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The Unity of the Person

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Introduction

LATELY I HAVE BEEN dealing with an age-old metaphysical and theological problem. In Indian thought it is the question of whether or not Brahman (the ultimate reality in Hindu thought) has “ragas” (qualities, determinations). In European thought it arose with Plotinus and his attempts properly to articulate the idea of the transfinite One and has continued within metaphysics and Christian theology. The dilemma it seems to present is that, on the one hand, the ultimate reality—Brahman, The One, God, the Absolute—must be beyond all the limiting attributions of finite beings; yet, on the other hand, it then appears to be a blank unity which is indistinguishable from nothing. “Not this, not that” and therefore, it seems, nothing. The root problem is the assumption, as explicitly formulated by Nicholas of Cusa, that *omnis determinatio est negatio*—to be is to be something and *therefore* not to be something else. This assumption, for example, is embodied in Greek metaphysics in which the “unlimited,” or “lower infinite,” is made determinate and therefore actual by the imposition of “forms” upon it as their “matter;” hence Plotinus’s problems in forming the idea of the transfinite One, the “higher infinity” above all exclusive finitude. I do not propose here to deal with all the answers to this problem but only with one: the distinctive unity of the person.

Metaphysics and theology have too often been mere meta-*physics* or meta-*logic* in applying the categories of physical reality, or of formal logic, to all reality and thus have failed to articulate categories proper to personal existence. The dilemma regarding the one transfinite reality, in short, arises from thinking of it not in personal terms but in impersonal ones, and the answer is to press on to a thoroughgoing personalist conception. For the

unity of the person is neither an empty one nor one of finite and exclusive parts nor even that of an organic whole and its mutually dependent parts. It transcends any unity of parts and is one of *self-expression*, *self-enactment* and *self-differentiation*.¹

Exclusive and Nonexclusive Properties

Cusanus's thesis, though widely accepted in the past and today, is false. Some properties, such as colors, do exclude other properties of the same type and thus entail that their bearers are finite. But others do not, and they are pre-eminently and perhaps exclusively personal ones. They exclude only their privations and distortions. What, for example, does knowledge exclude? Only its privation of ignorance and its distortion of error. It is they which denote finitude: not knowing and being mistaken are clearly limitations in themselves and entail further limitations. But knowing itself is wholly positive and nonexclusive. Of course, there have been complaints that knowledge has negative aspects, such as inhibiting action or distorting reality. But the situations and examples adduced are either ones that follow from other limitations (as in the self-consciousness which, arising from fear of making mistakes, disrupts what we intend to do) or are not really forms of knowledge in the first place if they do distort reality. Again, consider moral qualities such as justice and generosity. At first sight, justice may seem to limit generosity by forbidding us to be generous with what we hold in trust for others or have already pledged to other parties. But such generosity would not be generosity, for it is not giving freely *of one's own*. What justice inhibits is a specious and immoral generosity such as that of those politicians who take credit for being generous—with the taxpayers' money. Far from limiting generosity, justice helps to make it genuine.

The Unity of Our Mental Powers

First, our mental powers (what used to be called "faculties") are not separate and distinct, though at one time one of them may be more prominent than the others: cognition, as when thinking hard about the options in a critical decision; will, as when resolving upon one of them and seeing it through despite setbacks and disappointments; and emotion, as when hoping that one will complete it and rejoicing when success is finally achieved or feeling disappointment when it isn't. But careful reflection will show that in each of these moments the others are engaged also; or, rather, that all mental activ-

ity is a unity of functions. For example, knowing requires a desire to know; judgments and decisions about how to find things out and about the truth and relevance of evidence; and feelings of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the results, and whether one has come to know what one sought to know or must give up or try again.² Again, as in Husserl's example of rotating a cube in one's hand, memory and imagination are necessarily involved in perception as when one carries forward the facet that one has seen and anticipates at least some vague outline of what is yet to be seen. Even when one function seems to be in conflict with another, as when feeling or emotion is at variance with one's better judgment or "reason," nevertheless emotion has its cognitive structures—its object or objects and the perspectives in which they are viewed and evaluated—and there is some feeling attached to the better judgment; otherwise one cannot feel the conflict: it is just that feeling is noticeably stronger on the one side than on the other.

Above all, the person himself is engaged in the exercise of his powers. Too often philosophers and psychologists have spoken of "the mind" as if it were an anonymous, self-directing, and hence impersonal entity and likewise have hypostasized and depersonalized "memory," "cognition," "perception" and other "faculties." These days they seem to have replaced "the mind" with something even more impersonal: namely, "the brain." They have forgotten that all these are nothing without the person who is using them. For example, what catches our attention is usually not a function of decibels, mere "noise," but of meaning and "message": the sound of our own name above the noise of a crowd or, when we are asleep, of our baby's crying above the familiar noises of traffic outside. It is the infant himself—not his mind, let alone his brain—that makes the effort to see things clearly and learns to see recurrent things and not just recurrent shapes and colors, and to interpret and allow for the effects of perspective.³

The unity of these "faculties," functions, and powers is that of the person who uses them and expresses and enacts himself in and through them, now more prominently through this and in this way and then through that and in that way.

The Unity of Intentions and Virtues

Our intentions necessarily maintain a unity in diversity and change with changing situations precisely in order to remain the same. A commander's intention is to defeat the enemy, but to fulfil it he must at one time attack and at another defend, now advance and then retreat. If, like Robert Niv-

elle in 1917, he proposes always to attack and, even worse, not to adapt his tactics to new weaponry but in the age of the machine gun still to regard the bayonet as a primary weapon, he will certainly be defeated. To do the same specific action in every situation is *not* to fulfil the same general intention and to perform the same generic action. Wiser Frenchmen than Nivelle know that at times it is necessary *reculer pour mieux sauter*. Again, this is a self-differentiating unity.

Likewise, traits of character are manifested in many different ways according to different situations: generosity can be a giving of time and attention as well as things, and it is not shown in giving bottles of whisky to alcoholics—just as courage is shown far more by the boy who allows himself to be called “chicken” for not risking being run over by a car or train than the one who gives into his fear of being thought a coward and does risk being seriously hurt or killed. The unity of a course of action or a trait of character is not that of the “material” act but of the “formal” intention. Its differential manifestations are implicit and are actualized in the appropriate situations. Even more strikingly, the love of parents for their child can and, as the occasion arises, *must* manifest itself in ways that, to the child, may seem to be quite opposed to it, as when they do not give him what he asks for, chastise him for what he has done wrong, or push him away when he becomes too “clingly” and dependent on them. Their love, in order to be genuine love and not indulgence nor a craving to be loved, is directed to the child’s good and hence can issue in “material” actions seemingly akin to those of coldness, rejection, or anger and not love at all.

Theologically, this self-differentiating unity of the person explains how God remains one and the same, and eternal, while necessarily differentiating his actions in relation to changing finite entities. The details of his actions necessarily change so that he does not.

The Ultimate Unity of the Person

Can we go further and bring together these and perhaps other suggestions and say what a person is who can differentiate himself in all these ways and yet can remain one and the same throughout? Christianity has a clear answer: “God is love” (1 John 4:8), though even eminent theologians appear not to have appreciated its full significance. And man is made in the image of God (Gen. 1:6). Hence it follows that man, and personal existence in any form, are love. Can philosophy also come to that conclusion? I think to some extent it can.

First we must consider the unity of the virtues. Virtues are qualities of actions and, when habitual, of character. They fall into two classes: those which are or may be required for the effective performance of any activity or the realization of any project and those which are ingredients of the moral life. Examples of the former are courage, fortitude, diligence, carefulness, self-control, and, in cooperative enterprises, willingness to do more than one's explicitly agreed tasks. Consequently, they can be put to evil uses as well as good ones. Europe, and other parts of the world, would have had a far less unhappy history in the last century had the Nazi and Communist parties attracted more people who were lazy, self-centred, opportunist, uncooperative, careless, and negligent, and fewer who were dedicated, diligent, and self-sacrificing. Even wisdom or prudence is good only by definition as effective knowledge of the right and good. Again, specifically moral virtues—such as justice, generosity, and mercy—need to be balanced against each other, as mentioned above. It follows that behind and working in and through them there needs to be virtue itself, self-dedication to all that is good and right. Kant wrongly concluded that this is the good *will*, for he assumed that “ought” implies “can” and that emotions were “pathological” in being events that merely arise within us and are beyond our control. But the person is not the dimensionless point of the bare will. The desires and emotions which we would reject *are* ourselves, and, when doing our duty with gritted teeth, we know that we are not as we should be nor doing all of our duty. We know we ought to be what we cannot bring ourselves to be. What is required is wholehearted devotion to the right and good: “Blessed are the pure in heart . . .,” not those who have only a good will. And wholehearted devotion is love. Love, therefore, is the unity behind and expressing and enacting itself in and through the specific virtues and is that without which they would cease to be moral virtues.

It is usually assumed, as by Brentano, that knowledge—specifically as perception or in the form of “presentations”—logically, and perhaps temporally, precedes love (*Psychology* 266–67). Indeed, it may seem to be common sense: how can boy love girl without first meeting her? But coming to know something is an action, the fulfilment of an intention, and thus of a desire to know. Even when something forces itself upon our attention, we are not as passive as we may appear to be and as empiricist and associationist psychology assumed us to be. The above example of the parent when asleep illustrates just this point: he takes no notice of the traffic because he is not interested in it and so has learned to sleep through it; but, even when asleep, he is sensitive to the sounds that the baby makes, for that is what he is interested in. Other psychologies have recognized the necessary and selective role of inter-

est in knowing but have nevertheless interpreted it in reductionist ways by taking it to be merely a function of “drives,” themselves specifications of two fundamental desires: to survive and to reproduce. But as Max Scheler said, in that case man would be a deficient animal because of his long period of infant dependency and manifest unfitness to survive while in it and need for artificial aids, such as clothing and fire, thereafter. On the contrary, our infant dependency is the consequence of a transcendence of “drives” and “instincts” and their limitations by an openness to the world, the whole of what there is, and not just to an environment marked out by reference to what we need for biological survival (Scheler, *Formalism in Ethics* 285–89). The same applies to contemporary theories of “evolutionary epistemology”—according to which our cognitive powers and knowledge evolved in order to promote survival and are validated because we have survived by employing them—and also to pragmatism and Marxism. None of these can account for our general openness to the world. It follows, conversely, that systematic ignorance is the result of lack of interest, as in the Enlightenment’s attitude toward the “Dark Ages” and Voltaire’s to history generally, and likewise that systematic error is the result of hatred, as in the great reductionisms of the modern age and their hostility to all that is distinctively personal and, indeed, to everything that is more than matter in motion or mass-energy. Likewise, a world view that despairs of this world, as in the Hellenistic age, or holds it to be illusory, as in much of Hinduism and original Buddhism, or to be real but evil, as by the Gnostic systems, will have little taste for the pursuit of natural and human sciences. Genuine knowledge of the world will therefore spring, as Scheler says, from “taking an interest in” it (“Love and Knowledge”), an interest in it primarily for its own sake and not for some limited purpose. Scheler tacitly equates this open “taking an interest in” with love, and I have followed him in my previous publications on this theme.⁴ Such a “taking an interest in” may well not be love as the total response of oneself to the object, but, at the least, it is a central feature of love and something that can grow into love. Therefore this embryonic love is prior to and the precondition of knowledge.

So it is with all other human activities. Arts, crafts, sports, and social life in all its forms flourish when the majority of those who engage in them do so for more than immediate pleasure, gain, or prestige, and show some self-transcending interest in and care for them: when an artistic achievement, a well-made chair and a graceful off-drive to the boundary are prized irrespective of who makes, performs, or owns them, or of what price they can command or income they can earn.

What is central to a person—I conclude with St. Augustine, Pascal, and Scheler—is his *ordo amoris* or *ordre du coeur*,⁵ the pattern of his fundamental loves and hates, or lack of love. It is that which shapes and expresses itself in how he comports himself. Indeed, a person, again following Augustine and Scheler, is an *ens amans*, all of whose personal powers and functions, and all of whose qualities and activities, are the self-expressions and self-enactments of the love that he is, or of its distortion into hatred, malice, and envy, or of its atrophy into lack of interest and care. In us, this unity of love can not only be distorted or atrophy, but it can also be broken, as in the compartmentalisation of one's life and the display of one set of qualities in one part and of another in another; in the experiencing of and failure to overcome or reconcile conflicting desires, as by Chaucer's Wife of Bath, torn between Venus and Mars, between wanting to love and be loved and wanting to dominate and control; and in St. Paul's not doing the good he wanted to do and doing the evil he did not want to do (Rom. 7: 20). It can also result in psychological disorders such as schizophrenia and multiple personalities, brought about either by physical causes or as ways of coping with unwelcome events and desires and attitudes that one would disown. Nevertheless, insofar as each of us is one person, and not seemingly two or more, it is as a unity of love which differentiates and expresses itself in the details of what we think, how we feel, what we aspire to, what we say, and what we do.

NOTES

1. Two common and connected applications of inappropriate categories to personal existence are (1) causation instead of expression and enactment, as in the "standard" model for the relations between mind and body, in which decisions, intentions, motives, and emotions are mental events causing and caused by bodily ones, and (2) identity as identity of components (erroneous also in relation to organic existence) and not of form, function, and structure, and, in personal existence, supremely of intention.

2. See my "Governance by Emotion" for the role of emotion in all action and "The Cognitive Functions of Emotion" on its roles in knowing; both draw upon Michael Polanyi and Max Scheler. See also St. Augustine's study of the mutual involvement of memory (equivalent to all our tacit mental operations), understanding, and will in *De Trinitate* bk. X.

3. See especially Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge* (and subsequent publications) on the irreplaceable role of the "personal co-efficient."

4. See my "The Cognitive Functions of Emotion" and the references there to the following: Polanyi's *Personal Knowledge*, Scheler's "Love and knowledge," and J. Macmurray's *Reason and Emotion*.

5. See the references in Scheler's *Formalism in Ethics, The Nature of Sympathy*, and "Ordo Amoris."

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