

Discovery and Affirmation of the Concept of ‘Human Person’ by Christian Philosophy

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Abstract:

The concept of ‘Human Person’ has a long history and has become the subject matter for many branches of study. Human beings are characterized as ‘Persons’ apart from all other kinds of entities. ‘Person’ is a comprehensive name which expresses the entire nature of the human being.

The term person in English is derived from the Latin *persona* which is also traceable to the Greek *prosopon* (πρόσωπον). The direct meaning of *prosopon* is face which was originally used in the Greek theatre to denote the made-up faces or the masks worn by an actor. For Romans, *persona* had a juridical sense which expressed a kind of dignity, recognized by the law. For them only a Roman citizen was *persona*.

With the advent of Christianity a new world vision was opened. This vision influenced the outlook on human being as well. Human beings were considered unique because of their special place in nature and their superiority over other creatures. According to the Christian metaphysical tradition, human being is unique because of the endowment of the immortal rational soul and being created in the image of God.

Severinus Boethius, a Christian philosopher of early 6th century, defined the concept of ‘Person’ for the first time. This was considered a classical definition which provided a firm theoretical base to a new humanism, that is, to view all the human beings as persons who have equal rights and dignity. Thus, Christian Philosophy pioneered to discover and affirm the concept of ‘Human Person’ in an innovative way, discarding the previous oppressive and narrow perspectives. My research focuses on this aspect in order to declare once more the value and dignity of each individual as a ‘Human Person’. There is a serious need for it in the contemporary society, to provide a theoretical forum to affirm the personhood of all individuals, so that all may become ‘persons’ and allow others to be ‘persons’ and construct a society based on human values.

Key Words: *Prosopon*; Trinity; *Persona*; Wholistic; Incommunicability; Personality; Individuation;

1. Introduction

Human beings have many dimensions because human nature is multi-dimensional which has been partly disclosed and is largely in the state of potentiality. Among the many dimensions, human beings are identified as persons.

The concept of person is central to philosophy and it has been addressed throughout its history. This awareness has increased at present. “Our epoch, more than any other, sees at the centre of history the human person. The explosions of the freedom of rights of the human person, proclaimed in a solemn document after the Second World War, are its most eloquent testimonial.”¹

The theme of person has become the subject for many branches of study. “As a term it has a long history. As a concept it has had many problematic nuances. But when applied to the human being it makes him more human, more complete and more real.”²

¹ L. BOGLIOLO, *Metaphysics*, Theological Publications in India, Bangalore 1987, 119.

² G. I. ONAH, *Self-Transcendence and Human History in Wolfhart Pannenberg*, University Press of America, New York 1999, 72.

The concept of person, that is to consider humans as persons, is a patrimony of Christian culture. The contribution of Boethius for arriving at a definition of the concept of person is momentous. The first definition for the concept of person by Boethius was later developed and brought to its culmination by St. Thomas Aquinas.

1.1 Scope

The concept of human person has a long history and has become the subject matter for many branches of study. However, Christianity has already defined the concept of human person centuries ago. Severinus Boethius' first definition of person provided a firm theoretical base for a new humanism.

Many theories and premises are proposed by many thinkers from various fields about the concept of person in order to affirm the freedom, equality and other human values. Nevertheless there is also a need not to forget the first affirmation about the concept of person which serves still as an ideological pedestal for any verification on the human values. In the midst of individualistic, consumerist and pragmatic trends of the present globalized world, such affirmation is vital in order to safeguard the value and dignity of each individual as a human person.

1.2 Methodology

Since this is a philosophical research, a deductive reasoning is employed throughout as primary method in order to accentuate the process of reasoning from one or more statements or premises to reach a logically certain conclusion. Various views and premises on the concept of human person are reasoned out in a deductive way in order to arrive at a conclusion which can provide a solid conceptual root to the same.

Further an analytic method is used especially to evaluate the classical definition given to the concept of person in order to evaluate its adequacy to view human person as a comprehensive title which expresses the entire nature of the human being.

Phenomenological method is used to inquire into the situations where the human beings were not treated as persons and to authenticate the need to affirm the personhood of the individuals.

2. A Short History of the Concept of Person

The term person in English is derived from the Latin *persona*. This *persona* is also traceable to the Greek (*πρόσωπον* - *prosopon*).³ Its first meaning is "face" and *prosopon* was originally used in the Greek theatre to denote the made-up faces or the masks or the disguise worn by an actor. Later, the term was applied to the individual actor who put on the mask. In other words, the term *prosopon* functionally referred to the dramatic persons who acted in plays with the masks. Boethius, who defined the concept of person for the first time, also affirms it.⁴

³ Generally it is accepted that Polybios (200-120 B.C) was the first to use *prosopon* in the sense of person. However, it is Boethius who worked on this concept systematically and provided a definition.

⁴ BOETHIUS, *Tractates, Contra Eutychem*, III, 6-16, trans., H. F. STEWARD - E.K.RAND, William Heinemann Ltd., London 1926, 87.

Basing on *prosopon* as the mask and derivatively as the individual actor, the Stoics tried to give it a religious significance. For them this world is a stage set by God and each man has a role to play on that stage. They also spoke of a rational world plan guiding the events of history and the destinies of the human being. Zeno and Chrysippus compared a human being to a dog tied to a cart. It can follow willingly or be dragged.⁵

For the Romans, *persona* had a juridical sense.⁶ *Persona* expressed a kind of dignity, which was recognised by the law. They identified *persona* with legal rights, that is, the rights of a Roman citizen. For them the slave or a non-Roman citizen was a *non-persona* who had no rights.⁷

These are some shades of meaning of the term person in the pagan Greek and Latin cultures. Up to the advent of Christian culture, the term person was used in the above senses.

With the advent of the Christian culture, the term person acquired an entirely different meaning.⁸ The Christian adoption of the term, however, was primarily for theological motives.

The term took on a special significance in Christianity and figured importantly in the theological discussions of the *Incarnation* and the *Holy Trinity*.⁹ There were several heresies regarding the nature of Christ and the Trinity during the first four centuries. To counteract these heresies and to safeguard the true doctrines of the church, the Fathers of the church during these centuries developed a Christian concept of person, but based themselves on the ancient Greek and Latin terminologies and their significance. The Nicean and Chalcedonian formulas gave the first doctrinal clarification to the terms nature and person. Nicea I (325) defined Christ as consubstantial with the Father, while Chalcedon (451) defined Christ as one Person with two natures.¹⁰

Thus the Christian concept of person is based on ancient Greek and Latin terms, first and foremost defining Christ as one *persona* in two distinct natures or one *hypostasis* with two complete natures, the divine and the human.

According to the Christian concept of God is one substance in three persons, thus eventually each individual human being created in the image of God must also be a person.¹¹

It was Tertullian who, at a very early date, gave precision to the terminology.¹² According to him *persona* (person) referred to that which is threefold in the Trinity and one

⁵ Cfr. DAVID SEDLEY, "Stoicism", in *Routledge - Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, ed., Edward Craig, 10 vols. vol. XI, Routledge, New York 1998, 159.

⁶ Generally, the Romans were notable for their juridical mentality. They had a juridical outlook of all aspects of the human beings. Cfr. A. VENDEMIATI, *La lege naturale nella 'Summa theologiae' di san Tomaso d'Aquino*, Edizione Dehoniane, Roma 1995, 19-20.

⁷ Cfr., ADOLF BERGER, "Roman Laws" in *The Encyclopaedia Americana*, George A. Cornish et al., ed., 30 vols. Vol. XIII, American Corporation, New York 1968, 645.

⁸ Cfr. ROBERT E. BRENNAN, *Thomistic Psychology: A Philosophic Analysis of the Nature of Man*, Macmillan, New York 1952¹², 282.

⁹ "The Trinitarian-Christological controversies of the 2nd to the 5th centuries in the Greco-Roman world occasioned the first development in the notion of person." Cfr. M. J. DORENKEMPER, "Person", in *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, W. J. McDONALD, ed., 17 vols. Vol. XI, The Catholic University of America, Washington 1967, 168.

¹⁰ Cfr. *Ibid.*

¹¹ Cfr. R. DE SMET, "The Discovery of the Person", in *Indian Philosophical Quarterly*, 4(1976)1, 8.

¹² Cfr. FREDERICK COPLESTON, *A History of Philosophy*, 9 vols. vol. II, Image Book, New York 1993, 25.

in Christ. After him, faithful to the Western viewpoint, St. Augustine said that the term person in the Trinity could only mean a subsistent relation.¹³ He being a Platonist, - the human person means for him first and foremost the soul, because the human soul is one substance endowed with thinking and ordained to govern the body. Therefore the soul makes a human being an individual and personal.

3. The Contribution of Severinus Boethius: The First Definition

Any philosophical study on person is incomplete without mentioning Boethius (480-524). His definition of person is the classical one. It has become the pioneering one for the ontological notion of person and found in his *Contra Eutychem* which conclusively refutes the heresy of Nestorius.

Nestorian heresy affirmed that in Christ, person was twofold and therefore there were in Christ two natures and two persons. Towards the end of his work Boethius argues that Nestorius was led astray by the false notion that person may be applied to every nature.

Boethius defined person as “*naturae rationalis individua substantia.*”¹⁴ The definition came as a polemic against discrepancies with regard to the nature and personhood of Christ.¹⁵ In order to affirm the personhood of Christ, the personhood of human beings was also defined. Thus the classical definition of the concept of person had its birth in the milieu of the Christological heresies.¹⁶

The principal components of the definition of Boethius are therefore, (i) that the term person exists only in individuals, not in universals; (ii) person belongs only to substance and not to accidents; and (iii) person is attributed only to rational beings and not to animals, plants or to other irrational creatures. And Boethius agrees that his definition is in close affinity to the Greek concept *hypostasis*, which could mean the individual subsistence of a rational nature.¹⁷

4. The Boethian Definition and the Thomistic Clarifications

St. Thomas accepted the definition of Boethius and gave an account of the evolution of the concept of person, beginning from the Greek ‘*prosopon*’.¹⁸ He said “For as famous men were represented in comedies and tragedies, the name person was given to signify those who held high dignity...Thence by some the definition of person is given as ‘hypostasis’ distinct by reason of dignity.”¹⁹

Now, the definition of person by Boethius has three main parts: individual, substance and rational nature. St. Thomas gave to each of these three terms an evaluative of corrective

¹³ Cfr. M. J. DORENKEMPER, “Person”, in *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 169.

¹⁴ “The individual substance of a rational nature.” BOETHIUS, *Tractates, Contra Eutychem*, III, 4-5, 85.

¹⁵ Cfr. KEVIN DORAN, *What is a Person? The Concept and the Implications for Ethics*, E. Mellen Press, New York 1989, 4-5.

¹⁶ Cfr. BOETHIUS, *Tractates, Contra Eutychem*, II, 5-12, 77.

¹⁷ Cfr. Idem., *Tractates, Contra Eutychem*, III, 20-29, 87.

¹⁸ Cfr. ST. THOMAS AQUINAS, *I Sententiarum (Scriptum super libros sententiarum, magistri Petri Lombardi Episcopi Parisiensis)*, d.23, q.1, art.1, solutio, ed., P. Madonnet, IV Tomi, Tomus 1, Sumptibus P.Lethielleux editoris, Parisiis 1929, 557.

¹⁹ Idem., *Summa Theologica*, Ia, q.29, a.3, ad.2, trans., Fathers of the English Dominican Province, American Edition, 3 vols. vol. I, Benziger Brothers, New York 1948, 158. This work will be cited as *ST*.

comment. While falling in line with the definition of Boethius, he also refined it further and brought out more clearly the ontological characteristics of person.

4.1 Individual

For Boethius a person is first of all an individual. It is true that when Boethius used ‘*individuum*’ he meant the unparticipable character of the person, who retains its wholeness and particularity: and it expresses the wholistic character of the person. But individuals also have their concrete, distinguishable and individuating marks. At the same time they also have universal characters, by which individuals are grouped into classes, societies and nations. This concrete character and the universal character of the individual must be included in the use of ‘*individuum*’ according to Boethius. Therefore St. Thomas adds that if a person is termed *individuum*, it means that he or she is ‘divided from others’ or at least ontologically distinguishable from others.²⁰

4.2 Substance

‘Substance’²¹ could mean either nature or part of a finite essence which underlies the accidents. St. Thomas substituted the term ‘*subsistere*’ for ‘*substare*’ which means ‘to stand by itself’. ‘*Subsistere*’ is the essential aspect of a substance with regard to person: to subsist or to exist by itself. For St. Thomas, the first condition for being a person is to be a subsistent.²² By this substitution St. Thomas wanted to give an integral view of the person. A person is a complete substance and subsists in one’s self and by one’s self.²³ Thus his integral view of the human being is aptly incorporated in his view of the person; to subsist means to exist by one’s own act of being.

4.3 Rational Nature

The final element of the definition by Boethius affirms that the person possesses a rational nature. In St. Thomas there is a distinction in the use of the words ‘Intellect’ (νοῦς) and ‘Reason’ (διάνοια). Intellect (*intus leggere*)²⁴ is in the same thought pattern of Aristotle. But Boethius uses the word ‘rationality’ with the Platonic meaning of ‘*dianoia*’ as the superior activity of the soul.²⁵ For St. Thomas the activity of the intellect is ‘understanding’ and the activity of rationality is ‘reasoning’.²⁶ But he also pointed out that reason is subordinated to intellect because of its discursive character which appears inferior to the intuitive character of the intellect. ‘Intellect’ has the intuitive character which means, that it can enter into the reality more deeply and it can intuit the first principles. In a general sense

²⁰ Cfr. R. DE SMET, “The loss of the Person”, in *Indian Philosophical Quarterly*, 4(1977)2, 12.

²¹ ‘Substance’ comes from the Latin verb *substare*, which literally means ‘to stand under’.

²² Cfr. R. DE SMET, “The Loss of the Person”, 10.

²³ “et ideo quamvis genera et species non substent nisi in individuis, tamen eorum proprie subsistere est, et subsistentiae dicuntur; quamvis et particulare dicatur, sed per posterius; sicut et species substantiae dicuntur.” ST. THOMAS AQUINAS, *I Sententiarum*, d.23, q.1, art.1, ad.2, 557-558.

²⁴ “Il nome di intelletto implica una certa conoscenza intima; intendere é quasi un leggere dentro ‘intus leggere.’” NICOLA ABBAGNANO, “intelletto”, in *Dizionario di filosofia*, Unione tipografico-editrice Torinese, Torino 1971, 493.

²⁵ For Plato rationality means (διάνοια) ‘*dianoia*’, “attività superiori dell’anima”. Ibid.

²⁶ Cfr. ST. THOMAS AQUINAS, *ST*, IIa.IIae, q.8, a.1, 1626.

the human being is said to be rational, but also capable of intellectual activity which is a step higher than rationality.

From all these observations the Thomistic way of interpreting the Boethian definition of person can be formulated as follows: “Person signifies what is most perfect in all nature - that is, a subsistent individual of a rational nature.”²⁷

5. Thomistic Ontological Conclusions on the Concept of Person

St. Thomas, through his refinement and clarification of the Boethian definition, clarified the ambiguities of the definition and improved it. His originality regarding the concept of person is evident through his assertion of some characteristics or qualities of it. For him the concept of person contains within itself the aspects of relationship, personality, incommunicability and individuality. These can be considered as Thomistic conclusions on the concept of person.

5.1 Relationship

In the definition of Boethius, person is seen as possessed of a rational nature. For St. Thomas human actions proceed from two internal principles: the intellect and the will. These are the two principles of rationality.²⁸ Thus the will is also a faculty of the soul by which the human being naturally tends to good. Therefore person is endowed with a free will. It follows that freedom is the property of the will.²⁹ This shows the capacity and freedom of the human person to love, to have friendship and have communion with other persons. St. Thomas proved that for human persons it is natural to be in relationship, since the very word person connotes relationship.

Further, the human person is the climax of all creation because it incorporates everything in it. Therefore, St. Thomas called person the centre of the cosmos and what is most perfect in all nature.³⁰ Thus, person can relate to all creatures. The relationship to the whole of the universe is possible for the human being because, by being a person he/she is elevated to a noble state.

5.2 Personality

According to the definition, personhood belongs to the very substance of the existence of the human being, whereas personality is only one of the properties like acts, powers and habits which are accidents. That is why it is said that the person does not grow but that personality can grow. It is natural to be a person, but personality is something that has to be developed. Here the consideration is ontological, not psychological because ontologically one's actions proceed from one's 'being', that is, from one's being a rational creature.³¹ Therefore the act of being or rational nature characterizes personality. Thus personality

²⁷ ST. THOMAS AQUINAS, *ST*, Ia, q.29, a.3, res.158.

²⁸ Cfr. Idem., *Summa contra gentiles*, Liber II, Capitulum 91, (Leoninae Text), Desclèe & C. Herder, Romae 1934, 152.

²⁹ Cfr. Idem., *ST*, Ia, q.79, a.2, ad.2, 377.

³⁰ Cfr. Idem., *ST*, Ia, q.29, a.3, res. 158.

³¹ Cfr. ROBERT E. BRENNAN, *Thomistic Psychology*, 292.

makes the human person an individual who cannot be reduced to an instrument or an experimental object.

5.3 Incommunicability

Individuality makes a person incommunicable, unique, self-enclosed and autonomous.³² St. Thomas affirmed that “the very meaning of person is that it is incommunicable”.³³ Incommunicability of person signifies that a person is complete in him/herself; as a whole being a person is complete in him/herself. Saying that a person is ontologically closed means that he/she is not in need of receiving anything from outside in the ontological sense.

St. Thomas distinguishes three types of incommunicability: *partis* which means, a person cannot communicate with other things as a part, because it is complete and total; *universalis* which means, a person cannot communicate as the universal communicates with its individuals, because it is a subsistence; *assumptibilis* which means, a person cannot communicate as an assumer to the assumed, because the assumer passes its personality on to the assumed and the assumed loses its own personality.³⁴

Incommunicability or the ontologically closed nature of the person does not mean a negative reality such as closed without openness to other realities or as a hindrance to the self-transcendence of humans.

5.4 Individuality

St. Thomas gave three standards for the ontological foundations of human individuality: individuation by matter, individuation by esse, individuation by rational soul.

5.4.1 Individuation by Matter

Matter ‘in general’ cannot be the principle of individuation, because it is already a part of human nature.³⁵ Therefore, matter ‘in particular’ is that which individuates, because it is the concrete matter that makes nature *this* or *that* reality. In human persons it is the individual human body that makes a difference between ‘this’ man and ‘that’ man. One person differs from another because of *this* flesh and *these* bones.”³⁶ St. Thomas summed up this observation as follows: “Matter is the principle of individuation of all inherent forms.”³⁷ However, while not neglecting matter as a factor of individuation, it also has to be noted that there are even higher standards to value the individuality of the human being than matter.

³² Here incommunicability is meant ontologically as a property of the human person. The incommunicability of God as person is not dealt here, since it involves further detailed study of God’s Trinitarian aspect and personality. Cfr. *Ibid.*, 288.

³³ *Idem.*, *ST*, Ia, q.30, a.4, ad.2, 164.

³⁴ “dicendum quod triplex incommunicabilitas est de ratione personae: scilicet partis, secundum quod est completum; et universalis, secundum quod est subsistens : et assumptibilis, secundum quod id quod assumitur transit in personalitatem alterius et non habet personalitatem propriam.” ST. THOMAS AQUINAS, *III Sententiarum*, d.5, q.2, art.1, ad.2, 200.

³⁵ Cfr. J. M. DE TORRE, *Christian Philosophy*, Vera-Reyes, Philippines 1981, 196.

³⁶ M. BROWN, “St. Thomas Aquinas and the Individuation of Persons”, in *The American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*, 65(1991)1, 30.

³⁷ ST. THOMAS AQUINAS, *ST*, III, q.77, a.2, 2464.

5.4.2 *Individuation by Esse*

Individuation by *esse* is an essential metaphysical principle. This is fundamental because without existence, there would be nothing at all. So existence is necessary for the principle of individuation. At the core of every created thing is *esse* which is its most fundamental act and its own existence and this depends on God for its existence.³⁸

Esse comes as one of the factors of the individuation of the person. It is understood that all things are radically individual insofar as each, in a unique way, is related to God, the giver of all existence. But it is something unique for a human person to be an individual which is a unique capacity and status that other creatures are not gifted with.

5.4.3 *Individuation by Rational soul*

The human person as a totality is individuated by the soul. But the human soul requires a body. In this sense, the human body also becomes an essential factor for the individuation of the person. Therefore the soul is prior to the body as a principle of individuation.

The human person is seen as the integral nature, a composite of material and immaterial. Therefore it is individuated in both material and immaterial ways. “Like material thing, person is individuated by matter. Like immaterial thing, person is individuated by the rational soul. And like all created things, persons are individuated by existence (*esse*)”.³⁹

Thus individuality becomes another factor that proves the nobility of the human person. The body, soul and existence prove that the human person is something unique and original.

6. **Appraisal and Conclusion**

Personhood of the human being is the basic principle that upholds humanity with its values and originality. The role played by Christian philosophy in the development of personalistic humanism cannot be neglected. Its contribution to bring out a decisive notion of the person opened up new frontiers to the dignity of man. As Emmanuel Mounier says, “It is *Christianity* that, first of all, imports into these gropings a decisive notion of the person.”⁴⁰

A precise application of the term person to Christ and to God in the Christian religion and its subsequent application to man opened up a new field to Christian humanism as such. According to the teachings of the Christian religion, man was created in the image of God. Therefore, every man must be said to be a person in the proper sense of the term, because God is also seen as a person. Personhood is not something given by positive laws from outside (as the Romans thought), or something put on man artificially (as the Greeks thought) or even coming from the predestination of God (as the Stoics thought). It is something

³⁸ Cfr. M. BROWN, “St. Thomas Aquinas and the Individuation of Persons”, 31.

³⁹ M. BROWN, “St. Thomas Aquinas and the Individuation of Persons”, 42.

⁴⁰ EMMANUEL MOUNIER, *Personalism*, University of Notre Dame Press, London 1952, xx. Here by the word ‘gropings’ the author means the indecisive states and even the improper sense that the term person had in the earlier Greek and the Roman Worlds.

ontological and inherent in human nature. To be a person is the birthright of every one whether slave or citizen.⁴¹

St. Thomas's view of person was essentially an ontological view. He clearly shows that on the ontological level a person occupies the highest place and 'the point of encounter of all reality'. Thus his dimension of communion is ontological. This promotes the reflection that man has a social nature not only naturally but also ontologically. This is called the ontological transcendence of man.⁴² This ontological reality invites communion with all others by breaking the chains of egoism that comes from racial, national, ethnic and other such divisive classifications. "This is a transcendence that does not mean separation, but the free and voluntary assumption of others into one's own interiority... It is the disposition to be and generous dedication for the good of others in all its forms."⁴³

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⁴¹ Cfr. R. DE SMET, "The Discovery of the Person", p. 8.

⁴² Luigi Bogliolo calls this ontological transcendence as the moral transcendence also. Cfr. L. BOGLIOLO, *Metaphysics*, 121.

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