

# Persons: The Difference between 'Someone' and 'Something'

by Robert Spaeman

Notes by David Alexander

## Introduction

"Persons" have a special position in existence as they do not compose a natural kind. Attempts to identify the attributes which enable us to apply the term "person" have taken two routes. On the one hand, there are those who sought precision about what it means to be rational, assuming Boethius's definition of the person as "the individual substance of a rational nature." Some went too broad, associating it with subjectivity or consciousness, too broad because even birds share some kind of subjective inwardness. Some have sought to distinguish human, personal inwardness from other inwardness. The other route to understanding persons has focused on the social character of personal existence. The state of personal existence depends on a communicative event.

Up until recently, the concept of person has served as a concept with evaluative connotations. After Kant, it became the central plank in the foundation of human rights. But now its role has been reversed so that it plays a key role in demolishing the idea that human beings as human beings have some kind of rights before other human beings. It is argued that only human beings have rights, and only through being persons, but not all human beings are persons. Incredulity at the moral cretinism, while appropriate enough as a first response, needs to be supplemented in the long run.

To assert that all human beings are persons makes some prior assumptions which some are not willing to make. One such assumption is that, although persons relate to one another *a priori* through mutual recognition, recognition is not an antecedent condition for being a person but a response to a prior claim. Demonstration of attributes is not a prerequisite for recognition as persons, but merely membership of the species. Persons are "individuals" in an unparalleled sense and it is because of this that we do not recognize persons by their individual demonstration of specific features. This book is prompted by a challenge to tradition, but to not a defense of tradition as tradition developed its own destruction. Life is not an attribute but "the being of living things." Persons are living things that are grouped not in species or genus but in community.

## Chapter 1: Why We Speak of Persons

The term "person" is often used in a way that is the opposite of emphatic, in contrast to the forceful and solemn "human being." On the other hand, to ascribe "personal existence" is to recognize that someone can claim a certain kind of treatment from anyone who encounters him. There is an old, faded use of person in the term "dramatic personae," but this is not the modern meaning of person. The discussion in this book will mainly have to do with the sense of the word "person" as a predicate, when we say someone is a person.

In order to know if someone is a person, we must first know they are a human being. However, to say someone is a person does not describe some further property as there is no "property" of personal existence. On the basis of some identifiable properties, we are licensed to say of some that they are persons. What does the predication of personal existence add? By paying attention to the usage of the word we may deduce that a person is someone who is what he is in a different way from that in which other things, or animals, are what they are.

"Being a man" uses the term "Man" as a classificatory term that excludes some. It gives primary *a limine* specification to anyone we propose to say anything about. We do not think of a man's relation to manhood in the same way that we think of a dog's to dogginess. We think of only human beings in terms of a mental self-differentiation. "Human" is used in normative terms except when we say "to err is human," but that does not extend to acts of malice, even though these are characteristic of human beings. We call such "inhuman."

Medieval philosophy treated "man" as one among the animal species but for us, "animal" carries the connotation of "non-human," so we prefer "living creature" when we want a category including both man and animals.

"I" is ostensive as it exemplifies the thing or quality being described. Unlike other pronouns, few can doubt "I" refers to something real. (What about "I robot"?) I does not refer to the "ego" but the whole person. The universally attested idea of the metamorphosis points to this recognition that the human being is not what he is in the same way as everything else we encounter is what it is. The stories of metamorphoses are not stories of "substantial change", the coming to be of a new thing out of the material of a prior thing. The distinctive feature of the stories is that the subject himself, not only a material substrate, survives the transformation. Only human beings undergo metamorphoses with their identities intact. Abstract individual identity is a feature of dreams too. These are cases of abstracting individual identity from qualitative similarities. The same conception is at work in ideas of reincarnation.

Any entity in nature displays what it is by what it does, by its manner of expressing itself. Even plants and animals display "deviation from type." The ideas that are present to animals are food, mate, prey, peril. We as observers may see these drives as a system explained by the theory of evolution. Human beings, as living creatures, participate in the inner difference of all higher life-forms, the difference of living and living well. Human beings are apparently unique in being conscious of this difference.

No one is simply and solely what he is. Self-acceptance is a process that presumes non-identity with self, and must be seen as the conscious appropriation of the non-identical, as integration.

There are "secondary volitions," the phenomenon of taking a position on one's own desires and acts of will. We can desire to have, or not have, certain desires. We evaluate not only the objects of our desires, but the desires themselves. When we succeed in bringing our desires into line with our evaluation, we feel free. When we fail, we feel impotent. In secondary volitions, we treat ourselves as we would another person whose behavior we seek to control. However, we run up against a boundary: it lies beyond our control to alter the fundamental direction in which we influence ourselves.

To speak of ourselves in the third person is to step out of the central position that all living things in nature occupy in relation to their environments, and to see oneself with other people's eyes as something "out there," from a point of view from outside one's organic center. This self-objectification makes both speech and morality possible. Speech anticipates the standpoint of the one who is to hear what is spoken. Rather than merely "expressing ourselves," we must submit to a prescribed system of rules that makes understanding possible. The system of speech itself prompts the emergence of self-difference. Our experience of the "view from nowhere" makes it impossible to view ourselves as mere organic systems, where every encounter has meaning only in relation to the system's requirements. Speech is the communicative event in which we realize ourselves as what we are, as persons.