the liberation of women and other oppressed human persons. They affirm the equal dignity and rights of all human persons. Among other things, early feminism influenced accepting women as “legal persons”. Some today may find it difficult to believe, for example, that in Canada women were not considered legal persons until 1929. More recently feminism has promoted the achievement of equality in practise such as equal pay for equal work. While there are some things in common among feminists today there are also some significant differences. For example, while many feminists do not consider preborn human beings to be persons and are pro-choice with regard to abortion, some feminists are pro-life—they consider preborn human beings to be persons having the right to life.(see, e.g., Chervin 1986; and LaCugna 1993) Related to this see Chapter 5 below for a fuller discussion of the question, “When does the human person begin?”

While one could consider a number of other philosophies with regard to personhood, here we will only briefly consider two others, post-modernism and ecological thought. Post-

modernism tends to speak of perspectives regarding truth, values, and so forth. Related to this we can consider, for example, all the above as well as other perspectives on the person. This approach can facilitate our understanding each other, that is, people of different backgrounds holding different points of view, and tolerance. A critique of this approach with which I agree is that with it there is often a neglect of considering what actually is true which can foster relativism. The approach of considering perspectives of truth needs to be balanced by the correspondence notion of truth. With this classical view, a statement is true if it corresponds to reality; it is false if it does not correspond to reality. Thus in considering, for example, various human perspectives or philosophical views of the human person, we should ask ourselves whether or not or how well they correspond to the reality of the person.(cf. Grenz 1996).

Ecological thought promotes our kinship with all life. Proponents of this view often see a danger in an overly human-centered or anthropocentric view. Some well-known Christian authors such as James Gustafson, Pope John Paul II and Pope Francis speak of the need to balance anthropology with a theocentric ecological view. In this view the human person is considered in the light of both God, the Creator, and a proper respect for the integrity of all of God's creation.(Gustafson 1981 and 1992; John Paul II 1989; and Francis 2015)

In nearing the end of this historical overview on the nature of human beings and personhood, I would like to refer to a core principle of the Tri-Council Policy Statement on Ethical Conduct for Research on Human Beings. The Tri-Council includes the Canadian Institutes of Health Research, the Natural Sciences and Engineering Council of Canada, and the Social Sciences and the Humanities Research Council of Canada. According to the first version of this document (1998) the cardinal principle of research is to respect the “intrinsic human dignity” of the human person. The use of the word “intrinsic” here is interesting since it implies a rejection of relativism and subjectivism. Regarding research on human subjects this document also says that the person should never be treated “solely as a means (merely as objects or things)”.(i.4 and i.5) This principle as we considered above was enunciated by Kant. It has also been taken up by some Christians such as Paul Ramsey and the Catholic Church’s Second Vatican Council which was held from 1962-65 (Vatican II, GS, Chs. 1 and 2). A later version of the Tri-Council Policy Statement (2014) continues to affirm that: “Respect for Persons recognizes the intrinsic value of human beings and the respect and consideration that they are due.”(Ch. 1.B.1.1)

Although historically there have been and today there still are some different views regarding the person, it is generally agreed that all of us human beings (at least those of us who can read this) are persons: neuroscientists, theologians and others. This book explores what it means to be a human person, and some of the implications of this, in the light of neuroscience and Christian theology as well as some related disciplines such as philosophy.