

CHAPTER 1

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE CONCEPT OF PERSONHOOD

A BRIEF SKETCH

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1. INTRODUCTION

The history of words is passionate and surprising and it is not uncommon to find terms that originally had a pejorative meaning develop through time towards a mainly positive one. Tolerance, for example, now signifies an essential quality of democracy, but for a long time it signified a humiliating attitude, one tolerated what one could not prevent. Likewise, the adjectives "gothic" and "baroque" were originally contemptuous.

The word "person," which originates from the vocabulary of the theater of antiquity, did not seem a priori to be destined to signify the human being in terms of what is fundamental to it and what is singular and irreducible about each and every member of humanity. This development was not predictable. With the benefit of hindsight, however, we can at least reconstitute it.

2. THE DEVELOPMENT

In its origins we find the Greek word *prôposon*, the Etruscan *phersu*, and the Latin *persona* that signified the "theatrical mask" or "megaphone" through which the actor spoke in front of the audience. The word "person" then came to signify the "role attributed to a mask" and, from this, the character of a play before it expanded beyond the realm of the theater to signify the honor and dignity with which someone was endowed.

In the course of time the French language diversified the possibilities of this semantic path by accentuating the deepened value of the word. In the 15th Century the formula "in person" came to be used, which emphasized the importance of the man or woman to whom one refers. This importance can also be seen in formulas such as "content of his person" (16th Century), "person's good deeds," "great person" and "to love his person" (17th Century). The memory of the theater, conjugated to the nobility of the hero, leads to the expression "play a part" that we have preserved in order to describe the attitude of he or she who performs the role.

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But, grammar in turn has taken hold of the word "person," reinforcing its positive meaning. Grammarians associated verbs to "personal" pronouns and identified the "first," "second" and "third persons" controlling the verbal form. Today, we sometimes qualify the "third person" as "non-person," which reinforces the character of identity of I, you and we.

The juridical domain also gave a place to the person fairly early on. From the 13th Century the law opposed "personal," used to qualify that which is attached to an individual, to "real" which applied to goods. In the 15th Century the word "person" came to express an individual's capacity to be a legal subject. In 1495 the expression "to summons a person" (*assigner à personne*) was coined, signifying that a legal summons is too important not to be attended to personally by the individual concerned. The more recent expressions, "personal law" and "personal status" bring out the particular character of an individual authorized to adopt a certain number of laws from his native country to a foreign one. Thus the originality of the case is underlined. More generally "the person" has become a juridical category designating any individual or group of individuals (moral persons) recognized by law as free agents, and therefore in possession of both rights and duties.

If we want to measure the nobility of the word "person," such as it has been formed through time, then we need only think of the negative terms that can be opposed to it: "impersonal" appeared in the 12th Century, qualifying a verb without a real subject; "impersonally" from the 15th Century, meaning "without a person's designation"; and, in our time, "to depersonalize" signifying "to make banal or anonymous," etc. These negatives have remained fairly constant over a long period.

To summarize, "person" refers to a subject, a subject with a soul. Animals are not persons. D'Alembert and Diderot's Encyclopaedia defines "person" by the formula, "individual substance of a rational nature."

The greatest deepening of the word's value came from Christian theology, which from the time of Tertulian (died in 222 AD), used "person" to express the doctrine of the Trinity and to resolve the question of the two natures, divine and human, in the one person of the Son of God. In order to name the distinctions within a single God, Tertulian spoke of a substance in three persons, and to unite the human and divine in Christ he spoke of one person both God and Man at the same time. Thus, for the first time the word *persona* was given its full weight, which only came to be used in its everyday sense, however, after the Council of Chalcedon in 451AD. We should recall at this point that the great dispute of Arianism centered around his doctrine declaring that in the Trinity the Son is not equal to the Father. The Council of Nicéa (325AD) had asserted the equality of the three persons in the unity of the divine substance.

What is more, Christianity emphasized the unique character of each and every human being. Greek thought tended to unite God and the world in a global nature. In this totality the human individual was not considered to be unique and eternal. According to Plato the soul enters another body at death and according to Aristotle, it disappears. Greek tragedy underlined that human freedom is powerless against necessity and fate and that revolts against it will only lead to failure.

Christian anthropology, on the other hand, teaches that each and every human being is human, and destined to eternal life. This applies to all descendants of Adam and Eve. Christian logic thereby underlines the responsibility of each human being and also the seriousness of sin, which is a refusal of the alliance that the Creator offers to all persons in general and to each one in particular. In this way, the increased value of – I would even say sudden appearance of – the individual person was made possible and, therefore, the progress of interiority and introspection, already evident in Saint Augustine's *Confessions* and then so noticeable in the spiritual literature of Christianity, especially that of 17th Century France. Have we taken sufficient cognisance of the extent to which the insistence on the "personal" salvation in the Christian message contributed to shape our individualist mentality, even if we have forgotten the path by which we reached this heightened self-centeredness, which now seems excessive?

But it is one thing to define the theological absolute of the person and another to put this value, proclaimed intangible, into concrete real life. St. Paul wrote to the Ephesians (2, 15-17), "Christ wanted to create a new single man, from a Jew and a pagan, by establishing peace, and reconcile them with God in a single body by means of the cross. He killed hatred. He came to announce peace to you who were far off, and peace to those were close by."

History has taught us the difficulty of putting this program into practice, particularly when Christians found themselves, beginning at the time of the Renaissance, confronted with the problem of American Indians and Black Africans. Were the Indians and Blacks persons? What kind of respect was due to them? Aristotle, whose authority remained very strong for a long time in the West, proclaimed that the "Barbarians" were, legally, predestined to slavery. The Europeans who arrived in the West Indies, then on the American continent, forced the Indians to work, despite the protests of Las Casas and his Dominican colleague Vitoria. Las Casas obtained from Charles the Fifth (of Spain) the *New Laws* of 1542, that declared all the indigenous people from America "free vassals" of the Spanish King. In his teaching at Salamanca, Vitoria expounded the thesis, later taken up by Grotius, according to which there exists a natural World community whose members are both the States and the individuals. The former are protected by public law, the latter by private law. It is forbidden to infringe these two laws, even if the Indians are Barbarians and refuse to become Christians. Vitoria wrote: "Even if the faith has been announced to the Barbarians in an acceptable and sufficient manner [which, he thought, was not the case] it is not permitted to wage war to against them and take all their goods." In the same spirit Pope Paul III asserted in 1537: "We declare that the Indians, like all other peoples, ... must not be deprived of their liberty nor their goods and that they can and should freely and legitimately be in full possession of them." But these entreaties, like Charles the Fifth's *New Laws*, went unheeded. The civil and religious authorities did not see to it them being properly applied.

With regard to the treatment of the Blacks, it is estimated that from 12 to 15 million African slaves were transported, in inhumane conditions, from Africa to America from the beginning of the 16th Century to the middle of the 19th Century. Between one and a half million to two million Blacks died while being transported. In 1774 a ship-owner from Bordeaux received patent letters of nobility from the King, that distinguished him for,

among other things, "his zeal and commerce in the slave trade." In the 18th Century 3,361 slave ships are estimated to have left Nantes between 1725 and 1792, transporting more than 350,000 captives.

Did the Blacks have a soul? In other words, were they persons in possession of the right to be protected by the law? Montesquieu had the courage to ask, with scathing irony, in chapter 15 of his *Esprit des lois*. A text that should not be read literally, of course:

Having exterminated the people of America, the Europeans had to enslave the African people, in order to use them to clear ground. Sugar would be too expensive if we did not make slaves work on the plant that produces it. They are black from head to foot; and their noses are so squashed that it is almost impossible to pity them. We can only think that God who is a very wise man, has not put a soul, moreover a good one, in a body that is totally black. It is impossible for us to suppose that such people are men, because if we did we would start believing that we were not Christians (1961).

Since the end of the 18th Century national legislation and then international law have increasingly affirmed the sacred character of the human person. The American Declaration of Independence of July 1776 declared in absolute general terms: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." Thirteen years after this, the French Declaration of the Rights of Man proclaimed in its turn: "Men are born and remain free and have equal rights. No-one should be troubled for his opinions, even religious, provided that the demonstration of them does not disturb the public order." In the wake of these stands taken, France abolished slavery and in 1948 the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* was proclaimed by the U.N., in which the word "person" features strongly:

Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world... The General Assembly of the United Nations proclaims... Everyone (*Toute personne*) has the right to life, liberty and security of person. Everyone has the right to recognition everywhere as a person before the law... Everyone is entitled in full equality to a fair and public hearing by an independent and impartial tribunal, in the determination of his rights and obligations and of any criminal charge against him... Everyone has the right to freedom of movement and residence within the borders of each state... Everyone has the right to own property... Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion... Everyone, as a member of society, has the right to social security... Everyone has the right to work... Everyone has the right to rest and leisure... Everyone has the right to education... (UNESCO 1948)

During the time that the person was being taken into account by legislation, philosophy was discoursing upon it. Kant, placing himself in the direct line of the Christian anthropology proclaimed, if not really inscribed in the real life of Christianity, wrote in the *Groundwork to the Metaphysics of Morals*:

Beings whose nature depends on nature have only a relative value, when they are beings deprived of reason, that of means; this is why we name them things. Reasonable beings, however, are called persons because their nature designates them as ends in themselves (1948).

In this kind of discourse person designates the human individual as universal singular: I have the power and right to say "I" and, at the same time, I recognize that all human beings have the right to say "I."

Moving in the opposite direction to the development that we have just been considering, the exacerbated liberalism of the 19th Century then, in another way, the totalitarianism of the 20th Century, tended to crush the person under the weight of economic imperatives or a community deemed to be walking towards a radiant tomorrow. This happened in such a way that paradoxically the person, from then on omnipresent in the law, was on the defensive and still is today. This is how "personalism" developed.

The term "personalism" was created by Renouvier in reaction against positivism in order to assert that liberty is the fundamental characteristic of the "me." Posing the question: "What can the person do in the world?" he responded, "All or nothing. The person is either a ripple upon the ocean of existence that is quickly obliterated or the active member of a body of true

humanity. It is in the individual (along with the necessary moral conditions), through conscience, knowledge and love... that happiness can be achieved" (1896). The philosophy of personalism intended to go beyond Kantian ethics, because it refused to define the person only according to the criteria of rationality. The person is not only perceptive or rational or volitional, it is all of these things at once.

Between 1930 and 1950 personalism was taken into the hands of Emmanuel Mounier, founder of the Journal *Esprit*, who wanted to defend "the primacy of the human person over material necessities and collective machinery." But, at the same time, he insisted on the fact that the person does not exist alone. A person is not self-sufficient; it can only live in a society. The person and the human community are therefore in solidarity and it is society's duty to provide the human beings that form it with the right conditions for individuals to flourish. Hence the formula: "individual for society; society for the person."

Today "personalism" is no longer spoken about, but the problem of the identity of the person persists. It is at the heart of our debates on abortion, euthanasia, cloning and genetic modification. We should note that at the moment where our democratic sensibility is more attentive than ever to the fundamental rights of the human person, in France and the rest of the world, terse formulas from different sectors of contemporary thought have denied and continue to deny the irreducible originality of the human being. Under our very eyes it is subjected to a formidable venture of deconstruction.

Here, we need only recall certain impressive proclamations: "We believe," wrote Levi-Strauss in *The Savage Mind* (*La Pensée sauvage*), "that the ultimate goal of the human sciences is not to form man but to dissolve him" (1966) "In our time," confirmed Michel Foucault in *The Order of Things* (*Les Mots et Les Choses*), "we can only think in the void of disappeared man... To all those who still want to speak of man, or his liberation, to all those who pose questions on what is man... we can only retort with a philosophical laugh" (1971). The declarations contained in *The Neuronal Man* (*L'Homme neuronal*) are in the same vein: "psychology is not able to claim the status of a special science"; "The identity

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