

Abortionist Willie Parker's Flawed Personhood Theory

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Many of you have written about abortionist Willie Parker's distinction between "human beings" and "persons," which he trotted out during his [debate](#) with Mike Adams. Adams handled that objection persuasively in the exchange, so I will only add a few thoughts here.

For starters, why should anyone think there can be such a thing as a human who is not a person? Parker presents no argument for that. He merely asserts it. Idling beneath his assumption is **body-self dualism**, which, again, he never defends.

According to **body-self dualism [and the Materialism worldview]**, the real you is not your body, which is mere matter in motion. The **real you is your thoughts, aims, desires, conscious decisions, capacity to reason, and capacity for relationships**. Once you lose mental control in these areas, your living body remains but you do not.

Personhood theory applies body-self dualism to law and ethics. Personhood theory says being human isn't enough to ground your right to life. Only "persons" have that right—that is, **those who achieve a certain level of cognitive functioning**. Lose that function and your right to life no longer applies. In short, we are left with two classes of human beings: human non-persons we can kill and human persons we can't. If you don't make the grade, your rights can be overridden by the interests of actual persons.

Personhood theory grounded in body-self dualism is deeply problematic and pro-life Christians must be ready to say **why**?

First, body-self dualism is **subjective**. When personhood is detached from the living human body, human value is entirely subjective. Who decides which traits matter? Might makes right. **Those making the rules decide if your life is worth living.**

Second, body-self dualism is counterintuitive. If pressed, you are forced to say things like, "My body existed before I did" or "I was mere matter until my conscious self showed up." You must also admit that you've never hugged your mother since one cannot hug desires, thoughts, and aims. And if you're a psychologist, don't even think of curing multiple personality disorders. That would entail mass murder, given multiple personalities—each with separate aims, desires, and thoughts—are intentionally destroyed in treatment. At bottom, body-self dualism cannot explain simple statements like "you see." Sensory acts like seeing involve bodily acts (via the eyes) and intellectual acts (via the mind). Both are inextricably wound up in human nature.

Third, body-self dualism cannot account for human equality. Does each and every human being have an equal right to life or do only some have it in virtue of some characteristic which

may come and go within the course of their lifetimes? If an arbitrarily selected trait like self-awareness grounds fundamental human value, and we don't share that trait equally, those with more of it have a greater right to life than those with less. Human equality is a myth.

Fourth, body-self dualism distorts human “dignity.” Parker confuses intrinsic dignity, which we have in virtue of our humanity made in the image of God, with attributed dignity, which we earn through achievement or performance. As Christopher Kaczor points out, the beach bum and the university scholar are both equal in their God-given, intrinsic dignity. However, they differ in their attributed dignity.

Fifth, body-self dualism provides a philosophical foundation for intentionally killing innocent human beings outside the womb and justifies involuntary euthanasia and involuntary organ donation. That is, if the rights of a cognitively disabled patient can be overridden by the interests of actual persons, what's wrong with intentionally killing him to benefit others? Given the logic of personhood theory, there is no theoretical ground for opposing such killing. If that weren't bad enough, on personhood theory, cognitively disabled humans could—and perhaps, should be—used for organ harvesting that benefits actual “persons.” To borrow an example from Frank Beckwith, Suppose a surgeon alters the brain of a developing fetus so he or she never attains self-awareness. At age five, the child is killed to provide organs for actual, self-aware people. On theoretical grounds, how is this wrong? I'm not making this stuff up. Jeff McMahan and Carol Kahn suggest creating “body clones”—brain-altered bodies cultivated for rejection-free body parts. The medical journal *Lancet* opines that unconscious people should be lethally injected so their organs can be harvested.

Christians have a better foundation for human dignity. Instead of setting aside an entire class of human beings to be killed because they don't measure up, we say that all humans have an equal right to life regardless of size, development, cognitive function, or dependency. In other words, our view is inclusive, indeed, wide open to all.