

BEING A PERSON AND ACTING AS A PERSON

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Abstract. The article is primarily concerned with the ambiguities which surround the concept of the person. According to the philosophical tradition taking its roots from Locke's definition, personhood depends on consciousness. Therefore, 'personhood' can be ascribed to different entities, and only these entities acquire a moral standing. This can entail that a human being may or may not be considered as a person, as well as higher animals and even artificial machines. Everything depends on manifest personal characteristics. In order to sort out different meanings ascribed to 'person,' I distinguish between being a person and acting as a person. Then, I show that a human being is a paradigm of the person and his being always precedes his acting.

I. Toward Thinking about a Person

Some concepts are coined and developed within theoretical discussions among philosophers. Others come about as a reply to practical needs, and only later are taken up by thinkers. And yet others begin as theoretical concepts and finally end up as practical ones. This last pattern seems to be the case in the notion of the person. It was coined in the ambience of theological disputes concerning the nature of Jesus Christ, and for a long time it served as a theoretical tool in humanistic reflections on the nature of human beings.

In recent decades this situation has changed dramatically. As Robert Spaemann notes, „Intellectual preoccupations with the concept of the person have, until the present day, assumed a somewhat theoretical and academic character. But in recent years, unexpectedly, that has changed. The term 'person' has always (since Boethius) served as a *nomen dignitatis*,

a concept with evaluative connotations; in the wake of Kant it became the central plank in the foundation of human rights. Now its function has been reversed. Suddenly the term ‘person’ has come to play a key role in demolishing the idea that human beings, qua human beings, have some kind of rights before other human beings” (Spaemann 2006, p. 2).

In sum, we can say that the concept of the person has become one of the central ideas of practical philosophy, and that it has acquired the character of a divisive wedge: one human life is considered priceless and worth living, while the other’s is perceived as without value and not worth living; one human is bestowed with dignity, while the other is devoid of it; one human has rights, and especially a right to life, while the other has no rights at all. Should the notion of the person become a plank in the foundation of human rights, it will pertain only to a strictly selected group of humans. The main arena where such a shift has occurred is in contemporary bioethics. A growing body of literature in this field argues that not all human beings are persons, and that not only human beings are persons. To be a person means something different than to be a human. Even if some people are regarded as persons, it is not self-contradictory – it is claimed – to describe non-human entities as persons. Something which was typically considered a person can be a non-person; and vice versa: a being which was traditionally held to be a non-personal entity can acquire a personal status (Hursthouse 1987, p. 93). Personhood – in this view – is distinct from humanness. This distinction sometimes operates to such an extent that it seems reasonable to call it the detachment of the person from the human being. Let us look at a detailed account of this situation.

II. Thinking through the Prism of the Person

A paradigmatic understanding of the person for contemporary bioethics has its roots in the thought of John Locke. He set out the notion that a person „is a thinking intelligent being, that has reason and reflection, and can consider itself as itself, the same thinking thing, in different times and places; which it does only by that consciousness which is inseparable from thinking, and, as it seems to me, essential to it” (Locke 1969, p. 466). Locke was primarily interested in what makes a given entity a person over time. He himself did not define the nature of personhood, in the ontological sense. Nevertheless, such a thing was carried out by other philosophers, including contemporary bioethicists, who drew upon Locke’s insights concerning the person. In their

comprehension, a person is ontologically constituted by mental features among which consciousness and self-consciousness play the main role. In this approach, both the consciousness of current occurrences and past ones comes into play. It is thus because a person is a being that is aware of itself as a currently thinking entity and at the same time has the ability to encompass its past. In that latter activity consciousness becomes consciousness of the past occurrences concerning that entity, which means that it has a memory. On the one hand, any experience which is embraced by that past or present consciousness belongs to the person. And on the other hand, any mental event which is outside consciousness cannot constitute a person. Hence the obvious conclusion that without self-consciousness, in both versions, no entity can be considered a person.¹ Surprisingly this description of a person fits several different entities. First of all, we are naturally led to argue that a human being is a person because he/she has a reason, reflection, and overall consciousness as well as memory. As long as he/she is aware of present happenings and can recall those from the past, he/she is a person. Moreover, it seems reasonable to claim – at least *prima facie* – that only those activities embraced by consciousness/memory belong to the personal domain. Without consciousness/memory I cannot realize that I indeed exist and to what extent I exist. Secondly, the concept of a person can be applied to some higher animals. Some philosophers hold that apes and dolphins should be recognized as persons.² They seem to be aware of their being enduring in time. Some scientists try to prove that they are rational and thinking creatures, and that their abilities to master a rudimentary human language and to act purposefully confirm this thesis.

Finally, one can claim that some inanimate machines can also be counted as persons. Some of them are so constructed that they can perform acts which appear to be rational, intelligent and conscious. Ann Warren, for example, points to so-called sapient machines (Warren 1997, p. 93). But we

¹ For instance, Rich – within bioethical debates – openly declares, that „we consider human beings to be persons because of their capacity for self-consciousness (...). If consciousness were not a necessary (and hence presupposed condition for personhood), most of the discussion of the subject of personhood would become completely unintelligible, as well as much of moral philosophy” (Rich 1987, pp. 209. 216). In more general terms this condition is conveyed by Lizza: „Any being devoid of the capacity for cognitive function would by implication lack each of the particular characteristics that (...) philosophers use to define persons. Thus, there is general agreement among philosophers that some cognitive function is a necessary condition for being considered a person” (Lizza 1993, p. 355).

² Many philosophers argue this point. I would like only to point to some examples. (Midgley 1985, pp. 52-53, Gómez 2003, p. 143).

can also take into consideration all sorts of computers.³ Their actions are highly rational; their operations suggest that thinking-like processes occur in them; and their abilities to control their subsystems and retrieve data from a hard drive can be seen as examples of present and past consciousness. Martians or other extraterrestrial creatures furnish similar examples. In some science fiction movies they appear as person-like entities, and we have a tendency to think about them in this way. At any rate, this shows clearly enough that the category of the person is not only a spacious concept, but also a troublesome one.

The reason that this notion seems troublesome appears especially when we apply it to particular situations. Human embryos or even fetuses cannot be called rational, intelligent and self-conscious entities, at least in an active sense. Because of the limited development of the cerebral-nervous system, they cannot perform such activities, and in this self-deployed manner of thinking they cannot be counted as persons. Person-like abilities can be ascribed to advanced fetuses and newborn infants. But even then these creatures are not self-conscious, and it is difficult to hold that they are able to recall any past experiences. Comparing such human beings to adult apes, one can claim that, for example, a three-year old chimpanzee is a more conscious, rational, and intelligent creature. It acts with a certain purpose and manages much more successfully many more difficult situations than, say, a one-month old human baby. We can ask, who is more a person – an infant or a chimp? Peter Singer, as it is well known, claims that the latter is indeed a person but not the former.⁴ When we compare the quality of acts performed by different entities aspiring to the status of a person, we also find striking contrasts and are led to surprising conclusions. Human beings are rational, intelligent and self-conscious – but not always. Consider, for example, people who have lost their consciousness and become comatose. Abiding literally by the definition of Locke and its aforementioned modifications, we should contend that they are not persons. People who are old and suffer from dementia or Alzheimer's disease possess some mental abilities but they often operate at such a low level that they are less conscious than adult and healthy apes. Such people are unable to think clearly and logically because their cerebrum is dying. Consequently, they also have

³ Such possibility considers Riki Dolby. (Dolby 2006, pp. 352-364).

⁴ Singer argues in one place that „Normal adults and children, but not fetuses and infants, are persons.” See: (Kuhse, Singer 2002, p. 239). In another place he states that „it is surely indisputable that the notion of person can meaningfully be applied to the other great apes.” (Cavalieri, Singer, 2002, p. 139).

serious problems with their memory, so they are not conscious of their past activities and achievements.

Furthermore, some healthy adult human beings who seem to exemplify true personhood cannot, in some respects, perform as well as other person-like entities. For example, some computers that are programmed to carry out specialized operations, e. g. making statistical calculations, are much better in that enterprise than humans. We can say that they are more rational, as far as mathematical precision is concerned, and definitely quicker and more effective. When a human being is, say, tired and his normal mental operations are slower or poorer, many other machines and computers can surpass his abilities, and there is a strong tendency to perceive these mechanisms as persons in a fuller sense than the aforementioned humans.

If this thinking is applied to ethical considerations, there are further severe consequences. These become evident when we realize our essential dependence. Locke's definition of the person underlines mental characteristics and pays no attention to any other qualities. Locke did not mention any ontological foundations of these features. Nor was he interested in clarifying their nature. Hence, in the main bulk of the post-Lockean tradition, what basically constitute the person are active rationality, thinking, reflection, and self-exercised consciousness. Should it be thus, we are close to contending that such mental qualities alone have ethical importance. It seems reasonable to say, that if they matter as factors in the constitution of the person, they should be protected for their inherent worth. If the person is such a unique entity, then everything which builds it up has a special value. And vice versa – anything else which is not in an essential relation to these mental features is devoid of value.⁵ Further, this way of thinking can be radicalized. It can be claimed then that the person is valued just because it has these features. As Robert Nozick put it frankly, „(...) if the basic moral characteristic is shared by everyone, then it does not seem to have anything special to do with you. Your value would consist in being a bearer of this characteristic (for instance, rationality, ability to revere the moral law); you would not be valued for being yourself. (...) You are valued for your self but not for yourself. (...) There is then the sense that any other bearer of the characteristics can equally well replace you, so that you are not valued or respected for being the particular person you are” (Nozick 1981, pp.

⁵ Post-Lockean anthropology paying a special attention to these active factors, underlining also the importance of their biological-neurological basis. Only in this case can we perceive a positive and essential relation to the mental features.

453-454).⁶ What stems from that declaration contains an all-important thesis: Only mental characteristics count, as far as the moral meaning of the person is concerned. The person who embodies these qualities is secondary to them, and we can even say that such embodiment is merely casual. From this standpoint it is understandable why the three-year old chimp will be more valuable than the one-month old infant; or that those who are comatose or an elderly person stricken with Alzheimer's disease will be considered creatures with less value or even devoid of a moral status altogether. The person in the moral sense is an entity which outwardly exhibits its mental and psychological characteristics. And there is nothing which makes an entity valuable except these mental characteristics, exercised at the conventionally accepted level. Any focus on the bearer or subject of these features is rejected or at least considered unimportant. The person, in such a descriptive and anthropological sense, becomes an independent, autonomous-like concept. It is not necessarily connected with a personal entity, and moreover it seems to be a temporary phenomenon. Not only can the role of a bearer of the mental features be ascribed to different entities, but also a set of person-like characteristics can appear on certain occasions and disappear in others. In the case of humans, different stages of development or health conditions either permit or prohibit the constellation of mental features to be displayed. Consequently, a given entity that had once been valued highly can later be conceived as without value; at one time it can be worthy and at other times worthless; in some periods it can possess dignity but in others such dignity can be lost. In this perspective, the concept of the person is not only a divisive tool but also a troublesome and ambiguous issue. As such, it is not a helpful category, and we are reasonably prompted to look for an alternative understanding.

III. Being a Person versus Acting as a Person

Looking at the usage of the concept of the person, we can distinguish some important aspects, namely being a person and acting as a person. They are intermingled with each other but at the same time they are not reducible

⁶ In a similar vein, but strictly within contemporary bioethics, Helga Kuhse argues, „[...] if one takes this approach, then one is not saying that human life has sanctity, but rather that rationality, the capacity to be self-aware, moral or purposeful, and so on, have «sanctity»” (Kuhse, 1987, p. 212).

to each other. Each facet operates on a different level of reality, although sometimes this difference is not obvious. Beginning with the second aspect – acting as a person – we can argue that any active mental feature is an example of an operation. Consciousness determines an act of intentionality either toward an inner self or an external world. Rationality consists in capturing and ordering different meanings. Reflection seems to be a kind of rationality and consists in pondering experiences or, more generally, on past data, with a tendency to order them. Such activities are usually seen through external phenomena such as language and purposeful conduct. Many entities of different kinds can perform these activities, and if they do so, we can assert that they act in a person-like manner. The problem begins when we infer a being from an action. Such a tendency came out in the above analyses. It turned out that possession of some important mental characteristics became the basis for both anthropological and ethical pronouncements: a person is made up of a set of mental qualities, and as such can acquire a moral standing. The presence of some person-like activities creates the being of the person itself. It seems, moreover, that this thesis does not apply to the epistemological order, that is, as if the manifestation of certain phenomena revealed the preexisting person. It is clearly used in the stronger sense, namely as an ontological claim: the displayed phenomena constitute a personal being. This is confirmed by the ethical activity itself: only beings who reveal their mental/psychological features are considered moral persons. Had they not possessed these features, they would have been considered entities with lesser value, or even valueless and devoid of dignity. We can ask whether it is justifiable to infer personal being from a set of qualitative features. This doubt concerns the methodological move, that is, how it is possible for a dynamic being to be constituted by a set of momentary phenomena. The advocates of this position claim that our empirical investigations can establish only these outward qualities. It follows that the person is no more than a derivative state of these qualitative elements. The person comes into being when these elements/characteristics obtain. It is usually claimed that access to their extra-empirical background is unavailable because it is something meta-physical, that is something beyond physics, biology or neurobiology. Naturalists contend, therefore, that the person is not only a temporal phenomenon but also a kind of exclusive feature of a given being, e. g. a human being. It is a sort of ‘label’ which is attached to a human being in moments when he/she is physically and mentally unimpaired and fully flourishing. It follows, according to this view, that in some moments of life, we humans are persons, and in others we are not. Looking from the

perspective of 'the acting person' at 'the being person,' we can say that the latter is a product of the former. When person-like features are exercised at a high level and constitute an uninterrupted stream of action, we can claim that a person is present. When, however, these elements operate at a lower level of realization and some disruptions occur, we may be tempted to claim that there no person is present but only single and person-like behaviors. Thus, the striking dependence between the acting person and the being person reveals itself: an absence of action results in an absence of being. Deficiencies in the external elements make the internal reality of personhood impossible. Hence, the external elements seem to be necessary constituents of the internal personal reality. Is such thinking really credible? Why does an external set of features appearing and disappearing casually create the reality of the person? Is there anything special in these single elements that enables such a complex reality as the person to exist? Is it not better to look at this problem from the opposite side?

I maintain that the opposite perspective is more promising. It starts from the second facet of the person, namely from its being. Initially, we can allow that operations of different kinds are perfect examples of personhood, because an entity *is* somehow in its acting. Actions seem to be *modi* of personal being. Nevertheless, a different understanding of the person as being should be taken into consideration. It is located on a more basic level of reality, hence it is something which exists *before* the acting-being, and even enables it. Thomas Aquinas pointed out that that the first and basic source of being consists in the act of existence. It is strictly connected with the concept of soul. As Thomas put it, „if any definition covers all types of 'soul' it will be this: the soul is the primary actuality of a physical bodily organism” (Thomas Aquinas 1951, II. 1, p. 233). It is an element which actively organizes a (human) body. Thanks to this action, an entity comes into being, and its fundamental structure is set in place. Later, all activities take their roots from the soul. The human body cooperates with it, but it is not in itself the source of higher activities. The medieval philosopher pointed to the priority of the soul by saying, „We must not think, therefore, of the soul and body as though the body has its own form making it a body, to which a soul is super-added, making it a living body; but rather that the body gets its being and its life from the soul” (Thomas Aquinas 1951, II. 1, p. 225).

From this new starting point, we can claim that the soul is the source of all mental activities, including consciousness, reason, reflection, and memory. In order to display them the soul needs, of course, further material and biological (neurobiological) structures. Nevertheless, although

important, these structures play a secondary role in the appearing of mental activities. They ‘cooperate’ biologically and finally enable consciousness, reason, reflection and memory to be displayed in such and such a ‘clothing.’ But these bodily possibilities do not constitute an absolute source of mental features. The latter ones – taken in themselves, i.e. in the quality of their operations – have a different character, which strongly suggests their different origin, i.e. their non-bodily origin. The body in itself cannot create on its own something which surpasses it qualitatively, e.g. the material brain cannot autonomously create an extra-material thought or reflection. Although some naturalists claim that mental factors are entirely explicable in terms of supervenience and emergence,⁷ it is almost incredible that a lower ontological reality could create a higher one.⁸ Mental activities indeed exhibit such a higher character; in fact, the ability to reflect on one’s body and even on one’s own reflection itself are the best confirmations of the soul’s prior ontological reality.

On this account, the being of the person has its origin in the inner dimension of its existence, and it is not secondarily constituted by the external factors. These factors, as long as they are not substances,⁹ cannot constitute

⁷Supervenience and emergence point to the relationship and dependence between two kinds of properties: lower ones and upper ones. Emergence is concerned with explaining how the upper level emerges from an underlying physical or biological complexity. Supervenience refers to the manner in which the upper level properties may only be present in virtue of the lower level ones. In the context of this paper, the best example is the relationship between the brain and thoughts, or other mental properties. On the theory of supervenience (Kim 1993, p. 53-78).

⁸The concepts of supervenience and emergence can be useful in the natural sciences. But in thinking about a person, they seem inadequate. Supervenience and emergence have a real problem in explaining the relation between the physical (biological) and the mental. As James Moreland puts it, „if supervenience is allowed, the emergence of the mental can only be taken to be ex nihilo or to arise from potentiality in matter due to the appearance of sufficient physical complexity. Regarding the former, (...) coming-to-be ex nihilo is not a state of affairs a naturalist can affirm in a non-question-begging way (...). Regarding the latter, for two basic reasons the naturalist cannot say that mental entities emerged from potentiality in matter. First, given a fairly clear conception of the physical (with room for reasonably constrained extensions by future physics), there is simply no way to see how, even in principle, the nature of mental (e.g., semantic contents, intentionality, the felt essence of pain) could be depicted as latent in matter, not can any explanation whatever be given for its actualization. (...) Second, such a move makes mental potentiality a fundamental feature of the universe and this notion is at home in either a theistic or panpsychic world-view but not in a naturalistic one.” (Moreland 1998, pp. 51-52).

⁹We can of course claim that, say, rationality is a substance in itself, and as such it gives rise to the person. But then a problem with an extra-empirical element is revealed

substance-like sources of existence. Instead, they are in a different relation to the source of the being, i. e. to the person's soul. They are necessary conveyers of that primordial reality. It is thus reasonable to claim that the person tends naturally to reveal itself to the world.¹⁰ If the person exists, he/she will spontaneously seek to communicate itself both to itself and to the surrounding world, although in different ways. Consciousness, rationality, reflection, and memory can be easily perceived as the means of such communication. First, it is a kind of auto-communication, when the person realizes that he/she exists, and that he/she is such and such. That process is usually connected with the perception of the self as a unique personal entity existing in time, i. e. having a past and future, but also living here and now. Such a realization requires a prior concept of itself as 'I'. Only then is it possible to say: 'I have a past'; 'I have a future'; 'I live here and now'. Secondly, the being of the person communicates itself to the external world. In order to do this, it needs further 'tools', including a language and as well as logical and purposeful conduct. Although they are based on the possibilities inherent in the bodily constitution, these acts of communication cannot be realized without mature mental features and concepts. Only when the person, as a rational and conscious entity, speaks and acts, is it possible to declare 'I speak', 'I act', instead of 'it speaks' (or it is spoken), 'it acts' (or it is being done). Furthermore, as reason, consciousness, reflection, and memory are conveyers of the self to the self, so are language and purposeful conduct the outer manifestations of the existing self. But this final stage of revealing the person would be impossible without the essence of the person being present all along.

Conclusion

What has been said enables us to draw some conclusions. If the person is prior to acting, whatever acts as the person must be a person in advance. This thesis allows for distinguishing a couple of categories of the person.

again. Therefore, naturalists must avoid any understanding of mental activities in terms of basic substance.

¹⁰ As Norris Clarke – giving a contemporary interpretation to Thomas Aquinas thought – puts it, „Every real substance (...) is highly dynamic. The whole point of its being is to express itself, to fulfill itself, to share its riches, through action appropriate to its mode of being (its essence). (...) Because of this dynamic inner core, every being, by its very nature as existing being, as being in act, tends naturally to flow over into action according to its essence.” (Clarke 1994, pp. 106-107).

First, the human person revealing its personal existence manifests and unfolds its real being – its soul. It is not an act of ontological creation *ex nihilo*. At most, it is the act of creating the manifold manifestations of its personal being. Hence, it can be an act of creation only in the epistemological sense. The range of mental activities performed by the human person is really wide. It includes thinking, deliberation, self-consciousness, and it seems that the climax consists in a possibility to reflect on one's own reflection, to think about one's own thinking, to deliberate on one's own deliberation, to be conscious of one's own consciousness (let us call these abilities in short reflexive-consciousness).

Second, the aforementioned sapient machines or computers are sometimes regarded as kinds of persons. They indeed act as persons do in many cases. But they do not possess an independent source of personal existence. They are not persons as humans are. They actually reveal the person who constructed and programmed them. And even if their current abilities surpass the abilities of the constructor, they remain the creatures of the inventor and his ideas. It was he who foresaw these higher activities, and on this account he alone should be considered a person in the strict sense. These machines and computers do act as persons but they are not persons of a metaphysical kind. They have a memory but not a remembrance: they indeed possess a data bank but are unable to work on it independently, recall it on their own and modify it in new ways. In that activity they strongly depend on an outer command, which – all in all – can be given by a human person. Only this person can initiate such an operation, that is, perform a deliberate calling up of that data (remembrance). The personhood of machines exists only in act but not in the underlying essence (understood as existence and source of all further activities). Thus, we can conventionally call them 'machine-persons' or 'artificial persons.'

Finally, higher animals can be partially considered persons. Compared to computers, they are independent sources of their actions and operations, and they act in a person-like way. Many of their operations strikingly resemble the undertakings of human persons.¹¹ Nevertheless, the quality of these manifestations is clearly lower than the acts performed by human persons.

¹¹ As MacIntyre successfully proves, animals like dolphins, chimpanzees, gorillas all have intentions, identify objects, perform purposeful actions, and „most important of all, they exhibit in their activity belief-presupposing and belief-guided intentions and they are able to understand and to respond to the intentions communicated by others, both the intentions of other members of their own species and the intentions of humans.” (MacIntyre 1999, p. 46).

They are unable to master a more sophisticated language which seems to be a necessary condition to perform – as Alasdair MacIntyre puts it – speech acts like assertion, questioning, requesting, enjoying, agreeing or promising. Moreover, „such animals cannot grasp the world as a whole. They cannot stand back from their immediate environment. (...) They notably lack those conceptions of a remembered past and an envisaged future that only the possession of language makes possible, and so they cannot put the present in a temporal context (...)” (MacIntyre 1999, p. 30. 47). This latter drawback points to the more serious lack in the animal existence, namely the lack of the reflexive consciousness. If we declare that they are persons, we do so only with reference to a paradigmatic picture of the person, and this is always the human person (Devine 1987, p. 137). Hence we can call apes persons, for example, but only in an analogous sense, or as David DeGrazia put it, they are „border persons” (DeGrazia 2006, p. 46).¹² When we recall Spaemann’s view, quoted at the beginning, that the concept of the person plays an important role in demolishing the idea that human beings – understood as human persons – have some kind of rights before other human beings, we can better comprehend the philosophical context of his claim. If personhood can be ascribed to different entities and no distinctions between them are made, it is understandable that some human beings – as a result of the empirical comparison between mental and psychological features – will be marginalized and deprived of adequate rights. Basically, the problem consists in emphasizing the role of the acting person at the expense of the being person, and also in conceiving the former as a semi-autonomous and independent entity. Because of the anti-metaphysical sentiments regnant in our culture, the being person is usually ignored at the initial stage. The process of formulating the notion of personhood is focused only on the active factors as perceived empirically. All non-empirical factors, such as metaphysical substances, are rejected out of hand. At the centre of attention remain, at most, the material sources of the person-like characteristics. That is why the sole characteristics are considered within a materialist ontology, which excludes a priori any non-empirical agents. If we agreed with the naturalist approach, we would be compelled to admit that the person is a conventional

¹² This triple distinction reveals naturally a kind of the hierarchy operating within the category of the personhood. First, there is definitely the human person, and this is a kind of touchstone for any thinking in terms of the person. Secondly, is the animal person, which from the point of view of the main conception is merely a border person. Finally, there is the ‘machine-person’ or ‘artificial person’, which can be considered as a person only by deploying a remote analogy.

construct and even an artifact. Its conventionality would consist in fixing a set of features which still employs the language of personhood, so that whatever possesses these features must be morally considered a person. Thus, being a person would be a matter of our ('full persons') common imagination and its projection onto different entities, whether machines or animals or human beings.¹³ The person would be also an artifact because we can stimulate different entities to act as persons do. Now in fact we are in possession of the technological powers to do so. But it seems almost certain that in the future this technological capacity will be much more available and widely employed. Nevertheless, producing such acting persons in a still progressing variety of forms will not enable us to deal with the problem of the being person, especially in the field of ethics. To alleviate this problem, it is necessary to introduce a clear-cut distinction between different kinds of persons, and especially to put at the centre the human person as a paradigmatic model for all thinking about the nature of personhood. If this is acknowledged, we are led to oppose decisively the detachment of the acting person from the being person. Even if we can operate only according to the notion of the acting person in many cases (for example, in comatose patients who register no brain activity), it is necessary to realize that this is a secondary conception of personhood, which is impossible to conceive and understand without prior recourse to the being person. Therefore, the strict connection of the acting person with the being person, as well as the necessary hierarchy of the latter over the former, should be considered the basic axioms of all thinking about the person.

In order to have a starting point well established, that is, the concept of the human person, we need decisively to presuppose one all-important point, namely the existence of the non-empirical source of the being person. Actually, it offers a more satisfying explanation as why these mental factors appear at all, and why they have such a clearly non-materialistic quality. In so doing, we can point to this spiritual centre of the human being as something that plays a twofold role in relation to the human body. First, it is the origin of all mental activities, and – acknowledging that – we do not have to look for them in the material realm alone. Secondly, what is personal is not a purely spiritual. It actually 'absorbs' the materiality of human existence. The human person requires its bodily dimension in order to express

¹³ Dolby seems to draw upon this thinking in referring to sapient machines. He says that, „the requirement that must be met by a robot is that people are prepared to treat it as a person.” (Dolby 2006, p. 363).

and manifest itself, and we can even argue that the human person constitutes itself only when the body is in place.¹⁴ Though such a thesis depends on the reality of a metaphysical order, we can reach a similar conclusion when we deploy a different epistemic approach to these phenomena. When we are open to the wide and varied content of what is given, the person shows by itself that it is constituted by something more than empirical data. A phenomenological investigation of the personal characteristics – as we can rightly name this approach – allows us to claim that they have spiritual quality, and as such cannot be products of the mere material reality, regardless of its complexity. If this ‘more’ is acknowledged, we can inquire about its source. Non-reductivist thinking will then direct our attention to an adequate background from which these non-material phenomena arise. In other words, if something given to explanation (the phenomena of mental features) reveals its clear spiritual character, the same should be claimed about its ‘originator,’ its source (the source of these phenomena). The notion of the person must not be a demolition tool in thinking about human beings. It can still be a helpful idea in many essential endeavors, including an ethical one. The only important condition which must be met is to realize that that concept of personhood is extremely complex, and it becomes dangerous only when interpreted one-sidedly. Our main concern, therefore, is not to naturalize the understanding of the person, even though it sometimes seems to be the best way for a scientific comprehension of personal reality. Although the person can be investigated by scientific methods, these are not the only and best means for disclosing who the person really is. Rather, the Aristotelian-Thomistic and humanist approaches both ground and supplement that picture. They widen our horizon as far as the notion of the person is concerned, and guarantee that the full truth about the person will be acknowledged and displayed.¹⁵

¹⁴ Sometimes the body can weaken that personal profile. But because a person is someone more than his/her body, a person deformed and stricken by a disease is still a person. We can say that he/she is a deformed or ill person, which means that his/her body does not allow for a full revelation of who he/she really is.

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