

THE CONCEPT OF PERSON: SOME BASIC REMARKS

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The search for a concept of “person” is quite old: since the ancient traditions of considering *persona* as »playing a role« philosophy has tried to find out what a person makes it so specific that it can be distinguished from anything else that is not a person. So to say: what is the essence of a person – supposed there is such a thing as a person at all. Probably one of the most famous definitions of human beings (which we would regard as the most likely incorporations of persons) is the Aristotelian characterisation of man as *zoon politikon* (or animal sociale – and the Latin version makes clear how close the core concepts are of what the question is all about: mankind is always given in somewhat kind of social appearance and thus persons have a social relevance).

Hence, if we jump into contemporary discussions about society, it does not go far astray to rediscover the long gone debates on what persons are. One of the etymological explanations gives us the hint of the mask, persons can be seen as actors in certain scenery they find as their both natural and cultural environment. Being a person then means to act in different situations differently; and acting as a person redefines the possibilities of recognizing each others as persons as well as constituting one selves as persons in a framework of social behaviour.

In the need of simplification one has to outline just the major parts of this model: society is the intimate playground persons can appear on and act upon. One is inclined to put it into a Kantian scheme, wherein the conditions of personality are the actual conditions of society itself. Acting in certain manners of social behaviour restricts and opens the scope of »being a person« at the same time, so that personality only reflects the predisposed opportunities society is providing. Persons in this view do not write the play they are engaged for nor put they under question the ontological need for this playground at all. The appealing advantage of this kind of model lies in the practicability of its explanatory force. Knowing the rules of a society makes us successful in predicting the possible actions of a person and thus makes us believe to see how we can understand personality itself as result of specific conditions to be found in the obvious structure of society.

But this picture that is shown here in a too strongly shaped blackwhite contrast is not only practicable and empirically right, it is also not true. Seeing persons this way simply leads to no intimate concept of personality, not to mention to any ontologically holding system (one might call it a structure of what there is, I prefer to call it an indispensable truth of being believed by no one but still unevitably true). I will give you a few reasons why the interpretation of the relation between society and persons should be altered and then I would like to line out some points that could help to understand the concept of persons better.

The first reason is quite simple: societies always require persons but not vice versa. The empirical claim that human life is primarily orientated towards a community is not an ontological proof for the necessity of societies. Unless one does not define society as living together of at least two people, there can be thought of forms of getting along well without any larger institutions than families. Societies however, seen as artificial constructs, have not got any independent standing cut off their inventors once having built them. There are no societies without persons and there are no persons depending on societies. Every person is fully and to its perfect fitting complete as a person before even getting close to any form of society.

The reason for this assumption lies in the difference between the pragmatic function of and the ontologic value of a person. Whereas the first can be seen in the light of what a society can provide for (and demand from) a person, no society whatsoever will be able to serve in the latter aspect: the ontological value, the essences of what a person makes unique and appreciated as such, do not root in any entity having been set up after the appearance of a person. So the perfection of a concept of personality invokes eventually the building of larger structures – but it never succeeds them. What comes first by its very being itself, never depends on what comes later.

The next reason must be seen as *reductio ad absurdum*: the supposed relation between persons and society could of course hold as relation of two equal elements. Persons are the acting factors of society and society is the playground for persons. But any relation like this asks for an unequal ratio that makes understandable what the semantic features of the terms are used for. And since the scheme of being an element (of a larger unity) does already require the possible understanding of what that unity will look like, there is always an unprecedented intuition of the essence in its perfect state. Person and society can not define each other by pointing to the quintessential parts of the other half and at the same time denying to have possessed the relevant property itself. The decision whether to favour person or society in this relation still can be put under question, but there has to have such a decision. Otherwise society would lack of the most evident feature it has: the meaning for certain persons they live in this society. A hollow semantic

(that means one, that is not based on an independent meaning of its own, hence does not grip on to an ontologically mirrored picture of the given), must leave any question for the role – such a possible society could play – unanswered.

The last reason discovers the fundamental gap between the relation of person and its personality compared to the relation between society and its concept. On the one hand you have got an intrinsic constitution: persons are the bearers (and by that the very realization) of their personality. On the other hand, no society is the realization of its intrinsic concept for societies do not have any intrinsic features that are not socially invented themselves. As a result of this difference, societies are either real or conceptual; persons, nonetheless they might switch between these categories, always are the reality of their own conceptuality. I will make this clear by reference to a medieval distinction in the concept of person.

The definition of the term »person« varies in medieval discussions, but one of the major lines throughout intellectual history is to see a person as the incommunicable existence of an intellectual nature (*intellectualis naturae incommunicabilis existentia*). There is one important factor in this definition (as for example held by Duns Scotus), namely that the essence of personality can not be shared with any other person, because it is not communicable what comes to the very core of being a person. Of course each person has such an intricate element – but no one is able to tell which specific dimension makes the difference even between two almost identical persons (take twins as an example). The epistemological necessity not to know how a person can be identified as this unique person implies another consequence. With the same necessity no person can be characterized fully and no person can be replaced by any other person. This statement seems to be trivial. But it is not, as you might understand it.

The above mentioned concept of society as the community of role players indeed has an option not to go further down as to the typical surface of actors. Individual features of unique characters (something we would like to see very close to what a person stands for) are held to be a luxury surplus of an elsewhere functioning group. Societies with their institutions do have a need for special abilities and outstanding talents. But at the foundation of most of the modern societies one finds a restriction of individuality as well: appreciated basics of our civilization lie in the fact that equal rights are granted regardless of any personal ideosyncrasy or individual advantages some members of the society may have and others do not. There is no conflict between the assumption that society should be blind for personal differences and the value of these differences though. Since the concept of a person works as an ontological insight to the essence of the given, it must be excluded from any functional (or pragmatic) tool of explaining a society. I would like to make one step

further: modern concepts of society can claim their success only on the basis of the distinction between the prevalent ontological invariances of personality and the there upon built possibility of representing individuality as it was not happening in that constitution.

There is probably more than one reason for this relation of intrinsic dependence, but I consider the nonidentity of conceptuality and reality the most influential.

Societies do not have the ground of their existence in the beginning of their existence. The principle (*principium*) of their being comes from outside, whereas the principle of a person (to be the instance of being so perfectly conceivable that it can not be expressed otherwise than to be incorporated as this person) is already given by the adequate description of its conceptuality. Yet, the conceptuality of a person of course is not the concept of this person but the latter is the ultimate reality of the former. In opposition to that each society has got its own concept without having the conceptuality of the same precise reality. The factors that determine a society are multiply differentiated but no one is to be reduced to a concept of being the instance of the social. You will find a completely altering picture regarding a person: the conceptuality (or to put it like this: the personality) of the possibility of seen as an intellectual existence (that is what it is like to be a concept) cannot be separated from its reality: persons do exist alongside with their uniqueness as possible instances of the concept of a person. Societies however can be set up into the smallest details as a concept – but unless they are not founded somewhen, they will remain a mere conceptual existence. The concept of a person requires and grants its realization at the same time.

Let us finally have a look to the consequences this approach could have. First, the irreducibility of a personalized reality demands full awareness of the fact that no person can be replaced by another. The value of persons is bound to the pure existence of human beings and therefore universally valid. Neither culture nor society is entitled or even able to change the value of personal existence. In addition to this, persons can not substitute each other in consideration of their unique characters they and only they can provide to the human pluralism: especially there is no hierarchy whatsoever that could overwhelm the mighty stance of the individual and personal existence. The idea of societies as covering and enabling institutions for the single persons is not only misleading but false. Societies do not create any value nor produce a surplus of what is given when people construct societies.

Second: future forms of social contexts should start from the perfect concept of persons. There is no need for an educational system within a society that is independent from the personal approach to educate children. Societies have not got any right to claim specific views about where their people should be brought to. Ideological patterns of building up a nation, a culture or a certain

leading group have no ground in ontological settings. Persons always come first – and therein the Kantian statement not to use persons as means but to see them as the final goals of action still holds.

The third consequence is not so easy to see, but it seems to me the most important one. Insofar the discussion on personality and the concept of person belongs to the theoretical philosophy the ontological priority of this part is inherited by the following subdivision of questions concerning the society. Hence practical philosophy will step behind theory and stay as an epiphenomenon to the first philosophy.

At this very end it is once again clear to see why the emphasis is laid on the concept of persons rather than on the persons themselves. The concept of person – as presented the expression of an existence that can not be represented but by itself and still being an intellectual one – has got its final structure even without real persons. For all you need to have »reality« of persons, you do need a concept of how that reality might appear like. But within this concept the reality of its »not being a concept alone« is inscribed as the specific individuality of a person as such and as a »concept of person« while the person as such is the person as concept.

Last but not least it is worth mentioning that although all these remarks find a strong background in the philosophy of Duns Scotus they exceed it in a larger scale of thinking towards idealism. Whereas medieval philosophy takes reality (of concepts as well as of things) as one undoubtedly given fact (even though next to it there can be a range of varieties of possible other worlds and hence totally different realities) – this approach deals with reality as a concept itself. In the light of shifting reality into conceptuality – a feature that is embedded into the possibility of persons as individual bearers of irreducible realities – one might to see a brighter vision even for practical philosophy (for instance: the structure of societies could in one case of possible realities be as described in the beginning of this text; but yet that was a concept of how it could be. The question if and how roleplaying actors may also be seen as persons cannot be answered in that way, because every possible answer has to be generated out of the insight that the concept of this very question and the conceptuality of its answer cannot be rendered by the same level of reality. To neglect this insight is to play the cards wild: once you accept the concept of person as a distinct feature from its possible scenery of appearance, you have to accept the ontologically deeper roots of being a person coming before being able to act as a person. That means, the reality has been set up completely before any possibility of describing it can take place.

ABSTRACT

Person буюу бие хүний тухай дундад эртний үеийн ойлголт нь нийгэм судлалын хүрээнд судалгааны хэрэгсэл болохын хувьд харьцангуй давуу талтай. Ингээж уг ойлголтыг бодит агуулгынх нь талаас бус хэрэглээнд нь авч үзвэл бие хүн нь зөвхөн хэн нэгний нийгэмд гүйцэтгэх ролийг илэрхийлдэг гэхээсээ илүүтэй, зөвхөн тэр хүн (индивид)—ээр илэрхийлэгдэж байгаа бие даасан, өвөрмөц шинжүүдийг илэрхийлж байгаа юм. Энэ үүднээсээ нийгмийн судалгааны практик ажиллагаа нь онолын төвшинд, ойлголтын хүрээнд шалгагдаж, харилцан уялдаатай байх ёстойг харуулж байна.