

## Is an embryo, a fetus, a Person? - adapted from Peter Kreeft

Written by Calvin Fox

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First, the pro-choicers are correct to claim that the "person" and "human being" are not identical, but wrong to claim that the "human being" is the broader category and "person" the narrower subset. It is the other way round. There are persons who are not human persons: the three Persons of the Trinity, angels, and any rational and moral extraterrestrials who may exist, such as the E.T., Martians, and someone who has never heard of the Boston Red Sox. But though not all persons are human, all humans are persons. Old humans are persons, very young humans are persons, and pre-born humans, fetal humans, are persons too.

How is a person to be defined? The crucial point for our argument is not which acts are to count as defining a person (is it speaking, or reasoning, or loving) but the relation of these personal acts to the person-actor. [not by what one does, but as one who is able to do them]

One who is consciously performing personal acts? If so, people who are asleep are not people, and we may kill them.

One with a present capacity to perform personal acts? That would include sleepers, but not people in coma.

One with a history of performing personal acts? That would mean that a 17-year-old who was born in a coma 17 years ago and is just now coming out of it is not a person. Also, by this definition there can be no first personal act, no personal acts without a history of past personal acts.

One with a future capacity for performing personal acts? That would mean that dying persons are not persons.

Surely the correct answer is that a person is one with a natural, inherent capacity for performing personal acts. Why is one able to perform personal acts under proper conditions? Only because one is a person. One grows into the ability to perform personal acts only because one already is the kind of thing that grows into the ability to perform personal acts, i.e., a person.

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To say that some human beings are not persons is to say that only achievers, only successful functioners, only sufficiently intelligent performers, qualify as persons and have a right to life. And who is to say what "sufficient" is? The line can be drawn at will - the will of the stronger. Nature, reason, and justice are then replaced by artifice, prejudice, and power. When it is in the self interest of certain people to kill certain other people, whether fetuses, or the dying, or enemies of the state, or Jews, or Armenians, or Cambodians, or heretics, or prophets, the killers will simply define their victims as non-persons by pointing

out that they do not meet certain criteria. Who determines the criteria? Those in power, of course. Whenever person hood is defined functionally, the dividing line between persons and non-persons will be based on a decision by those in power, a decision of will. Such a decision, given the fallenness of human nature, will inevitably be based on self-interest. Where there is an interest in killing persons, they will be defined as non-persons.

To the second argument, it must be said that "human being" is not a merely biological term because the reality it designates is not a merely biological reality, though it is a biological reality. To identify human beings and persons is not biologism; in fact, it is just the opposite: it is the implicit claim that persons, i.e., human beings, have a human biological body and a human spiritual soul; that human souls inhabit human bodies.

The reason we should love, respect, and not kill human beings is because they are persons, i.e., subjects, souls, "I's", made in the image of God Who is I AM. We revere the person, not the functioning; the doer, not the doing. If robots could do all that persons can do behaviorally, they would still not be persons. Mere machines cannot be persons. They may function as persons, but they do not understand that they do not have freedom, or free will to choose what they do. They obey their programming without free choice. They are artifacts, and artifacts are not persons. Persons are natural, not artificial. They develop from within (like fetuses!); artifacts are made from without.

The connection between the two errors of (1) reducing persons to functions and (2) reducing "human being" to a merely biological category is obvious: the first is the root cause of the second. Once a person is defined in terms of functioning, then zygotes, fetuses and even normal newborns are no longer fully persons. What are they, then? Only members of a biological species, "human being." This justifies abortion, of course, and infanticide. I know no argument justifying abortion that does not also justify infanticide.