

THE PROBLEMS WITH "PERSONS"

Presidential Address

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This paper originated in the fact that for the last three years I have consistently been unable to convince students in medical ethics classes that the notion of "person" as distinct from "human being" makes sense. The majority of students who take this course are medical or nursing students and are above average in intelligence, motivation, and scientific education. Thus, it has seemed to me that this educational problem is not a problem with the students.

For three years, three semesters a year, two or three sections a semester, I have assigned standard philosophical articles on the notion of person. In almost every instance the students have rejected the ideas presented. They are perfectly able to restate the idea, but if asked their opinions, most students reject the idea of "person."

While I am not a proponent of the "common man" argument, it is nevertheless worrying to find a majority of students consistently rejecting a standard philosophical notion. Furthermore, they are willing to accept much less obvious and outré ideas, such as Rawls's "veil of ignorance." It therefore has seemed to me that there is some basic problem with the idea of "person."

The contention of this paper will therefore be that the notion of "person" as it exists in philosophical theory, is inconsistent with the ideas of modern science and thus cannot, as generally stated, be successfully assimilated into medical ethics. Why this is the case will be examined and a new formulation will be proposed.

Theories of "person" in philosophy may be divided into four large groups, which I shall call (1) the Cartesian, (2) the Kantian, (3) the social, and (4) the materialist. Each one, when carefully examined, exhibits a "failure of fit" with contemporary science.

The oldest approach to providing criteria for the idea of person is what I will call the Cartesian, after one of its major

