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978-0-521-40929-2 - The Call to Personhood: A Christian Theory of the Individual in Social Relationships

Alistair I. McFadyen

Excerpt

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## Introduction

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In this book I am trying to answer some very basic questions concerning human being. What is a person? What is individual identity, and where does it come from? What makes us the people we are? The simplicity of these questions is deceptive. It is rarely as easy to give a good answer as it is to raise a good question. But simplistic answers to these questions abound and present themselves in our unanalysed common sense of what it is to be a human person, and therefore of what is good, right, normal and acceptable in personal existence. Such quick answers are both unhelpful and cheap. They are cheap because they save us from facing difficult issues, such as the origin of our views about what is good, right, normal and acceptable in personal existence, and the practical effects which these normative constructions of personhood and personal existence have. Simplistic answers which fail to account for the complex and manifold dimensions of human life are also dangerous because they will be bound to practices which are careless of the full reality of what it means to be a person. A distorted understanding of personal existence will be tied to distortions in its practice.

These questions are intensely practical. I shall explain later why my answer to them tends to operate at a rather generalised, abstract and formalistic level and why I adopt a systematic terminology. It is far from intended as a purely intellectual act of contemplation. My concern throughout is with practice and, even where my argument is at its most theoretical, I hope that it is not pure theory but functions rather as a theory of the practice of the various dimensions of personal life and of person-making. I believe, in other words, that people live and are as this theory suggests, although it may rarely come to explicit articulation in our lives.

Indeed, the reflections which resulted in this book began in my

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own experience of nursing in a psychiatric hospital. The questions I attempt to answer in it were first raised in the most practical ways possible, as I met people whose identities and capacities for relation appeared to be distorted in some way, those who had been injured by the networks of relation surrounding them, and those for whom society had no room because their behaviour in or perception of the world was not socially acceptable. I was not only confronted by the people, of course: I also became part of the institution of the hospital. As with all institutions there was a practical understanding of what it is to be a person operating in it, shaping the identities and relations of those of us who worked or lived within its ambit – at least while we were there. In order to comprehend the nature of psychiatric disturbance and therapy I had to try to discern and to understand how people and relations become broken, but also how the institution functioned either to heal or to exacerbate problems.

The question of what it is to be a person is raised in a particularly acute way in a context such as this, and that is one of the reasons why I think it might help the reader if I continue to use it as a source of illustration and reflection in this Introduction. However, I want to be clear before proceeding that the question does not only arise in extreme situations and in extreme ways such as this, but concerns all of us in the mundane, humdrum aspects of our lives. There is an infinite range of situations in everyday life in which people are less than persons and in which we need to think about what it means to be a human person. It may be necessary to ask the question as we are shopping, as we sit next to others on a bus, as we bicker with our partners. Even in these situations, the question may be complex and perplexing, but it cannot be avoided except by running away from ourselves, from others and from God. The benefit of using an extreme situation as an example is that it can help to clarify the issues; the danger is that it can also help to remove the recognition and discussion of those issues from the 'normal', mundane, everyday situations in which most of us confront them a good deal of the time.

The question of the person in such a place as a psychiatric hospital is urgent, necessary, complex and provocative. In it the various dimensions of personal existence which I am trying to make sense of in this book were all present together: the psychological, the social, the interpersonal, the material, the political, the institutional, the technical and the spiritual. This overlaying of the dimensions of personal life generated an array of explanations and expectations of what it means to be a person which functioned within the institution. Sometimes these were interlaced and

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overlaid in a way that did justice to the multidimensionality of personal existence, perhaps with different explanations (and, in this context, different interventions) appropriate at different levels or at different points. But otherwise they competed with each other, especially when a claim to exclusivity was made for a particular explanation. These different ways of conceiving the person are associated with different practices, so which ones are operating and how they interrelate can make a very significant difference to the treatment given. The following two examples may help to illustrate this point.

A conceptuality which explains everything with reference to the individual alone, for instance, will try to trace the origins of pathology within the individual and will then treat internal states without reference to the person's relationships. The most common form of this individualistic explanation attends almost exclusively to the material reality of the individual's body, explaining disorders of personal identity or behaviour in biological or chemical terms. Therapy is then a matter of physical, usually chemical, intervention. Counselling and other more personal forms of therapy will tend not to be offered. Much criticism has been made of the general biochemical medical model in the last twenty-five years, not least because this way of interpreting disease discourages carers from interacting with patients in a personal way. Patients become 'the hip in bed 3'. Interaction is with the bits of their bodies which are malfunctioning. The patient is present as body (and often only as a bit of body), not as person, for illness is not considered a personal experience but an objective, physical syndrome. Similarly, healing is entirely a matter of professional intervention in the patient's body, so she or he is not involved in that either.

Alternatively, a conceptuality of the person in which relationships are thought to determine personal identity might be operating. In this case, attention might be shifted from the individual to the network of family relationships. There may be attempts, for example, to intervene in the family structure rather than in the individual's body. The individual presenting the illness is then considered the symptom of the family's illness. Work done with the individual will tend to be of the interpretative sort. The patient may be assisted in finding new ways to understand the family dynamic and its effects on her or him and to construct new ways of interacting in that and other social contexts; to find, in other words, a new personal identity in relation to others.

The danger attending this view, if it is exclusively held or held in an extreme form, is that it can reduce the sense of responsibility and autonomy

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which is essential to personal being by fostering the view that one is merely the product of one's relationships – whether they be pathological or therapeutic.

There are those whom we do not count as persons, who are not included in our definition of what a person is. Our treatment of them will change for the better as they get nearer to being so counted. The assumption that the mentally ill are somehow less than persons has at times shaped psychiatric provision and treatment (our treatment of animals also seems to me to be generally related to the extent to which they approximate to 'persons'). If one's conception of personhood includes the idea that persons are autonomous and must never be interfered with against their will, then it will be almost impossible to assist the acutely ill unless one also defines mental illness as at least a reduction of personhood which permits some coercion in treatment. Consider the paternalistic way of treating the elderly and the disabled which most of us fall into without thinking ('Now, we can make a nice, big effort, can't we dear? . . . Does she take sugar? . . . Oh, no, let me do that for you – you really can't do that on your own!'). Does this, too, reflect our assumption that they are somehow less than persons? In the advanced stages of dementia there may be no sign that anything is experienced, and almost all reflexes may be suppressed or even lost. There are extremely unfortunate consequences (for us as well as for them, I think) which follow as soon as we read their state as totally lacking personal existence.

I have said rather a lot about psychiatry because that is where the present work began and it provides, I think, a helpful reference point for the discussion that follows. However, this book is not about psychiatry, or even medicine in general, but about what it means to be a person and what personal, social and political practices seem to be required by personal being. My concern in the foregoing has been merely to indicate two things: that this theoretical work has a practical origin and intention; and that the theoretical understanding we have of what persons are and should be is bound up with the way we treat people.

What does it mean to be a human person, and how can that be conceived appropriately? This is the central question which arose out of my hospital experience and is the focus of the reflections contained in this book. There were collectivist ways of answering it available, but it was striking how pervasive individualistic answers were. Even in psychiatry, which is traditionally more ready to acknowledge the place of relational and social

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determinants of illness than other branches of medicine, individualistic conceptions of personal being operate and are pervasive, at least as a sort of 'default value'.

Both collectivist and individualist answers (for a range of reasons which will emerge in the main body of the book) seemed ultimately to offer unsatisfactory conceptions of individuality and personal being, although each also had some helpful insights and intentions which seemed worth preserving. Individualism attempts to do full justice to personal freedom and autonomy, although these take a pathological turn as individuals are considered self-contained entities cut off from one another and God. Collectivism, on the other hand, tries to take the role of social relations and institutions in human life seriously. This too, however, creates a deficient understanding of the individual for whom autonomy, freedom and independence from social structures become impossible.

This raises the question of whether there might be a third option, steering something of a mid-course between individualism and collectivism, which can do justice to personal freedom and autonomy whilst simultaneously acknowledging the role of social relations and institutions. Can the question of what it means to be a person be answered more adequately by the construction of a different kind of conceptuality? This book is an attempt to construct such a third option. Whilst I hope that it might offer something new, both the insight that individualism and collectivism are unsatisfactory and the attempt to find a third option are hardly original. So this is really much more a contribution to a discussion already in place than the breaking of completely new ground.

Investigating the possibility of this third option has therefore involved engagement with a wide range of contributors to the conversation. Perhaps the most important of these is Martin Buber. His personalist philosophy extended Feuerbach's language of 'I and Thou' to construct a description of personal being in terms of dialogue which was at the same time something of a practical programme. His is such a pervasive presence in these pages that I am often, I am sure, quite unconscious of it, and consequently find it difficult to acknowledge adequately. Buber's terminology and conceptuality were fairly readily taken up by theology and, in particular, by two of the key Protestant theologians of this century, Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, both of whom shared Buber's desire to leave Idealist conceptions of the subject behind. They are also a constant presence throughout the book.

Much of the contemporary discussion is characterised by the desire

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to move away from the more simplistic aspects of personalism, especially its tendency to concentrate on small-scale, relatively unstructured, interpersonal relations. There is now a desire to attend to the ways in which large-scale relations and context (social, cultural, historical, political, moral, etc.) are determinative of personal being. One of the most important contemporary debates in social philosophy concerns the ways in which institutions of various sorts affect us. Jürgen Habermas, Niklas Luhmann, Hans-Georg Gadamer and Karl-Otto Apel have each been trying to explain and explore human being with reference to various aspects of social existence, and particularly its mediation through language. Their exchanges have provided a fertile range of conceptualities which illuminate the nature of human society, and the problems of conceiving it appropriately, in diverse ways. Habermas and Apel in particular have been concerned to explore how the social and political conditions of freedom, truth and justice can be conceived and secured so that a genuinely human society can be formed in which people may themselves be free and truly human. It is true to say, however, that the individual and personal aspects of human being have rarely been the explicit or central theme of these discussions.

Two of the theologians who have been most concerned to respond to this debate and to work out some of the implications for theology are Jürgen Moltmann and Wolfhart Pannenberg. Both have been important influences on my own attempt to formulate a theological contribution. Pannenberg has been more systematic in his assessment of and response to these debates, especially where they intersect with the concerns of the philosophy of the human sciences. He has been rather more concerned with the institutional; Moltmann has been more general in his discussions of community and of human being. Both understand person as a correlate of community.

I have also found Rom Harré's contribution to the conversation, a discussion of the socio-psychological aspects of identity and selfhood, extremely helpful. Chapter 3 is largely the product of engagement with his work in which he constructs a theoretical explanation of how the assumptions concerning personhood which surround us in our social, cultural and moral environment may be internalised in the construction of our own identities as we work out for ourselves what it means to be a (particular) person.

The key insight which grew out of engagement with these attempts to formulate some middle way between individualism and collectivism was the fruitfulness of understanding personal being and identity in terms of

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communication. Communication does not just refer to speech or to other forms of linguistic communication; it embraces every interaction in which there is change and exchange – between people, between them and their environment, them and God, or between any relatively discrete entity or system and another – and that, by definition, is every interaction. Essentially, it is the transfer of information. Information is any content of communication which has some meaning; that which is not simply 'noise', but which is coded or ordered in a way which may produce an effect on those receiving it. For the recipient to find a communication informative, its content must be sufficiently new and different from present states (say, of understanding or knowledge) to make a difference, whilst sufficiently close to those states to make contact with them, be relevant and have meaning. The communication may then be said to have informed the recipient, in so far as the recipient has been changed by it.

At the time of writing, Mrs Thatcher is the prime minister. On the face of it, that statement contains information and is meaningful but, since most readers will already know the information it contains, it is neither interesting nor informative and is unlikely to make any difference to them – although it may, admittedly, prompt some reaction depending upon readers' feelings about this fact or their understanding of why I have mentioned it. Of course, when it was spoken by a newsreader the morning after the 1979 general election, it really was news. If I say it in a certain tone of voice, then it may also convey new information concerning my political affiliation to anyone hearing me; in which case, it is communication not so much of information about a state of affairs as of my feelings. If, however, someone hears me say this who can speak English but understands nothing of English political institutions and has never heard of Mrs Thatcher, then the statement becomes meaningless and uninformative for her or him because it makes insufficient contact with what she or he presently knows and understands. Similar illustrations could, of course, be given for non-linguistic forms of communication, such as physical exchanges.

We are constantly embraced by various networks of communication and exchange and are in continual communication ourselves from the time of our conception in the womb. We become the people we are as our identities are shaped through the patterns of communication and response in which we are engaged. We carry the effects of the communication we have received and the response we have made in the past forward with us into every new situation and relationship. This happens most obviously, but by no means primarily or exclusively, through memory, and



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is what I later term the 'sediment' which is laid down through our communication history. It is this which makes us the people we are.

Basic problems concerning personal identity, the boundaries of the individual, freedom, subjectivity, and the distortions of communication, relation and identity surface immediately we begin to understand ourselves in this way. These problems are discussed in the course of my argument where the options which are offered by thinking in terms of communication are explored. This way of thinking does seem to offer a conceptuality which is able to incorporate the valid insights and intentions of individualism and collectivism, but which has several advantages over them. It allows an understanding of the self which is thoroughly relational but which does not sacrifice its individual integrity; it takes account of the physical boundaries and rootedness of persons, but also of their being socially formed through their histories; it overcomes the dichotomy between the personal and the institutional; and it makes possible an account of personhood which is normative and can therefore act as a touchstone for understanding distortions, but which simultaneously acknowledges the unique particularity of each person.

As the work evolved it became clear that it needed to be as coherent and systematic in its conceptuality and expression as possible. A conceptuality which is consistent and appropriate to the various elements of the discussion will help to illuminate the ways in which they are interrelated. The interweaving of central themes, treated at different levels and in different ways, throughout the different chapters makes it possible to build up a central image of this conceptuality in a gradual, but all-embracing way. This has required the use of a controlled terminology throughout the book which functions as a sort of technical language which enables more rigorous thinking.

My use of a somewhat technical language does mean that I discuss my theme at a largely theoretical level. This, however, does not imply a withdrawal, disengagement or retreat from practice, but a concentration and compression of the issues raised there. That concentration inevitably involves abstraction and generalisation, but it is only in this way that the assumptions guiding practice can be uncovered and formulated.

It also became clear that the project required a new terminology as existing ones were often inadequate to express what I wanted to say and/or were so tied to other conceptualities as to be misleading. There are no neologisms as such; all that I have done is to use some terms in a relatively



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novel way or redefine them so they better suit my purposes. The presuppositions of individualism are so deeply ingrained in our culture that it is impossible to carry on using our normal language for talking about personhood and individuality without slipping into its misconceptions unless we self-consciously modify it. I have tried to keep the peculiarity of this new way of speaking to a minimum, but there are still bound to be occasions when readers find the terminology a little strange. Provided it stays within certain limits, that effect can actually be positive and constructive: the individualistic way of regarding personal being is so ingrained in us that we need to be shocked somehow into a new cognition and consciously unlearn it. An unusual use of language can help in this because it stops the operation of normal presuppositions short and may also bring them into sufficient light to be examined. That is certainly the effect I wish my terminology to have. The measure of its success will be whether readers find themselves provoked into dialogue with the conceptuality I am developing, or whether it presents itself as a totalitarian imposition.

A short glossary of key terms is included at the back of the book so that readers may keep in touch with the central ideas as they move through or dip into the argument, without having to keep fingers in pages where these are first introduced and defined.

My basic conception of the person in this discussion is both dialogical (formed through social interaction, through address and response) and dialectical (never coming to rest in a final unity, if only because one is never removed from relation). In dialogue the partners are simultaneously independent (otherwise the listening and speaking of both would be unnecessary) and inseparably bound together in a search for a mutuality of understanding. The basis of a dialogical understanding of personhood is that we are what we are in ourselves only through relation to others. Persons are unique centres or subjects of communication, but they are so only through their intrinsic relation to other persons. So they are centred beings, but they become centred in a personal way only through relation with other personal centres, through commitment to others, and so on. I do not want to anticipate my later argument by laying this out clearly here, but to indicate how this conception of the central theme of the book required a specific method so that the discussion would take a form appropriate to its content.

Conceiving of persons in this dialogical and dialectical way makes it impossible to think of us as having a clearly defined 'centre' or

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'foundation'. Likewise, the method has no straightforward centre or foundation, but brings two worlds of discourse into dialogue and dialectical interaction: a theology most affected by Barth, Bonhoeffer and Moltmann; and contemporary social thought, especially that of Habermas, Luhmann and Harré. Both are subject to interpretation and, where necessary, to criticism. Bringing them into contact with one another has allowed them to cross-fertilise and be mutually informative as well as mutually critical. I hope that readers will find the fruits of that interaction as creative as I have done, although I recognise that there are bound to be suspicions, on the part of those who normally work within one or other of these worlds, that setting up this sort of interaction is illegitimate and is sure to sacrifice the integrity of distinct disciplines. The danger that integrity and identity might be sacrificed attends any dialogue, but dialogue itself actually depends upon maintaining the distinct identities of the partners. So everything depends upon the interaction being structured in such a way that it remains a real dialogue. There are dangers attending the isolation of worlds of thought too, of course, as these turn into either totalitarian or artificially separated and partialised forms of explanation.

This separation and partialisation is what worries me most as a Christian theologian. Talk of human being in our society has been so completely secularised that we find it increasingly difficult to talk of humanity with reference to God in a way which is meaningful in our contemporary human situation. It is my belief that this missing dimension makes a real and important difference to our theoretical understanding and to our practice. Non-Christian readers will understandably be reluctant to accept talk of God where I build it into the argument; I would invite them to take the argument as a whole and judge whether it has added anything at the end. I am not trying to impose a Christian perspective on anyone, but I am asking that the ability of Christian theology to be a fruitful dialogue-partner with secular thought be taken seriously for the mutual enrichment of both partners in their search for the good, the true and the right.

Christians and some Christian theologians might also have their suspicions and reservations concerning the kind of relationship with secular thought on which this book is based. The theological task, in my understanding of it, has two poles: to understand and critically reflect upon Christian doctrine, tradition and history on the one hand, and the social, cultural and intellectual world in which we are living on the other. Christian reality is always bound up with its social world, and that is one very important reason why, even when the theologian is attending to the