

Introduction

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A MERICAN SOCIETY WITH ITS CULTURAL TRADITION has held certain assumptions, both manifest and latent, about what it means to be a "person." Today, our private and public assumptions about personhood or humanhood can no longer be taken for granted. In many arenas—legal, political, biological, medical, philosophical, and theological—we are witnessing uncertainty and conflict that signals fundamental ambiguities about whether, in American society, we can or should have a set of shared assumptions about personhood.

Many aspects of the "problem of personhood" with which our society is grappling are being raised most visibly in biology and medicine. What is life and death, and when do they begin? According to what criteria should we initiate or cease certain forms of treatment? How are developments in fields such as molecular biology, genetics, and neuroscience transforming our biological and social notions of "person"? Questions about and attempts to define personhood, however, are not confined to or solely determined by developments in biomedicine. They are embedded in a society's and culture's notions of the relationships between persons (the I and thou, the individual and the collective) in its legal and political system, in its attitudes toward and dealings

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with various classes of persons, and in its philosophical and religious traditions.

The papers in this issue address some of these varied contexts in which our ideas about persons or personhood are being questioned, debated, and perhaps reformulated. The papers were prepared for a conference, "The Problem of Personhood: Biomedical, Social, Legal, and Policy Views," held by Medicine in the Public Interest in New York, April 1-2, 1982. The conference was convened to add to our understanding of the views of personhood that may be emerging in our society, in part implicitly as one weaves together ideas and events taking shape in different forums. A major theme in the conference was a consideration of the ways that medical, philosophical, religious, and social matters pertaining to our private biology and social being have moved into and are being dealt with in public domains such as governmental commissions, courts, and legislatures. Are these the proper arenas for dealing with the problem of personhood? Is it possible and is it desirable, in a pluralistic society, to try and reach a formal agreement about what we mean by "person" that would be binding on us all? If so, what will be the form and substance of that agreement? If not, how should our society deal with the problem of personhood?

In addition to those who are represented by papers in this issue, the conference participants were: Sissela Bok, Harvard Medical School; Charles L. Bosk, Department of Sociology, University of Pennsylvania; Irving S. Cooper, Center for Physiologic Neurosurgery, Westchester County Medical Center; Margaret A. Farley, Yale University Divinity School; Charles O. Galvin, School of Law, Southern Methodist University; Hans Jonas, New School for Social Research; John Ladd, Department of Philosophy, Brown University; Robert J. Levine, Yale University School of Medicine; Victor M. Lidz, Department of Sociology, University of Pennsylvania; Stephen R. Scher, Medicine in the Public Interest; Howard P. Rome, Mayo Graduate School of Medicine; and Chris J.D. Zarafonitis, University of Michigan.

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