

Ethics and Personhood: Some Key Issues

Ethics
Matters

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Introduction

A number of key issues in ethics turn on the question of personhood:

- Abortion
- Human embryonic stem cell research
- The moral status of animals
- The moral status of chimeras, cyborgs, robots and other autonomous entities

This presentation considers just a single issue from a group of interesting concerns: is the concept of personhood a binary concept? In other words, is someone either a person or not? Or are there gradations of personhood?

A binary concept

Computers are binary in structure:
everything is ultimately reducible to
a series on zeroes and ones, off
and on, no and yes.

If the concept of a person is a binary
one, then we are forced by the logic
of the concept to say of
something/someone that it either is
or is not a person. It does not admit
of degrees.



A Sliding Switch: A Gradualist Concept

Instead of thinking about personhood as an on-off switch, we might think of it as a dimmer switch, sliding from the highest to lowest extremes.

We will call this a gradualist concept.



The advantage of this approach is that it allows us to make more finely textured judgments

The Next Step: A Multivalent Concept

The next step in refining this concept is to realize that it is a multivalent concept, that is, that there are a number of criteria that are relevant in determining personhood.

We have already seen how our understanding of the concept of intelligence developed from a relatively narrow concept to one that includes many different types. Howard Gardner, one of the leaders in the field, now distinguishes among nine different types:

- | | | |
|----|---------------------------------|------------------------|
| 1. | Naturalist Intelligence | Nature Smart |
| 2. | Musical intelligence | Musical Smart |
| 3. | Logical-Math Intelligence | Number/Reasoning Smart |
| 4. | Existential intelligence | |
| 5. | Interpersonal Intelligence | People Smart |
| 6. | Bodily-Kinesthetic Intelligence | Body Smart |
| 7. | Linguistic Intelligence | Word Smart |
| 8. | Intra-personal Intelligence | Self Smart |
| 9. | Spatial Intelligence | Picture Smart |

Axes of Personhood

The next question is which characteristics are relevant to the attribution of personhood? Candidates include:

- Intelligence
- Ability to have a life plan
- Ability to feel pain
- Ability to experience happiness
- Ability to have emotions
- A soul

Once you have established the characteristics, it is then necessary to specify the things that are indicators of the possession of those characteristics. For example, IQ tests are intended as ways of determining the presence of intelligence.

Some Vocabulary

Conception: the coming together of sperm and egg

Pre-Embryo: 1-14 days

Zygote: days 1-3. Divides into two identical cells (blastomeres) and continues to subdivide every 12-20 hours

Morula: days 4-5. After 3 days, the zygote is called a morula or pre-embryo. Sixteen cells.

Blastocyst: After 5 days, the morula becomes a blastocyst. The inner group of cells will become the fetus, and the other group will become the uterus

Implantation, in which the pre-embryo attaches to the endometrium, occurs 10 days after conception. 12 days after conception, blastocyst produces hormones that can be detected in the urine

Twinning can occur any time during the first 14 days

Embryo: 16-70 days

The primitive streak: 16 days. Twinning no longer possible.

Now called an embryo.

21 days: about the size of the tip of a pencil

Fetus: 70 days until birth

Human Blastocyst



Embryonic and Fetal Development

There are a number of possible points in the development of the embryo/fetus which may be morally significant:

- ***First Trimester***
 - Fertilization
 - Implantation in the uterine wall (day 5)
 - Appearance of the primitive streak (17 days)
 - Beginning of the heartbeat (23 days)
 - Development of the brain waves (48 days)
 - Point at which essential internal and external structures are complete (56 days)
- ***Second Trimester***
 - Point at which the fetus begins to move around (12-13 weeks).
 - Viability
- ***Third Trimester***
 - Birth

Concluding Two Questions

Thus we see two key questions about the concept of personhood:

1. Is the concept of a person a binary concept or a gradualist concept?
2. Is the concept of a person dependent on a single criterion (soul, human DNA, etc.) or a group/family of criteria?