

Personhood and Communities of Interpretation: A Phenomenological Foray

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If personalist philosophy is of any importance to humankind, it is because it addresses two persistent and troublesome features of the human condition. The first is the human tendency to lose sight of its own distinctness amid the plethora of phenomena that we experience, and the variety of our responses to these phenomena. Given the complexity of our condition and the extraordinary complexity of the wider reality that we call the universe, the “who am I?” question surfaces naturally in any creature that is sufficiently reflective. This might be called the “dark wood” syndrome after Dante’s metaphor for the condition of being lost in the midst of a dark wood and needing to begin the journey of self-recovery.

The second feature is that human beings are, as Aristotle said, rational beings, at least in the minimal sense of being guided and informed by understandings, ideas, concepts. This means that the journey of self-recovery has a cognitive dimension. Of course, the way ideas influence actions is not univocal, as there are many modes in which understandings relate to actual experience. Sometimes they are positive guides; sometimes they supply a framework of understanding; sometimes they are rationalizations, tools for dissimulation and even self-deception. But because the answer to the “who am I” question is one way or another likely to influence our choices and actions, and thereby the self that we become, it is a matter of great practical consequence that we attend to the task of formulating the best answer that we can.

These two features of the human condition set the stage for personalist philosophy and all its philosophical kin such as existentialism and phenomenology. What distinguishes personalism from those kindred movements is its focus on the term “person” as the most promising strategy for answering the “who am I” question. Personalism claims that the “I” is inadequately understood until it becomes personal, or, in C. S. Lewis’s more poignant phrase, “till we have faces.” That is not an empty claim. It implies that there

are criteria for judging when an account of the "I" is adequate, that is, criteria for understanding the heart of "personal" reality, and therefore of judging what is impersonal or a distortion of the personal. This task has real urgency in the context of a philosophical tradition that was so strongly influenced by Descartes' impersonal description of the "I" as a "thinking thing," and that has subsequently found other ways to reduce the "I" to something less than personal.

In this paper, I will essay an account of the meaning of "person." My account has two parts. The first describes the general features of personhood, the parameters that apply to every being we call a person. This description centers around the concept of membership in a community of interpretation (or of interpreters), and particularly, of the task of inhabiting several such communities simultaneously. The second part draws attention to three features of personhood that become evident in the aforesaid description, namely, the active nature of personhood, the uniqueness of each person, and the inherently qualitative character of personhood. Along the way, I will make some comparisons between this way of conceiving personhood with other ways such as Heidegger's notion of authentic existence.

I.

In a previous paper, I suggested that a fruitful and serviceable concept of the person is that of a member of community of interpretation, and acknowledged my debt to Josiah Royce for his discussion of the concept in his last major work, *The Problem of Christianity*.¹ Royce's idea provides an integration of Aristotle's two claims that humans are social and rational animals. Our rationality always occurs in the context of our sociality, and thus within a community of interpretation. Implicit in this claim is that a necessary condition for being a person is to be a communicative being, capable of understanding and expressing meanings and ideas. We might call this the capacity for mindfulness, though we must be careful to note that mindfulness includes a downside that we might characterize as wrongheadedness, uncritical acceptance of ideas, the superficial mindfulness that attends Socrates' nemesis, the "unexamined life." The basic point is that persons live within a matrix of understandings or interpretations, whether they are critically examined or uncritically accepted, whether they are "right on" or "off the wall." We may be wrong, stupid, or even simple, but we are not mindless.

1. Josiah Royce, *The Problem of Christianity* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1914).

In this paper, I want to expand that analysis by noting that, from a phenomenological point of view, “community of interpretation” is really plural, that we simultaneously inhabit a number of communities of interpretation and consequently face the task of giving some consistency and integrity to the way we indwell each one in the light of who we are in the others. Persons cannot be defined as the sum of the social roles they play because they do not merely take on different self-contained “roles” *ad seriatim*. Rather, persons compose their identity in any given role in the light of their simultaneous membership in other communities of interpretation.

The following typology of communities of interpretation will bring us closer to the actualities of our personal experience. Alternate typologies are certainly possible, but they must all incorporate these five common arenas of experience. I designate all kinds of family and extended family experience in terms of the *community of intimacy and kinship*. Important distinctions are made within this community, as for example, between my immediate family and the extended family that I see only at periodic family reunions. But we can make presumptions about relations and responsibilities with family that we cannot make with persons who are not part of our family.

I am indebted to Michael Oakeshott² for the next two kinds of communities. *Civil communities* refer to the political communities to which we are obligated and in which we may play many different kinds of roles. Civil communities are not only the official organs of government, but also the racial, ethnic, and gender communities that are struggling for just status in the civil order. The obligations of citizenship to support and, where needed, to improve the civil order, are incumbent on every member of the civil community. We do not have a choice here beyond becoming an outlaw or an expatriate in which case we take our place in a different civil order. The case is different with *enterprise communities*, which are defined by the purpose for which they are founded, so that it is appropriate to say they have a mission. All commercial corporations are of this sort, for their mission is to provide goods or services in exchange for money. All groups that promote specific causes or interests, from barbershop singing to the elimination of drunk driving, are enterprise communities. Enterprise communities are the most numerous, and most people will be affiliated with several of them. They are the *modus vivendi* of the worlds of work and leisure. We have choices among these communities, while the family and civil order we are

2. Michael Oakeshott, *On Human Conduct* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975, 1996), 108–85.

born into are fated to us. But importantly, we cannot live without some sort of enterprise that enables us to survive, so enterprise per se is our fate.

The fourth community is the *bio/eco-community*, which includes our own biological inheritance as well as the rest of the order of nature in which we live our natural lives. This is a community of interpretation because our bodies are continually sending signals that we interpret and respond to, both at the commonplace level, such as heeding the warnings of pains, and at the specialized levels of medical practice where more subtle messages can be detected and interpreted. Our bodies and their actions are part of the larger eco-community that is responsive to our practices and “tells” us when we are poisoning her (and ourselves) and when we are promoting her (and our) health. The bio/eco-community is a combination of fate and freedom because we have a measure of control over our bio-eco health, though we always work within inherited parameters that come with the territory of our genetic inheritance and the rest of the natural order.

Finally, I would add *religious communities* in which we interpret the ultimate order in which we live, move, and have our being. This may seem anachronistic in our secular age, but the vast majority of all people who have ever lived have been part of some sort of religious community, so it has been one of the major forms of human experience. And even in our “secular” age, it is still true that, in Ortega y Gasset’s observation, “everyone must make a living in metaphysics as well as economics.” Whether through direct participation in a religious community or by one’s own reflections and rationalizations, one deals somehow with ultimate questions. The fact of our mortality alone insures that we all must face the ultimate question of whether we are part of something larger than the life-span we know in space and time. In answering that question, whatever our answer, we are, willy-nilly, in the community of religious interpretation.

From these brief characterizations of the five communities of interpretation, we can see that they are unavoidable. To be alive is to be in a family, or at least to know that one had a family whose influence on oneself is profound; to be situated in a civil order that entails ongoing obligations; to be engaged in some sort of activity that insures one’s survival and utilizes one’s energies; to be embodied and connected to the entire natural order; and to face the questions about the farther horizons of one’s belonging.

Because these several dimensions of human existence are built in, unavoidable, we might say that persons are the very paradigm of multitasking software. Staying with that metaphor, we must also observe that no one of those tasks can ever be “closed.” Behind every program or arena of experience that is front and center at any given time, the others are all open

in the background and contributing something to what we are doing in the currently focal program. No program or community of interpretation is self-contained and impervious to the others. It is precisely this inherent and constant complexity of our existence that gives it its defining personal quality. If I am here (in Santa Fe) as an active member of community of professional academic philosophers, I am a *philosophical person* to the extent that my stated views here are consistent with and vitally connected to my experience in those other communities of interpretation to which I belong. Persons are always simultaneously multidimensional, not serially monodimensional.

If multidimensionality in terms of the concurrent communities of interpretation that I have mentioned, or some other phenomenological taxonomy that covers the same range of experience, is the defining feature of personal life, then we could reasonably expect the *denial* of that complexity to result in major distortions of personal life. These distortions are various kinds of reductionism. Thus, if I claim that my professional life in an enterprise community is impervious to, not qualified by, my simultaneous membership in the other communities of interpretation, I become a professional “technician,” a possessor of specifiable expertise, like Data on *Star Trek*, but something short of a professional person. If I insist that my family life is not influenced by my membership in other communities of interpretation, I define myself as something of a breeding machine or baby factory, or, in terms of a more current vogue, as a servant of the “selfish gene.” If I conceive of citizenship in the civil community as unrelated to the other communities of interpretation, I thereby define myself and all citizens as mere pawns of the state, or as mere instantiations of the *Zeitgeist*, so that citizens are no longer persons in the full sense of that word. Sadly, this is not a mere abstract possibility in our world. If I separate the bio/economy from the other communities of interpretation, I reduce myself to an entity that can be fully understood in terms of materialistic naturalism. Finally, if I close off the religious community from vital connections to the others, I turn religious life into a species of spiritualism or absolutistic dogmatism. Every case of illicit separation results in a reductionistic distortion, a forfeiture of the fullness of personal life.

All of these distortions entail a denial of the simultaneous multidimensionality that is the hallmark of persons. They are retreats to a more simplistic monodimensionality, which can be of two types. Serial monodimensionality reduces each arena to its focal concerns, so that the self enacts by turns each of the distortions mentioned above. We might call this soft-core reductionism. Imperious monodimensionality claims that one of

the reductions is actually the true explanation for all the other forms of experience. Behaviorism (of the Skinnerian sort) and sociobiology are examples of this imperious kind of theorizing that we might call hard-core reductionism. From the personalist perspective presented here, all these forms of reductionsim must be faulted, because each one illicitly forecloses the rich, deeply textured, multidimensionality of the experience of being a person.

II.

Having given the general parameters of the concept of person, I want now to draw attention to three features of personal reality that are implicit in the above description.

The first is that although the word "person" is a noun, inviting us to think of it as a thing with a determinate nature, it is really more of a verb that invites us to think of an ongoing process. "Personing," an odd form of speaking, is really a clearer way of saying what our description implies, that to be a person is to be in the act of composing one's identity within a particular community of interpretation in a manner that is consistent with and vitally informed by who one is in other communities of interpretation. If we take "composing" as a musical metaphor, we can use its suggestion that "personing" entails both continuing the development of a melody line and harmonizing it with other lines that are going along simultaneously. The point is that being a person is a kind of creative act. Persons have "depth" or "resonance" because of the background meanings and themes that inform foreground thought, feeling, and action.

Our analysis confirms and lends additional support to the claims of earlier personalists like Lotze and Bowne who explicitly rejected any account of personhood that relied on older concepts of the soul as a special kind of substance. They insisted that reality is more like events than "stuff," more like process than substance, and that persons must be understood accordingly. "In like manner," Bowne wrote, "the soul has no being in it; but it knows itself as active and as acted upon; and in this fact and knowledge it has the only possible mark of reality."³ Our analysis elaborates this claim by essaying a phenomenological account of the kind of action that "personing" entails, namely, the ongoing composing of oneself from themes that come from multiple communities of interpretation.

3. Borden P. Bowne, *Metaphysics* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1898), 335.

A second claim about persons finds ready support in our description, namely, that each person is unique. While there are profound commonalities between persons, no two are alike because each one is a unique mix of communities of interpretation, and therefore a unique set of parameters and possibilities. No one in the universe has my family history or my precise biological heritage, so no one else in the universe brings my parameters to the philosophical questions that I engage in my enterprise community. Each person is nothing less than a cosmic singularity, the universe's only chance of realizing some set of possibilities. This follows directly from the phenomenological description of persons as composers who harmonize distinctive themes from simultaneous communities of interpretation. The vast majority of us are genetically unique, twins being the only exception. But all of us, even genetic twins, are personally unique. This is not an article of religious faith or romantic idealism; it is a phenomenological fact.

Uniqueness, in democratic thought, has often been associated with the belief that each person has inherent value. In economics, uniqueness or rarity does often confer value, but not by itself. There must be something inherently desirable in the rare object for its value to be enhanced by rarity. Snowflakes are unique, but worthless, as are most seashells. In a moment, we will look closely at the relation of uniqueness to the value of persons, but here I want to draw out the significance of uniqueness for our understanding of community. It qualifies the notion of "community," since all interactions occur within a context of difference between members. "Interpretation" is necessary because we cannot successfully be programmed to overcome all our differences. Some coordination of our views and practices are necessary since we are not carbon copies of each other. Cooperation, not uniformity, is the proper social task of persons. Nor is it appropriate to think of each person as an individual chip off the social block, as social constructivists sometimes seem to say. Persons, because of their uniqueness, cannot be reduced to their socially identifiable parts. The concept of "person" that we are dealing with is not derivative; it is the primordial experience of our humanness. Persons are self-organizing Gestalts, and no quantity of data from any quantity of sources can render personal experience fully predictable. A part of "the unexpected" that always lurks is the potential for a person to say or do something that is not "with the program" because his or her unique "score" prompts its own unpredictable development. This is the "different drummer" syndrome that Thoreau bequeathed to democratic thought and that we rightly prize as our personal birthright. A persistent form of humor is the misfit in highly regimented communities, like the military recruit who turns right when everyone else turns left. Uniqueness is a

reminder that extreme degrees of regimentation and totalitarian ideologies of collective humanity, however ardently utopian and well-intentioned, will forever run afoul of a constitutive feature of personhood. Respect for uniqueness entails, at a minimum, a recognition of the limits of collectivism and regimentation. As a practical matter, this translates into the claim that persons inherently have a measure of freedom, an inner propensity to honor and cultivate their own distinctive possibilities. If discussions of freedom could be grounded in a clearer view of the nature of persons rather than in abstractions like “free will” and “determinism,” they might avoid some of the fruitless controversies and ideological distortions that have plagued them in the past.

The third feature of personhood that our description illuminates is its inherently qualitative character, which rightly brings to the fore the notion of value. The concept of quality necessarily entails the propriety of value judgments, good/bad, better/worse. Kant argued that the dignity of each person inhered in the will that was enlightened by the moral law and that promoted the self-concept of a moral agent. Our view can be seen as a revision of Kant’s interpretation, acknowledging the rightness of his view that value is constitutive of personhood, not a nicety that may or may not be conferred upon it. The language of value is rife with implicit dualism of this sort, that some object or entity, conceived in neutral terms, “has” value, which must then be described as an additional feature over and above the object or entity that is said to “have” it. In contrast to this way of proceeding, and acknowledging Kant as our ally, we wish to show that the very meaning of the word person carries the necessity of value judgments, that is, judgments of better and worse kinds of “personing.”

But we must hasten to add that these judgments do not apply in the first instance to comparisons of one person with another. When Nietzsche wrote about a “ranking of souls,” and developed his typology of noble souls versus slave souls, he invited the misuse of an invidious comparison between persons. In his own way, Heidegger’s distinction between authentic and inauthentic modalities of Dasein does the same thing. Both propose general categories into which persons can be grouped. While we cannot escape that problem completely, our approach does supply three limitations to its severity. First, each person is unique, and thus incomparable with any other in any full sense. Second, the awareness of the qualitative nature of persons applies in the first instance to the degree to which one cultivates and harmonizes the communities of interpretation in which one lives, not to how one ranks with others on some general scale. Self-cultivation, not competitive efforts to achieve a general ideal, is the focus of our concept. Noble

versus slave, authentic versus inauthentic, set up general gradations of value that tend to gloss over the uniqueness of each person, and thus slide easily to general concepts, abstract qualities, by which individual persons can be judged, without any sensitivity to what a person is in the first place. They represent a temptation to a “rush to judgment” about the value of individual persons, a temptation that we rightly need to avoid or at least attenuate by clarifying our notion of persons. Third, remembering Aristotle’s observation that happiness (as fulfillment) should only be attributed an entire life, we may claim that if “personing” is a process, as we have claimed, then the quality of the person must await the completion of the process before we can make summary judgments about the quality of the life. We might call this the “Sidney Carton” syndrome, for the main character of Dickens’s *A Tale of Two Cities* ends his life by sacrificing it on the guillotine for Charles Darnay, saying, “It is a far far better thing I do than I have ever done. . . .” Earlier themes, in life as in art, are susceptible to being transformed in later developments, which puts a major qualification on pronouncements about the value of any person. As long as we are incomplete, the value of our personal possibilities is beyond the knowledge and judgment of anyone.

But having said all that to limit the illicit kinds of value judgments one can make about persons, it is important to affirm that the concept of person as inherently qualitative does have a determinate meaning. We can say that the quality of a human life is a direct function of the extent to which one is open to the themes from the several communities of interpretation in which one lives, and is engaged in developing and harmonizing those themes in ever fuller compositions. We might call this quality the “more stately mansions” syndrome after the O. W. Holmes poem, “The Chambered Nautilus,” that begins, “Build thee more stately mansions O my soul, as the swift seasons roll.” A soul that denies the possibility of more stately mansions, of ever fuller integrations, lives in a self-imposed limitation of personal life, a sort of self-inflicted wound. A soul thus divided against itself is either sick, deluded, or demonic, and while those conditions are importantly different from each other, they are all negative judgments on the quality of personal life.

Socrates, as Plato depicts him, conceived of philosophy as the warfare against these constrictions and diseases of the soul. He attempted to uncover the disharmonies and contradictions in the souls of his fellow Athenians, engaging them in conversation that easily shifted from one community of interpretation to another, interrelating themes that came from the family, the state, the body, the trades, and transcendent horizons to which the soul may be attuned. The examined life that he commended was precisely this venture

toward ever fuller integrations of the meanings and themes from the various communities of interpretation that feed and prompt the soul's expansive strivings. In his last days, according to Plato, he was engaged in an intense crescendo of interpretive activity, working to integrate piety and reason in the *Euthyphro*, virtue and the civil order in the *Apology*, personal history and political obligation in the *Crito*, and death and life in the *Phaedo*. What he said in those dialogues is engaging and instructive, but it is what he was *doing* in striving to integrate vital meanings from all the communities of interpretation that shows us the personal heart of the philosopher, and prompts us to claim that the most succinct and very best commentary on those dialogues of his last days is Goethe's dying words, "More light!" In such aspirations and efforts at ever fuller integrations of ever richer meanings within ever wider communities, the nature and destiny of persons comes to light—like a bird on the wing. □