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0521277574 - The Category of the Person: Anthropology, Philosophy, History

Edited by Michael Carrithers, Steven Collins and Steven Lukes

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This volume is dedicated to the memory of Marcel Mauss, in whose words:

A comprehensive knowledge of the facts is only possible through the collaboration of numerous specialists. Sociology, though lacking the resources of the laboratory, does not lack empirical control, on the condition that one can truly compare all the social facts of history as understood by the specialists of each branch of history. This is impossible for a single person. Only mutual supervision and pitiless criticism, thanks to the facts being set in opposition, can yield firm results.

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## Preface

‘A comprehensive knowledge of the facts is only possible through the collaboration of numerous specialists. . . . Only mutual supervision and pitiless criticism can yield firm results.’ Behind these dry words lies the passionate communal spirit with which Marcel Mauss and his colleagues of the *Année sociologique* school sought to forge a new understanding of human life. Of all their creations one of the most remarkable was Mauss’s last essay, published in 1938, on the notion of self or person. The basic lines of argument had already been sketched by Durkheim forty years earlier.

Mauss proposes that our seemingly natural and self-evident conceptions of our selves, our persons, are in truth artefacts of a long and varied social history stretching back, at least in principle, to the earliest human communities. Other societies have held very different notions of the self, and each society’s notion is intimately connected with its form of social organization. The notion least like ours, that of the ‘character’ or ‘role’ (*personnage*), Mauss finds in ethnographic materials from North America and Australia. In such societies each role was in daily life the locus of different rights, duties, titles and kinship names within the clan, and was on ceremonial occasions vividly exemplified by different masks or body paint. No general rules applied to ‘roles’ as such apart from the clan, nor were they thought to bear an inner conscience.

A revolution then occurred in ancient Rome, when the ‘role’ – the ‘mask’ or *persona* – was made the locus of general rights and duties as a legal ‘person’ and a citizen of the state. To this more abstract ‘person’ was later added the notion of an inner conscience and inner life, chiefly

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through Christianity. And this notion of person, now bearing both a conscience and a civic identity, became the foundation of modern political, social and legal institutions.

This sketch does little justice to Mauss's rich argument, but will arm the reader to face its complexity. Perhaps because of this complexity subsequent scholars have conducted little 'mutual supervision' of it. We have attempted in this volume to re-create, albeit under very different circumstances, Mauss's communal enterprise. Each of the authors was asked to address himself to Mauss's essay, which is translated here. Most of them, whether implicitly or explicitly, have addressed each other as well. And almost all of them attended and gave a first version of their paper at a series of seminars held in May and June 1980, in Wolfson College, Oxford, to whose Fellows we are deeply grateful for hospitality and financial assistance at that time.

Mauss's essay was given in French as the Huxley Memorial Lecture for 1938, and appeared under the title 'Une Catégorie de l'Esprit Humain: La Notion de Personne, Celle de "Moi"' in the *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 68 (1938). (It was reprinted in Mauss's *Sociologie et anthropologie* [Paris, 1950] – with some printing errors.) A translation by Ben Brewster was published in Marcel Mauss: *Sociology and Psychology* (London, 1979). The translation by W.D. Halls was commissioned for this volume with the permission of Routledge and Kegan Paul PLC. In all important passages French terms are given in parentheses in the text. The following are usual equivalents:

*moi* – (the) self  
*soi* – (one's) self  
*personne* – person  
*personnalité* – personality  
*personnage* – role, character.

The quotation from Mauss that prefaces this volume is taken from the autobiographical sketch presented as part of his application for membership of the Collège de France in 1930. It appeared in *Revue Française de sociologie* 20 (1): 1979. G. Lienhardt's paper originally appeared in the *Journal of the Anthropological Society of Oxford*, 1980. L. Dumont's paper appeared in *Religion* 12: 1982, 1–27, and is reproduced here with the consent of the author, the editor of *Religion*, and the publishers, © Academic Press, Inc. (London) Ltd.

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