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Introduction

> Nothing is more difficult than to realize that every man has a distinct soul, that every one of all the millions who live or have lived, is a whole and independent being in himself, as if there were no one else in the whole world but he . . . We cannot understand that a multitude is a collection of immortal souls.
>
> Newman *PPS* IV 6 80–3

Despite the citation of Newman, this book will make no claims about the immortality of the soul or of the person. Its subject is far less theological, though overall not unreligious. What I want to try to answer is the more elementary question of whether the concept of 'person', as developed over time, adds anything (or should add anything) to our understanding of what it is to be human: a question which has to underlie Newman's challenging statement.

Although Newman understands that man has – not 'is' – a soul, he might be taken to imply that a multitude of persons is a multitude of souls. Presumably he prefers to speak of souls because the word 'soul', as distinct from 'self' or 'person' – let alone 'ego' – has, after Christianity, unavoidably religious connotations. In classical Greece, however, the primary sense of *psyche* (which we translate as 'soul') relates to the possession of *life*: humans have 'souls', corpses do not. But if we accept that we are alive, we will ask what it is to be alive, and whether some aspects of our life, some functions of our 'soul' (*psyche*), are more basic than others. Then we might ask, as did the Greeks, whether we – or our souls – are immortal and enquire into the relationship between our souls and our bodies. And though I shall not discuss the question of

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immortality, I cannot avoid – in a project about persons – asking whether there is a necessary and intelligibly enduring relationship between 'souls' and bodies.

Since in various respects these will seem to be *religious* questions, so those who *now* talk about souls may propose or assume some sort of religious understanding of the world, and attribute such an understanding to others. Hence, and bucking any residual taboo on 'religious talk', I shall also have to enquire whether 'soul' is an essential component of any intelligible account of human personhood: that is, whether we can be persons without in some sense 'having' souls. In the first part of the following study we shall find that those ancient and medieval thinkers who gradually built up the concept of the person included the soul within that account.

But if 'soul' is or became a term of religion as well as of psychology or anthropology, it by the same token belongs in a world in which there is a God or gods. And if the concepts of 'soul' and 'God' go together, we may wonder whether the concept of person – which had use in a world of souls and gods – has further authentic use in a world held to be bereft of both. Or at least, and more specifically, whether it can play the *same* role in a god-less and soul-less world as it did in earlier settings. And whether those who suppose – implicitly or explicitly – that talk of gods and souls is empty, even damaging to our self-understanding, can find some way of retaining the 'worth' that we earlier attributed to 'persons' equipped with souls: or whether they prefer (or should prefer) to discard it.

One corollary of that may seem of particular importance. It might be argued that in a god-less and soul-less world there is no true basis for moral obligation, since we live in a value-free universe – all values being human constructs – and that new-fangled ways of protecting persons (whoever they may be) cannot be intrinsically binding in that they can only be defended in conventional or at best prudential terms. And without God and soul other possible ideas or realities about persons may have to be rethought or abandoned too: spirit, for example, and any concept of the spiritual indicating not only religious but also aesthetic values more potent than the products of mere sentimentality.

If our liberal society is to be thought capable of justifying many of its basic assumptions philosophically, there are many threats it must defuse, including those just listed. If it cannot, then talk of persons and obligations to persons will seem merely descriptive and conventional, or – if axiological – arbitrary. Yet any satisfying answer to such challenges must be more than ideological. Hence I shall argue that if we have learned more

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about what it is to be a person than was apparent in the past, the mere discovery of new or newly recovered facts – as for example about the nature and origins of the person's incommunicable uniqueness – will, in and of itself, provide no further reason to attribute worth to persons: other, that is, than a man-made value which can be bestowed and cancelled, being ultimately dependent on the will of the powerful. If persons are to be *intrinsically* valuable, it may be the case that this is possible only if their worth depends on the existence of an extra-mental entity capable of conferring its own worth upon them. In any case, the distinction between descriptions of persons and evaluations of persons must be kept clear as we proceed.

What then is – or was – a person? How is he or she best identified? Just as a human individual? Or as some sort of bearer of qualities both physical and non-physical, to be denoted by two corresponding types of predicates (such as 'fat' or 'just'). Otherwise perhaps, as Boethius puts it, as 'an individual substance of a rational nature' (*Against Eutyches* 3)? If the last, then human beings are persons, but there may be other persons who are not human beings, perhaps angels: Boethius certainly believes that there are three 'persons' in God. That may help us understand why he and other Christians might think it more informative to call us 'persons' rather than just human rational individuals; because in some way we are like God.

Boethius sometimes (as at *Consolation* 5.4 and 5.5) says that human beings possess both 'reason' (apparently discursive reason) and 'intelligence' (presumably – like the Greek *nous* – the more 'divine' power of direct intuition). But what does identifying ourselves as persons – rather than merely as human rational animals, however richly 'rational' is understood – add to our understanding of our nature? Are there other more concrete 'structural' features common to all who should be designated 'persons', whether human or 'divine'? Is Boethius' account, however modified and explicated, specific enough? And again, what weight should we put on the fact that it was formulated in a 'religious', indeed in a Christian context: that is, in a world in which there were claimed to be both souls and a God?

In such a context there may exist an account of persons which is axiological rather than merely descriptive; even in contemporary non-religious circles it is often held that persons are not merely individuals, but individuals possessed of special value. However, if some humans (such as slaves or the unborn) have no (non-mercenary) value, they might not be persons; in particular, they might not be persons in the then necessary

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legal sense. Thus, there might (legally) be corporate persons, though a corporation is not a human individual, while some human individuals might not be (or not be legally recognized as) persons. In any case, we need to know the source – whether human or divine – of human 'worth' or 'value', and in whom it is (or could be) recognized, and why.

Boethius must have thought that all humans have, in God's eyes, some intrinsic worth, but he does not specify in what human 'dignity' – doubtless his preferred word – consists. Presumably as a Christian his account of it would have been stronger than what was traditionally Roman: namely that living beings are ranked both between species and within species such that in that hierarchical structure some human beings – even some free males – have more 'dignity' than others, and accordingly are more worthy of respect; this Cicero indicates in the *De Officiis* (1.109), where, as we shall see, discussing our various 'roles' (*personae*), he observes that the second *persona* indicates our social ranking within the human community. Such ranking, in non-Christian Roman jurisprudence, was legally recognized, albeit Roman law insisted that a real person was not only 'of an incommunicable nature' (*alteri incommunicabilis*) but also partaking 'of his own right' (*sui iuris*): that is, free to make his own decisions (as slaves, having no 'dignity', were not).

Despite his silence, such ambiguity could not have satisfied the Christian Boethius, since Paul (Galatians 2.6; cf. Deut. 10:17, Acts 10:34) teaches that God is no respecter of persons (*prosopa* = *personae*, as translated by Jerome); hence that in God's eyes *all* human beings possess equal 'dignity'. Nor, as we shall see, could it have satisfied Augustine who observes unambiguously that the 'dignity' of men as rational beings in God's image is bestowed by God's gift (*Sermon* 371.4).[1] For whereas the pagan Roman account of dignity implies hierarchic relationships within human society, the Christian version, though partially dependent on God's decree in *Genesis* that man is of higher order and dignity than other creatures, yet cannot be limited to that. For human dignity, as Augustine 'knows', is primarily determined by our creation in God's image – as by texts indicating that God is no respecter of persons – and

[1] For further Augustine references (*CD* 12.28; 22.24; *Spirit and Letter* 28.49) indicating that man's dignity is evidenced by his remaining even after the fall as a (distorted but real) image of God – but only by God's gift – see the extended discussion of Pera (2015: 86–109) and pages 47–49 below. Pera is right to emphasize the radical difference between Christian and Kantian accounts of human dignity, though he puts too much stress on part of the Christian account, at times almost seeming to suggest that man's dignity consists solely in his superiority to the lower creatures.

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that therefore – one can infer – some portion of the respect due to God should also be shown to his image; hence eventually that since God expects us to respect his rights over us, so we must respect the rights we owe to one another as in his image.

Yet Boethius, Augustine and many others were often incoherent on the question of the 'dignity' and consequent due respect owed to many in their society – not least in the case of slaves. Signs of a more Christian approach, however, can be found elsewhere in late antiquity, not least among the Cappadocian Fathers. Especially powerful is the challenge of Gregory of Nyssa to any belief that monetary value can be put on a human being, on any instance, that is, of an image of God. So much for slavery, though Gregory's words had little immediate practical impact.

Two other areas, however, in which human dignity was manifestly degraded in ancient society were also subject to calls for reform: enforced prostitution (of males as of females) is roundly condemned both by Gregory and by his brother Basil. And before long laws were introduced to attempt to purify ancient society by suppressing it. As for the poor, their omnipresence (as the Gospels themselves had regularly lamented) was held to be a disgrace in a Christian society by the same Cappadocian preachers. Such calls for reform, however little immediately successful, were indicators that the Christian belief in human dignity could – eventually – become the source of major calls for more wide reformations of society.[2]

Hence, as noted, the problem arises whether without specifically religious (or perhaps in a 'Platonic' world metaphysical) claims it is possible to confirm and explicate inherent dignity and respect – hence, and in modern times, intrinsic rights – so that, as persons, we should not be treated only as means to an end, but as ends in our own right. That was Kant's hopeful non-religious formulation. If it is correct and defensible – despite Kant's failure adequately to defend it, which we shall inspect in

[2] For details on the Cappadocian defence of human dignity see recently Harper (2016). A certain foreshadowing of the idea that in some sense humans were born equal and that enforced sexual activity is contrary to the law of nature can be found in the work of the third century jurist Ulpian, but it is only a foreshadowing; thus as Honoré (2002: 85) puts it, 'All [humans] are [born] equal in that they possess dignity but, in contrast with modern thinking, the degree of dignity varies from person to person'. Honoré and others attribute this 'cosmopolitanism' – recalling Marcus Aurelius' 'Dear city of Zeus' and appropriate after the Constitutio Antoniniana (of 212) granted citizenship to all free inhabitants of the Empire – to Stoic influence. If so, that influence probably came more from ideas 'in the air' rather than specific Stoic sources.

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due course – then even in a godless framework each person really is uniquely valuable in the same way as all other human individuals: that is, if and only if he or she is uniquely different from all those other human individuals. The question of whether such strictly 'secular' claims – for which Kant offered the most persuasive and compelling arguments – can do more than license a mere axiological whistling in the wind will be a recurring theme of the present study.

It is assumed by most of our Western theorizing contemporaries that persons are individualized members of the human species and not merely specimens of a human type; that each is unique and that all are equally valuable (however such value is to be measured) and therefore possessors of rights; or (as a legal positivist, equipped with no legitimate defense of intrinsic rights, would have to phrase it) 'worthy' of possessing them. Nor is being equally valuable normally construed as being equal in having no value at all, but as being an equal possessor of much, even of infinite and certainly of immeasurable value.

Yet if that is the case, there might seem something odd about treating some persons – say one's own family – as more important (to ourselves) than others. Should we distinguish (conceptually) between the absolute worth of all persons and the more variable worth which we are obliged to respect in our local situations? If we claim to love humanity, does that imply that we should never prefer one person to any other? If so, we not only seem to be talking 'academically' – in the worst sense of the word – but tending to neglect the *uniqueness* of individual persons in the very defense of their equally valuable status. Are we rather to conclude that as finite beings we are only in a position – in practice – to accept obligations to a limited number of our fellows? Perhaps our responsibility for others, and our concern with their value or worth, diminishes in accordance with certain inevitable modes of human society and human flourishing.

Here I should pause to clarify a terminological problem, perhaps already noticed by readers. Modern comments on human worth (at least since Hobbes who collapses 'worth' into 'value') normally treat of a man's 'value' – which suggests human evaluation; earlier writers normally prefer 'dignity' or 'worth'. I have tried to retain the distinction, but at times the demands of idiomatic English indicate that 'value' may have to be preferred where 'dignity' or 'worth' would be more appropriate. Nevertheless 'dignity' is better than 'value' in relation to the original Christian concept of man's being created in the image and likeness of God, since it indicates that human worth depends not on some later gift of God to humankind but on the fact that at our very creation as God's

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image we *ipso facto* participate in the divine dignity; hence we are worthy of a share of the respect due to God himself.

*

It might seem unnecessary to defend the historical approach I have adopted in the present essay. Unfortunately, that is not the case since authors who write sympathetically and systematically about persons often fail to understand that many of our apparent insights have in the past been far from self-evident; on the contrary, they are the result of hundreds of years of thought about human nature. Slavery offers an excellent test-case for this claim. Discussing it as a gross infringement of human rights and noting that ancient slave-owning societies tolerated a 'relationship that does violence to the personhood of those held as slaves', John Crosby writes:[3] 'We. . . marvel at the immaturity in the understanding of the person that ancient peoples had who simply took slavery for granted; we think it is as if they had hardly awakened to the personhood of human beings'.

Rejecting this as grotesque historical blindness, I shall argue that we can only understand many of our present intuitions about the 'personhood of human beings' by enquiring into the development of the concept of the person over long periods of time. In such an inquiry we should remember not only that ancient (and medieval) societies – including the Athens of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle – could never have developed as they did without slaves (as Aristotle himself pointed out), but that this-worldly slavery is not explicitly condemned even in the Gospels; nor, for that matter, by the great majority of ancient and medieval Christian and other thinkers of the highest rank. The 'personalist' approach, Christian or non-Christian, to slavery arose not from the *direct* words of the Scriptures but from extended reflection over centuries on their deeper implications as the concept of person was gradually worked out and became part of more extended philosophical investigation. And, importantly, as social and industrial substitutes for chattel slavery were developed.

Hence the present enquiry will proceed within clear chronological and spatial parameters. I shall pursue 'persons' first within Western culture

[3] Crosby (1996: 13).

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from Socrates in the fifth century BC to Boethius in the fifth century AD,[4] and thence into the High Middle Ages. I shall call the account of persons that gradually emerged in this period the 'Mainline Tradition'. Thence I shall move through the early modern period and its precursors on to the present day, in the hope of casting further light on whether modern and contemporary challenges even to more developed versions of Boethius' summary can be met – and what we are left with if they cannot. I impose these limits not only because my competence does not extend beyond them but because the complex development of the concept of a person with which I am concerned took place – and perhaps could only have taken place – within our Western world where a remarkable – Christians should say providential – assimilation of Greco-Roman and Hebrew-Christian traditions was developed.[5] Parallel discussions of persons in the requisite sense might have occurred elsewhere, though a superficial trawl suggests this not to be the case. Which is not to deny that individual features of the concepts I shall examine may occur outside Western parameters.

I must constantly remind the reader, however, that in our Western tradition persons can be discussed descriptively within what are now taken to be the two distinct disciplines of philosophy and theology; but that there remains a serious unanswered question as to whether and how they can be discussed axiologically within strictly secular parameters. That question is of no mean contemporary importance since only in comparatively recent times have Western thinkers tried consciously to construct (rather than merely assume) an ethics and a theory of human value with no explicit or implicit reference to God.

What I have written is a very preliminary survey, largely limited to individual figures rather than examining radical changes in the *Zeitgeist*. Nevertheless, I can hardly insist too much on one 'world-historical' comment at the starting-point: that Mainline Tradition, the development of which I analyze in the first part of this book, was built, as already noted, on a combination of two sources: Graeco-Roman and Jewish-Christian. When we reach the beginnings of the modern age, we shall

[4] My limitation to Western writers means that I shall say little more about those Greek Fathers of the Church (Basil, Gregory of Nazienzen, Gregory of Nyssa) whose work on the delineation of the Divine Persons in the Trinity is of importance, but I shall subsume the effects of their theological work in my remarks especially about the contribution of Boethius: well versed in Greek theology between the Councils of Nicaea and Chalcedon.

[5] For an introduction to the question of how Christians came first to realize the need to take philosophy seriously see Rist (2007).

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see that a number of those who contributed to the weakening and even (in the hopes of some) the destruction of that tradition, tried to remove the influence of one or other of those two foundational sources. Neo-pagans like Giordano Bruno – to say nothing as yet of Nietzsche and Heidegger – wanted to revert to the classical world, while many Protestants, starting with Luther himself, thought Greek ideas, especially in ethics, had corrupted Christianity and needed to be largely erased. That judgment of Luther's, of course, I believe to be false, since Christianity properly understood is no mere fideism and needs philosophical tools to explain itself theoretically.

Be that as it may, I also believe that if either of the two basic sources of the Mainline Tradition about persons be excised, that tradition must wither and die. I have not pursued that theme abstractly in this book, but my treatment of individual thinkers certainly must point towards it. It is no accident that those who have contributed most to emasculating the Mainline Tradition and so brought us into the post-Christian culture of our present Western world were Protestants by belief or culture: such were Grotius, Bacon, Hobbes, Locke, Shaftesbury, Mandeville, Hutcheson, Hume, Rousseau, Bentham, Kant, Fichte, Feuerbach, Hegel, Mill, Nietzsche – to name but a few and non-contemporary examples. Of course, there are early and still 'Catholic' exceptions: Machiavelli and Descartes in particular; and of course in many respects the latter-day history of Protestantism belies the intentions of its sixteenth-century founders. Brad Gregory's *The Unintended Reformation* is a good place to look for confirmation of that judgment. It is perhaps particularly informative to compare the movement within and beyond American Protestantism from the hardline theocratic Puritanism of the founders of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, through the more liberal attitude to religious liberty defended in Rhode Island by Roger Williams, to the deism of Thomas Jefferson and in our own time to the post-Protestant, neo-Kantian and widely approved approach of John Rawls.

Despite the pre-emptive strike delivered in the previous paragraph, specialists on particular epochs may complain that their favourite lesser figures have passed unmentioned. If I offer no apology for my more cavalier procedure, it is because I want this book to enable the readers to see the broader acres of the forest through which I shall try to guide them and not to be lost among the trees, let alone the bushes and shrub. I have written this work because although 'persons' are often philosophically or theologically newsworthy, and excellent more or less systematic accounts of them exist – especially in their different ways those of

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Sokolowski, Spaemann and Scruton – there are few adequately detailed historical accounts of how the concept of the person originated, how it was constantly modified, how it is open to further modification, how it disintegrated, and whether, to what extent, and under what wider cultural conditions, any version of it can still do useful philosophical work: in brief how over persons – as in other philosophical domains – we have found ourselves – I would argue for worse – where we are. Since understandings of what a 'person' is are now so varied, so vague and so disputed, it is unsurprising that those who employ the word – usually to advocate some mode of treating human beings well or ill – do not recognize that in their neglect of history they are often talking past one another.

Finally, I should draw attention to the fact that of the four parts of this book, the first is largely descriptive, purporting to explain how the basic features of the Mainline Tradition were identified and assembled. Though here there is much of philosophical interest – since the concept of person emerged as the result of attending to very specific philosophical challenges – this part of the book is substantially historical. The following three sections, however, are different; there I not only describe how the Mainline concept of the person was challenged or rejected – whether or not intentionally – but also offer my own views as to the strength and weakness of the various challenges it faced, as well as the metaphysical, moral and political implications if it has been found seriously wrongheaded. An essential part of my claim will be that many current beliefs about persons – widely, indeed now in the West almost universally, accepted uncritically – are none the better for that, and that embarrassingly unfashionable proposals, under increasing fire for more than five hundred years, are the only plausible alternative.

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