

Why we are not “persons”

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1. Human beings

“I know that I exist”, says Descartes’s meditator, in the Second Meditation, “but I do not yet know *what* I am.”¹ Actually, of course, all of us know perfectly well what we are – we are human beings. And Descartes, too, knew this perfectly well. Writing outside the artificial and rarefied context of the *Meditations*, he was perfectly clear that each of us is a creature of flesh and blood, with arms and legs, able to move around the world, see and hear, using our eyes and ears, and all the rest of it. I am a specimen of a certain biological species that we now call *homo sapiens*.² I’m not some incorporeal spirit mysteriously lodged in a body like a sailor in a ship (and indeed Descartes himself went on to make just this point in the Sixth Meditation); on the contrary, I am a genuine human being, *un vrai homme*, as Descartes elsewhere put it, or, in Latin, *verus homo*.³

Given that we all know quite well that we are human beings,⁴ why do so many philosophers today prefer to use a different term, and say that we are “persons”. It’s amazing how quickly professional philosophers get used to special bits of jargon, and cease to hear them as jargon. A good example is “normativity”, now standardly used to refer to evaluative or prescriptive language. to the special authoritative force of moral principles – we’ve got so used to it that we have forgotten how opaque this term is to ordinary educated speakers of English who are not professional philosophers. Jargon should in my view always be avoided in philosophy, partly because it’s so often employed (whether consciously or not) in order to intimidate, and partly because it encourages the delusion that philosophy is like a science, aimed at acquiring technical or specialized knowledge, instead of being about understanding – fitting the knowledge we already have into an intelligible framework.⁵

¹ I here paraphrase the start of the fourth paragraph of the Second Meditation. René Descartes, *Meditations [Meditationes de prima philosophia]*, 1641]. AT VII 25: CSM II 17. In this paper, ‘AT’ refers by volume and page number to the standard Franco-Latin edition of Descartes by C. Adam & P. Tannery, *Œuvres de Descartes* (12 vols, revised edn, Paris: Vrin/CNRS, 1964-76); ‘CSM’ refers to the English translation by J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff and D. Murdoch, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vols I and II (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), and ‘CSMK’ to vol. III, *The Correspondence*, by the same translators and A. Kenny (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

² Our present view of species, post Darwin, is of course different from that of Descartes (or Aristotle): we no longer think in terms of an immutable essence, but accept that human beings emerged from earlier mammalian forms. These important discoveries about our origins raise many interesting philosophical questions about what it is to be human, which merit further discussion.

³ For the French phrase, see *Discourse on the Method*, Part Five, AT VI 59: CSM I 141. Descartes is here referring back to his earlier work in the *Traité de l’homme*. For the Latin formulation, see letter to Regius of January 1642; Descartes goes on to explain that ‘we perceive that sensations such a pain are not pure thoughts of a mind distinct from a body, but confused perceptions of a mind really united to a body.’ (AT III 493: CSMK 206).

⁴ A parenthetical comment: the correct modern English translation for *homo* is not “man” but “human being”; so in the Nicene Creed, *et homo factus est* should be rendered “and he became human” or “he became a human being”, *not* “he became a man” (still less “he was made man”; the Latin *factus est* doesn’t mean “was made”: it is simply the past tense of *fieri*, to become). Notice, as a further aside, that the Creed does not say *et vir factus est* (he became a man, as opposed to a woman); and hence one spurious but still sometimes used argument for restricting the priesthood to men collapses. The Greek equivalent to *homo* (human) as opposed to *vir* (male) is *anthropos*, as opposed to *anēr, andros*; the Greek version of the relevant phrase in the Nicene Creed, employs the splendid cognate verb ἐνανθρωπέω, to be “humanified”, to become human.)

⁵ See Anthony Kenny, *What I Believe* (London: Continuum, 2006), p. 14.

You may think that “person” is not a piece of jargon, but a perfectly ordinary English word. So it is, in ordinary usage, as when we say “she’s a very nice person” But notice that the plural of this ordinary innocuous term is “people”, as in “the teachers at this university are very nice people”. People in this sense are simply human beings – we are back to the basic common-sense meaning of the term ‘person’, which is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as ‘an individual human being, man, woman or child’.⁶

But “person”, as a piece of philosophical jargon is different, and the difference is signalled by the fact that its plural is not “people” but “persons”. Lawyers, those other great lovers of jargon, sometimes use this term in drafting rules “persons proceeding beyond this point do so at their own risk”– but that’s probably just a piece of pompous grandiloquence: “people proceeding beyond this point” would do just as well (though there are other legal contexts, for example when corporations are treated for certain purposes as “persons”, where the jargon may have some point). Outside of the law, the other main setting I can think of where “person” has a technical sense is in the faintly absurd English class system of the early part of the twentieth century (as depicted for example in the novels of P. G. Woodhouse or Dorothy Sayers), where “person”, plural “persons” was used to indicate people of supposedly inferior social rank who therefore did not qualify as gentlemen or ladies. “There are some young *persons* at the door”, Jeeves might say with icy emphasis, indicating that their social status was dubious. In Dorothy Sayers’ novel *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club*, a parlour maid in the household of a wealthy family remarks that Lord Peter Wimsey’s friend, Inspector Parker of Scotland Yard, is “quite the gentleman”; but the cook sharply rebukes her, saying “No Nellie; gentlemanlike I will not deny; but a policeman is a *person* and I will trouble you to remember it.”⁷

There are of course many other familiar meanings of the term ‘person’, including for example its ancient use as a way of referring to one of the characters in a play (in Latin, *dramatis personae*); or again there is the technical theological sense in which the Father, Son and Holy Ghost are the three persons of the Trinity.⁸ But the modern specifically philosophical use of *person*, plural *persons*, appears to stem from Locke, who distinguished a person from a man or human being. “For should the soul of a prince, carrying with it the consciousness of the prince’s past life, enter and inform the body of a cobbler, as soon as deserted by his own soul, every one sees he would be the same *person* with the prince, accountable only for the prince’s actions: but who would say it was the same *man*?”⁹ The right reply to this extraordinary attempt to force a card upon us is to say that everyone certainly does *not* see that he would be the same person. Aristotle, for one, would have said no such thing – and not just because he doesn’t use any term corresponding to “person”, but because he regarded the whole notion of souls flitting about from one body to another as absurd.

In Book One Chapter 3 of the *De Anima*, Aristotle says that most talk of souls has something absurd about it. For various philosophers tack the soul on to the body (συνάπτουσι [*synaptousi*]), or they locate or place it in the body (τιθέασιν [*tietheasin*]), but they give no account of what the condition of the body must be like for this to be possible. The relation between soul and body, Aristotle goes on to say, surely cannot be a purely contingent or haphazard one (it cannot involve τοῖς τυχούσιν πρὸς ἄλληλα [*tois tychousin pros allēlla*]). Pythagorean talk of metempsychosis suggests any soul could flit into any body, which is nonsense, since it ignores the

⁶ I do not mean to suggest that ‘person’ and ‘human being’ are *synonymous* terms. For one thing, ‘person’, as will appear in as moment, has a number of distinct specialized uses; for another thing, many people are inclined to think there could be persons who are not human beings (for example extra-terrestrials sharing some of our human attributes, not to mention mythological creatures such as centaurs or fauns). I am grateful to an anonymous referee for *Eidos* for drawing attention to the complications arising from this; they clearly merit further discussion, but doing justice to them (and to the large related literature in this area) must be postponed for another occasion.

⁷ Dorothy Sayers, *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club* (1928).

⁸ Thanks are again due here to the referee mentioned in the previous footnote.

⁹ John Locke, *Essay concerning Human Understanding* [1690], Bk 2, Ch. 27, § 1.

fact that each body has a characteristic form or shape (*morphe, eidos*). You might as well say that carpentry might be embodied in flutes.

This last phrase has been furiously debated, but it's a perfectly straightforward consequence of Aristotle's commonsensical view of these matters, known somewhat portentously as hylemorphism. The soul is not a substance, a separate entity in its own right, but is related to body as form is to matter, or as organization is to material constitution, or as function is to structure. Formally speaking, a flute is an instrument that has to make a characteristic high-pitched breathy piping melody; and in order to instantiate this form, the material has to be constructed out of a tube made of metal or something similar, with holes or stops and a mouthpiece shaped so that the player's breath can strike a narrow edge. For this reason, the 'soul' (in inverted commas) of a flute couldn't migrate into the body of a trombone, still less into a chisel or a hammer, nor for that matter could the soul of a chisel migrate into the body of a hammer. The relation between the activity being performed, and the structure of the relevant materials is not a haphazard one, but is tightly constrained by the specification of the form, the design specification if you like, and the suitability of the materials, properly configured, to execute this design.

Wittgenstein, I would venture to suggest, came quite close to sharing this Aristotelian insight, when he famously said *Der menschlicher Körper ist das beste Bild der menschlichen Seele* ("the human body is the best picture of the human soul").¹⁰ There's nothing at all behaviouristic about this: any kind of reductionism is anathema to the Wittgensteinian approach, and the same goes for Aristotle. The point, rather, is that we see the concert pianist's skill and sensitivity in the slenderness and flexibility of his fingers, in the movements of his body and the expression on his face as he plays, indeed in the whole way in which he engages in the very physical process of playing the piano; and there's no doubt much more that we can't see, in way the nerves and sinews and brain are configured so as to make all this possible. The more we think about this, the less sense we can make of the idea of the concert pianist's soul transmigrating to another body (the body of a sumo wrestler, for example).

2. Dualism and its pitfalls

The trouble with Locke's notion of a "person" is that it takes us away from this sound Aristotelian and Wittgensteinian picture, towards some kind of suspect dualistic conception of what makes me me, or what makes the prince the prince or the cobbler the cobbler. It is sometimes alleged that Christian doctrine inclines towards this Lockean or Cartesian conception, since it seems to allow the idea of a soul separated from the body after death. Before commenting on this, I can't resist inserting a brief word on Gilbert Ryle's famous denunciation of Cartesian dualism as promoting the myth of the "ghost in the machine".¹¹ I am not sure quite what Ryle meant by "ghost", but it was not perhaps the happiest choice of term. A ghost, in normal parlance, is a departed spirit, a soul separated from its former body. So a ghost (if such things there be) still has, one would suppose, a certain hankering after its former life, a certain residual link with the corporeal state it once enjoyed. This has long been the common conception of a departed spirit— something rather thin and incomplete and lacking.¹² Descartes's scholastic predecessor, Eustachius put it like this:

Separated souls are *not*, as angels are, whole subjects that are totally and in every respect complete ... A [human] soul, even when separated, it always apt to inform the body and to be substantially united with it; but this is not true of an angel.¹³

¹⁰ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* [1953], II, iv.

¹¹ Gilbert Ryle, *Concept of Mind* (1948), Ch. 1. This section of the paper draws on material from my *Cartesian Reflections* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), esp. Ch. 1 and Ch. 9.

¹² The notion is a very ancient one indeed; see Homer, *Odyssey* [c. 700 BC], Bk 11, lines 465ff.

¹³ Eustachius e Sancto Paulo, *Summa philosophiae*, Part III, Third Part, Treatise 4, Discourse 3, question 1; transl. in R. Ariew, J. Cottingham and T. Sorell (eds), *Descartes Meditations: Background Source Materials* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 91.

A human ghost or spirit, then, unlike an angel, cannot be conceived in utterly immaterialist or dualistic terms: it always retains that conceptual link with at least the possibility of embodiment. So perhaps “angel in the machine” would have been a better phrase for Ryle to have used to characterise the Cartesian model he was attacking, in so far as his gripe was that Descartes conceived the mind in wholly dualistic fashion, as categorially distinct from the body. In fact, some twenty years before Ryle, the Thomist philosopher Jacques Maritain was already attacking Descartes along just such lines. “The sin of Descartes”, Maritain declared, “is a sin of *angelism* ... what he saw in man’s thought was *independence of things*.”¹⁴

Whatever the subtle differences between angels and ghosts, it is in any case clear from what Eustachius says that he (Eustachius) is not a dualist about human beings. On the contrary, as a Christian scholastic, he is reflecting the standard Thomist line in saying that a separated human soul is *not* a whole subject. According to Aquinas, a human soul is a *substantia incompleta*, an incomplete substance.¹⁵ Unlike an angel, a human soul always in principle needs union with the body that it “informs” for its essential completion; and this is why the souls in purgatory are not (as popular myth perhaps represents them) humans who have passed on to the “next world”, but are, rather, temporary beings or quasi-beings in a kind of suspended state, awaiting, indeed requiring as their very *raison d’être*, restoration to human status, when they will be rejoined to the body at the last judgement. The Apostles’ Creed says “I believe in the resurrection of the body”, not “I believe in the survival of ‘persons’ or Cartesian souls”.

But where does Descartes himself stand on this question of the soul’s completeness or otherwise? At times, most famously in Part Four of the *Discourse*, he seems clearly to reject the standard scholastic view of the essential incompleteness of the human soul. I can, he says, form a conception of the *complete and total me*, “this me (*ce moi*), that is to say the soul by which I am what I am”, as separated and distinct from the body. And from this I know I am indeed such a wholly independent incorporeal being.¹⁶ This is (and was at the time) an extremely radical and controversial claim. And it shows that Maritain’s indictment does indeed constitute a strong case for Descartes to answer. The “sin” (or at least the philosophical error) with which he stands charged is, as Maritain saw, *not* that he supposed we were ghosts in machines (which would imply that the mind is an incomplete or partial aspect of our human existence) but rather that he supposed we were, like angels, complete incorporeal substances that only *happen* to inhabit bodies.

In fact, as I’ve argued elsewhere, Descartes actual position on this matter is far more complex than the “Cartesian dualism” of common caricature. When his contemporary Antoine Arnauld attacked him for maintaining that the body is “merely a vehicle for the soul – a view which gives rise to the Platonic definition of man as a *soul that makes use of a body* (*anima corpore utens*),¹⁷ Descartes firmly rebutted the Platonic interpretation and refers Arnauld to the “proof” in the Sixth Meditation that the mind is “substantially united with the body”.¹⁸ Writing to Regius the following year, he insisted that a human being was indeed a genuine unified entity, an *ens per se*,

¹⁴ Jacques Maritain, *Three Reformers* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1928, repr. 1947), pp. 54-5.

¹⁵ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* [1266-73], Part I, Qu. 75, art. 4 and Part I, Qu. 118, art. 2. Compare Francisco Suarez, *Metaphysical Disputations* [*Disputationes metaphysicae*, 1597] Disp. 33, sectn 1, §11: ‘anima etiamsi sit separata est pars ... essentialis, habetque incompletam essentiam ... et ideo semper est substantia incompleta.’ (‘A soul, even if it is separated, is essentially a *part*, and has an incomplete essence, and hence is always an incomplete substance.’)

¹⁶ *Discourse on the Method*, Part Four (AT VI 33: CSM I 127).

¹⁷ Fourth Objections, AT VII 203: CSM II 143. Six sets of *Objectiones doctorum aliquot virorum cum responsionibus Authoris* [sic] (‘Objections of several learned men with the Replies of the Author’) were published with the first edition of the *Meditations* in 1641; the second edition of 1642 included a seventh set of objections and replies.

¹⁸ Fourth Replies, AT VII 227-8: CSM II 160.

not merely an *ens per accidens*: mind and body are united “in a real and substantial manner” by a “true mode of union”.¹⁹

Yet isn’t Descartes left with a problem, since in the Second Meditation he seems to be saying that I am a “person” in the Lockean sense, a mere conscious being, who can exist without a body. How can I, *qua* “res cogitans” be a complete incorporeal substance, yet at the same time *qua* human being be really and substantially embodied? My answer to this is that Descartes is not a dualist but a trialist. I don’t mean that the human being, the creature of flesh and blood, is a third *substance*, alongside mind and body (some people have misunderstood me here). Ontologically speaking, Descartes thinks there are only two things, mind and body. But Descartes’s trialism is an *attributive* trialism. The mind-body complex is something which is the bearer of distinctive and irreducible *properties* in its own right; in this sense we might say that water is not a mere mixture but a genuine compound, possessing attributes “in its own right” (distinctive “watery” characteristics that cannot be reduced to the properties of the hydrogen or oxygen which make it up). Or as Descartes puts it in the *Principles*, while he recognises only “two ultimate classes of things”, thinking things and extended things, nevertheless appetites, passions, and sensations, which arise from the close and intimate union of the two, are items which “must not be referred either to the mind alone or the body alone”.²⁰

So for Descartes, the whole conscious world of pain, pleasure, emotion, feeling, and indeed most of our human attributes involves *irreducibly psycho-physical processes*. The human mind-body complex is a genuine unit, not a separate soul making use of a body or endowed with its creator to have certain kinds of awareness on the occasion of damage to the body it uses. When *my* body is damaged (and the “my” is important for Descartes), *I* feel pain. And that gives us proof, the best kind of intimate proof— proof available, says Descartes, even to those who never philosophize— of the genuineness of the union.²¹

I just want to add one brief postscript about Descartes, which is about the language of substance, and possible confusions it gives rise to, as when Descartes sometimes uses substantial language like *ens per se* when referring to the mind-body union. As so often, the terminology has its roots in Aristotle. Aristotle uses the term “substance” in at least two senses: first ontologically, to mean a basic unit of independent existence (e.g. an individual man, or horse, or tree), and second logically or grammatically, to mean simply a subject of predication (as opposed to that which is predicated).²² So for Descartes, even if ontologically speaking the union consists of only two distinct substances, mind and body (substance being taken in the first Aristotelian sense of a basic unit of independent existence), he still allows himself to talk of the human being as a substance in Aristotle’s other sense, namely a *subject of predication* – that subject in which attributes inhere. It is the human being, the mind-body complex (and not either of the ultimate substances that make it up), that is the subject in which attributes of a certain distinctive type (namely sensations, passions and appetites) inhere, or to which they must be referred. This, it seems to me, gives us more than enough to support Descartes’s use of the term “substantial union” to characterize the human being, the mind-body complex, even though from an ontological point of view he always maintained there were only two ultimate kinds of existing thing involved, *res cogitans* and *res extensa*.

As with so much in Descartes, the germ of this way of thinking is derived not directly from Aristotle but via St Thomas Aquinas. Though Aquinas believed, like Aristotle, that the intellectual

¹⁹ For ‘we perceive that sensations such a pain are not pure thoughts of a mind distinct from a body, but confused perceptions of a mind really united to a body.’ Letter to Regius of January 1642 (AT III 493: CSMK 206).

²⁰ ‘I recognize only two ultimate classes of things, first intellectual things, i.e. those which pertain to mind or thinking substance, and secondly material things, i.e. those which pertain to extended substance or body ... But we also experience within ourselves certain other things [appetites, passions or emotions, and sensations] which must not be referred either to the mind alone or to the body alone’ (*Principles*, Part I, art. 48).

²¹ Letter to Elizabeth of 28 June 1643, AT II 691-2: CSMK 227.

²² Aristotle, *Categories* [330 BC], Ch. 5.

part of us could survive the death of the body, he insisted that a large number of basic human faculties (in particular, sensory ones) were *irreducibly psychophysical*:

Some operations that belong to the soul are carried out through bodily organs, such as seeing (through the eye) and hearing (through the ear), and likewise for all other operations of the nutritive or sensitive part. Hence the powers that are the sources of such operations *are in the compound as their subject, not in the soul alone*.²³

This last phrase seems to me to prefigure Descartes's position with uncanny exactness.²⁴ In a nutshell, then, Descartes's position is that ontologically speaking there are only two substances, but there are three distinct and irreducible types of attribute; and since the third type of attribute, comprising sensory and passional experience, inheres in the complete human being, as in a subject, we are justified in talking of a "real and substantial union". It is not, of course, a position free of all philosophical difficulty. But it is a considerably more subtle and interesting position than the exclusively dualistic caricature that is so often dismissed.²⁵

But for present purposes, my point in all this is that Aquinas's phrase "in the compound as their subject, not in the soul alone", takes us (and if I am right, Descartes too) much closer to the robust and common-sense Aristotelian and Wittgensteinian view that the answer to the question "what am I?" is *not* a Lockean person, or a centre of consciousness, *not* a soul (in the caricature sense of a potentially migrating immaterial essence), but instead a *human being*, a creature of flesh and blood, whose attributes cannot properly be understood without implicit reference to the body.²⁶

3. Personhood and its dangers

In this closing section of the paper I want to look further at the problematic term "person" and offer some thoughts on the philosophical, and indeed moral, pitfalls which lie in wait for us once we depart from the robust common-sense view of ourselves as human beings, and instead accept the dubious card that Locke is forcing on us.

The most famous use made of the Lockean notion in moral philosophy is that of Immanuel Kant, who made it the foundation of his moral theory. What makes us "exalted above any price", according to Kant, is the fact that we are *persons*, that is to say, subjects who engage in moral reasoning (or "morally practical reason"). This alone, says Kant, gives us *dignity*—in German *Würde*—an "absolute inner worth".²⁷ Now the Kantian notion of "respect for persons" is sometimes lauded as taking us in the direction of universal human rights; in the words of Ingolf Dalferth, it is supposed to foster, or encapsulate, a humane way of living with others, one in which "we commit ourselves to viewing and treating every human being, not merely family and friends, but also strangers and enemies, as human persons with untouchable dignity".²⁸

²³ *Summa theologiae*, Part I, Qu. 77, art. 5 (emphasis supplied). Peter King draws attention to this passage in an interesting article entitled 'Why isn't the mind-body problem medieval?' in H. Lagerlund (ed.), *Forming the Mind: Essays on the Internal Senses and the Mind/Body Problem from Avicenna to the Enlightenment* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2005), pp. 187-206.

²⁴ There are of course key differences between the two philosophers, of which the most striking one in the present context is Aquinas's grouping of nutrition with sensation as a function of the soul-body compound; for Descartes, it is a purely physiological function.

²⁵ For a different view, arguing that Descartes never succeeding in providing a satisfactory account of our distinctively human nature, and was increasingly prepared to accept some version of angelism, see Stephen Voss, 'Descartes: The End of Anthropology', in J. Cottingham (ed.), *Reason, Will and Sensation* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994), pp. 273-306.

²⁶ Parts of the foregoing section draw on material developed in John Cottingham, *Cartesian Reflections* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), Ch. 1 and Ch. 9.

²⁷ Immanuel Kant, *Metaphysics of Morals* [*Metaphysik der Sitten*, 1797], trans. M. Gregor (Cambridge 1996), 186 (Akademie edition, VI, 435).

²⁸ Ingolf Dalferth, 'Religion, Morality and Being Human: The Controversial Status of Human Dignity', *Ars Disputandi*, Supplement, series 6, pp. 143-180...

But the problem here is precisely the logical gap between “human being” and “person”. If we are to make acceptable use of the concept of human dignity, it seems clear that its scope needs to be extended far beyond the domain of those who are possessed of practical rationality.²⁹ Dignity and respect needs to be something accorded to all of us not *qua* persons, but *qua* human; it should be recognized as an inalienable and absolute human attribute, independent of our circumstances, capacities, group-membership, qualifications or faculties. It is notorious that the principal forms of modern secular consequentialism cannot ground such a universal notion of dignity (Peter Singer’s ‘preference utilitarianism’, in its sinister attitude to the unborn and to infants, makes this abundantly clear).³⁰ And it’s highly significant that Singer eagerly embraces the terminology of ‘persons’. “Only a person,” he says, “can want to go on living, or have plans for the future, because only a person can understand the possibility of a future existence for herself or himself.” He goes on: “This means that to end the lives of people against their will is different from ending the lives of beings who are not people...killing a person against his or her will is a much more serious wrong than killing a being who is not a person.”³¹ It is an appalling irony that while Singer’s grandfather died in the Theresienstadt concentration camp as a result of being classified in effect as a non-person, the grandson has been seduced by a toxic mixture of consequentialist and Kantian ideas into embracing a position that implicitly entails that *had that classification been correct* (had the grandfather suffered from dementia, for example, or had it been a question of a relative who was an infant), the killing would have been much less serious.

Contrast the Compendium of the Catholic catechism, which insists that the dignity of a person extends to “all human beings”.³² Nicolas Wolterstorff, in an impressive recent study, has underlined the roots of this idea in the Hebrew Bible, where he argues, with a wealth of supporting evidence, that there is a clear recognition of the equal value of all in the sight of God. Throughout the Old Testament, what Wolterstorff aptly calls the “quartet of the vulnerable” – widows, orphans, resident aliens, and the impoverished – make repeated appearances. And in the injunctions of the law and the prophets, and the poetry of the Psalms, God is seen as calling on his people to “loose the bonds of injustice” by rescuing these vulnerable groups who have been wronged: to “raise the poor from the dust, and lift the needy from the ash-heap” (Psalm 113 [112]). Injustice is seen both as wronging God and as wronging the victims of injustice by failing to recognize their inherent human worth.³³

The Christian New Testament strongly continues the same message. The “kingdom” which Jesus was to inaugurate was to be a kingdom of “justice and righteousness” – the very combination that so frequently occurs in the Old Testament (in the Hebrew terms *mishpat* and *tsedeqa*). And the righteous king or Messiah foretold in the Hebrew Scriptures was to be one who (in the words of Psalm 72 [71]), “judges the poor with justice and ... saves the lives of the needy.” On Wolterstorff’s reading, the words and actions of Jesus (consorting with outcasts, touching and curing those who were ritually unclean, explaining why it was right to heal on the Sabbath) were designed to “appeal to our worth as human beings to explain God’s care for each and every one of us.”³⁴

Not only does Wolterstorff trace the origins of the idea of universal human dignity back to early Jewish and Christian moral thinking, but he also makes the striking claim that without such theistic resources we will be left without any satisfactory grounding for dignity: no secular worldview can do the job. There’s a serious worry here for those many moral philosophers who, blind to the sinister example of Singer, persist in regarding Kant’s principle of respect for persons as providing a fully secularized basis for the modern conception of inherent human dignity. The

²⁹ This final section of the paper draws on material from my ‘Dignity, Autonomy and Embodiment’, *Ars Disputandi*, Supplement, series 6, ed. M. Sarot (2013), pp. 181-196.

³⁰ Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics* (Cambridge 1979, 3rd edn. 2011).

³¹ Peter Singer, *Rethinking Life and Death* (Oxford: OUP, 1995), p.198.

³² *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church* [2005], §66.

³³ Nicolas Wolterstorff, *Justice: Rights and Wrongs* (Princeton, 2008).

³⁴ Wolterstorff, *Justice*, p. 131.

problem is that if human worth depends on our status as rational agents, or our capacity for rational deliberation, then those who lack that capacity (infants, those born with severe mental impairment, Alzheimer's patients) risk being excluded from the protected domain. Wolterstorff makes repeated use of this point to pose a powerful challenge to a variety of secular moral theorists (including Alan Gewirth and Ronald Dworkin): if rational choice (Gewirth) or mental creativity (Dworkin) is the criterion, how can this explain why every human, *qua* human, should be regarded as having inherent worth?³⁵

In the Christian worldview, by contrast, "God loves ... each and every human being equally and permanently"; and if this is true, then "natural human rights are grounded in that love," since they "inhere in the bestowed worth that supervenes on being thus loved."³⁶ The idea has a certain intuitive plausibility, since our experience of human parental and conjugal love does seem to give some support to the idea that attachment or commitment to someone can endow that person with a certain moral status. Nevertheless, there does remain an important philosophical qualm about how exactly love can "bestow worth". The question is analogous to that arising in the famous Euthyphro problem: the crucial worry is whether love in itself can make something valuable.

In recent times, Harry Frankfurt has argued that by loving something, or caring about it, we imbue it with worth or value.³⁷ Value, on Frankfurt's picture is a matter of our exercising our will, our choice, to care about something or someone. The resulting picture is one where, in a certain sense, it is we who *create* values by our own authentic choices. By deciding what we care about we bring value into the world. But there is a serious problem with this view, together with many other "internalist" views (compare Bernard Williams's idea that value is generated by my commitments to certain "projects" that I make my own)³⁸ – namely that they seem to put the cart before the horse. I cannot, surely, create value or worth merely by caring about something (or else I could bestow worth on a pile of worthless rubbish merely by choosing to care about it); on the contrary, it seems that my caring about something is only justified if that thing is *already* worth caring about. Caring, in other words, *depends* on worth, rather than creating it.

Perhaps, however, the status of the person caring makes a difference. Wolterstorff uses the analogy of a great monarch bestowing her friendship on a courtier: the courtier is now "honoured and envied in ways she was not before".³⁹ Unfortunately for this argument, it still leaves open the question of whether the courtier *ought* to be so honoured. Has genuine worth been bestowed— is the courtier now genuinely fit to be honoured— or is any resulting "honouring" that may occur merely a prudently deferential recognition of the monarch's arbitrary power? (Here parallels abound with the Euthyphro problem: the mere arbitrary commands of a God, however powerful, cannot create moral obligation). If, however, we add the premise that the aforesaid Queen is supremely good and wise and just, then her bestowing of her friendship will make not just a causal but a moral difference: there will now be genuine reason to honour the courtier, namely that in the eyes of one who is wholly good and wise and just the courtier in question is an object of affection and delight.

If we cash out this analogy in theistic terms, then it seems plausible to hold that the impartial love of a supremely good and just God for all his creatures does indeed give us reason to honour them all alike. In the eyes of a supremely loving, good and wise heavenly father, each of us, as Wolterstorff puts it, is "irreducibly precious". As for whether there can be viable alternative secular groundings for the idea of universal dignity and worth, that is of course still an open question, though in the light of Wolterstorff's arguments it does appear doubtful. Wolterstorff has made a strong case for thinking the standard Kantian-derived attempts to provide such grounding

³⁵ See Ronald Dworkin, *Life's Dominion* (New York 1993); Alan Gewirth, *Human Rights* (Chicago 1982).

³⁶ Wolterstorff, *Justice*, p. 360.

³⁷ Harry G. Frankfurt, *The Reasons of Love* (Princeton 2004), 40ff.

³⁸ See Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley 1993), Ch. 5. For more discussion of the positions of Frankfurt and Williams, see J. Cottingham, 'Integrity and Fragmentation', *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, Vol. 27, no 1 (2010), 2-14.

³⁹ Wolterstorff, *Justice*, p. 259.

are not promising, but this evidently leaves open the logical possibility that a better secular alternative might be round the corner.

What is I think clear, in conclusion, is that the terminology of persons is both philosophically suspect and morally dangerous. It seems at first sight innocuous, since in ordinary English, a person is just a human being – anyone you happen to meet. But in Lockean terminology it becomes the “conscious self”, a supposedly immaterial substrate that can flit from body to body, with the absurd result that Aristotle pointed out that there is no intelligible relation between function and structure. And in Kantian moral theory personhood becomes the bearer of dignity and worth, where that dignity and worth is attached not to our humanity, but to our rationality. One great benefit of the Judaeo-Christian religious and philosophical heritage, which so many contemporary philosophers have unfortunately set their faces against, is that it takes us back to a more robust notion of corporeal embodiment as the basis of our humanity. We are not mysterious incorporeal beings, but are formed out of the dust of the earth (as Genesis says, and as modern evolutionary theory confirms); we are informed matter, or enmattered form, as Aristotle would have put it; that is the key to our identity, and to any future we may have, in this world or (if there is one) the next. And our moral status stems *from this human status*, not from any privileged entitlement accorded by philosophers to possessors of their own favourite attribute of rationality, and graciously accorded to other club members who happen to share it.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ An earlier version of this paper was given as a keynote address at the conference on *Being a Human Being, Being a Person* sponsored by the Ian Ramsey Centre for Science and Religion, University of Oxford, and the Institute of Philosophy, University of Warsaw, held at Blackfriars Hall, Oxford in July 2013. I am grateful for participants at the conference for their stimulating comments, and subsequently to the Editor of *Eidos*, Przemysław Bursztyka, for helpful suggestions for improvement. I am also grateful to two anonymous referees for *Eidos* for their valuable comments.