THE HUMAN PERSON: A STUDY IN PARADOX

Dr. Richard Penaskovic,
The College of St. Rose, Albany, New York 12203

The way the term, person, has been understood down through the centuries might be called a test-case for the path concepts cut through time. In ancient civilizations one looks in vain for a true concept of the person. Apart from the Christian revelation the notion of person does not even exist. Theologians in the early Church formulated a concept of the person in order to make some sense out of the mysteries of the Trinity and the Incarnation. The more the concept of person was looked at through philosophical lens, the more theologians allowed this concept to move out of their exclusive territory. When this occurred in modern times, the notion of person became secularized. [1]

It is the thesis of this paper that the human person is more than can be contained in a univocal concept. The human person might best be described as a two-legged paradox. The human person has never become accustomed to the tragic miracle of consciousness. [2] Perhaps "his species is not set, has not jelled, but is still in a state of becoming, bound by his physical memories to a past of struggle and survival, limited in his futures by the uneasiness of thought and consciousness." [3]

It will be argued that the human person might best be described as a bridge or mediator between a closed and an open world, between nature and culture, instinct and reason. The attempt to come up with a satisfactory definition of the human person is not entirely pointless. Past definitions of the human person are valid building blocks to a yet to be completed integration, functioning in a similar vein to comments about God's nature and essence. [4]

The Problem

There are two main traditions present in Western philosophy concern-

1. A. Guggenberger, "Person" in HANDBUCH THEOLOGISHER GRUNDBEGRIFFE II ed. by H. Fries (Munich: Koesel Verlag, 1963) p. 295.
2. J. Steinbech, SEA OF CORTEZ: A Leisurely Journal of Travel and Research (New York: Viking Press, 1941) p. 96.
3. J. Steinbech, SEA OF CORTEZ, p. 96.
4. H. Urs von Balthasar, THEODRAMATIK II: Die Personen des Spiels (Einsiedeln, Switzerland: Johannes Verlag, 1976) p. 316.

ing the human person. The first may be called the individualistic tradition. This finds its main proponent in Boethius who defined person as *"rationalis naturae individua substantia."* [5] Such a definition has a twofold thrust; rational individuality and subsistence. Some scholars wonder whether it suffices to approach the human person from the vantage-point of *ousia.* [6] Correspondingly, such an approach to an understanding of person seems quite static, i.e., excludes becoming. Such a view of the person may have sufficed in the early Middle Ages, however, the contemporary philosophical scene puts a premium on the person as process, as project, as task and as becoming. [7]

The second main approach to an understanding of the human person may be called the relational view. Most personalist and existentialist philosophers understand the human person relationally. One finds such a view of the person in such men as M. Buber, G. Marcel, R. Guardini, K. Jaspers, J. Macmurray, E. Mounier, R. La Senne, M. Nédoncelle, P. Wust, and Th. Haecker. This understanding of the human person has its roots in the christology of the early Church. St. Augustine, for example, understood the trinitarian persons relationally.

This approach finds its clearest spokesman in Richard of St. Victor, who understood one's relationship to God as constituting the human person. Richard of St. Victor defines person in this way: *"Persona est rationalis naturae incommunicabilis et singularis existentia."* [8] Richard of St. Victor's definition substitutes *incommunicabilis* and *singularis existentia* for the *individua substantia* of Boethius. Richard believed that the definition of Boethius was valid only for created persons. By using the term, *existentia,* Richard felt that he had a concept which was wide enough to encompass the person of God, the angels and the human person. [9]

John Duns Scotus seconded the view of Richard of St. Victor in regard to the human person. For Scotus human beings are persons precisely through their orientation to God. Scotus believed that the human person could stand in relationship to God in two ways: in prayerful openness to God or as standing alone apart from God. The latter move has the character of

5. Boethius, LIBER DE PERSONA ET DUABUS NATURIS CONTRA EUTYCHEN ET NESTORUM, PL 64, 134 BC.

6. J. D. Zizioulas, "Human capacity and human incapacity: a theological exploration" SCOTTISH JOURNAL OF THEOLOGY 28 (1976) p. 403.

7. M. Heidegger, SEIN UND ZEIT (Tuebingen: M. Niemeyer Verlag, 1949) pp. 145ff. See G. Allbright, "The Person in the Thought of Jose Ortega y Gasset," INTERNATIONAL PHILOSOPHICAL QUARTERLY 15 (1975) pp. 279-292 and A. Tallon, "Person and Community: Buber's Category of the Between," PHILOSOPHY TODAY 17 (91973) pp. 62-82.

8. Richard of St. Victor, DE TRINITATE 4,21; PL 196, 945 A as cited by H. Muehlen, DER HEILIGE GEIST ALS PERSON (Muenster: Verlag Aschendorff, 1967) p. 37, footn. 2.

9. H. Meuhlen, DER HEILIGE GEIST ALS PERSON, p. 37.

sinfulness, although Scotus never called it such.

Philosophers in the Middle Ages, particularly Aquinas and Scotus, believed that it was impossible to come up with a satisfactory definition of the human person. The human person might best be termed an analogy or a paradox. There are at least three ways of considering the paradox that is the human person: as body and spirit, as man and woman, as individual and community. Reflection on these three polarities does not solve the riddle of the human person. In point of fact, they make the puzzle more profound and penetrating. In each of these three dimensions the human person continuously runs between the two poles in search of rest and completion, but in such a way that he/she is ordained to transcend the poles. [10]

Body and Spirit (Geist)

It is important to distinguish the human body (Leib) from other, non-human bodies (Koerper). The human body is part and parcel of the self as experienced, whereas non-human bodies and things are regarded by the self as foreign objects. This understanding of the human body goes back to Max Scheler who regards the human body as being prior to the distinction between physical and psychical.

Soul and body refer to two entirely human principles of the one human being (Seienden). Body is not the same as matter. Body may be described as matter informed by spirit, whereas soul (Seele) should not be identified with spirit (Geist). Soul may be called spirit informing matter. What is paradoxical about the human person is this: that the human soul is not a pure spirit independent of matter, but the finite and the human spirit is constituted in its intellectual/spiritual qualities (Geistigkeit) through its bodyliness. [11]

The human person, then, may be regarded as the synthesis of two, otherwise not to be united, kingdoms, nature and spirit, matter (matière) and thought (pensée). For this reason the human person may be called a compendium of the world, the measure of all things, the world-sphinx. [12] The human person mediates between the lower and the higher worlds, the world of the senses and the intellectual or intelligible world. The human person forms the border or limit (methorion) around two realities, the one being material, bodily, without reason, the other incorporeal and intelligible.

The paradox that is the human person finds expression even in the Stoics who distinguished between life according to nature and the renunciation of human passions. Aristotle has as his moral ideal the ruling of the passions, yet even Aristotle must concede the fact that humans are

10. H. Urs von Balthasar, THEODRAMTIK II, p. 325.
11. F. P. Fiorenz, J. B. Metz, "Der Mensch als Einheit von Leib and Seele" in MYSTERIUM SALUTIS II: Die Heilsgeschichte Vor Christus, ed, by J. Feiner et al (Einsiedeln, Switzerland: Benziger Verlag, 1967) p. 621.
12. H. Urs von Balthasar, THEODRAMATIK II, p. 327, footn. 3.

evil, undisciplined, yes animals. In *Genesis* mankind is made from the slime of the earth while simultaneously coming forth from the hand of God. Paul continues the paradox by pitting spirit and flesh in war against each other in Romans 7:23.

The human person guards the border between brute, animal life and the intelligible, divine world. Apropos of this Peter Lomabard writes *"homo quasi in medio collocatus, habet supra se Deum, sub se mundum."* 13 Ficino has a similar view. He says, "If man connects the higher and the lower nature as its bond, he desires both. Therefore by a certain natural instinct he ascends to the higher, descends to the lower. And while he ascends, he does not desert the lower, and when he descends, he does not leave the sublime." 14

Even Pascal admits the paradoxical nature of the human person. "There is internal war in man between reason and the passions. If he had only reason without passions ... If he had only passions without reason ... But having both, he cannot be without strife, being unable to be at peace with the one without being at war with the other. Thus he is always divided against, and opposed to himself." 15 Pascal adds that this twofold nature of man is so evident that some have thought that we had two souls.

It should be pointed out that dualism does not exist merely between spirit and matter. Dualism is found right in spirit or *Geist* which for its own proper activity, namely, reflexion, needs the body/soul foundation while, at the same time, transcending it. In every act of the human person from digging a ditch to mystic contemplation we have a remarkable *conspiratio* or working together of spirit and matter, soul and body.

Teilhard de Chardin, using the creation account in Genesis and the thought of Aquinas as his points of departure, sees the human person as a bridge between two shores, matter and spirit. Chardin distinguishes between the outer face of things (*matière*) and the inner face of things (*pensée*), the "without" of things and the "within". For Chardin tangential energy acts on the outside of things. Scientists look upon the growth of the universe as a sequence of combinations: atoms forming molecules, molecules forming cells, cells forming plants and animals. On the other hand, we have consciousness or the "within" of things, which one finds in the lowest forms of inorganic matter. Operating on the inside, on consciousness we have radial or spiritual energy, separated from, but related to, tangential energy. Chardin formulated the Law of Complexity-Consciousness, which states that complexity increases on the outside until stopped by the loss of tangential energy. But, on the inside, radial energy drives the organism toward higher

13. P. P. Lombardus, II SENT. 1,7 as cited by H. Urs von Balthasar, THEODRAMA-TIK II, p. 330, footn. 15.

14. M. Ficino, THEOLOGIA PLATONICA III, 2 (Opp 1576, I, 1, 119) as cited by H. Urs von Balthasar, THEODRAMATIK II, p. 331.

15. B. Pascal, PENSEES, trans. by W.F. Trotter (New York: E.P. Dutton & CO., Inc., 1958) p. 109.

levels of both complexity and consciousness. In the evolution of animals, complexity-consciousness reached the level of instinct and awareness, while in man, the level of thought. [16]

The paradox of the human person means that, spatially, the universe encompasses and swallows me up like an atom, yet "by thought I comprehend the world." [17] Neither one of the poles, spirit nor body, has the upper hand; both form *unum ens*. The one-sided Platonic understanding of the person as a soul who uses a body must be corrected by the Aristotelian emphasis on the *meson* or *aurea mediocritas*, the golden mean.

Man and Woman

The polarities and tensions between spirit and body repeat themselves and become even more profound when speaking about the sexual differentiation of the human person into man and woman. The polarity between man and woman anticipates the third tension, that between individual and community, since the man/woman relationship serves as a model for the orientation of the human person to community.

Man and woman are simply two poles of a single reality, two different representations of a single being, two *entia* in a single *esse*, an existence in two lives. In no way are man and woman two different parts of a whole which one puts together later on much like a puzzle. The human person, then, is a "dual unity". What we have are two different, but inseparable realities. Both man and woman are ordained to a final, unfathomable unity. [18] In this context we are dealing not so much with a problem capable of resolution, but with a profound mystery.

Metaphysicians in all cultures have seen the polarity between man and woman as the basic rhythm of life. [19] This polarity may be seen most clearly in the relationship between heaven and earth. Heaven is seen as fruitful, invigorating the earth by means of the sun and rain, whereas the earth, as the passive principle, answers by reason of its own power and potential, *materia-mater*.

Assuredly, we have here a real danger, that of identifying the heavenly/masculine sphere with spirit and the earthly/feminine sphere with matter or with nature. Thus we have the subordination of the earthly/feminine to the heavenly/masculine. Such a tendency may be seen in Plato's *Timaeus*, Aristotle's *Physics*, (Aristotle looks upon woman as matter and as an object to be used), and from there to the anti-woman statements in the patristic period and well on into the Middle Ages. [20]

16. T. de Chardin, THE PHENOMENON OF MAN, trans. by B. Wall (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1961) pp. 300-302.
17. B. Pascal, PENSEES, p. 97.
18. H. Urs von Balthasar, THEODRAMATIK II, p. 335.
19. *ibid.*, p. 336.
20. *ibid.*, p. 336.

St. Augustine, for example, believes that in relation to man Eve stands for body vis-à-vis male spirit. Augustine defines only the male as alone the full image of God. Woman, in herself, is not this image, but only when taken together with the male, her "head". In short, for Augustine and many of the Church Fathers, male: female — spirit: flesh.

In accord with Aristotelian hylemorphism, Aquinas looks upon the human person as composite of body and soul, in contradistinction to the platonized patristic anthropolgy that sees the human being as a soul imprisoned in the materiality of the flesh. This more integrated view of the body/soul relationship made possible for Thomas an escape from the patristic dualism that identified the male with spirit, and the female polarity with the earthward drag of the body. [21] In a word, Thomas gives a positive valuation to the body. Aquinas believes that the body has an excellence with respect to its end as long as it serves that end. This view might have helped overcome the patristic pessimism about women, sex and the body except for the fact that Aquinas followed Aristotle and the Church Fathers in their intellectualist definition of *homo*, so that the body-denying dualism and its associated androcentrism were reinvigorated. [22] Aquinas did this by saying that the final fulfillment or end of the human person, viz., life with God, is achieved by the operation of the rational soul. Thus, ultimately, the body is left out once again. [23]

It would appear that no metaphysical polarity can claim to be the final answer for an understanding of the difference between the sexes. Chinese philosophers, perhaps even as early as 1000 B.C. distinguished two interacting energy-modes within every natural object. These energy-modes or principles were called the *yang* and the *yin*, the former masculine in character, the latter feminine. Men and women, not less than inanimate things, were seen as the product of the interaction in varying degrees of the *yang* and the *yin*. They manifest differing proportions of the qualities of each activity-mode. Not even the Chinese philosophers were able to achieve a perfect balance between these two principles. Men were thought to be heavenly, that is, predominantly *yang* and of great worth, whereas women were reckoned to be earthly, i.e., predominantly *yin* and of less account. speaking, then, about the sexual differentiation of the human person into man and woman we again are up against the paradox that is the human person.

21. E.C. Mc Lauglin, "Equality of Souls, Inequality of Sexes: Woman in Medieval Theology" in RELIGION AND SEXISM, ed by R.R. Ruether (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1974) p. 216.

22. *ibid.*, p. 217.

23. *ibid.*, p. 217.

24. J.B. Noss, MAN'S RELIGIONS (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co. Inc., 1974) pp. 242ff.

Individual and Community

A certain polarity or tension exists between the individual and the community. At one time concern for the total salvation of the individual appears to predominate, while at another time the salvation and well-being of the community seems to be the central task, even though the latter task can only be attained by means of the salvation or well-being of each individual.

Pre-Christian thought looked upon both poles as a whole. The tension was especially felt where an invidual failed to stay in his community or in cases where he was, for one reason or another, ostracized. The individual, so ostracized, lost his footing in society and only the precarious right of the "sanctuary" could, in certain circumstances, save him. 25 The individual, stripped of community, lived a precarious existence. In order for the individual to live and to grow, some community or other had to put a mantle around his nakedness. Only the slaves without rights, or those tolerated in some way because they were used, those who imperfectly integrated into society, could live on the edge of the community.

How does the individual escape the prison of his/her own individuality? By insertion into a community, be it the city, state or country, the individual escapes the prison of his/her own self. Even among primitive peoples this insertion into the community occurs only at a price. Certain limits are placed on the individual's freedom. The *bonum commune* takes precedence over one's own good as an individual.

By insertion into the community the individual takes on certain obligations and has certain rights. Insofar as the community lives and is nourished within the eternal law (*theios nomos*), which far surpasses the boundaries of a single community, the individual comes to share in this too. Does anyone act as the mediator between divine and human laws or rights within the comunity? Yes, in the pre-Christian world at least, special individuals possess authority and represent the established order before the gods. The founder, the hero, the king become mediators between two worlds, two laws, two rights, divine and human. In such individuals alone do we find individuality represented in its fullness. These special individuals represent the community before God and God before the community. These special individuals may be called corporative persons. Such corporative persons are not abstractions from the idea of a single individual, nor simply the exponent of a body-politic independent of themselves, but are its essential incarnation, one in which every single individual is present. 26

In community the individual *qua* individual feels at home. However much the individual questions the concrete conditions and situation of a city or country, he/she does not question the notion of a city or a country as such. The milieu or area of a city or country inserts the individual into the sphere of the divine. In primitive cultures, as in all developed cultures,

25. H. Urs von Balthasar, THEODRAMATIK II, p. 352.
26. *ibid.*, p. 354.

the center of the city or of the kingdom coincided with the center of the world. As Mircea Eliade shows using numerous examples, the axis-point between heaven and hell went clear through this center. If the establishment of a city meant inserting oneself into a new community, it was thought to be connected with the establishment of the world by the gods themselves. To settle in a territory, to build a house implied, both for the individual and for the community, that one make an important and even vital decision. [27] By creating the environment in which one would live, one imitated the gods who created the world. The world means "ordered multiplicity", community, apart from which the individual could not even imagine him/herself. Thus individuals understood themselves primarily and without question as members of a family, a group, a city, a country, all of which were thought to be at the very center of the world: the family, group, city or country to which I belong were not simply communities parallel to other communities, but were thought to be *the* community in relationship to which all other communities were on the fringe. [28]

In what way is the relationship between the individual and the community paradoxical? The word, individual, comes from the Greek, *a-tomon* and means in-divisible. The human person is in-divisible inasmuch as the human person is self-conscious and free. That is to say that there is something unique to every human, a uniqueness which excludes commonality. To be a person means to share in common what other persons have while, at the same time, excluding what others have. This statement, however paradoxical, is true despite the fact that persons (as centers of freedom and self-consciousness which exclude each other) can know each other and communicate with each other.

Apart from the community the individual falls prey to loneliness. Loneliness might be described as a kind of exhilarating deprivation. The lonely person is deprived of wordly relations, but is surfeited with the experience of the self. Loneliness may be called that event which invites our inward voice to discuss, but ultimately, nothing can be said. Loneliness constantly outmaneuvers the individual being here, there and nowhere. [29] How does loneliness arise? It wells up from our autobiographical narration. As we lie sick in bed what is lonely is our narrative to ourselves of our being there cut off from the community of our friends.

Is it possible for the individual to free him/herself from that narrating voice within, which places one as the main character in one's autobiographical adventure? No, the self always has as its travelling companion the story of how it is alone. In reflecting on one's loneliness, the individual can always give it a name, a place, a narrative. In a word, loneliness means lonely narration. One cannot touch, evoke, or call forth the story-less me.

---

27. *ibid.,* p. 351.
28. *ibid.,* p. 351.
29. A La Branche, "Autobiographical Loneliness" PHILOSOPHY TODAY 19 (1973) p. 188.

The self may be billed as the main performer in the drama one narrates mentally. Far from being a virus that may be filtered out of one's experience loneliness is part of the narrative self which the individual weaves thick and fast. 30

One may illustrate the polarity which exists between the individual and the community by an analysis of language. However, such a task falls outside the scope of this paper. An analysis of language would show that while, on the one hand, language expresses that which individuals share in common (for example, words having specific and agreed upon meanings), still, at the same time, language functions as a creative expression of one's unique individuality. 31

Conclusion

The human person eludes every attempt to be boxed into categories or to be encompassed within the limits of a definition. For this reason the definition of person proposed by Boethius and the relational understanding of person are inadequate. The human person is essentially a paradox or an analogy and is therefore undefinable.

An analogy may be drawn between the human person and the cosmos. Human persons exist in the world (because the cosmic powers are amalgamated within the person), yet the human person transcends the world (insofar as the person represents God to the rest of creation). This inner-cosmic analogy is grounded in the analogy between God who is represented by the human person and the person who represents God. God as the original copy (*Bild*) can clearly be seen in the human person as the image of God (*Abbild*). However, this occurs in such a way that God remains Creator and the human person created, i.e., God transcends the human person in a yet greater dissimlar way. To the extent that the human person is an analogy or a paradox, to that extent does the human person approach God of whom we can only say what He is not. "*Si comprehendis, non est Deus.*" 32

It may well be the case that philosophical reflection can take us only so far in understanding the meaning of person. It seems to be true, at least on the theological level, that the paradox of the person is continued and even intensified when speaking of the divine persons, three persons in one God or the union of the divine and human nature in the person of Christ. If this be true, then this paper should be understood as clearing the forest to build a house, philosophy at the service of theology.

30 *ibid.*, p. 192.

31. H.G. Gadamer, WAHRHEIT UND METHODE (2d ed.; Tuebingen: J.C.B. Mohr Verlag, 1964) pp. 361-465.

32. E. Przywara, MENSCH: Typologische Anthropologie I (Nuernberg: Glock und Lutz, 1958) pp. 116ff.