

A Matter of Faith
Psalm 139:13, Isaiah 49-1, Ecclesiastes 11:5, Jeremiah 1:5
June 13, 2010

To be or not to be – human – that was Hamlet's question and it is our question.

Hamlet also reflects –

What a piece of work is a man,
how noble in reason,
how infinite in faculties,
in form and moving how express and admirable,
in action how like an angel,
in apprehension how like a god!
The beauty of the world, the paragon of animals—and yet,
to me, what is this quintessence of dust?

What is this quintessence of dust?

What does it mean to be a human being;
or -- a person?

At what point in our development do we become
a human being?

Now this would seem to be a rather academic or
philosophical question, the kind you would deal
with perhaps in a Philosophy 101 course?

But whether you want to delve into such deep
waters or not; you will have to, come this fall as
once again the question will be put on the
Colorado ballot.

Now, while it feels a bit like a philosophical question, it truly is a religious question and a religious question that the Bible has dealt with and that theologians over thousands of years have pondered.

The answer, it seems, is a matter of faith.

Today, there are three answers that we can choose from in this multiple choice survey.

The first answer is that personhood or status as a human being begins at **conception**.

This is the position of the folks who want a legal description of “Person” to include every human entity from the beginning of its biological development.

The second answer and what seems to be the only biblically based position is that personhood, or status as a human being, begins -- at **birth**.

For centuries scholars of the Old Testament agreed that the most important Hebrew word describing a human being was *nephesh*, a word that occurs 755 times in the Hebrew Bible... *Nephesh* is the usual term for the total human nature and the defining characteristic of a *nephesh* is breath.

In fact, Jacob argues that the etymology of *nephesh* goes back to the root that means ‘to breathe.’ [Is a fetus a Person; the Bible’s view,” by Dr. Roy Bowen Ward]

This position holds that personhood and status as a human being comes with taking of the first breath – which occurs at birth.

And Jewish common practice a couple thousand years ago, was that full human rights weren’t even transferred to the born infant until the father blessed and accepted the child.

Now there is another pseudo-answer that is hinted at in some of the scripture that we read such as, [Jer 1:5] and it would infer that possibly personhood is conferred even before conception as God tells Jeremiah,

"Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations."

But this doesn’t really tell us anything about the conference of personhood, but just that God had plans for Jeremiah once he did become a person.

The third answer holds that becoming a person, a human being, is a developmental process. This position holds that the human gestational entity moves from **potential** personhood to **actual** personhood over the nine month period from conception to birth.

So what is a human being, what is an actual person?

There are those whose faith brings them to believe that a fertilized egg is an actual person – that all that is required is a combination of genetic material into a unified genome.

But my faith brings me to have a different understanding of an actual human being.

My faith finds that an actual human being – a person -
- has greatly fulfilled their potential.

They are self aware, aware of others, can work and play; even a new born has work to do.

An actual person appreciates life,
this is not to say they necessarily enjoy it,
but they appreciate it, they are aware of it.

An actual person thinks, has cognition, has sensations and constructs those sensations into meaningful projections of a reality—
even if it is the reality projected by a new born.

An actual person can relate, communicate, interact, has intention and will.

Honestly, human actualization is something that takes place during the entire life of a person; but there is a threshold that is achieved near the time of natural birth, that clearly qualifies one as a human being – as a person; a time when most, if not all, of the things I just mentioned are achieved.

Just as we don't have trouble telling the difference between a hatched chicken and the eggs we eat for breakfast; we should be able to see the difference between a fertilized human egg and an actual person.

For most legal purposes, we use the biblical standard of taking a breath and being born as when we confer personhood upon an individual; it is then that we issue a birth certificate and confer most legal rights to an individual.

We don't issue conception certificates; at least not at this point.

My faith leads me to see a clear distinction between a potential and an actual human being.

A zygote, a fertilized egg, is a potential human being.

In fact, about 70% of them naturally never make it to birth.

And if we were to recognize the fertilized egg as a fully actual human being, it will ruin a wonderful philosophical dilemma of which came first the Chicken or the Egg.

The unambiguous answer would simply be neither, they are the same thing.

My faith leads me to believe that becoming human, becoming a person is a developmental process and that the rights of personhood need to be conferred as actuality is approached and not granted at the very beginning.

A hypothetical student may have a potential of getting an A in Statistics.

But let's just say that what they got after sluffing around all semester was actually ... well, let's just say – it was not an A.

But this hypothetical student would have loved to have been graded on their **potential and gotten that A.**

We must not confuse potential with actual.

But it is a matter of faith.

Which answer you choose all comes down to a matter of faith.

There are those whose religious faith lead them to believe that being a fully actualized human being is not a developmental process, but one that occurs at another point in time; such as at birth or at conception.

I might, ***might***, even want to argue that we are not an actual human being - a person, until we are able to fulfill the image of God – that is when we are capable not only of being loved, as a baby is capable, but also of loving.

Genesis says that we are created in the image of God; that personhood is the result of being created in this image of God.

But this clearly isn't a physical image, it is rather a spiritual image.

And what I believe is most importantly reflected in that image is the ability to love – and that is the ability to **intentionally** increase the value of another entity.

And that is something we develop into in the years after birth.

Of course, such love then, is a love that is directed at even those who cannot love us back, like a new born, or a pre-born.

But that's the point –
it is a matter of faith.

When one becomes a person, a human being, is a religious position held as a matter of faith and many faithful people hold differing and reasonable positions on this matter.

What would be very wrong --
so very wrong --
would be to codify into law one of those religious positions above the others.

So that what for now may seem like a lofty philosophical question or a matter of private undisclosed personal faith; it will be a life changing matter on which you this fall will need to decide. You will need to answer the question in a very real life changing way.

As Hamlet would say,
“What is this quintessence of dust?”

AMEN.