Introduction

The theme of this book is the human person. To make this subject more visible and easier to name, I wish to introduce the term "the agent of truth" as a synonym for "the human person." The phrase is also meant to be a paraphrase of the term "rational animal," the classical Latinate definition of human being. The book is an inquiry concerning the agent of truth.

The new term has two advantages over the old. First, it expands the meaning of thinking and truth. The word *rational* seems to limit thinking to calculation and inference, but the new phrase does not connote such a restriction. It encompasses all the forms of understanding, including those that go beyond language. Second, the term shows that attaining truth is an accomplishment and not merely passive reception. It speaks not just about reasoning but about success in reasoning, and so designates human being in terms of its highest achievement: the human person is defined by being engaged in truth, and human action is based on truth. I do not intend to *prove* that human beings are specified in this way (what sort of premises could I use?), but rather to describe, analytically, what our engagement in truth means. I hope to show, not to demonstrate, what we are as human persons.

We cannot help but take ourselves and one another as involved in truth, but what it means to be so implicated remains obscure to us. The aim of the book is to clarify what we all know is true.

The major inspirations for this book are Husserl and Aristotle. The study will emphasize the role of syntax in language and thinking. Human voicing becomes speech, and it becomes able to serve as a vehicle for thinking and the attainment of truth, when syntax is introduced into it. *Syntax* is a plain word for Husserl's technical term, *categoriality*.

My study of syntax and thinking will lead me to focus on predication, on "saying something about something," as the central activity in thinking, and it will also lead me to discuss the nature of definitions, in which we give the genus and specifying difference of things when we wish to show

what those things are. I will also discuss accidents and properties. These are ancient philosophical issues, but I will not treat them in an antiquated way. I will claim that predication and definition take place, not simply in "the mind," but in human conversation. I will show that logical forms are the residue of public, conversational activity. The form of predication, for example, comes about when a speaker brings an entity into a conversation and states something about it. Likewise, definitions occur when a speaker makes a specifying distinction and explains what it is that he has introduced into the conversation. I would like to think of this book as a recapitulation of Porphyry and Boethius as well as Aristotle. I take into account the modern turn to the subject, but I consider this subject as a participant in the human conversation and not a solitary self. Many conundrums of modern philosophy are dissolved by this simple expedient.

A central topic in the book is the issue of mental representation. When we know things, do we in some way assimilate copies, forms, likenesses, or images of them? What can such representations be, and how do they work? To avoid the difficulties associated with mental representation, I have tried to reformulate the problem. I claim that when we speak about things we take in their intelligibility, which we capture and carry in the names that we use, and that when we picture things we embody their intelligibility in the images that we compose. When we make distinctions, the intelligibility and necessity, the substance of things, shows up to us, and this disclosure occurs within the framework set by syntax.

Although logical, linguistic, and pictorial syntax are the major themes in this book, I also explore the kind of syntax that occurs in human action, when one thing is done in view of another, when ends are distinguished from purposes, and when my good and the goods of others are brought into syntactical reciprocity in such phenomena as acts of justice and friendship. I hope to show that the ends of things, their being at their best, is part of what they are and part of their meaning. When things are given names and thus entered into syntax and enlisted into language, what they *should* be is part of what their names signify.

Since the study of the brain has become so prominent in contemporary theories of mind, it seemed necessary to say something about the neurophysiology that underlies thinking and truth. I have, therefore, included some brief chapters on the involvement of the human body, especially the brain and nervous system, in human experience and understanding. I try to show that human perception can be seen as the transformation of many different kinds of ambient energy into the one kind of electrochemical energy that is found in the activity of the nervous system and brain. The energy activated in our neural networks is not just input; it can also become output generated by the nervous system itself, and when this occurs in certain ways it allows us to reactivate earlier experiences in imagination and memory and to project ourselves into new situations. In

connection with this topic, I take the rather bold step of proposing an alternative way of thinking about mental imagery. I suggest that, instead of saying that the nervous system and brain construct internal images of things that are "out there," we think of the nervous system and brain as functioning like a lens. The neural activity involved in experiencing can be considered as "lensing" and not as imaging or picturing. The advantage of this change is that it counters our tendency to think of mental images or ideas as intervening between our minds and the things that we know. I hope to provide an alternative to representationalism in sensibility as well as in thinking.

The role of syntax in our experience, activity, and speech is the central theme in my analysis, but I begin the book with a particular syntactic form, which I call the "declarative" use of the first-person pronoun. It is the use we make of the word *I* and its analogues when we endorse or appropriate a particular exercise of our rational, syntactic powers, when, for example, we say, "I *know* she is coming," or "I *promise* I will be there." Such declaratives could not be used except on the foundation of another syntactic articulation, and they mention us precisely as actively engaged as agents of syntax or agents of truth. They designate us as persons in action, as acting rationally even as we utter the words. A topic associated with declaratives is what I call "veracity," which I define as the inclination toward truthfulness that defines us as human beings or persons and establishes us as responsible agents.

The issue of philosophical language is treated episodically at various stages in the book. I try to describe what is distinctive about philosophical speech. The study of philosophical discourse is my way of speaking about what Husserl calls the "transcendental, phenomenological attitude," the point of view that we adopt when we enter into philosophical reflection. Husserl has made an important contribution to philosophy by showing how the philosophical standpoint is different from the stance we take in prephilosophical experience and speech, in what he calls the "natural attitude." I have tried to amplify and concretize some of his ideas by formulating them in terms of philosophical speech instead of philosophical attitudes and reflection. I distinguish philosophical speech from other levels of speech (from standard language, scientific language, and declaratives); I describe it as the theorizing of the human conversation in all its amplitude, with the inclusion of the things that are brought into the conversation and correlated with it; I differentiate it from scientific discourse; and I treat it at greatest length in the last chapter of the book, where I distinguish the philosophical voice from the voice of the omniscient narrator in a work of fiction, and where I discuss how words have to be troped when they are brought into philosophical discourse. The distinctiveness of philosophical speech is especially important in the study of human knowledge, because the claim that we have mental images and

mental representations is stated from the philosophical viewpoint. The terms used in such claims need to be taken philosophically, but they are often given meanings taken from the prephilosophical attitude, with the consequence that a radical disjunction is introduced between what is "inside" our minds and what is "outside" them.

I wish to describe the human person philosophically by clarifying what it means to be involved with truth. We enter into rationality when we introduce syntactic composition, whether verbal, pictorial, or practical, into experience. Such articulation allows us to converse with others and to reason with them, instead of resorting to violence or disengagement; it allows us to appropriate, by the use of declaratives, what we have articulated, and to raise questions not only about facts and about our purposes, but also about the ends that are inscribed in things. The use of words reveals the good and the best in what we name. Our philosophical exercise is itself a culmination of our rationality, not something alien to it. It brings to a kind of completion the truthfulness we enter into when we begin speaking with others.

PART I

THE FORM OF THINKING

1

Two Ways of Saying "I"

> One could express it this way: In a zoo there could be a sign, "This is a zebra"; but certainly not, "I know that this is a zebra." "I know" has meaning only when a person utters it. But then it does not matter whether the utterance is, "I know . . . ," or "This is . . . ."
>
> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, §588

> My observation is a logical and not a psychological one.
>
> §447

My purpose is to clarify, philosophically, what human persons are. It is our rationality that makes us persons, and I wish to describe such rationality in action, to show how it is made manifest. If I succeed in doing so, I will have helped exhibit what is distinctive about human beings. I will begin, not by making general remarks or offering broad descriptions, but by targeting a particular human activity, something very definite, and using it as a wedge to open up the dimension of being that is proper to persons. The activity I will target is a special way in which we use the word *I* and its variants, a special way we use the first person, when we speak. Our rationality and hence our personhood come prominently to light in this usage. This phenomenon can then serve – if I may switch metaphors – as a bridgehead for the exploration of other ways in which our rationality appears.

We cannot show what we are as persons without also showing what it means for things to appear to us. Our rationality is not simply the power to have ideas, to calculate, and to draw inferences in our minds; our rationality is essentially a disclosure of things, and even reasoning serves ultimately to show forth what things are. Reasoning comes to rest in understanding. In order to discuss rationality, therefore, we must discuss the manifestation or the truth of things as it occurs in its various ways: in perception, thinking, remembering, picturing, quotation, and the like, as well as in practical agency and deliberation, since human conduct also involves a specific manner of displaying the world. Our treatment of the

human person must also study the appearance of things, and all of this will begin with a treatment of the way we use the word *I*.

We must maintain a certain modesty as we discuss the human person. We will always remain mysterious to ourselves, but it is possible to shed light on this mystery, to bring out its dimensions and keep it from being confused with other things. I hope to provide glimpses that clarify, not mechanisms that explain.

How We Speak of Ourselves

We use three different terms to refer to ourselves: first, we call ourselves *human beings* or, in the generic sense of the word, *men*. Second, we speak of ourselves as *persons*. And third, we say that we are *selves*. These terms have been developed at various stages in the course of Western culture and philosophy.

The first term, *man*, is the most basic and spontaneous. It simply marks us out as one of the species of things in the world, one among the many kinds of being: there are minerals, plants, and animals, and among the animals there are bears, wolves, cats, and, finally, men.[1] We come to light as differentiated from the other kinds of animals and living things. The second term, *person*, was developed after the earlier term *man* and as a refinement of it.[2] The term

[1] See Robert Spaemann, *Personen: Versuche über den Unterschied zwischen 'etwas' und 'jemand'* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1998), 17: "'Man' is first of all a concept of a biological species, and ancient and medieval philosophy numbered man among the *animalia*, the animals. Man is an *animal rationale*." By contrast: "Persons enjoy a special place among all the things that exist. Persons do not make up a natural kind" (p. 9).

[2] The Greek term *prosōpon*, as well as the Latin *persona*, signified a mask and hence a character in a play, a meaning retained in the phrase *dramatis personae*, the persons or characters in the drama. One must have already been aware of human beings in order to be able to designate "someone" as a character in a play. The person is not the actor but the agent represented by him. In Stoic and Academic thought, *persona* often designated the role one played in life, as opposed to one's nature. In medieval society a *persona* was someone with legal standing, a freeman and not a slave, or a legally recognized human being as opposed to a thing. This too is a qualification added to a human being, and it presupposes the difference between men and other living things. Such legal standing could even be extended to artificial persons, so long as they could take legal action. Medieval theologians emphasized the singularity of the person; personality was taken not just as an instance of a nature, but as the ability to have one's nature and to be responsible for the way one "owns" it. On the ancient and medieval senses of *person*, see Spaemann, *Personen*, 30–42.

The connection between personhood and representation surfaces in an original way in the political philosophy of Hobbes. He defines a person as someone whose words and actions can be considered either to be his own or to represent some other man or thing. See *Leviathan*, ed. Richard Tuck (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), Chapter 16, which is entitled "Of Persons, Authors, and Things Personated." The verb *to personate* is used to good effect by Hobbes. Representation is a defining property of the modern state as opposed to premodern political society. One might ask whether political representation is somehow related to epistemological representation in Hobbes's thought.

is more sophisticated, and arose in conjunction with theological and legal controversies. Its classical philosophical definition was given early in the 6th century by Boethius, who said that a person is an individual substance of a rational nature.[3] This definition highlights our rationality: a person is an individual being that is endowed with reason. The definition also leaves open the possibility that there may be persons who are not human beings (Boethius applied the term to the divine and the angelic); they too could be individual entities invested with a rational nature. In the legal context, there can be "persons" like corporations and states, which are entities that have a standing in the law and are recognized as agents. My discussion, however, will be limited to the human person. Finally, in addition to *man* and *person*, the third term we use to refer to ourselves is *the self*, and this term is very strange indeed. It could not have come into use except through some philosophical contrivance. How odd it is, even grammatically, to speak of "the self."[4] The linguistic strangeness of the term *the self* is matched by the oddity of the terms *the ego* and *the I*, which are often used as its synonyms. Under what normal circumstances would we ever refer to "the I"? Why have we not contrived to speak of "the he" or "the she" or "the they," or even "the you"? Furthermore, why should we reserve to ourselves the privilege of being "selves," when every entity shares in that distinction? Everything – a horse, a tree, a ruby, a molecule – is itself, and hence it is "a self," is it not? Why do we presume to take ourselves as "*the* selves," the paradigms of identity? We seem to claim for ourselves alone the identity that belongs to all beings. Is this not metaphysical arrogance?

We begin with the word *person* and what it signifies. Our procedure will be twofold. On the one hand, we will explore certain phenomena and certain activities that manifest human persons as such. One the other, we will try to deal with certain problems or perplexities, certain choke points that block our understanding of human persons and hence impede our understanding of ourselves. Some ideas act like conceptual acid and dissolve the person into impersonal forces, or disfigure the person into a caricature of himself. Dealing with such perplexities is not a waste of time, since unraveling the snags in our ideas is also a fresh registration of what we are trying to discover.

[3] Boethius's definition is found in "A Treatise against Eutyches and Nestorius," Chapter 3. See *The Theological Tractates and The Consolation of Philosophy*, trans. H. F. Stewart and E. K. Rand, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968), 84–5.

[4] See Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 113: "It is probable that in every language there are resources for self-reference and descriptions of reflexive thought, action, attitude . . . . But this is not at all the same as making 'self' into a noun, preceded by a definite or indefinite article, speaking of 'the' self or 'a' self. This reflects something important which is peculiar to our modern sense of agency."

Informatives and Declaratives

The classical definition of persons tells us that they are individual entities that possess reason. It is the power of reason that makes us persons. Even when we use the word *person* in a less technical way, simply as a reminder that the individual we call a person is a human being and should be treated as such, we imply that the dignity he has and the respect he deserves follow from his rationality. It is because he is rational that he must be "treated as a person and not as a thing." But how is the rationality that establishes us as persons manifested to us?

We might think that this rationality appears primarily in our ability to calculate and draw inferences: we work out sums and solve equations; we draw conclusions from premises; we examine various facts and make inductions from them. We reason deductively and inductively. Our rationality is exhibited by such calculation and inference, but it would be wrong to restrict reasoning to such mathematical and logical exercises. To limit it in this way would make us think of ourselves as animals that have calculating machines or computers in their heads. In fact, reason is more widely distributed in our being, and it is manifested in many other ways besides calculation and inference.

Instead of concentrating on the power of reasoning, we begin by examining the word we use to name ourselves, the word *I* and its variants, such as *me* and *mine* and the plural forms. Our rationality is exhibited and our personhood is made manifest in our very ability to use the first-person pronoun. To show this, we must distinguish between two different ways in which we use this term.

First, there is what I wish to call the *informational* use of the word *I*, in which we simply name ourselves as we would name any other object that we want to say something about. If someone asks, "Who in this room weighs over 150 pounds?" and I say, "I do; I weigh over 150," or if in another context I say, "I am now in Cherry Hill, New Jersey," or "I am hungry," I am using the term in that informational way. I might just as well have said, "Robert is in Cherry Hill, New Jersey," or "The man sitting at this table is hungry." I could have expressed the same fact in third-person discourse.

In contrast with this informational use of the term *I*, we can distinguish what I wish to call the *declarative* use of the word. Suppose I say, "I suspect that you are cheating," or "I shall return," or "I must pay my debts," or "I know that this is a zebra." These statements are not merely reports about myself, as were the informational remarks we just examined. If I say, "I distrust you," I do not merely state a fact about myself; rather, I declare myself as distrusting you, and I thereby declare myself in my rational agency. I engage myself in what I say. This usage of the term *I* expresses me, the speaker, as a rational agent and hence as a person or an agent of

truth. Moreover, it expresses me as acting rationally here and now, in my present use of the word *I*. This usage does not *say* that I am a rational agent; it does not predicate rational agency of me; rather, it directly expresses me as acting as a rational agent when I use the term *I* and say, "I distrust you." It does not just inform you about me, but exhibits me in my personal agency. It shows and does not just tell.

The difference between the informational and the declarative use of the term *I* is rather subtle. Its subtlety is enhanced by the fact that one and the same sentence can be used in both ways. It would be possible, albeit somewhat unusual, for me to say, "I distrust you" and state it as a mere matter of fact. I might say something like this: "Well, after all that has happened, it should be no surprise that I distrust you and have done so for some time now." I would not be *declaring* my distrust at the moment, but simply *reporting* it to you as a bit of information. I would just be stating a fact about a permanent state I am in, and I would state it with as much detachment as if I were to say that I am six feet tall, or if I were telling you about someone else. However, when I say, "I distrust you," in a declarative manner, I am formally establishing or confirming that relationship. The declarative, "I distrust you," institutes or reasserts distrust, while the informational merely tells you of it. The declarative appropriates, whereas the informational reports.

Still another indication of the subtlety of the distinction lies in the fact that we might not be sure whether a given statement is informative or declarative. A statement like "I am in this room" seems obviously to be just informational, a mere assertion of fact, but it could also be used declaratively if the speaker were making a significant point and asserting himself in his rational agency. He might state it in the course of a heated argument about whether or not he is going to remain with us during a difficult time; when he declares, "I *am* in this room," he may state this fact in order to show that he has engaged himself to be there with us. He declares that he is in this room deliberately, through his rational agency, not as a mere matter of fact. Sometimes a speaker might deliberately play on the declarative ambiguity of a statement, on the fact that it could be taken either as informational or as declarative: the statement shimmers between seeming to be the one and seeming to be the other, as a patch of color may shift between looking orange and looking red, and we are left unsure what it really is. The speaker toys with the listener. Linda says, "Well, I am here, am I not?" and Sidney cannot tell whether she is only recording a fact or deliberately making a point about what she is intent on doing. Linda might hide behind the ambiguity. If Sidney takes the statement as declarative, she might run for cover and say that she was just mentioning her presence and stating an obvious fact; but if Sidney takes the statement as an ordinary bit of information, Linda might make it clear that she was really transmitting a message or sending a signal, that she was declaring