

THE PERSON AND HIS SOCIETY

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It was probably Kant who for the first time declared in his *Grundlegung der Metaphysik der Sitten* (*Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*) that "Man is a person". This "man" was an antithesis to a "thing" by virtue of the former's being a rational agent and an end in himself. Prior to Kant the human life was allowed a place of esteem in the classical philosophy primarily for its participation in the divine life through rationality - rationality being a divine quality - than for its own sake. Moreover, a distinction was made in the Pre-Kantian philosophy between free men and slaves. The slaves were denied all rights and given a status almost on a par with the brutes. Hence it is no wonder that Kant should be accredited as bringing about a Copernican revolution with his rigorous prescription to treat a man, irrespective of sex and social status, always as an end and never as a means. Being a member of the Kingdom of Ends, a man is essentially a moral agent as distinct from a mere rational self-conscious substance.

Howsoever incomplete and question-begging may this Kantian account of person be, it is still revolutionary in so far as it brings down the concept of person to earth from aloft. And it is in this sense that Kant, after Aristotle, one of the "very greatest philosophers"¹, is the first philosopher for the modern thinkers on the issue.

A person is made person by his surroundings. Nature is no more viewed as antagonistic to him. Being non-natural or supra-natural is not to add anything to a persons' credit. A person is exemplified best by me or you.² Persons are beings like ourselves, "ones of us" - conscious bodied individuals who can originate action and interact with us as persons.

To count as "one of us" one has to stand in the "Right Relation" to you and me", i.e. to share "with us enough of the human world constituted by interpersonal relationships"³. This "interpersonal relationship" is again to be understood independently of the concept of person as "human ties", for otherwise it will involve a circularity. This relationship can hold between human beings and human beings alone, and not between a human being at one end and a Martian or a Computer at the other. It depends upon "international understanding" of each other. "Right Relation" is a "direct understanding involving relation⁴ which holds between "Right Kind of Beings."

So this is a point of view which perceives a person as a member of a society. Hence, apart from being a rational agent, which characterized a person in the metaphysical point of view, a person has to be "physical agent, endowed with memory, expectations and other psychological and intellectual capacities, not all of them implicitly contained in the rationality conditions as it is usually formulated. The development and exercise of these capacities required both a complex biological organism and a complex social environment."⁵ A person is a responsible agent and responsibility being something to be understood only in the social context, a person must be viewed in his historic-social background alone.

This social life, marked by interpersonal relations, is made a necessary requisite of the being of a person also by N.V. Banerjee.⁶ Banerjee expresses this interpersonal relation with the formula "I *with* others". The concept of a person is radically different from that of an individual. It required the "neutralization of spatiality", the very mark of an "individual" which "divides" him from others.

Persons are persons because of this interpersonal relation. In absence of this tie they would be mere individuals like Leibnitzian monads. But this tie is not something imposed upon from without, rather "person *qua* persons are held in this relation."⁷ What Banerjee has insisted upon is the "realm of the personal" rather than a person as such. So to say, in his view, there cannot be a person abstracted from the realm of the personal, which is defined by the word *we* analysed as *I with others*.

Strawson's account of person⁸ consists in viewing him as an irreducible

and primitive being that admits of both P and M-predicates simultaneously. Coupled with Strawson's account of "basic particulars" where he reserves that name for material bodies and those who have material bodies, a Strawsonian person may be described as a predicated material body. This is plain naturalism in that it stands on the demolition of the Cartesian ego-person - the latter being conceived as a supra-natural principle. However, it also refuses at the same breath to reduce a person to the level of a material body. This is not to opt for any "non-naturalism" of Moorean type, but to retain and honour a person's distinctive character from a thing. The words "nature" and "natural" need not have narrow applications confining to trees and rivers and thunderstorms, it can very well be allowed a wider sense so as to embrace not only cows and monkeys but also much higher evolutes like human beings including their hopes and fears and thoughts and beliefs. This explains why a person is said to be an unbreakable unit. A broken person is a former person. The breaking may be thought to result in two (why only two?) Cartesian substances, but these substances neither separately nor together qualify for personhood.

This description of the metaphysics of a person makes him essentially a part of nature, a member of the class of persons.⁹ It is clear from Strawson's insistence on the logical priority of other-ascription over self-ascription of a P-predicate. A person derives his own identity from the identity of the class to which he belongs. This is *objectification* of oneself. So personifying oneself is classifying oneself.

It may however be objected that apart from the class-identity, the individual subject does have his own private and personal self-identity. This is undeniably true. But this consciousness of self-identity unmixed with class-identity can be only a secondary kind of identity derivable after a withdrawal, either complete or partial, temporary or permanent, from the society. This is secondary not only logically but also temporally. For a child cannot be thought to be having self-identity first. Now, since this self-identity consists in either temporary or permanent withdrawal from the society, submerging into this would mean de-classifying and, therefore, de-personifying oneself. It is permissible for an ordinary empirical person to occasionally submerge into such a self-search. But our logic would make us say that in those particular moments he, may be what he-is-in-himself,

ceases to be a person. His return to the family, due to hunger for instance, makes him a person once more.

A person, seen in this light, is essentially an Aristotelian social animal. The personhood is characterized by the social involvement and interpersonal relationship. And this makes a person essentially a moral agent - a free and responsible one. His activities may and do affect the interest of others in this or that way. Others, therefore, react to him with gratitude or resentment, and in case of his activities affecting the interest of the society, i.e. in the vicarious level, with moral approbation or indignation. He can also react to himself with pride or remorse when his own activities, he feels, affect others, interest in this or that way. This picture of a moral person has been beautifully and convincingly illustrated by Strawson in his celebrated essay "Freedom and Resentment."¹⁰ This is also glorified by H.G. Frankfurt in his essay "Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a person."¹¹ Frankfurt makes it a necessary point to contingently have or lack freedom of the will for determining the personhood of one. A lower animal necessarily does not, and a divine being necessarily does, enjoy this freedom of the will, hence none, in this view, qualifies for being a person. It is only man, who sometimes enjoys and sometimes does not enjoy this freedom that can be called a person.

This picture of a person is one of an ordinary human being as found in his spatio-temporal situations. His role in these situations and the impact of the latter upon his being is essential to the make-up of his personhood. This concept of 'role' however is not a new concept, rather we can go so farback to the etymological derivation of the word 'person' from Latin *persona* standing ambiguously either for a mask worn by a dramatic character or for the dramatic character itself. So the first entry to the word 'person' in the Oxford English Dictionary¹² reads:

"1.1. A character sustained or assumed in a drama or the like, or in actual life, part played; hence function, office, capacity, guise, semblance, one of the characters in a play or story..."

So the situations in which the person finds himself make him a person. Any withdrawal from this situation will lead to the destruction of his personhood.

A solipsist or a subjectivist is not a person but an individual. A person is inseparable from the "realm of the personal". A person is a moral person - responsible and accountable for his deeds.

A question may be raised at this point: whether the modern man has been losing his personhood gradually? For is he not withdrawing himself from the society and thereby evading his responsibility towards it "The present age is one of consumerism and the person seems to be in the process of being consumed up by his situations. He is running after wealth and money at the cost of everything else. It is the craze for easy-money which encourages him to indulge in all sorts of anti-social activities. Corruption and violence is the daily headline. No one is dear to him, not even his spouse who can be easily put to death for a meger amount of money. He is allowing himself to be swept away by the blowing wind without the slightest resistance. He seems to have been gone without the consciousness of his role, which makes him a person.

Personhood consists in surpassing the narrow boundaries of an individual and in enacting one's assigned role. Then, can we not ("we" = who think ourselves to be persons) think of being more persons and less individuals by performing our roles in the best possible way? Can we not have dreams for a better society and better tomorrows for the future generations? If we have dreams then the ways for their materialization also can be found out. For this purpose those who have been working relentlessly with this commitment for the real betterment of the people and the society at large, call them the more evolved species of mankind, can probably serve as our model persons.

NOTES

1. The phrase was used by P.F. Strawson in *Individuals* 'Introduction' p.11, Methuen, London, 1974 reprint.
2. "I am a person, so are you". Daniel Dennet : "Conditions of Personhood" in *The Identities of Persons* ed. A.O. Rorty, University of California Press, 1979, p. 175
3. Peter Smith : "Human persons" in *The person and the Human Mind* ed. C. Gill,

- Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1990, p. 70.
4. *Ibid.*, p.73
 5. A.O. Rorty : "Persons, Policies and Bodies" in "*International Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. XIII, No. 1 (Mar 1973), p. 71
 6. N.V. Banerjee : *Language Meaning and Persons*, George Allen & Unwin Ltd., London, 1963.
 7. *Ibid.*, p. 125
 8. P.F. Strawson: "Persons" in his *Individuals*, Methuen, London, 1959.
 9. "A person is an interactive memembr of a community" - A.O. Rorty : "*Persons and Personae*" in *The Person and the Human Mind*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1990, p. 35.
 10. P.F. Strawson : *Freedom and Resentment and Other Essays*, Methuen & Co. Ltd., London, 1974.
 11. *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. LXVIII, No.1 (Jan. 14, 1971)
 12. *Oxford English Dictionary*, Vol. VII, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1933.