THE IMAGE OF GOD, PERSONHOOD AND DISABILITY

Jim Good
Nazarene Theological College, Brisbane

Peter Singer is currently Professor of Bioethics at Princeton University's Center for Human Values. His book *Practical Ethics* has been translated into 15 languages and used in courses throughout the world. Singer is described by a critic as "one of the most influential philosophers in the world today."[1] In 1979 Singer suggested, "The life of a newborn baby is of less value than the life of a pig, a dog, or a chimpanzee is to the nonhuman animal."[2] In 1993 he argued, "Life only begins in the morally significant sense when there is an awareness of one's existence over time."[3] Building upon these views, Singer proposes the notion of the replaceable fetus/newborn baby in cases where disability is detected. In Singer's thinking, neither the fetus or the newborn baby is aware of their existence and they are not to be considered as a person. Consequently, he reasons that it is feasible to abort the unborn child with disabilities or kill the newly born child with disabilities on the basis that the loss of their life "is outweighed by the gain of a better life for the normal child who will be conceived only if the disabled one dies."[4] Singer explains:

> When the death of a disabled infant will lead to the birth of another infant with better prospects of a happy life, the total amount of happiness will be greater if the disabled infant is killed. The loss of a *happy* life for the first infant is outweighed by the gain of a *happier* life for the second… Killing a disabled infant is not morally equivalent to killing a person. Very often it is not wrong at all.[5]

In 1996 Singer defended two sets of parents who wanted their newborn infants with Down's syndrome to die. He explained:

> There is no sharp ethical distinction between what they did, and what most pregnant women do when they are offered an abortion because the fetus they are carrying has Down's syndrome…There remains however the problem of the lack of any clear boundary between the newborn infant, who is clearly not a person in the ethically relevant sense, and the young child, who is. In our book *Should The Baby Live?* my colleague Helga Kuhse and I suggested that a period of 28 days after birth might be allowed before an infant is accepted as having the same right to life as others. This is clearly well before the infant could have a sense of its own existence over time, and would allow a couple to decide that it is better not to continue with a life that has begun very badly… Could we return to a view of infants more like that of ancient Greece, in which a public ceremony a short time after birth, marked not only the parents' decision to accept the child but also society's conferral on it of the status of a person?[6]

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[1] John Swinton, *Raging With Compassion: Pastoral Responses to the Problem of Evil* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 2007), 187.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics,* 2nd ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 189.

[4] Ibid.188.

[5] Ibid. 186 and 191.

[6] Peter Singer, *Rethinking Life & Death* (New York: St Martin's/Griffin, 1996), 217.

For Singer, an individual should not be deemed as a person until they demonstrate rational capacity and a sense of their own existence, and not before those involved with them recognize they are capable of contributing happiness to others, and enjoying happiness themselves, in ways equivalent to any potential replacement child.

Many people will be repulsed by the views expressed by Singer regarding the infanticide of children born with disabilities. They will be deeply offended by his cold and clinical approach to abortion. However, perhaps surprisingly, his definition is not altogether different from that commonly offered by mainstream Western Christianity. James Torrance explains that Western theology has been enamored for the past 1500 years with a concept of the person as a "substance possessing three faculties, reason, will and emotion, with primacy given to reason."[7] Stanley Grenz argues that Protestant theologians of the last two hundred years have generally seen the essential attributes of a person as the capacity for reason, along with the possession of conscience and will.[8] Max Turner[9] asserts that a person's capacity for rational thought and analysis, awareness of self and the possession of an advanced degree of autonomy in decision making are all seen by Western Christianity as prerequisites to the recognition of an individual's personhood.[10] Like Singer, many Western Christians appear to believe that an individual must possess and demonstrate certain abilities to be considered a

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[7] James Torrance, "The Doctrine of the Trinity in Our Contemporary Situation," in Alisdair I. C. Herron (ed.) *The Forgotten Trinity: A Selection of Papers Presented To The BCC Study Commission on Trinitarian Doctrine Today* (London: BCC/CCBI Inter-Church House, 1991), 14.

[8] Stanley Grenz, *The Social God and the Relational Self: A Trinitarian Theology of the Imago Dei* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998.) 171ff.

[9] Max Turner, "Approaching 'Personhood' in the New Testament, With Special Reference to Ephesians" in *Evangelical Quarterly* 77.3 (July 2005), 212-213.

[10] The word "recognition" is used deliberately. While there are similarities in the way the two groups define personhood there is also an important difference. For Singer an individual remains a non-person until they satisfy his definition. The Christians described here use an individual's development of rational capacities to permit the "recognition" of the personhood they would argue has existed in that individual in a dormant or unfulfilled state all along. John D. Zizioulas, "On Being a Person: Towards an Ontology of Personhood," in Christopher Schwobel and Colin E. Gunton (eds.) *Persons, Divine and Human* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991) and *Being As Communion,* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2000) offers the most helpful analysis for questioning Western assumptions that people "have" personhood as opposed to "being" persons. For further reading see: Dean G. Blevins, "The Practicing Self: A Theory of Personhood" in *The Asbury Theological Journal* 60.1 (Spring 2005), 23-41; Peter Hicks, "One or Two? A Historical Survey of an Aspect of Personhood" in *Evangelical Quarterly* 77.1 (2005), 35-45; Graham McFarlane, "Living on the Edge – Moving Towards the Centre: the Place of Jesus Christ in our Quest for Personhood" in *Evangelical Quarterly* 78.1 (2006), 37-50; Steve Motyer, " 'Not Apart From Us' (Hebrews 11:40): physical community in the Letter to the Hebrews" in *Evangelical Quarterly* 77.3 (July 2005), 235-247; Deryck Sheriffs, "'Personhood' in the Old Testament? Who's asking?" in *Evangelical Quarterly* 77.1 (January 2005), 13-34; David Starling, "The Very Practical Doctrine of Total Depravity" in *The Briefing* Issue 363 (Dec 2008), 10-13; and Michael P. Wilson, "Theological Reflections on entering the World of the Disabled - the first tremors of an earthquake?" in *Epworth Review* 31.4, (October 2004.)

whole person. This is problematic for persons with disabilities. For their sake, at the very least, Christians need to discover and embrace more inclusive theologies of personhood.

Let me introduce my friend Craig.[11] Craig has a moderate to severe intellectual impairment, Down's syndrome, prominent levels of Autism, a poorly functioning lower intestine, an incomplete bowel, a colostomy bag, a significant vision impairment and poor hearing. Craig rarely speaks and he appears to know only a few words. As I think about Craig I can't help but wonder about the definitions of personhood provided already. Under these definitions Craig is not a person. Craig's parents acknowledge that he has brought them greater stress and difficulty than their other children. They admit that Craig experiences pain and hardship and indignity on a level few of us could manage. On Singer's scale of happiness then Craig doesn't qualify as a person. Craig's incapacities also mean his personhood remains unfulfilled in the view of much of mainstream Western Christianity. This disturbing reality is clearly at odds with the view held by Craig's parents who clearly believe him to be every bit as much a person as his siblings. During my many conversations with Craig's mum and dad, held over several years, it was common to hear things such as: "Craig's Craig"; "Craig is our 'cheeky' little boy"; "we understand that he has got problems, but we love him just the same as we love our other children." These comments have inspired me to seek an understanding of personhood that includes Craig. My method will be to view Genesis 1:26 and 1:27 as a starting point, taking seriously the idea that we have been made in the image of God. By beginning with *who God is* I hope to conceptualize *who we are* as persons made in God's image in a way that includes Craig.[12] My search comes at a time of renewed interest in Trinitarian conceptions of God. [13] This trend traces some of its roots to the theological reflections of Gregory of Nazianzen (A.D.330-389) and Augustine (A.D.354-430). By synthesizing aspects of their work I will establish that God is a communion of love between the three persons of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. I will then show that this understanding has significant implications for the personhood of all with disabilities.

Gregory of Nazianzen was one of the earliest to point out that an ontological distinction exists between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit even while they remain as one. The Godhead is seen by Gregory as "a monarchy that is not limited to one person…but one which is made of …the unbegotten, the begotten and (He) which proceeds from the Father."[14] This three-person God is completely unified: "one God worshipped in Trinity, and three, who are united in one Godhead."[15] This unity exists at various levels: partly through mutual indwelling - "the

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[11] This is not my friend's real name.

[12] I am indebted to Thomas A. Noble for this method. See his: "The Mission of the Holy Trinity," "Holy Persons," "East and West in the Theology of John Wesley," and "The Cappadocians, Augustine and Trinitarian Holiness" - Private Papers.

[13] See Alisdair I. C. Herron (ed.) *The Forgotten Trinity: A Selection of Papers Presented To The BCC Study Commission on Trinitarian Doctrine Today,* (London: BCC/CCBI Inter-Church House, 1991,) with James Torrance's "The Doctrine of the Trinity in Our Contemporary Situation," being particularly helpful.

[14] Philip Schaff, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Volume VII: Cyril of Jerusalem and Gregory of Nazianzen,* (Eerdmans Publishing Company: Grand Rapids, MI, 1978.) Oration XXIX, 301.

[15] Ibid. Oration XVIII, 259.

Father in the Son, and the Son in the Spirit…"[16]; partly through their being one essence – "a unified essence of the three persons"[17]; and partly through their unity of approach and understanding -"…a union of mind, an identity of motion, a convergence of its elements to unity."[18] In pointing out this unified, three-person God Gregory was able to carefully establish that the three are not isolated, autonomous beings lacking inter-personal connectedness. Instead, he noted the existence of a genuine relationship between the three – in his words God is an "infinite conjunction of three infinite beings"[19] with "mutual relations one to another."[20]

Like Gregory, Augustine saw that a relationship existed between the three persons of the Trinity: "Indeed, it is hard to see how we can say, either the Father alone or the Son alone; since both the Father is with the Son, and the Son with the Father… because they are always one in relation to the other, and neither the one nor the other alone."[21] However, Augustine goes a step further than Gregory by explaining *what* provides the link in God's communion of relationships. Augustine takes passages from 1John and suggests that God *is* Love.[22] Love is always "*of* someone that loves" and with love "something *is* (always) loved." [23] Augustine states that love is "a certain life which couples or seeks to couple together him that loves and that which is loved."[24] Consequently, Augustine establishes a "three" wherever love is to be found: "he that loves, that which is loved and love."[25] Augustine then suggests that while "both God the Father and God the Son can be called love"[26] it is fitting that, of the three, the Holy Spirit "specially be called love."[27] He reasons: "the Spirit Himself is God who is Love (and) …if there be among the gifts no greater gift than love, and there is no greater gift of God than the Holy Spirit, what follows more naturally than the Holy Spirit is Himself Love, who is called both God and of God."[28] Augustine then explains that the Holy Spirit, being common to both the Father and the Son, provides the "ineffable communion" existing between the Father and the Son.[29] Consequently, because the Holy Spirit is both God and

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[16] Ibid. The Prolegomena, 193.

[17] Ibid. Oration XXI, 279.

[18] Ibid. Oration XXIX, 301.

[19] Ibid. Oration XL, 375.

[20] Ibid. "The Fifth Theological Oration," 322.

[21] Philip Schaff, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Volume III: St Augustin: On The Holy Trinity, Doctrinal Treatises, Moral Treatises,* (Eerdmans Publishing Company: Grand Rapids, MI, 1978.) Book VI, Chapter 7, 101.

[22] Ibid. Book VIII, Chapter 8, 123.

[23] Ibid.124

[24] Ibid.

[25] Ibid.

[26] Ibid. Book XV, Chapter 17, 216.

[27] Ibid.

[28] Ibid. Book XV, Chapter 19, 219.

[29] Ibid.

Love and the communion between all three, and because each dwells ineffably in the other, love is thereby highlighted as the crucial link in the network of relationships existing amongst this three-person God. This "love" is freely bestowed by each to the other and freely received by each from the other.[30] Augustine was very careful to point out, however, that "substance should not be one thing and love another, but the substance itself should be love, and love itself should be substance…"[31] With this being the case, the Holy Spirit loves because the Holy Spirit *is* Love, and being in very substance "love" the Holy Spirit cannot help but be and do that which He substantially is.

These views of Augustine and Gregory expressed more than 1600 years ago help us today to identify God as a communion of relationships subsisting in love. This understanding of God permits some vitally important assumptions to be made about personhood, especially given the acceptance that we are made in the image of this God. Consequently, I propose that an individual is a person in so far as they receive love from others and, proportionate to their capacity, reciprocate that love in some way. There are three aspects to this proposal. First, God guarantees the personhood of each through His perpetual involvement in their life, even from before birth. Second, persons exist within a network of inter-personal relationships. Third, persons reciprocate the love bestowed upon them by others in a way that is proportionate to their capacity. Each of these aspects is considered below, along with the way in which they impact the personhood of those with disabilities. I will also highlight a number of significant implications stemming from this proposal.

1. God is the first 'other' in this matrix of inter-personal relationships. God guarantees the personhood of each individual by relating to them and continuing to hold them in love prior to any response. As previously mentioned, Augustine was one of the first to highlight the significance of this Biblical truth. He pointed out that God loves because God is Love and that it was God who "first loved us."[32] The opening chapters of the Bible also attest to this truth. Joseph Coleson points to God's loving response following the Fall: "God did not leave the human race hopelessly trapped… God put into motion a plan to redeem the race and restore us to a condition like (perhaps even better than) that enjoyed by the first humans before the Fall."[33] Coleson explains that Genesis 3 should not be considered as God inflicting punishment upon His creation, for that would mean God was acting inconsistently with His nature as a loving, relational being. Rather, Genesis 3 contains God's predictions about what would take place now that His creation had exercised its God given freedom. God's core nature as loving and relational is then once again demonstrated by Genesis 3:21, where God is shown clothing Adam and Eve by personally making garments for them. Psalm 139 illustrates that God knows each person intimately from the moment of our conception:

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[30] Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion & Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 25.

[31] Schaff, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Volume III: St Augustin:…*Book XV, Chapter 17, 216.

[32] Schaff, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Volume III: St Augustin:…* Book XV: Chapter 17, 217.

[33] Joseph E. Coleson, *Ezer Cenegdo: A Power Like Him, Facing Him as Equal* (Grantham: Wesleyan/Holiness Women Clergy, 1996), 1 and 2.

> You created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb… My frame
> was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place. When I was woven
> together in the depths of the earth, your eyes saw my unformed body.

God knows each person at the point of their birth. Psalm 22:9-10 says:

> You brought me out of the womb; you made me trust in you even at my mother's breast.
> From birth I was cast upon you; from my mother's womb you have been my God.

God then continues to know and journey with each person throughout their life. Psalm 23 speaks of a relational God who leads, guides, restores, journeys with and loves "all the days of my life." In the New Testament John 3:16 acts as a reminder that God's love for the world was so great that the giving of Jesus (God's self-giving) came before our response of belief. Galatians 2:20 also reveals a loving, self-giving God. Romans 5:8 highlights, "God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

Looking beyond these passages, the self-giving love of the incarnate Christ, rooted as it is in the self-giving love of the immanent Trinity, provides compelling evidence of a loving and relational God who validates the personhood of all. Despite having voluntarily alienated ourselves from God, God demonstrates in the incarnation a desire and will to embrace and include all within his love: "In the Christ event God sympathetically enters into our midst and communicates a love that spills over with unconditional love for all persons."[34] These "persons" include those who were lame, deaf, blind, covered with leprosy, or who had bled for many years. The incarnation demonstrates that those marginalised by our society actually enjoy the intimate, intentional involvement of the triune God in their lives. God teaches us to do the same, "To give ourselves to others and welcome them, to readjust our identities to make space for them."[35]

2. The personhood of all with disabilities is also established by their living within a set of relationships with other people. This could be their parents, siblings, work colleagues, social workers or friends.[36] Self-sufficiency is an illusion: "Non-disabled and disabled persons alike are caught up in networks of dependencies."[37] Jean Vanier also highlights this truth. Vanier spent the last 40 years of his life living with persons with disabilities in a small community in France. Each time someone with a disability passes away within this community, that person's life is celebrated and commemorated.[38] People gather together to tell stories about the person, to remember the contribution of that person to their group. Their laughter attests to the contribution this person has made to others, while their tears indicate the emotional connection that existed between this person and others within the group. Together, the tears and laughter indicate the recently departed person had belonged to the group, and the group

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[34] Thomas E. Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion: A Theology of Disability and Hospitality* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press, 2008), 18.

[35] Ibid. 29.

[36] Paul S. Fiddes, *Participating in God*: *A Pastoral Doctrine of the Trinity* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd. 2000), 49

[37] Reynolds, 47 & 103.

[38] Stanley Hauerwas & Jean Vanier, *Living Gently in a Violent World: The Prophetic Witness of Weakness* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 32

had belonged to that person. Quite clearly, relationships develop within Vanier's community in the same way that relationships develop in the world of those without apparent disabilities. The tears, laughter, celebration and mourning all indicate that persons with disabilities are not rendered indifferent to one another, they are not neutral onlookers or dispassionate observers of one another. Rather, Vanier's description of life within his community clearly indicates that persons with disabilities exist within a relational framework that evokes emotions, where priority is given and attention is paid to the other, and where people are lured outside of themselves to participate in events that are larger than themselves and which involve others.

Vanier's experiences are not unique. John Swinton describes attending the funeral for his friend Joanne, a woman whose disabilities were so severe she communicated almost exclusively through her eyes and her smile.

> When Joanne died a few months ago… I cried, we all did. At the funeral, I watched Joanne's parents pain and sadness; I watched her other caregivers truly mourn for the loss that they had experienced. I saw that when Joanne left this world, something changed, and it was not a change for the better. We miss her.[39]

Joanne's passing was mourned by so many people precisely because she existed as one person within a matrix of loving relationships.

3. Proportionate to capacity, an individual is a person because they reciprocate the love they have received from others. We have already noted Vanier's description of the celebration of a person's life following their funeral and the depth of emotion that is so clearly and regularly evident on these occasions. That this emotion exists is testament to the reciprocal loving relationships that are formed by persons with disabilities. While it is obvious that men and women with disabilities are capable of relationships, an important question remains: are persons with disabilities, who lack the rational capacity of others, capable of responding to and reciprocating God's love? After many years of close observation Vanier takes up the case for the affirmative:

> There are many things about people with intellectual disabilities that I do not understand, and I don't know how to communicate well with each one. But gradually, over the years, I have learned many things from them and about them – primarily, that within these people there is openness to God. And their longing for closeness is felt on a personal, intimate level. I don't know whether it's just the culture of my little community in France, but I never hear a person with a disability talking about 'Christ' or 'the LORD.' They only talk about 'Jesus' using his little name.[40]

Vanier's comments should challenge our preconceptions. Far from suggesting a limited capacity for responding to God, Vanier actually suggests that those with disabilities are capable of far greater intimacy with God than many others. Theirs is not the rational, well thought out response to God that comes from one with a superior intellect. Rather, Vanier notes a deeply sincere and heartfelt trust and confidence in the one they know closely and intimately as "Jesus." Could it be possible that these are the ones Jesus had in mind when,

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[39]Swinton, 185.

[40]Hauerwas and Vanier, 32.

with children gathered around him, he commented, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these"?[41]

But what of persons whose disability renders them unable to even utter the name of Jesus? Augustine's comments are worth noting:

> For in the same epistle he says a little later on "Beloved, let us love one another, and everyone that loveth is born of God and knoweth God. He that loveth not, knoweth not God, for God is love." And this passage declares sufficiently and plainly that this same brotherly love itself (for that is brotherly love by which we love one another) is set forth by so great an authority, not only to be from God, but to be God…For since "God is Love" he who loves certainly loves God; but he must need love love, who loves his brother. And so a little later he says "For he that loveth not his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen?" because the reason that he does not see God is that he doth not love his brother. For he who does not love his brother, abideth not in love; and he who abideth not in love, abideth not in God, because God is Love.[42]

Here Augustine suggests that whosoever loves his brother, loves God, because by the very act of loving we show that we love love, and by loving love we love God, who is Love. In these terms, any response of love by a person with a disability toward another person can be termed a response of love to the God who is Love. This Augustinian definition allows for the conclusion that the Joanne of Swinton's experience is a lover of God. Joanne's disabilities were of the utmost severity and she was rendered unable to communicate with words. However, "her eyes communicated a multitude of feelings and experiences…they laughed, they danced, they cried, they reminded us of the fullness of her personhood even in the midst of her apparent brokenness."[43] Joanne's smile showed her capacity for receiving and reciprocating love. Swinton recalls an occasion when Joanne's caregiver slowly ran the back of her hand across her stomach: "A deep smile passed across Joanne's face … and I sensed the presence of love."[44] Using the thinking of Augustine, it is possible to see in Joanne's loving response to her caregiver a demonstration of Joanne's love for God.

Such a relational understanding of personhood offers some important implications for those with disabilities. First, individuals with a disability are persons prior to their birth.[45] Interestingly, the possibility of pre-natal relational interaction is raised in a secular book that has sold over one million copies. The book is promoted as "the childbirth bible for today's Australian parents" and is authored by Miriam Stoppard, a woman described as "the UK's best known expert on pregnancy and birth."[46] Stoppard advises expectant parents:

> If you're observant and aware, you and your partner can be in touch with your unborn baby throughout your pregnancy. Your baby can hear you talk and sing, and can feel you

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[41] Mark 10:14.

[42] Augustine, BOOK VIII: Chapter 8, 123.

[43] Swinton, 184.

[44] Swinton, 185.

[45] See Ian Leck, "Abortion 40 Years On" in *Epworth Review,* 35.4, (October 2008.)

[46] Inside cover of Dr Miriam Stoppard, *Conception, Pregnancy & Birth* (London: Dorling Kindersley, 2005).

> touch him through your abdominal wall…Your baby is able to respond to sounds coming from the outside world,… and can make out the emotional tone of voices and moves her body in rhythm to your speech. She'll be soothed if you use a soft, reassuring tone.[47]

Stoppard asserts that the yet to be born child is held in a relationship by others and enjoys and responds to them in ways proportionate to their capacity to do so. Accordingly, given my definition, the yet to be born baby should be considered a person, a status denied that child by the definitions offered by such as Peter Singer.

Second, viewing those with disabilities as persons on the basis of the three aspects mentioned in my proposal helps prevent the commoditization of persons with disabilities. Thomas Reynolds, whose son is disabled, recognizes this danger when he writes: "Let me simply state from the start that I do not believe persons with disabilities are simply moral lessons or a means of inspiration for non-disabled people."[48] This danger is avoided by heeding the advice of Jean Vanier:

> Can we accept and love people with disabilities as they are? When we want to change people, we have power. We have generosity. We have goodness. But we have a cleavage when we want to do good things for people. The vision of Jesus was extraordinary…Jesus entered into this world to love people just as they are.[49]

We will avoid using a person with a disability as a commodity to be traded for our benefit when we learn to cherish their uniqueness and enter into a shared journey with them where we expect to give and receive.

Third, and finally, a relational conception of personhood guarantees that our status as persons is retained throughout our life regardless of our circumstances. At first glance this might not particularly bother either Peter Singer or those Christians who conceive personhood in terms of rational capacities. But perhaps a closer look at disability statistics might awaken such people to the very real danger of their being excluded from personhood by virtue of their own understanding of the term. Lindsay Gething points out that "overall, the occurrence of disability increases with age."[50] As an indication of this, Gething highlights a detailed study of disability carried out in 1992 revealing that only 7% of Canadians with disabilities were younger than fifteen years of age as compared with 14% being aged between thirty-five and fifty-four, and 43% being aged over sixty-five years.[51] Many of the incidences of disability in the older age brackets were due to the effects of conditions such as dementia and Alzheimer's or had been acquired in later years through spinal chord or brain injury. The point of this is a relatively simple one; as we age we are more likely to acquire a disability that may in fact impair our rational capacity. The lingering question then, especially for such as Peter Singer, is: do those who acquire disability later in life forfeit their status as persons at that point? This question was recently made very real to me after a meeting with a man in his fifties called

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[47]Ibid. 190-192.

[48]Reynolds, 16.

[49]Hauerwas & Vanier 25, 62 and 74-75.

[50]Lindsay Gething, *Person to Person: Community Awareness of Disability* (Sydney: Maclennan and Petty, 1997),7.

[51]Ibid. 5.

Alan.[52] Among a host of other incapacities, Alan can only say a few slurred words, he cannot independently prepare or eat a meal and he needs reminding to go the toilet. I had assumed that Alan had been disabled since birth until I was introduced to his twenty-five year old daughter who informed us that her dad had become disabled following a horrific car crash. Given the limitations of his intellect and his obvious unhappiness, is Alan no longer a person as suggested by Singer's definition? Has Alan in some way forfeited the recognition of his personhood granted to him as a baby by the definition used by many Western Christians? With a relational conception of personhood, tied as it is to our being made in the image of the triune God who is "a communion of relationships subsisting in love," the question of Alan's personhood is forever resolved in the affirmative. As each of us age, I think we should be glad about that.

Conclusion

The comments of Craig's parents ("Craig's Craig… he is our 'cheeky' little boy…we understand that he has got problems, but we love him just the same as we love our other children…") provide an important insight into personhood and disability. There, in just a few words, is the practical outworking of a thought process recognising personhood as a way of being that exists within community. Such thinking acknowledges that an individual is a person because they receive love from others and, proportionate to their capacity, reciprocate that love in some way. We have seen already that God is the first 'other' and that God holds each of us in a relationship of love, valuing each of us for the unique creations that we are. Let's not be mistaken, God is aware of the impairments of each one of us. Nevertheless, God's love for each of us also remains steadfast. None are excluded from God's love, and none are excluded from God's declaration that they are a person made in His image. That love, along with our being persons, exists and continues regardless of our direct response. That 'vertical' element affirms Craig's personhood. But there is also a 'horizontal' aspect. Craig's parents recognize and respect Craig's uniqueness; to them, Craig is Craig, complete, whole and distinct from their other children, and yet also as important to them as any of their children. Craig is an integral part of their family community; he is, as they say, their little boy. Theirs is a reciprocal relationship, they speak of Craig as their "cheeky" boy precisely for the reason that Craig interacts with them and responds to them in ways they clearly recognize. In a way that is proportionate to his capacity to do so, in his own way, Craig is reciprocating the love of his parents, and his parents recognize and cherish this fact. Others might miss it, but Craig's parents proudly declare the genuinely cheeky interaction they enjoy with their son. As Craig responds to, interacts with and loves his parents, he demonstrates in a very real way his love for the God who is Love. Craig may lack rational capacity, and Craig may have brought and endured hardship and unhappiness (both to himself and to others) that would be arguably greater than a replacement child born without his level of impairments. But Craig must not have his personhood denied by Peter Singer. Nor can we allow it to go un-recognized by the view of personhood commonly found in modern, Western Christianity. Craig *is* a person by virtue of his being held in a network of loving relationships with God and with other people. From before birth, Craig has always been a person created in the image of the Triune God. Craig will continue as a person throughout the remainder of his life. Craig doesn't *have* personhood. Craig *is* a person.

Bibliography

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[52]This is not the man's real name.

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