

Towards a contemporary anthropology of the person

Current usage of the term person:

The word 'person' is obviously value-loaded in our present culture. A few moment's reflection upon the way we use the term illustrates its curious power and, at the same, its ambiguity. Advertisers have caught on to the electricity in the word and have attempted to use it to their profit. No doubt, each of you has received more than one embossed envelope marked "Personal! Urgent!! Open immediately!!!" The first sheet that falls out of the envelope is blazoned in large letters with your name bordered in black or gold, informing you that by the mere swirl of your signature you will have won more than a million dollars. On the first mailing you may be addressed as Mr., Mrs., or Ms., with middle initial, but the tone of a second missive becomes less formal, "Dear Kenneth," and finally it warms up to downright cozy: "Dear Ken," with the implication that you can't be so stupid as to miss the chance of a lifetime. Now, unless you are very gullible, you will have passed this off as so much fraudulent fun. What is interesting, however, is the use of the personal names and forms of address, on the belief that they have pulling power, i.e., the power to pull money out of your pocket into the sender's.

There is more to current usage, however. We say, of a charming person, that he or she **has** a fine personality, meaning that he or she makes a pleasing self-presentation. On the other hand, if we say of some celebrity that he or she **is** a personality,

we refer to the projection of a public image that may or may not correspond to the reality of which it is a façade. The tabloids make their profit by shamelessly exploiting this suspected discrepancy between surface and depth. Altogether, then, these uses of the word 'personality' indicate a surface impression, and the advertisers, PR agents and campaign advisors stress its passing importance. As the ad has it: "You don't have a second chance to make a first impression."

In contrast, the adjective 'personal' and the noun 'person' usually denote depth. If an acquisitive questioner crowds me too closely, I am liable to say: "Back off! That's personal!," meaning that the inquisitor has encroached upon a privacy not open to casual scrutiny. More deeply still, is the experience of being taken for what and who one **is**. After a well-conducted interview, we are liable to say, "You know, I was treated **as a person**," that is, not as an item, function or cypher.

So far, then, we have uncovered an ambivalence in the various forms of the word. On the one hand, the term suggests something manifest and public, on the other, something hidden and private. It is, then, a paradoxical term, for it suggests something superficial, and concurrently something precious. More eminently still, it can suggest something possessing a unique dignity: "I was treated **as a person**."

Ancient sources of the term:

Now these present-day traits are found in the ancient sources

of the term as well, and even a brief history of the term sheds light on its meaning and on the reality for which it stands. It is noteworthy that the term 'person' has retained a remarkable consistency among the European languages. Moreover, unlike most of our words, such as the English 'tree' or the German 'Baum' or the Latin/French 'arbor/arbre', it is a term whose origins are not lost in the mists of time, but whose career can be traced from its origins to its present use. This suggests that it is an historically conscious term that calls each human being towards a realization of a dignity already possessed in which the values of being human are embodied in a maximal way.

It may help, then, to locate the origins of the term and to trace the capital developments in its career. The term finds its origin in the mediterranean cultures, locally among the Etruscans, that little known people who inhabited the area just north of Rome. From its beginning, the term has been associated rather closely with religious sensibilities, and indeed, it takes its origin from the cult of the goddess Persephone. It is significant that she was the goddess who spent part of the year above the ground and part under the earth. The word used for the mask in her cult was ***Phersu*** it both manifested the goddess in the daylight of her fecund power and hid her in the obscurity of her destiny.

As the Romans absorbed the elements of Etruscan culture, the term underwent a rapid expansion. In the Roman theatre it was used more generally to designate the mask through which the actor spoke

the character (we still preface plays with the *dramatis personae*), so that it referred to that which represented the character and at the same time was the device through which the actor sounded the character's spoken words (*per-sonare*). This close association with the spoken word recommended the term to the Latin grammarians who divided the speech-forms into first, second and third persons: "I, thou, it; we, you, they."

So far, then, the term exhibits a close association with the manifest and the hidden, and with representation and communication. But the element of dignity is present as well. For in the transference of the term from the deity to humanity, Roman jurisprudence did not initially confer it upon each and every human being, but only upon those who possessed full civic status. Neither children, nor slaves, nor women, nor usually foreigners, were held to be persons in the law, but only male adult citizens who were entitled to bring a case before the courts and have it heard. Finally, with Cicero, the term took on a metaphysical meaning and denoted what is distinctive in each individual as contrasted with the humanity shared in common by all. In the short period of three centuries or less, the Latin term had acquired an unusually rich contextual meaning.

Meanwhile in Greece a term (*prosopon*) with a different etymology began a career that would merge with that of the Latin *persona* to name this distinctive reality in the European languages. It placed the emphasis upon a direct face to face

visual encounter (**pro-**, **ops-**, **on:** to see and be seen), so that the highly charged aspect of intimacy came to the fore (in the I-thou relation). For this reason, the term was associated with the human face, which, as Aristotle tells us, is more than a physiological structure insofar as it is the expressive bearer of a distinctive inner (i.e. personal) meaning.

In the later development of the term, the Biblical scriptures played a role as a third source. In the interplay of late Judaic and Hellenic cultures, appeal was made to the notion of **personification** in order to interpret passages in the bible, especially those referring to *Sophia* (prosographic exegesis). The Septuagint translators of the Hebrew bible into the Greek used the term **prosopon**, as the sounding mask through which the Lord spoke ("out of the mouth of the Lord,"). The Latin translators naturally enough rendered that word as **persona**, so that both the Greek and Latin usage converged to introduce the term respectively into the Eastern and Western European languages.

New developments in theology:

The next marked development,-- one might even call it a surge,-- occurred in the context of theological doctrine. For the great Church Councils of the 4th and 5th centuries wrestled with the wondrous fact of faith: that Jesus the Christ is Lord (**Christos Kyrios!**). This demanded a new vocabulary towards which the Fathers groped. Once adopted, the term received a new and deeper meaning: for if Christ was both God and man,-- "fully God

and fully man,"-- possessed of both divine and human **natures**, yet he was also singularly **one**, even **unique**. The formula arrived at is still confessed by most churches that call themselves Christian: One (divine) person (hypostatically, i.e. personally) uniting two natures (divine and human). Now this naming of Christ was by no means a dry linguistic event. For in uniting humanity with divinity in such an intimate way, that is, by drawing human nature in the closest possible way into the very being of the divine person, the whole of humanity was called to an unprecedented dignity.

Nor was the term '**person**' said of Jesus alone, but also of the Father and the Holy Spirit within the Trinitarian Godhead. The term '**person**' was, indeed, an extravagant one! For by way of faith, it opened up a vision into the interior life of the Godhead itself: the Father eternally begetting his only begotten Son in a love that overflowed into the very person of the Holy Spirit. This mutual feast of love was sustained by the traffic between the divine persons. Then, too, following upon the Trinitarian love, as a model to be imitated and a reality to be participated in, a new sense of intimacy shaped the bonds between human individuals. Its first expression was that of the assembly or church (***ecclesia***). A new kind of friendship, a new fellowship, emerged with the call to an unprecedented intimacy with each other and with the persons of the Godhead. Here love itself received a new name: ***agape*** or charity. Moreover, human beings were called to a new dignity, that

is, to be nothing less than the adopted children-- one might even say, in a new sense, the 'love-child' (*kata charin*)-- of the Trinitarian God. And so, when in the High Middle Ages Thomas Aquinas defined the human person as intelligent and free and having dominion over his own acts, he placed that definition of the person in the context of the commands to love God and neighbour.

Modern developments: contraction to human subjectivity:

The third major development in the term can be signalled by the founding declarations of modernity. In the seventeenth century the term underwent simultaneously both a new intensity and a narrowing. For the center shifted to an all but exclusive interest in the human subject. The mediaeval theological context gave way to an intense concentration upon the possibilities of human agency both in coming to exact knowledge and in the exercise of autonomous freedom. Now such a contraction narrowed the horizon of possibility and expectant hope. Open transcendence had hitherto been ingredient in the religious sense of the term, but transcendence now came to be seen as not part of this real world, as proper to some other world inaccessible to reason, as a world given over to faith understood as merely subjective private opinion, no longer appealed to in public discourse. It seemed as though one were slicing an orange and had left a questionable part of it aside. So it appeared; but transcendence is not so easily suppressed. Instead, the modern

contraction is rather like squeezing an orange, so that **all** the elements or aspects remain but take on a new shape.

So, too, with the notion of person: all of the elements or aspects remain (the manifest and hidden, the communicability, the distinctiveness, the special dignity, and the intimacy), but they take on a new configuration. Some (such as autonomous power) assume new importance, some (such as transcendence) even acquire a certain negative value. One or another element comes to the fore, others retreat. In the instance of the fruit, the condensation of sugar is increased, but the fibres are crushed and the perceptible features are rearranged. So, too, with the modern notion of person; it retains the essential features of the older notion, but in a new arrangement, highlighting some features (such as autonomy and control), depressing others (such as mysterious depth and transcendent openness).

We may illustrate this contraction by contrasting modern psychological **introspection** with religious **interiority**. Modern introspection is typified by Descartes' inward journey which comes to rest in the self-assurance of a finite *psyche*. Both movements pass within from the outer world to the human subject; but introspection stops there, only to issue forth again as from a new and certain starting-point, either in order to control nature (e.g., Francis Bacon and modern technology) or in order to establish intersubjective relations (as in the modern novel).

Religious interiority possesses a quite different dynamic,

for it passes **beyond** the human subject. Instead, the subject becomes a footstool from which the sinner repents in order to place himself or herself in humility before the vast uplands of the sacred. In modern introspection the human subject becomes the first principle, both theoretically and practically: psychologically as an individual, politically as the secular state. All things, then, are referred to the human subject as to the final court of appeal. There can be no doubt that this has engendered the enormous interest and creative energy associated with modern novels, art, autobiography, and psychology. There can be no doubt, too, about the rich yield of this intense interest in the human adventure, a richness that emerged from the Middle Ages to achieve an unprecedented appreciation of selected features of the human person.

A strategy towards a contemporary configuration of person:

It is important, then, to notice that all of the elements or aspects associated with the term are present in the contemporary understanding: the play of appearance and ground, the demand for communication, the appreciation of distinctiveness, the insistence upon dignity and value, the expectation of intimacy. At first it seems that transcendence,-- the sense of a trans-human dimension to life,-- is missing from this modern list of features constitutive of the person; but the hunger for intimacy so characteristic of the present culture is the form that transcendence takes in the modern milieu. Nor is the survival of a

reduced sense of transcendence surprising, given that human beings have always been-- and still are-- persons. (Touching upon how these features are related, however, it is important to determine whether these features are to be understood as **elements**, and therefore conjoined by external relations; or whether they are to be understood as **aspects**, and therefore more intimately integrated by internal relations. We must ask eventually whether it is as elements or as aspects that these features best realize the full potential intimated by the reality of person.) Now, if these original features are all present, the attempt to formulate a modern understanding of the human person ought not to draw upon some extraneous consideration, but ought to seek the best configuration of these features that are already-- and have always been-- in play.

We pose, then, a series of questions: Does the modern contraction and its resultant configuration adequately realize the openness to which the person is called? Or does establishing the finite subject as primary not predispose the referral inevitably to the self as final arbiter-- either to the individual self (as in classical liberalism) or to the public self (as in the political alternative of state collectivism)? And does this not introduce a certain closure, either to other selves (as secular humanism finds its ultimate value in a brotherhood and sisterhood without a fatherhood), or at least to a finite horizon of possibility?

Second, can there be intimacy in its deepest, nearest form without an openness that invites further communion and an inexhaustible depth? There can be no doubt that there is in our present culture a prevalent hunger for intimacy far beyond sexual intimacy. Here encounter the paradox again. For the very word itself (**intimius**) associates this hunger with relations possessing meaningful interior depth. Yet at the same time, today's public speech forecloses all references to a dimension that transcends functional and relatively external human achievements, as though such interiority is not worthy of consideration in the public realm.

Third, can there be adequate depth of communication? There is today a pronounced interest in language and communication, but much of it rides on the surface. Is language best conceived as a closed system or as the dynamic that casts itself beyond expression towards an ultimately ineffable reality that cannot be exhausted by words?

Fourth, can there be a dignity that is not rooted in the functional value of each person (in productivity, in results produced, in winning at all costs), but in simply being there, in the absolute presence of each person. Thomas Aquinas gave to this actual presence the name **esse**, the very existing actuality of the person. Here is the root of the existential depth in each person. This unique and ultimately inexpressible dignity proper to each person **qua person** is rooted in the sheer act of that person's act

of **be-ing (esse)**. Devoid of insight into the radical value of each person, will this culture move more and more towards personality in the superficial sense, with a certain emptiness as the result, in which openness will mean the barren absence of privacy?

It is a paradox that an unlimited openness also preserves the deeper sense of intimacy, an intimacy that cannot adequately be brought to verbal expression, since it possesses-- in a certain sense-- a kind of secret, that suggests the mystery of the unique, and presages the adventure awaiting each genuinely personal encounter.

All of this points towards the inescapable need to liberate a **transcendence** from the more confined human concerns,-- towards the need to integrate such trans-human exigence within the contemporary configuration of the person. Among others, the Swiss psychotherapist and philosopher Karl Jaspers pointed the way by his emphasis upon transcendence. What is needed is a trans-human dimension, if not that of the goddess Persephone and the pantheon of the Immortals, then more radically still, the Trinitarian communion of persons. Of course, the precise character of that transcendence is too important an issue to be treated within the limits of this paper. And so, for the present purpose, I pass by whether the Christian Trinity, the God of the Hebrew Scriptures, Allah of the Koran or other world religions provides the better appreciation of this transcendent dimension. All of them to some degree recognize that transcendence. Now transcendence must, at

the least, refer to that which is not confined to human subjectivity and human collectivity. The new configuration must resituate the integrity of each person within a context that breaks through the social horizon. Contemporary environmental movements promote an initial recognition of this need, by their attempt to place the person in the larger ecology of the environing world, but adequate transcendence must be more radically open and more than intracosmic. The French philosopher of the concrete, Gabriel Marcel, put it well when speaking of the **Being** in which we as persons find ourselves: he described it as an inexhaustible **plenitude** that outstrips each and every analysis and that calls us to a fuller participation in it and with it. The person is the condensation-point of such being, who is called to immerse himself or herself in its mysterious fullness.

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