Against A Functionalist Definition of Human Personhood

by Jonathan M. Grodi

Abstract: In this paper I critique the functionalism that has begun to be applied to human personhood. Furthermore, I show that this tendency to view people functionally does not simply occur in strictly academic contexts, but is present in our everyday language and thinking. From the culture as a whole to individuals, sometimes consciously and often subconsciously grapple with this distinction between "who we are" and "what we do" - actions which our intuitions tell us are seldom the whole story about ourselves and others. I explore the essay "Abortion and Infanticide" by Michael Tooley whose approach, I demonstrate to exhibit the functionalism I wish to critique. I go on to show that functionalism falls contrary to our very basic moral intuitions about people and how it raises issues concerning difference between human persons. Finally, I examine how functionalism confuses personal functions as signs with what they signify which is personhood. All in all, functionalism is a useful hermeneutic device, but is thoroughly inadequate when we seek a full understanding of what it is to be a person.

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Tuesday, September 27, 2011

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I. Introduction

What is a human being? What is a person? Who or what is eligible for the group of beings which we label "persons" and to which we afford and defend the rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness? As time marches on and the limits of the human family are continually questioned, one particularly unsettling view that has begun to influence the dialogue concerning personhood is that of functionalism.

Human persons and the criteria for recognizing their dignity, value, and human rights, are ever more frequently being defined by what they "do" rather than what they "are". In discussions on abortion, euthanasia, bioethics, and philosophy of the mind, there is an ever increasing push to define the human person as the aggregation of its functions or behaviors, rather than to define these functions as "human" by virtue of their origin in the uniquely human person. This distinction is what is pursued by the common quip "Are we human because we gaze at the stars, or do we gaze at the stars because we are human?". In other words, is "human person", with all the meaning and moral obligation we attach to the phrase, simply a label we give to any being or system that performs the function of "gazing at the stars"? Or, does a human gaze upward into the heavens, pondering their vastness and beauty, while at the same remaining queerly conscious of his or her own distinct inner life from which erupts this awe-filled curiosity, precisely *because* he or she is a person?

In the discussions and deliberations of our day, we are reaching an important crossroads (perhaps already partially crossed): there either is, as a matter of fact, such a thing as a human person which we observe to have inherent value and dignity, or "human person" merely refers to certain members of the species *homo sapiens* which, by virtue of the functions or behaviors they exhibit, *we* place in a rights-privileged group we label "persons". Both views are profound, and both set the discussion of issues of human life in a profoundly different direction.

In this essay I will demonstrate how a functionalist approach to defining and delineating what is or is not a human person is thoroughly inadequate and leads to more, rather than less obscurity in our moral discourse. While at times it may seem convenient at varied junctures of bioethical and moral debate to view the human person from a functionalist perspective, the consequences and conflicts are unacceptable.

In addition, as we look toward the course which we chart for future bioethical and sociological discussion, it is not unreasonable to be concerned about what consequences may result from an increasingly functionalist definition of the human person. I will argue that while functionalism is often employed, for example, in the abortion debate to justify parameters of which instances of "life" are to be protected or not, defining the human person by what they do, how they function, or to what level they perform, points toward a paradigm of personhood that should remain safely in the prophetic fictions of Aldous Huxley and George Orwell.

II. Identifying Functionalism

Functionalism is a theory or method most often applied to mental states discussed in philosophy of the mind. In "*The Conception View of Personhood,"* medical doctor and ethicist

Dennis Sullivan states *"*Empirical functionalism is the view that human personhood may be defined by a set of functions or abilities. Such abilities must be present in actual, not potential form."[1] In other words, I might give the term "hat" to any object that fulfills the functions of resting on my head, keeping the sun out of my eyes, and looking stylish. Similarly, functionalism would have me define "person" as whatever and only that which satisfies certain function or exhibits certain abilities that are identified with personhood.

Looking at functionalism in this way, I believe we can identify a general philosophical and social undercurrent through which human personhood is being viewed today. For instance well-known author and Boston College philosophy professor Dr. Peter Kreeft notes "Modern man is increasingly reducing his being to functions. We no longer ask 'Who is he?' but 'What does he do?'. We think of a man as a fireman, not as a man fighting fires; of a woman as a teacher, not as a woman teaching."[2] In other words, in our very language we can see personal identity beginning to be linked to function and divorced subtly from any underlying identity. This observation can be taken further as personal self-worth and value are oftentimes very much caught up in what people do or what difference they think themselves to make. For example, many students develop their identity and sense of self-worth around their academics, athletic ability, or professional success, and then suffer great emotional distress when they aren't able to live up to these functions. All in all, one of the first places we can begin to identify functionalism applied to personhood is in the everyday language and the way one actively thinks about one's self and others.

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[1] Sullivan, "The Conception View of Personhood," p. 17

[2] Kreeft, "Human Personhood Begins at Conception," p. 6

Another more institutional example from which functionalism can be gleaned is the essay by Dr. Michael Tooley, philosophy professor at the University of Colorado, entitled "Abortion and Infanticide". In this essay, Tooley attempts to clear up the question of whether abortion is moral or immoral and, in doing so, finds it necessary to not only affirm abortion but the potential moral neutrality of infanticide as well. In his introduction Tooley states:

> The basic issue to be discussed, then, is what properties a thing must possess in order to have a serious right to life. My approach will be to set out and defend a basic moral principle specifying a condition an organism must satisfy if it is to have a serious right to life.[3]

In other words, Tooley will address the issue of abortion by specifying what "personhood" is thereby giving us grounds for determining to whom the rights and moral obligation of personhood go. Thus, according to Tooley, any organism that does not meet these criteria should not be afforded human "personhood".

Tooley goes on to propose that the terms "human being" and "person" must be separated as concepts. For Tooley's purposes "human being" must refer to a member of the species *homo sapiens* while "person" is to be used as a "strictly moral concept". By distinguishing these two terms, Tooley suggests that we now have two questions:

> If one says that the central issue between conservatives and liberals in the abortion question is whether the fetus is a person, it is clear that the dispute may be either about what properties a thing must have in order to be a person, in order to have a right to life-a moral question-or about whether a fetus at a given stage of development as a matter of fact possesses the properties in question.[4]

The second question is one of "facts", and one which could be easily resolved, according to Tooley, once we have resolved the first question. The first question, rather than a "matter of fact"

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[3] Tooley, "Abortion and Infanticide," p. 37

[4] Tooley, "Abortion and Infanticide," p. 42

is “a moral question”. Notice that Tooley does not ask “what properties do *persons* have or exhibit?”[5] in order that we may apprehend the category of “person”. Rather, Tooley questions “...what properties a thing must have in order to be a person.” In other words, Tooley is not so much seeking to discover what persons are, but rather to lay out guidelines for who we afford the moral declaration “person”.

The crux of Tooley’s essay and his definition of personhood comes in the “self-consciousness requirement”. Tooley states “The claim I wish to defend is this: An organism possesses a serious right to life only if it possesses the concept of a self as a continuing subject of experiences and other mental states, and believes that it is itself such a continuing entity.”[6] In other words, the exhibition of “self-conciousness” is the crucial criterion for whether an “organism posesses a serious right to life”. On the surface, this may not as obviously appear to be the application of functionalism; however, as Tooley elaborates his “self-consciousness” argument, his thoroughly functional view of personhood becomes clear.

Tooley’s argument is stated as follows:

> The simplified version of my argument is this. To ascribe a right to an individual is to assert something about the prima facie obligations of other individuals to act, or to refrain from acting, in certain ways. However, the obligations in question are conditional ones, being dependent upon the existence of certain desires of the individual to whom the right is ascribed.[7]

Tooley’s first premise, the description of the nature of human rights, does not seem problematic; he states that affording rights to a person is to recognize a very fundamental obligation that other

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[5] Emphasis added.

[6] Tooley, “Abortion and Infanticide,” p. 44

[7] Tooley, “Abortion and Infanticide,” p. 44

persons have toward them. To recognize the "right to life" of an individual, is to recognize that something about that individual obligates others to respect its life.

Tooley's second premise, however, raises critical questions. According to Tooley the only source of these obligations is the desire of the individual itself for the continuation of itself, a desire which can only "function" if the organism has a developed concept of "self". In other words, the *only* fact of the matter concerning my neighbor's personhood and my moral obligation to him is that my neighbor desires to continue living and I respect the desire. While Tooley goes on to address the obvious problems of an individual who fails to desire life because he or she is sleeping, in a coma, or depressed which we will examine in a moment, it bears pondering whether this state of affairs concerning the nature of personhood, rights, and moral obligations is satisfactory.

Tooley goes on to address the cases of people who are asleep, in a coma, or people who are depressed or propagandized to the point of ceasing to desire life. Since by his view these people would initially seem to be excluded from the category of "people" and since even Tooley himself finds this unacceptable, he goes on to explain

> an individual's right to X can be violated not only when he desires X, but also when he would now desire X were it not for one of the following: (i) he is in an emotionally unbalanced state; (ii) he is temporarily unconscious; (iii) he has been conditioned to desire the absence of X. [8]

In other words, Tooley justifies these three exceptions because the individuals would presumably continue to desire their right to life if it weren't for the temporary restraints. As the validity of Tooley's argument seems to rest on the justification of the exceptions he lists, it is crucial that his explanation holds. However when the dividing lines laid down are pressed, these

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[8] Tooley, "Abortion and Infanticide," p. 48

exceptions turn out to be harder to justify than Tooley suggests. Kreeft comments on the problematic nature of these types of seemingly justified exceptions. He writes:

> Is a person one who is consciously performing personal acts? If so, people who are asleep are not people, and we may kill them. Is it one with a present capacity to perform personal acts? That would include sleepers, but not people in coma. How about 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. What about one with a future capacity for performing personal acts? That would mean that dying persons are not persons. [9]

Kreeft points out the problems in trying to formulate and maintain such a functionalist definition, because wherever one chooses to draw the lines, they seem to remain somewhat arbitrary and cause difficulties when one attempts to apply them consistently.

Tooley allows his cited exemptions on the grounds that if the subject weren't sleeping, in a coma, depressed, or indoctrinated, he or she would still have the conceptual ability to desire to keep on living. This is problematic however for Tooley's conclusion since we could just as easily make the claim about individuals Tooley intends to leave out of the category of "persons". We might easily suggest that the unborn or young human *would* have the conceptual ability to desire to live *if* it weren't for the incompleteness of its development. Such a being has, as Kreeft put it "the future capacity for performing personal acts".

The bigger problem involves the underlying functionalism itself. To make Tooley's functionalist definition fit our intuition about persons, we are forced to make exceptions for some and intentionally leave out others. When we rely on the function of "desiring" then it seems that people pop in and out of existence whenever they fall asleep or wake up. When we modify this to

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[9] Kreeft, "Human Personhood Begins at Conception," p. 7

rely on the *capacity* to desire as our criterion, we face a troubling question of why we make excuses for socially acceptable groups of persons and why we fail to do so for undesirables. After all, the dead would possess the capacity to desire their continued life if, of course, they weren't dead. It seems that as a result "personhood" is actually quite arbitrary and the lines between persons and non-persons are based on the preferences of the society or in this case the writer.

Tooley might argue that the line is not in fact arbitrary because the exceptions he cites *possess* the concepts that are necessary to desire life while unborn children or young children do not - the possession of these concepts give someone a right to life even if they don't desire life. But what does it mean to possess the concepts especially in the case of the sleeper and the coma patient? While they may possess the concepts in some passive way, they have no way of actualizing these concepts and desires. Furthermore, a mentally handicapped person, a young child, and even an unborn child can respond to pain and exhibit an instinct to survival in ways that a sleeping person or coma patient may not. All in all, the lines that Tooley draws arbitrarily include some individuals while excluding others and this should give us cause to be skeptical.

Tooley's explanation - that the desires and concepts of a thing give rise to the rights of personhood - is compelling at first, but it wears thin when one tries to make sense of the exceptions that seem so necessary and intuitive. All things considered, the question we must ask is whether or not a functionalist definition is the kind of thing that will be able to adequately and correctly define personhood. While functionalism usefully identifies and groups together certain types of personal acts, it doesn't seem to adequately describe the personhood that causes these

potential acts to become actual. In the following sections I will demonstrate further how functionalism is an inadequate device for capturing what it is to be a person.

III.Functionalism and Personhood

Building upon the functionalism exhibited by Tooley as well as the questions his essay brings up, I will now move into a more general critique of functionalism as an adequate tool for delineating personhood. Our exploration of Tooley's article brought to light some inconsistencies in his argument and a level of arbitrariness in the lines he draws. With these in mind, let us consider whether defining "personhood" functionally is congruent with our social and moral intuitions.

Kreeft identifies three points about the application of functionalism to personhood which for him constitute major moral conflicts. He states:

> First, [functionalism] is degrading, demeaning and destructive to human dignity; it treats persons like trained seals. Second, it is elitist; it discriminates against less perfect performers. Third, it takes advantage, it is power play, it is might over right rationalized.[10]

Let us consider these points in order. First, Kreeft argues that functionalist definitions of human life are "demeaning and destructive to human dignity". What might the grounds be for such a claim? One might point to the general emphasis that is currently put on jobs, success, grades, and other functions or measures of function. While these are important, one would hesitate to call any of those successes the standard that defines whether or not a person is afforded rights. For example, when a child in the education system fails or falls short of goals, his or her very humanity is not called into question. Rather he or she is comforted by affirming his or her

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[10] Kreeft, "Human Personhood Begins at Conception," p. 6

inherent worth and dignity despite failings in "function". In this very basic example, it does not seem that personhood and the value and dignity associated with it are the kinds of things based in function. It is through this example that one can see how the introduction of functionalism into our thinking could be detrimental to the healthy self-worth of persons.

Kreeft's second and third points go together - that functionalism is elitist and that it takes advantage - in that each point makes observations about the context of functionalist definitions which we should be wary of. Any functionalist definition that attempts to divide humanity between "persons" and "non-persons" is including those who function well and excluding those who either function poorly, have yet to develop functions, or who cease to function normally. Regardless of whether it is Tooley drawing the line at mental function or if his lines were drawn based on physical or mental proficiency, with functionalism it is always one group of *functioners* which is deciding what level of functioning is sufficient.

Consider the following situation in which this is issue is being dealt with in our culture. The documentary entitled "Race: The Power of an Illusion"[11] is a compelling walkthrough of the close genetic similarities between members of different "racial" groups and the surprising amount of potential differences that occurs between members of the same groups. The documentary highlights the injustices of the past in which purported differences between racial groups were used to justify treating some as incomplete or non-persons. In response, the documentary seeks to show that genetic, physiological, psychological, and other perceived racial differences are in fact negligible and thus the grounds for discrimination untenable. While on the surface this seems like a worthy project, as one begins to analyze the underlying assertions of the

[11] A 3 part PBS documentary. http://www.pbs.org/race/000_General/000_00-Home.htm

film it turns out to be (whether intentionally or not) a chilling example of the pervasive presence of functionalism in how our culture views the human person.

The sentiments of the film are common in contemporary dialogue and print as well as other projects like the aforementioned documentary. Any differences highlighted between men and women, different racial groups, etc., are quickly called sexism or racism, and expunged from public conversation. While intentions are usually pure there is a deep but ignored problem. The implication is that if the "myth" of difference can be dispelled, the grounds for discrimination will be undercut. What is wrong with this? The problem is that the corresponding implication is that if the racial differences were to turn out not to be a "myth", then perhaps the racists were/are right. Furthermore, there *are* indeed biological differences between human groups just as there are differences between individual human beings. Among different human races, some are naturally taller or smaller, more or less agile, pigmented differently, or have differing body types that echo of the innovations of evolution passed. Additionally, on an individual level, some students (regardless of race) are simply more or less smart, agile, or creative. To attempt to argue that these differences do not exist is to actually affirm (or at least implicitly accept) the validity of the argument of those who attempt to use differences to accept some humans (themselves included) as "persons" and others not. Ignoring or explaining away "difference" is a temporary and shaky barrier at best against injustice or discrimination.

Now we are faced with the question of why such a shaky argument is accepted so readily as a prominent staple of politically correct dialogue. Why are we so put off by difference? Why is "difference" treated as the problem rather than the unjust attitudes and actions themselves? The answer, I believe lies in identifying the functionalism that has crept into the cultural

discourse. Differences in biology, behavior, speech, and other "functions" become problematic when we try to use one set of them or another as our basis for defining "personhood". In other words, if other humans function differently than us, and "personhood" is based on function, then the question of their personhood (or our personhood, for that matter) becomes problematic whenever a difference is allowed to be recognized. All in all, if the accepted definition of "person" is that of a being which thinks, moves, speaks, acts, and "functions" in "x, y, and z" ways, suddenly the definition becomes troubling and dubious precisely *because* of the range of differences we find throughout our human species.

In this light, we can see why differences are so feared and resisted in modern dialogue and thinking: When person is merely a functional term, our reason for respecting other human "persons" is wrapped up in our similarity rather than being based in some fact about persons themselves. As a result, differences present a challenge to our functionalist way of thinking about personhood. However this also points to the underlying reality that personhood is not based in biological function or behavior. The reason racists are wrong for using "difference" to justify a rejection of personhood is not because the differences are not there, but rather because differences in biological function, skin-color, mental function, or behavior are irrelevant to the nature of personhood - indeed personhood seems to be a much deeper reality altogether.

The problem is that personhood heartily resists a functional definition. For instance Tooley's proposal was compelling, but even Tooley himself intuited the personhood of his exceptions. On the level of our basic moral intuitions as Kreeft pointed out, we resist being valued or accepted for what we do rather than what we are. Human functions whether physical,

mental, social, or otherwise, always seem to exceed or fail to meet our functionalist definitions even in the cases of humans we feel sure are persons.

Certainly functionalism is useful in some contexts or situations. What makes something a musical instrument? Violins, cellos, guitars, flutes, and kazoos all fall under the category of "instrument". Even the pots and pans that a child pulls out of the kitchen cupboards and begins to bang on are defined as instruments by the child's mother seeing a teaching moment. What defines something as an instrument *is* its function and thus functionalist definitions are the kinds of things we use. However there certainly are things that can't be adequately defined functionally. What defines "the Mona Lisa?" A similar painting that looks, feels, is made of the same material, and is painted as well as - or some say *better* than - the original Mona Lisa, is still a forgery. The question is whether personhood and "persons" are the kinds of things that are defined by their function.

Personhood similarly seems to be the kind of thing that is beyond the grasp of a functionalist definition. A given functionalist definition might theoretically be constructed that at least temporarily satisfied our intuitions about what is or is not a person. However as soon as we encounter an example of a "person" who functions differently, or less perfectly, or not completely, functionalism lacks a meaningful and satisfactory explanation for what personhood really is. For even though the potential for functioning is not actualized, the capacity for personal action lies in one's *being* a person rather than the other way around.

The ways that "functions" often "function" in relationships between human persons are analogous to signs. When we meet new people or even recognize old friends, our observation of various functions that they exhibit clue us in to who and what they are, and in this sense

functionalism is certainly a useful tool. However these functions always act as signs or indicators of the deeper reality of personhood which we recognize. A functionalist description might be useful for identifying me in a crowd - I shuffle my feet, talk loudly, and wear unmatched clothing. However, these functions or behaviors are not what it means to be me, and no one normally confuses the two but rather recognizes the former as as a sign or indicator of the latter.

It is for another paper to explore the nature of personhood itself. Some call it the soul or essence, some simply intuit it and are satisfied with the mystery. Whatever it is, the capacity for functioning like a person is based in actually being a person, which functionalism is not able to adequately address. Functionalist distinctions seem useful until they are used to discuss the margins of personhood where they reveal themselves to be largely arbitrary and always the decision of more perfect or powerful functioners. We must remain skeptical of such approaches to the issue of human personhood until far more satisfactory justification is presented.

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