Is Nelson Mandela Still a Person? **[1]**

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Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela was a great man. He stood up against the injustices of Apartheid. He reached the zenith of human endeavours: achieving his life's goals, becoming a worldwide respected icon and hero, and the leader of a country which once sought to destroy him. But I believe that, to him, his greatest achievement was not his presidency—rather, it was seeing the realisation of his dreams of a free and fair South Africa liberated from hate and prejudice (regardless under whose stewardship) that was his greatest achievement. Not only was he man of greatness, but he was humble and compassionate as well, including towards his enemies. In this struggle he was of course not alone: many people stood beside him, fought with him, and fell around him in the decades-long struggle. But he could not be put down: even being sent to a prison colony could not quash his dreams.

In 1994, at the age of 76, Nelson Mandela became the first black president of South Africa. Five years later, at the end of his term, he voluntary stepped down and did not stand for re-election. Shortly thereafter he retired from public life. His life had been long and prosperous. Now he was ready to settle down, satisfied in what the country had become and achieved, and spend his golden years with his family and loved ones. He withdrew from public engagements and politics. Nelson Mandela, effectively, fell silent.

At the moment, at nearly 95 years of age, Mandela is in critical condition in hospital. His health had been ailing for a while now. He has been in hospital since 8 June and on life support for most of that time. The country, and the world, has come out in support of him. One may be allowed to believe that it is the prayers and nightly vigils of millions of people around the world who are keeping him suspended in this life by people desperately trying to draw him back into the land of the living.

But the truth is that he is an old man. Many people, at some point in their lives, want to be allowed to depart. I saw it in the eyes of my own grandfather the last time when I saw him: he was ready to go and did not believe that this world had anything more to offer him.

Mandela is a frail and elderly man. His life had peaked and has only been going downhill from there. He will never again revolutionise the world and it is doubtful whether he will actively engage in anything to the betterment of anyone ever again. He has become a burden on the health system. In that sense, he has become a feeble old geriatric. The truth is that, left to reach an advanced age, we shall all go that way. It happened earlier this year to Margaret Thatcher: the once powerful and revered "Iron Lady" had been crippled by dementia and had become the sad figure of a feeble and

fumbling old lady. Both of these giants achieved in their lives more than you or I ever will. But we shall all be made equal when our hourglasses run out. At the end of the lives of these two people specifically, they are or were incapable of requesting for their lives to be ended, if they wanted. In reality, there is no dignity in their deaths: just old, invalid and incapacitated people waiting for death to come. They are or were oblivious to everything happening around them, whether cards or flowers or well-wishes or media tributes or posters or books or banners or tears. And I can say this is true: I have stood by the bedside of a family member in an intensive care unit. I have seen how cold, mechanical machines must pump life into the body of a once great and strong man. That man's bear chest heaves with each hiss of the ventilator as the biology is conflicted whether to continue the fight or give up. There is no dignity in that.

This sad situation has led many people to support euthanasia. Rather than wasting away in a hospital bed, they believe people should have the choice of a swift and painless exit from this life. I do not support euthanasia. But let us suppose for a moment that pro-euthanasia advocates hold some valid points. Let us see what implication this has for the people who are on the other side of their lives.

The euthanasia advocacy group Dignity in Dying [2], like others across the world, strive to have euthanasia legalised. This group features the support of some prominent celebrities. One of them, Sir Patrick Stewart, is being used in their latest campaign. He is quoted on their website as saying, "We have no control over how we arrive in the world, but at the end of a life we should have legal control over how we end it." This quote is interesting, because it highlights the helplessness which we have at the beginning of life. It underscores the frailty of life at birth (as it is near death). But the frailty at birth is different from the one of the elderly in a hospital bed: for the one life, strength and opportunity is waxing, for the other it is waning.

Civil libertarians usually place the right to choose how and when you die on equal footing with a woman's choice to terminate a pregnancy1. They use words like "dignity" and "freedom" to advance their causes. Both of these words are relevant to Mandela today. He was a fighter for freedom. And, at the moment, he is not at a dignified peak of his life. Yet he will not be allowed to die. His life is more than his own: it belongs to the South Africans, and the world, who love him.

Turning back to the title of this article, I want to once again ask: is Nelson Mandela still a person?

Strict utilitarians will say no: as I have already said, he is past the prime of his life and is unlikely to ever contribute to society again. At least, not any more than he will demand from society in terms of healthcare and caretaking. In fact, at present he is not even conscious or lucid. Similarly, most abortion advocates will, perhaps reluctantly, have to admit that Nelson Mandela no longer has a right to life. This is for the same reason they advocate abortion: a foetus is not a human being capable of living independently and being a constructive force in the world. Like a baby in his or her mother's womb, Mandela is a "virus" who is preying on the resources of his family and causing his family and loved ones great emotional distress (and for more than sentimental reasons, but let us not get into those matters here). The reasons to consider a foetus a mere lump of cells are, at the end of the day, the same to consider Mandela, lying in his hospital bed, to be a lump of cells.

But, one might say, what about Mandela's *legacy*! Well, that is in the *past*. It does not reflect on who he is now. If you want to consider Mandela's *legacy*, you have to consider the *potential* of the unborn.

None of us can predict the future. We cannot say whether someone will have a prosperous or a disastrous life. We can speculate, but not know. The greatest stories which inspire us are those of people who overcome adversity. Who are we to say that because someone will be born into poverty (or perceived poverty) will not achieve greatness? Like a young man from rural Eastern Cape born into an oppressive society which discriminated against him because of the colour of his skin (another one of those frailties at birth). That young eventually became a dramatic force for good, recognised all over the world. I am a great cynic about the human condition. I am so because I understand the fallen nature of man, and because of what I have witnessed not only in history, but see happening around me in the present time as well. But when I see a small child, I become terribly excited: within that child, regardless the circumstances surrounding him or her, is *potential*. Not a life already spent

and opportunities achieved or missed, but one who can grab on to (or not) things which come his or her way. Within small children—even the unborn—is the opportunity to better the world.

Mandela will depart this world soon. He understood that his struggle was bigger than himself: that it was not just to make a better world for himself and his peers. He wanted to make a better world for those who come after him. What I am saying is give those people a chance to be born and to be a force for change. Most people who are aborted won't achieve greatness. But their lives would have had their own merits. But if you want to be pragmatic, allow for the chance for greatness. A teenage girl who gets pregnant would still be able to reach great heights. It may be more difficult and it may take longer. But she can inspire us as well as love her child. And even if we write off her chances, there is still the hope which we can place in her child, who can learn from her mistakes and strive for a better life.

It is a cheap shot to use Nelson Mandela, who cannot "defend" himself (would he wish to do so) to advance "my" own agenda. But I am happy to use his example in the struggle to abolish human abortion. The reason is that Nelson Mandela, as president of the Republic, signed abortion laws. Even great men are flawed. The best way to remember and honour a great man—and Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela continues to be a great and dignified *person*—is to remember the great things which he achieved and build on them, and to correct where he faltered as a mere human being, so that we can live in a country and a world which is, on the whole, better.

- 1. Of course in the case of the latter they always conveniently neglect the rights of the unborn, which is the primary focus of mine in this article.

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