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# METAPHYSICS, ETHICS AND PERSONHOOD: A RESPONSE TO KEVIN CORCORAN

Gregory E. Ganssle

In a recent issue of this journal, Kevin Corcoran has argued that the metaphysical theory one holds to about the nature of human persons is irrelevant to the sort of ethical questions that occupy bioethicists as well as the general public. Specifically, he argues that whether one holds a constitution view of human persons, an animalist view, or a substance dualist view, the real work in one's ethical reasoning is done by certain moral principles rather than by metaphysical ones. I raise objections to his analysis and propose that it is a combination of ethical principles and metaphysical principles that does the work in our judgements about the morality of abortion and other actions.

How do we go about coming to conclusions about ethical issues? We always employ some kind of ethical reasoning. It is also the case that ethical reasoning alone will not generate conclusions about particular ethical dilemmas. We need some other kind of premises as well. For example, if I wonder whether I am obligated to give you \$10.00, I need more than the ethical premise, "One ought to pay one's debts." In this case, I also need a bit of empirical knowledge. I need the knowledge that I borrowed \$10.00 from you previously. If we combine the right ethical claim and the empirical knowledge, we can generate an ethical conclusion that I am (at least *prima facie*) obligated to give you \$10.00.

## *Metaphysics and Ethical Disputes*

Some philosophers have argued that there are ethical issues that require more than the combination of ethical principles and empirical knowledge. For some issues, especially issues concerning ethics at the beginning and at the end of life, metaphysical considerations are thought also to be important. Not every philosopher, however, thinks that metaphysics plays a large role in these issues. For example, in a recent issue of this journal, Kevin Corcoran has argued that it is not the metaphysical theory one holds about the nature of human persons that will determine the outcome of the sort of ethical questions about the beginning and the end of life.<sup>1</sup> Specifically, he argues that whether one holds to a constitution view, an animalist view, or a substance dualist view of human persons, issues such as the morality of abortion or of various kinds of euthanasia will be decid-



ed more by one's ethical principles than by one's metaphysical theory.

The foil for Corcoran's discussion is the recent book by JP Moreland and Scott Rae, *Body and Soul: Human Nature and the Crisis in Ethics*.<sup>2</sup> Moreland and Rae think that it is metaphysics that is crucial for the central ethical issues of the day such as abortion, euthanasia and cloning. The project of their book is not to argue directly for the connection between metaphysics and ethics. It is to argue, first, that a Thomistic version of dualism is the best metaphysical view of the human person and, second, that this kind of dualism provides the surest ground for the protection of human beings at the boundaries of life.

Corcoran claims that Moreland and Rae never actually argue that the metaphysics of personhood is crucial to the ethical debates. Rather, they proceed under the assumption that personhood is the central issue. Corcoran reconstructs their line of thinking as trading on the following central premise: "If some human organism fails to instantiate the property of being a person, then that organism lacks a moral status sufficient for generating moral obligations or moral expectations to protect its life." (220). They argue that Naturalistic and "Christian Complimentarian" views of the person are not sufficient because they entail that some human beings are not human persons. Moreland and Rae, according to Corcoran, do not give us any reason to accept their central premise.

Corcoran's main criticism is to point out that it is never the metaphysical position that is doing the real work in these ethical debates. Rather, it is some ethical principle that is employed in combination with the metaphysics that does the work. He writes:

In this paper I acknowledge that naturalist views of human persons like animalism and CV [the Constitution View] fail to provide metaphysical resources necessary or sufficient for generating moral obligations or moral expectations to protect the life of the human fetus or PVS patient [patient in a Persistent Vegetative State]. I point out, however, that *any* metaphysical view of persons, be that metaphysic dualist or naturalist in nature, is impotent to provide such resources. I argue that other resources, metaphysically neutral with respect to dualism and naturalism, must be added to such views in order to generate moral obligations or moral expectations to protect human life. (219)

What Corcoran means by the impotence of a metaphysical view of persons can be illustrated when we see that someone can hold that the human fetus is a human person and still be pro-abortion. This combination is coherent if one holds that there are moral grounds for taking another human person's life and that abortion is or can be justified by those grounds. Conversely, one can also hold that the human fetus is not a person and still be anti-abortion. Corcoran offers the following ethical principle as being sufficient to protect the unborn fetus. "[E]very human fetus is created by God with the ultimate intention of coming to constitute a person and on the basis of God's ultimately good intentions for it the life of the fetus ought to be protected." (223) If one's ethic is grounded in God's

intentions one can protect the fetus without believing it to be a person. For each metaphysical position about persons one might hold, then, a variety of ethical positions are possible.

So far as this line of criticism is concerned, I think Corcoran is mostly right. It is true that the ethical position you hold about abortion will not depend on your metaphysics alone. Any metaphysical position about the personhood of the human fetus or about the nature of human persons in general can be held by either side of some ethical dispute as long as the right kind of ethical principles are deployed. So long as your ethical principles are sufficiently accommodating, you can hold any metaphysical view you want and still not hold views considered to be morally suspect. You can hold that dogs are metaphysically inferior to human beings but, armed with the ethical principle that any sentient being ought to be granted equal consideration and protection, you will protect dogs to exactly the same degree that you will protect human beings. Conversely, you can have an egalitarian metaphysics of sentient beings and still give strongly preferential treatment to human beings so long as your ethical principle allows you to distinguish between sentient beings that have rights to protection and those that do not.

I am not suggesting that these strange combinations are the inevitable outcome of a position like Corcoran's, or that he endorses such maneuvers. Such possibilities are instructive because Corcoran's major point is, I think, largely correct. It is possible to hold any metaphysical view at all and still get all the "right" answers on whatever ethical quiz you take if your ethical principles are carefully constructed. Clearly it is the combination of your metaphysics and your ethical principles that carries the day.

So how exactly does metaphysics play a role in ethical conclusions? I want to make two points, here. Consider a fairly obvious ethical principle: *It is morally wrong to torture an innocent person to death just for fun.* In what ways will metaphysics have a bearing on arguments that build on this principle? Metaphysics helps us sort out which things fall into the category of person and which things do not. An ethical principle such as *We have a moral obligation to protect important works of art* does not require a metaphysics of persons for its application. It may require a metaphysics of art. A principle such as *One ought to pay one's debts* may require very little by way of metaphysics.

The second point is that it is not the *details* of one's metaphysical theory that makes the difference in supporting an ethical conclusion. There are many different but incompatible positions about the metaphysics of persons that grant the human fetus personhood (as there are many different but incompatible theories that do not.) So far as some of the standard arguments for or against abortion are concerned, these theories are on a par. They each sort out persons from non-persons in a way that lands human fetuses on one side rather than the other.

So I am not prepared to concede that your metaphysical view is *impotent* in this regard. Sometimes your metaphysics will have to do quite a bit of work. Suppose you hold that you ought not torture an innocent person to death. This is an ethical principle that will not require much argumentation. If you seek to outlaw the fur industry based on this principle, your

metaphysics will have to do a lot of work. You will have to argue that weasels, minks and skunks are persons in the relevant sense and that harvesting them for fur is a form of torture.<sup>3</sup> My point is that either your ethical principle or your metaphysics will be doing the lion's share of the work depending upon which is more obvious than the other. In the fur case, it is not obvious that minks are persons, so you will have to have strong metaphysical arguments to support your ethical conclusion.

Neither your metaphysical view nor your ethical principles by themselves determine that outcome of an ethical issue. So, let us agree that it is a combination of principles (ethical, metaphysical and empirical) that is required to ground our ethical judgements about abortion and the like. We will call this thesis the *combination thesis*. I want to ask three questions with this thesis in mind and then raise one objection to Corcoran's treatment of abortion and the death of a person.

### *Three Questions*

#### *1. Do Moreland and Rae fail to grasp the combination thesis?*

We can wonder whether Moreland and Rae's approach is vitiated by their ignoring the combination thesis. They certainly claim repeatedly that metaphysics of person is crucial for the ethical debates they discuss.<sup>4</sup> I think that they do not actually ignore the thesis. Rather they assume it, and they assume that most of the relevant ethical principles that are both plausible and culturally embedded will trade on the distinction between persons and non-persons. They do not argue for this directly but they do show how many in these debates frame their arguments around the question of personhood. The abortion arguments, for example, are presented in terms of ethical principles such as the claim that a woman has a right to do what she wants with her body. Moreland and Rae point out that without a metaphysical view that the fetus is not a person, such arguments are not successful. So in working with the actual ethical arguments, they show their awareness that it is a combination of ethics and metaphysics that makes the arguments work.

#### *2. Are moral obligations all or nothing affairs?*

Corcoran implies that Moreland and Rae think moral obligations are all or nothing affairs. The sentence he uses to capture their central premise makes this claim clear. "If some human organism fails to instantiate the property of being a person, then that organism lacks a moral status sufficient for generating moral obligations or moral expectations to protect its life." (220). If a position does not protect the fetus to the same degree that it protects a fully functioning normal adult, then it offers no protection at all. I do not think Moreland and Rae hold this view. The question of what constitutes adequate protection is one that gets its bite from moral dilemmas. It is relatively easy to have an ethic that protects a fetus or a dog or a city park. The difficult questions come in when *prima facie* obligations come into conflict with other *prima facie* obligations. Do we keep the park or

build adequate housing for the inhabitants of the city? Ethical dilemmas involve the tug of competing claims. Which of the claimants deserves greater consideration and protection? Perhaps we can shed more light on the discussion by talking of a combination of ethics and metaphysics offering *degrees* of protection rather than either offering protection or failing to offer protection.

I think the reason that the issue of personhood has been and continues to be central is that when ethical principles conflict, the lesser obligation gives way to the greater. Any combination of ethics and metaphysics that protects the unborn fetus while claiming that it is not a human person will give way to the greater demands of personhood somewhere along the line. So Corcoran's principle, that God's intention for the fetus warrants its protection, will work fine as long as there are no conflicts between the protection of the fetus and other values. A similar principle may protect the lives of dogs. Dogs are created by God and are sentient and have a significant degree of intelligence. They ought to be protected, all things being equal. There are cases in which it is perfectly fine to kill a dog, however. The degree to which a dog must be protected is much less than the degree to which a human person is to be protected.

We ought to note that the presumption in the abortion debate has often been that the obligation to protect the human fetus will give way to other obligations unless the fetus has the highest metaphysical status that is possible for it and, therefore, the right to the highest degree of protection. Unless it is a person, the presumption is that other considerations trump the rights of the fetus. Whether this presumption is justified or not, it demonstrates that it is in the meeting of conflicting obligations that the contribution of metaphysical views is critical.

Moreland and Rae have discerned the widespread assumption that it is personhood that will be decisive for the abortion debate. They would not claim that any view that holds that the fetus is not a person would automatically be a position that supports abortion. They do recognize that a "door is opened" in that the protection of the fetus will go only so far if it is less than a person.

### *3. To what degree should our metaphysics answer to our ethical theories?*

Is it legitimate to argue *from* an ethical position *to* a metaphysical one? I do not know. Sometimes I think that to do so is to walk backwards. It might be fun for a while but it is easy to lose your perspective and your balance. Our metaphysics ought to come first and our ethics ought to be built with our metaphysics in mind. This order is the order of reality. The order of knowing, however, may be different. I may be more sure of a certain ethical position than I am of a metaphysical one. For example, I am more sure that persons have intrinsic value and that it is wrong to torture a baby to death just for fun than I am that dualism or incompatibilism is true. In such a situation it ought to be legitimate to use our ethical thinking to help us come to our metaphysical position. In fact, one of the reasons I am a libertarian about human freedom is that I have great difficulty making sense of moral obligations otherwise. Perhaps if one is convinced that abortion is

morally wrong, and one wrestles with the arguments Moreland and Rae present, one will be drawn to a dualist position.

### *Abortion and the Death of a Person*

Corcoran raises the interesting objection to dualism to the effect that, on dualism, no abortion ends the life of any person (222). Since a person survives the death of her body, when a fetus dies, there is no person who ceases to exist. If abortion does not end the life of a person, then our reasons for opposing it must be grounded in some ethical prohibition other than one prohibiting the ending of a person's life.

I find this to be a very interesting objection. First we must note that this line of thought is not limited to fetuses. If dualism is true, no murder causes a person to cease to exist. Second, this consequence holds not only for dualists but for anyone who holds to anything near to the orthodox view of the afterlife. Whether the dualist or the constitution-theorist is correct, we hold it to be the case that no person ceases to exist at death.

I think we can still hold that, in some sense, death ends the life of the person. It certainly ends the *earthly* life of the person. So too on a dualist view of the fetus. An abortion ends the earthly life of the fetus. Clearly the scriptural prohibitions against murder are not based on the idea that to kill someone is to cause them to cease to exist. To kill is to end the earthly life of a person. The earthly life itself has value - but it is not the only value nor the highest value. Perhaps this is why there are things that are worse than death.<sup>5</sup>

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### NOTES

1. "Material Persons, Immaterial Souls and an Ethic of Life," *Faith and Philosophy* 20 (2003) 218-228. This article will be cited parenthetically.

2. J. P. Moreland and Scott B Rae, *Body and Soul: Human Nature and the Crisis in Ethics* Downers Grove, IL: Inter Varsity Press, 2000.

3. The claim that harvesting a mink for fur is a form of torture is an empirical claim. So this case involves some significant empirical claims as well as the ethical principles and metaphysical positions. Empirical knowledge is required to be confident that certain actions are to be counted as belonging to the relevant ethical sort. Sometimes empirical knowledge is relevant also to the claim that certain beings are to be counted as counting as the relevant metaphysical sort. Consider the metaphysical claim that a person is any living thing that exhibits certain capacities. That a mink or a skunk exhibits these capacities (or not) is not primarily a metaphysical thesis. It is an empirical one.

4. For example, on one page (236) they make the claim three times: "Our view of a human person touches virtually every debated issue in biomedical ethics today..." "The notion of personhood is central not only in reproductive technologies but also in genetic technologies." "Finally, the ongoing debate over physician-assisted suicide (PAS) and euthanasia involve the definition of a human person."

5. I wish to thank Kevin Corcoran for comments on this piece and for

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