



THE CONCEPT OF PERSON
BETWEEN THE CHRISTIAN TRADITION
AND POST-MODERN SOCIETY

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Antimo Cesaro

This short essay analyses the concept of person in relation to its ancient and Christian roots, considering the role it plays in the contemporary political landscape and the conceptual and cultural twist involving its nature and its fundamental traits. In particular, it will show how the modern era, after arriving at a consciential and individual conception of the person, in its most mature and contemporary phase, tends to deconstruct its identity through new technologies and the mindset (*forma mentis*) they convey.

I

Prologus

It is a well-established opinion that Christianity constitutes the cultural substrate on which the concept of person has developed; and that is by virtue of a traditional (to the point of becoming conventional) historiographical tradition which deemed the Christian intuition about the value of a subject so meaningful that it marked a clean break with the typical naturalistic objectivism of classical thought.

As Guido Fassò has already remarked in the beautiful introduction to his successful book *La legge della ragione*¹, while discussing this theory it is necessary to be really careful to avoid not to fall into excessive and reductive simplifications which, based on a priori views, fairly often lead to framing in not-fully-exact perspectives the *development of thought* within specific historical contexts.

And “it is precisely the idealistic-spiritualistic-modernistic pattern -according to Fassò- that firmly presents us with a Christian framework that discovers the subject, the spirit and ultimately the *man* in his absolute value and autonomy, as opposed to the Greek-Roman world which was centred on nature, an objective reality in which man could estrange himself, passively fitting into the natural order of things”². This view of things cannot certainly be passively accepted, especially in light of Rodolfo Mondolfo’s research³ which, developing Zeller’s brilliant intuitions⁴, went beyond the schematic oppositions of the so-called *classicist conception* that postulated an irreducible antithesis between the ancient classical world and Christianity on the basis of the partitions objectivity/subjectivity, finiteness/infiniteness, naturalistic-legalistic ethics/ethics of the consciousness.

On the basis of these premises, strong doubts immediately arise regarding the evaluation of the *naturalistic objectivity* which would be typical of Greek thought and the alleged discovery of the *human person* by Christianity.

¹ Cf. Giulio Fassò, *La legge della ragione* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1964).

² Fassò, *La legge della ragione*, 5 (my translation).

³ Cf. Rodolfo Mondolfo, *La comprensione del soggetto umano nell'antichità classica*, (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1958), X.

⁴ Cf. Eduard Zeller and Rodolfo Mondolfo, *La filosofia dei Greci nel suo sviluppo storico* (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1932), 306-355.

Regarding the former, one indeed wonders whether what is commonly called a *naturalistic conception* is actually an objectifying projection of the human world into the physical, natural world, or it is rather a characterisation of the latter by the former; and if any doubts about the so-called *objectivism* of Greek thought begin to arise, if we accept for a second, with due caution, such a theoretical position, we then have to ask ourselves what is the exact meaning that should be given to the supposed *anthropocentric revolution* brought about by Christianity.

“The discovery of Christianity -Fassò observed, with an expression that is so naively simple it would look obvious if not properly understood- is God”, not man; “God who is no longer *nature*, yet a reality which is very different from men in their humanity (and rationality)”⁵.

The discovery of Christianity, we might add, is a *person-God*, not *nature*.

II

Nullus deus miscetur hominibus

Plato, *Symposium*, 203a

The personalistic inspiration of Christianity is therefore a reflection of the belief in a personal God who, in turn, establishes an *inter-personal* relationship with men.

⁵ Fassò, *La legge della ragione*, 10 (my translation).

Hence the need, for the early Fathers of the Church, to clarify a new concept, introducing it in the history of philosophy, so that it fully expressed the Christian notion of *person*⁶.

The cosmological scheme of Middle Platonism certainly seemed the most appropriate to express the new concept of the divine in a trinitarian form through a passage from the One (God the Father, uncreated) to many (made of corruptible matter) through *divine mediators*, who were created (*Logos, Pnuma*); however, what emerged from such a simplistic interpretation was heresy.

The difficulty lay in the fact that previous interpretations of the concept were hard to find throughout the whole classical world: if a metaphysics of the substance had long been investigated, a metaphysics of the person had to be invented *ex novo*. The term was not missing from the Greek vocabulary, but the word *pròsopon*, borrowed from theatre, was then used to express the outward appearance of a person, the mask of an actor, his role on stage; so that, if referred to man, it could at best express his role on the world stage; if the word were to be referred to God, it would prove completely inadequate (and dangerously ambiguous, since it implies a non-substantial character) to express the real and concrete distinction among the three divine persons.

⁶ For a full take on the matter, cf. Andrea Milano, *Persona in teologia. Alle origini del significato di persona nel cristianesimo antico* (Naples: Edizioni Dehoniane, 1996); Giuseppe Goisis and Marco Ivaldo and Gaspare Mura, *Metafisica, persona, cristianesimo. Scritti in onore di Vittorio Possenti* (Rome: Armando editore, 2011); to analyse the concept semantically, cf. Onorato Bucci, “La formazione del concetto di persona nel Cristianesimo delle origini: avventura semantica e itinerario storico”, *Lateranum* 2 (1988); Maurice Nédoncelle, “Prosopon et persona dans l’antiquité classique”, *Revue de Sciences Religieuses* 22 (1948): 277-299.

The word *hypostasis* was then suggested: once used in quite a general way in the classical world, it then came to be specifically used to express the concept of a person in its concrete, individual reality. The word was suitable to express a subsisting ontological reality (avoiding the overuse of the term *ousia-substance*), yet it was full of a complex spiritual reality, and with a wealth of psychological and moral implications (which was the primary aspect of the term *pròsopon*).

Hypostasis, then, to signify not an undefined sense of substance, but a concept capable of grasping, along with a number of peculiar psychological characteristics, what is common and undefined in something⁷.

Hypostasis, then, expresses the division, the particular (*tò idion*), the individual (*tò àtomon*), *someone* (*tòn tinà*): its peculiar characteristic is *to be in itself*⁸.

And, if during the period of Trinitarian disputes, the attention was focused on the *ousia-hypostasis* distinction, when the controversy centred on the person of Christ instead, the key point of the discussion became the distinction *physis-hypostasis*, with the subsequent emergence of what might be called the peculiar trait of the person: an irreducibility to its own nature; an irreducibility of the particular to the common kind; an irreducibility of every man to a generalised human nature.

⁷ Following Saint Basil's lead, we could argue that: "the distinction between essence and hypostasis is the same as that between *the general* and *the particular*, as, for instance, between *the animal* and *the particular human*" (Saint Basil, *Letter CCXXXVI*, 6).

⁸ For further discussion, cf. Francesco Livi, "La dimensione ontologica del personalismo dei Padri", *Sapienza* 2 (1976): 178-188.

III

Per – se – unum

Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, 29, 4 c

Before God, Triad-Monad, then, the multiplicity of the created finite entities arises; among those, there is man, made in God's image⁹ (that is, carrying in himself the *personal* mark of the Deity); man, created not only as a species, but as an *individual person*, defined by the necessity of a relationship with God¹⁰, with himself¹¹ and with other men¹²; man, capable of knowing and loving and, therefore, arbiter of his fate.

Hence the description of the concept of person in John Damascene: "A person is one who by reason of his own operations and properties exhibits to us an appearance which is

⁹ "Singulus quis que homo, qui... secundum solamentem imago Dei dicitur, una persona est et imago Trinitatis in mente" (Augustine, *De Trinitate* [*On the Trinity*], XV, 7, 11).

¹⁰ "The evangelical *your names are written in heaven* stands for *your persons*, meaning that God has a direct and personal relationship with every man" (Livi, "La dimensione ontologica del personalismo dei Padri", 183).

¹¹ Man discovers to be a *person*, in his self-consciousness, as a "unifying principle of a universe of experiences"; through the act of cognition, "which fixes a person who stays always identical in the flow of historical events" (it can be underlined, in this regard, the etymology that is used by Thomas Aquinas to derive the term person: *per-se-unum*, cf. *Summa Theologiae*, I, 29, 4c; cf. Pasquale Orlando, *Filosofia dell'essere finito* (Naples: Luciano 1995), 254; Réginald Garrigou-Lagrange, "La personalità di Cristo e l'unione ipostatica" in *La sintesi tomistica*, ed. Marco Bracchi (Brescia: Fede & Cultura, 2015).

¹² Singularity and communion imply one another, although, in his necessary openness towards others, in his interpersonal relationships, and in his transcendence towards God, every man remains irreducible in his freedom, and his absolute diversity remains unchanged.

distinct and set off from those of the same nature as he”¹³. This formulation passed patristic and scholastic scrutiny, it then flowed into the theoretical thought of Boethius (the person is “individual substance of a rational nature”)¹⁴ and was then revised by Thomas Aquinas (“the person is the subsisting distinction in an intellectual nature”)¹⁵ in the quintessential philosophical definition of the known characteristics of a person (rationality-intelligence, freedom-independence and individuality-unity); thus a *distinct, intelligent and free subsistence*¹⁶. These characteristics give

¹³ John Damascene [Saint John of Damascus], *Dialect.*, c. 43, Migne, p. 94, col. 613.

¹⁴ Boethius, *De duabus naturis*, 3, PL 64, 1345.

¹⁵ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, 29, 1 c; III, 2, 2; I, 29, 1 ad 3; *De pot.* 9, 1; *In I sent.* D. 23, q. 1 ad 3; *Qdl.* 9, 3 ad 2; for further reading cf. Sofia Vanni Rovighi, *L'antropologia filosofica di S. Tommaso*, (Milan: Vita e Pensiero, 1989); Umberto Degl'Innocenti, *Il problema della persona nel pensiero di S. Tommaso* (Rome: Libreria editrice della Pontificia Università Lateranense, 1967); Orlando, *Filosofia dell'essere finito*, 237-258. In particular, Orlando underlines the merits of the Thomistic definition, when compared to Boethius', stating: “As a clarification, I would also like to point out the decanting that Boethius' definition receives through the Thomistic formulation of person. Boethius defines the person as *individual substance of a rational nature*, while Thomas Aquinas prefers to say that *the person is the subsisting distinction in an intellectual nature*. The preference given to the *subsisting distinction* consists of a more comprehensive expression, which identifies in the subsistence the formal element of the substance. The expression *intellectual nature* is equally more comprehensive; the adjective *rational* restricts the definition of person to a human; while *intellectual* includes God, who uses intuition and not reason, in the definition. Therefore Aquinas will be able to say that *the term person identifies what is most perfect in all its nature* (*S. Tb.* I, 29, 3 c.), referring, in that instance, precisely to God” (Orlando, *Filosofia dell'essere finito*, 245).

¹⁶ “*Subsisting* is the substance's very own being, distinct from the accidental being” (Thomas Aquinas, *De pot.*, 9, 1; *In I sent.* D. 23, q.1, a.1, ad 3); in this light, the person, while sharing subsistence with the individual, distinguishes itself through its intellectual nature. “Subsistence is the virtue of the thing to be distinct from all other things; subsisting adjusts the very own being of the

man a chance to acquire dignity and provide an opportunity for greatness, but also for eternal damnation.

In this respect, the innovation brought about by Christianity can be seen, with all due caution, as we mentioned in our introduction and in the light of the considerations below, in the substitution of a previous *cosmocentric* mindset with an *anthropocentric* one¹⁷: hence the sense of the Christian catharsis, “the overturning of the cosmologically-preordained *universum* of the Greeks and the creation of a new view of reality, no longer centred on the cosmos, which, in the immutable determination of *its laws*¹⁸, pantheistically involves everything, including man and

substance, so that we called *distinct* the individual because of its individualised nature” (cf. Thomas Aquinas, *QdI* 9, 3 ad 2; *S. Th.* III, 19, 1 ad 4; *In III Sent.* D. 118, q. 1, ad 3; d. 6, q. 2)” (Orlando, *Filosofia dell'essere finito*, 253).

¹⁷ Of course, it is not to be ruled out the fact that within a general cosmocentric mentality a clearly-anthropocentric content of thought might emerge (an example is, for instance, the philosophical speculation of the sophists). What is worth noting “is that Greek speculation never stopped being cosmocentric, even when it focused its full attention on man, since it never gave him ontological priority over matter, i.e. it continued to consider him a *piece of the world* among others, one *case* in the context of the being” (Francesco D’Agostino, “Appunti per una teoria dell’Epikēia”, *Sapienza* 2 1977: 157). For further reading, cf. Francesco D’Agostino, “Antropocentrismo cristiano. Note sul pensiero di Johann Baptist Metz”, *Rivista internazionale di Filosofia del Diritto*, 47, (1970): 355-373; Johann Baptist Metz, *Antropocentrismo cristiano. Studio sulla mentalità di Tommaso d’Aquino*, trans. Aldo Audiso (Turin: Borla, 1969); Angelo Scola and Gilfredo Marengo and Javier Prades Lopez, *La persona umana. Antropologia teologica*, (Milan: Jaca Book, 2000).

¹⁸ Emphasis on *its laws* has been added; we tried to visually convey with the italics our uncertainties in considering innate with the cosmos or, if you will, inborn in nature, the *laws*, intended as *paradigms of reason*, which to us look rather like the result of a transfer, from a *human* dimension to the world of *nature*, of the (*human*) ideas of order, harmony and regularity (-of rationality-according to Fassò) which, from the beginnings of Greek philosophical speculation, represent the *implicit potential* of a subjectivistic attitude compared

the Deity, but a man who, created by God as a person, involves the entire cosmos in his personal history”¹⁹.

IV

Metanoia

With the announcement of the Christian *good news*, man’s conversion to new ethical and spiritual values takes place. There is a new, *revolutionary* worldview: the classical conceptions of time²⁰, history²¹ and man change; and that happens as a

to the alleged objectivity of the physical world. For further reading, cf. Fassò, *La legge della ragione*, 20-21; Mondolfo, *La comprensione del soggetto umano nell’antichità classica*, 70-71.

¹⁹ Crescenzo Sepe, *Persona e storia*, (Milan: San Paolo Edizioni, 1990), 60.

²⁰ “From Heraclitus to Pythagoras, to Proclus and the last Athenian philosophers, the doctrine of the eternal discourse weighs on the spirits. That is why history is unraveled... There is neither before nor after, since every event is, in its turn, in the past and in the future. And in the depth of the cycle, historical time always remains a time of dissolution... By liberating thought from the common conception of the eternal return, Christianity opened the doors to the idea of progress and freedom, an idea which was absolutely foreign to the Greek world” (Jean Guitton, *Le temps et l’éternité chez Plotin et St. Augustin*, Paris: Boivin 1933, 357-58).

²¹ “The Greek world is a world without history, so to speak, an eternal order in which time has no effectiveness, it can either leave the order always identical to itself or it can generate a succession of events that always come back to the start, in cyclical transformations that recur indefinitely... The opposite idea, namely that radical transformations happen in reality, as absolute initiatives, true inventions, in a word history and progress in the global sense of the term, such an idea was impossible before Christianity came and upset the cosmos of the Hellenes” (Emile Brehier, *La filosofia di Plotino*, Milan: Celuc libri 1976, 87). About the idea of time in Greek historians, refer also to Antimo Cesaro, “Tra tempo ciclico e tempo lineare: il tempo ritmico in Polibio di Megalopoli”, in

consequence of the Incarnation²², since the Word of God, by becoming *man*, has entered *time* and *history*.

It is primarily the concept of divinity that changes: unlike in the Greek-Roman classical world, Christianity professes divine transcendence and, simultaneously, an inter-personal relationship between God and man (evident in the Old and New Covenant).

A metaphysics replaces a mythology.

In the light of the aforementioned considerations, it can be said that while it is undoubtedly true that Christianity completely overturned the classical worldview of reality, such a concept, as Fassò pointed out, should not be passively accepted “in the sense this overturning is usually interpreted. Christianity does not replace objectivism with subjectivism. It is somewhat questionable to define Greek thought as objectivistic, but Christian thought can be defined as subjectivistic only when with subject we intend the Subject, not just an absolute but a transcendent one, the Father who is in Heaven, of whose

Tempo della legge e tempo della storia, ed. Giulio Maria Chiodi (Naples: Guida 1999), 177-198.

²² We should not ignore, though, as C. Sepe observes, that if God’s *personality* is fully asserted *by* and *in* Christ, (“who expresses in himself the mystery of the union of the two natures, divine and human, in the uniqueness of the Person and, at the same time, reveals God as a Tri-Personal essence”), nevertheless “in the Old Testament the truth of God as Person is already clearly manifested. [...] A first, though embryonic, *personalistic* assertion can be inferred from the examination of the name of Jhwh himself. His self-definition as *He is*, if on one hand serves to show the transcendence of his being, which is *above every name*, so that nobody may pronounce it, on the other hand it shows as a clear manifestation of his being as a *Person*. As a matter of fact, in his self-definition, Jhwh first introduces himself as an *I* who possesses a full consciousness and complete independence in the personal possession of the self” (Sepe, *Persona e storia*, 65-66).

kingdom man awaits the advent. [...] The fate of the Christian man is supernatural, and supernatural are the means to fulfil it: we are not on humanity and society level, but on the level of transcendence, not on the level of what is finite and relative, but on that of the Absolute, therefore not reason and law, but faith and grace”²³.

God is the *creator* of the world (and, as such, he deeply cares about his own creatures), he is the *father* of man (with whom he entertains a special *interpersonal* relationship) and, through the incarnation of the Word, he became *man* (nature itself, at this time, participates in the divinity).

Since there is no difference in nature among men, as every man is equally a child of God²⁴, it follows that conversion and the consequent salvation are to be referred to the totality of human beings (a *human unity*, which is, in turn, a reflection of the *divine unity*), regardless of their ethno-social characteristics. As a consequence, the Christian vocabulary gives to the word *humanity* a meaning that surpasses both the Greek acceptance of *anthropotès*, and the Latin acceptance of *humanitas*. “Christianity completely changes the scope of the word. It no longer considers the common nature of the human animal, but the nature of the people envisaged in their new dignity, as a consequence of the Redemption. In this way the word *humanity* defines its own entity, which consists of all generations and races, of human beings of all ages and countries, and of all conditions, among whom the presence of God instituted real solidarity”²⁵.

²³ Fassò, *La legge della ragione*, 26-27.

²⁴ Cf. St. Paul the Apostle, *Epistle to the Colossians*, III. 11: “In this new life, it does not matter if you are a Jew or a Gentile, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbaric, uncivilized, slave or free”.

²⁵ Marcel Prélot, *Histoire des idées politiques*, (Paris: Dallot, 1959), 116-117.

V

Melius est obedire Deo quam hominibus

For Christians the meaning of life can no longer be found in the compliance with the objectivity of the world, nature, society or the State, it has to be found in the *faithfulness to a person*, a fidelity of love, which can only be lived in freedom. And if *freedom* becomes “the quintessential human prerogative”²⁶, the possibility of a *mistake (sin)* linked to it becomes, paradoxically, the measure of the greatness of man, who by now has freed himself from a fatalistic view of existence.

To the personal God (by virtue of a metaphysical similarity) it is inextricably linked the person-man, *imago simillima* of the deity.

By virtue of this, man, as depository of sovereign and inexhaustible values, is the bearer of rights which are inherent to his personality, and which cannot be manipulated in any way. If man in the classical world was just a *pars in toto*, from which he drew meaning, now he acquires an absolute value, in and of itself; a value that is related, through love, not only to God, but also to another man, *thy neighbor*.

Consequently, love is the only rule of life among those who belong to God (*amor fundamentum iuris*) and who, in their spiritual dimension, form a single supernatural reality, a single *mystical body*.

Von Ihering, in his *Geist des römischen Recht*, stressed the importance of this innovation with very specific terms: “The simple idea that man, as such, is free, an idea that was practically never reached by the Roman Law, [...] represents such an innovation for all subsequent Law, if compared to the Roman

²⁶ Orlando, *Filosofia dell'essere finito*, 244.

one, that the superiority of the latter from a technical point of view is completely obscured”²⁷.

It would seem, then, that from a *Christian perspective* the juridical dimension, far from being considered only from a, so to speak, *vertical* perspective (with a predominantly public significance of the inter-subjective relationships), would also, and above all, express itself in a *horizontal* direction, in perfect consistency with the concept of person intended as the subject of *self- and other-oriented relationships*.

It is necessary to point out, however, when we generically mention a *Christian perspective* -like we did in the last paragraph- that early Christianity (and the Pauline²⁸ approach in particular) completely removed the concept of law (*letter, not spirit*²⁹; *outward appearance, not intimate participation*), placing the entire juridical dimension under a Pharisaic horizon characterised by falsehood and deception:

“Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God’s sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin. But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are

²⁷ Prélot, *Histoire des idées politiques*, 113-114.

²⁸ Cf. St. Paul the Apostle, *Epistle to the Galatians*, V, 18; *Epistle to the Romans*, III, 27, VII, 14, VIII, 2; *Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, III, 3.

²⁹ Cf. Augustine, *De spiritu et littera*, 21 (36) (MIGNE, *Patrologia latina*, XLIV, 222).

justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus”³⁰.

What are the consequences on a social and political level?

A partial reading of the Gospels might easily give the impression of an almost exclusive interest for spiritual needs, thus freeing men, by placing emphasis on the *substantial* character of the person, from any earthly commitment.

From this perspective, even the Gospel passages which are commonly considered social acquire a purely mystical and religious meaning, with the necessary conclusion, which Fassò³¹ had already pointed out, of a “Christian negation of law and justice, intended in its proper social function” and, more in general, of a “Christian indifference to society and its problems”, in accordance with the well-known Pauline principle: *hic civitatem manentem non habemus, sed futuram inquirimus*.

And yet an absolute sense of the person cannot deny, on an ethical-subjective level, in the spirit of a renewed Christian humanism and in an attempt to ontologically found a person we would like to call *global*, neither a dialogue nor a sympathetic bond with the *other*, in an *inter-subjectivity* which obviously should not be understood as a “*primum* in relation to the person, but as an immediate and direct consequence of personal enrichment”³².

On an ethical-philosophical level, borrowing the words of Mounier³³, we might say that the *vocation* of a person (intended as

³⁰ St. Paul the Apostle, *Epistle to the Romans*, III, 19-24.

³¹ Giulio Fassò, *Cristianesimo e società*, (Milano: Giuffrè, 1956).

³² Orlando, *Filosofia dell'essere finito*, 257.

³³ On the other hand, there is no doubt that precisely in Christianity the cultural ancestry of the community personalism of Mounier can be found; he harboured serious misgivings on a kind of sociability which was exclusively

propensity – which finds an expression in meditation- to go infinitely beyond itself) cannot absolutely disregard the *incarnation* (which is its bodily and material condition – which acquires value through *commitment-*) and, therefore, must necessarily open up to *communion* (even at the cost of *self-denial*, an initiation into self-giving and a life in others): the person has, by its own nature, a tendency to belong to a *community*.

VI

Conscientia ipsa

The Christian elaboration of such a concept therefore favours, since the origins of modernity, the secularisation of the person in itself, obeying a deeper cultural change triggered by a general process of desacralisation of the real. The person becomes fully incarnated in the self and in human consciousness, by identifying with the subject-individual and its moral identity, partially to the expense of its *community-centred* aspect. A first clear representation of this appears in Renaissance Humanistic art, which, in the XV century, expresses a desire for portraits, a custom that spreads among the Flemish and Tuscan merchant civilisations, where the

founded on the law (i.e. the society of the Enlightenment natural law theory, a product and consequence of a *contract*, the result of a *compromise of egotisms* rather than a real *interpersonal relationship*. Cf. Emmanuel Mounier, *Révolution personaliste et communautaire* (Paris: Éd. Mouton, 1934); Emmanuel Mounier, *Le personalisme*, (Paris: Puf, 2001). For further reading, Giorgio Campanini, *La rivoluzione cristiana. Il pensiero politico di E. Mounier*, (Brescia: Morcelliana, 1967); Giuseppe Limone, *Tempo della persona e sapienza del possibile. Valori, politica, diritto in Emmanuel Mounier* (Naples: Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane, 1988); *Emmanuel Mounier, actualité d'un grand témoin. Actes du colloque tenu à l'UNESCO*, ed. Guy Coq (Paris: Parole et Silence, 2003 – 2006).

financial bourgeoisie, the new protagonist of civil and political life, is developing greater self-awareness: the portrait is the natural expression of this newly-acquired dignity³⁴. Thus the portrait celebrates, symbolically, a praise of the autonomous individual, who gets more confident every day, thanks to his own economic and technical progress and to the opportunities offered by an increased social mobility. Therefore not only princes, high-ranking clergymen and noblemen, but also merchants, artists, bankers and craftsmen are beginning to feel the importance of the perception of their *imago* as a way to produce and spread a (real and symbolic) representation of their own persons. An *imago* – at *full-length*, *knee-length* or *half-length* – which is not devoid of fictional content (a reference to the social projection of the individuals), and which takes on, gradually, a *profile* pose, then a *three-quarter* one, and finally a *frontal* one. The latter is really evocative, for it directly approaches the viewer³⁵. In this way, a visual consciousness of the self arises, as a foreshadowing of the person as an entity which coincides with the individual self, which in turn is gradually acquiring a new social and political importance through subsequent natural law and contractarian doctrines³⁶. As a matter of fact, in the XVII century, at the height of this conceptual trajectory, Locke finally projects the idea of person on the individual (self), understood as a conscious and rational entity. “..., to find wherein personal identity consists, we must consider what *person* stands for; – which, I think, is a thinking

³⁴ Barbara Bottacin, “Sette stanze per la Dama”, in Gaia Carroli, Cristina Costa, Denis Isaia, *Incontro reale 3. Raffaello a Bolzano per capire la dama* (Bolzano: Tipografia Alto Adige, 2005), 43.

³⁵ Cf. Norbert Schneider, *The Art of the Portrait. Masterpieces of European Portrait Paintings 1420-1670*, (Cologne: Taschen, 1999), 6.

³⁶ Cf. Norberto Bobbio, *Il giusnaturalismo moderno*, (Turin: Giappichelli, 2009); John Wiedhofft Gough, *The Social Contract*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1936).

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, ...³⁷.

Later, in Kant, who in his doctrine combines the typical instances of the British empiricism with continental rationalism, the person becomes the cornerstone of every political and moral discourse for which the famous maxim of practical imperative holds true: “so act as to treat humanity, both in your own person, and in the person of every other, always at the same time as an end, never simply as a means”³⁸. In this conception, the person plays a decisive role within the political structure of modern states, in which it becomes the bearer of a complex set of rights and duties, which define the boundaries that set the scope of the established powers.

The person, in a modern sense, refers therefore to a stable and durable conception of individual identity, which, from its earliest formulations, is determined as a function of a self/individual consciousness intended as something immutable, in its ability to recognise itself as such, and to conceive an identity with its very own self. “[A]nd by this everyone is to himself that which he calls *self*: – it not being considered, in this case, whether the same self be continued in the same or diverse substances. For, since consciousness always accompanies thinking, and it is that which makes every one to be what he calls self, and thereby distinguishes himself from all other thinking things, in this alone consists personal identity, i.e. the sameness of a rational being:

³⁷ John Locke, *Essay concerning human understanding*, II, 7.

³⁸ Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, trans. Mary Gregor, Jens Timmermann, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 61.

and as far as this consciousness can be extended backwards to any past action or thought, so far reaches the identity of that person; ...³⁹.

VII

Post conscientiam

In the current period of rapid technological and social evolution, characterised by a significant fragmentation of the identity⁴⁰, the concept of person instead *recedes*, since it inevitably undergoes a twist that involves its nature and its fundamental traits. The post-modern era appears to bear witness to a sort of flaking off and weakening of the personal identity and of the person itself, in favour of kaleidoscopic identitarian practices conveyed by the new mass communication tools⁴¹. As a matter of fact, the self tends to deconstruct itself by following the typical logics of the virtual environment, in which a relevant part of its existence is displaced⁴². The self floats freely in cyberspace, taking

³⁹ Locke, *Essay concerning human understanding*, II, 7.

⁴⁰ Cf. Michel Maffesoli, *The Time of the Tribes: The Decline of Individualism in Mass Society* (London: Sage Publications, 1996); Paolo Bellini, *Cyberfilosofia del potere. Immaginari, ideologie e conflitti della civiltà tecnologica* (Milan – Udine: Mimesis, 2007), 93-107.

⁴² “The virtual environment, despite the fact that the technology that produces it is founded on tight logic and internal stability and consistency, is actually and continuously subjected to a mutation, in form and content, ... This is clearly the manifestation of a new dimension of existence, which tends to shape, in an increasingly decisive way, the cultural paradigms and the operational methods through which the post-modern subject establishes his relationship with reality. It is a real cultural revolution, broadly speaking, which might be compared, in terms of importance, to the modern one. In the virtual dimension, a reintegration of nomadism within a planetary civilisation that is

on shifting personal identities each and every time, changing as the very same nature of the space it is passing through; the person thereby loses its fixity, which was typical of its modern conception, to take on characteristics we could define as archaic, where personal identity is not crystallised in a stable self-concept, but it is determined in accordance with perspectives that are functional to the logics of cultural adaptation, seconding the typical liquidness of contemporary civilisation⁴³. As with the Homeric man, also for the post-modern subject identity does not seem to manifest itself statically in its *being*, but rather, and quite dynamically, in its *actions*⁴⁴, and it is revealed through feats, not through memorable ones, as was the case with Greek heroes, but in the mundane desire to be a part of the *media narcissism*⁴⁵ induced

almost completely *sedentary* is carried out, thus generating a new existential condition” (Paolo Bellini, *Cyberfilosofia del potere. Immaginari, ideologie e conflitti della civiltà tecnologica*, 103).

⁴³ Cf. Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, (Cambridge: Polity, 2000).

⁴⁴ “Man identifies himself with his own deed, so that he can be fully and legitimately understood from it; he has no hidden depths. [...] The being [of Homeric men] emanates freely in the world, through their fates and deeds” (Hermann Fränkel, *Dichtung und Philosophie des frühen Griechentums*, München: Verlag C. H. Beck, 1962, 88, cit. in Giovanni Reale, *Corpo, anima e salute. Il concetto di uomo da Omero a Platone*, Milan: Cortina, 1999).

⁴⁵ “Many users, as a matter of fact, seized by a sort of electronic narcissism, where the wish to show and intrigue is a partial substitute for material existence, tend to project on such a platform their private mental sphere. They confide, sometimes in real time, to the community they feel a part of, thoughts, wishes and practices that were once jealously guarded within the sphere of their own consciousness or, at most, where whispered to a much narrower set of friends, family and confidants. Very personal messages, although often futile or foolish, together with pictures portraying the subjects in the most diverse situations, clearly represent, compared to the past, the emergence of a much greater porosity between the public and the private sphere” (Paolo Bellini, *L'immaginario politico del Salvatore. Biopotere, sapere e ordine sociale*, Milano-Udine: Mimesis, 2012, 22).

by the new connective technologies. These, in most cases, just like the ancient pagan gods, possess the body and the consciousness of the user, who, while surfing the network, passes through archaic experiences, where, free from *his own* body and without *his own* soul, he is unable to fully exercise a personal freedom of the will⁴⁶, but, inspired by the deity⁴⁷ (that, in this case, is bearing the virtual features of media content), fulfils himself, “unfolding in the most vigorous way his human strengths”⁴⁸, by carrying out, in harmony with the *cyberworld* in which he is now inscribed, his individual destiny.

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⁴⁶ “Not even here there are autonomy and freedom in the sense that we give to these words. Those who err do not do it for ill will. That does not exist for the Greek man, who does not even have a word to describe what we call *will, volition...*” (Walter Friedrich Otto, *Theophania. Der Geist der altgriechischen Religion*, Hamburg: Aufl. 1959, 61).

⁴⁷ “In the face of a view like the Greek one, where the proximity of the gods appears to be so immediate and decisive, our concept of freedom and lack of freedom makes no sense. We cannot in fact say that the Homeric man is not free. It is better to state that only in the presence of the deity he acquires the joyful certainty of his strength, of his ability, of himself. Top self-perception and awareness of divine proximity are one and the same. [...] The Greek man, in his decisive moments, is, so to speak, taken in within the Divine, i.e. the Deity is so close that he perceives the divine action as his own and vice versa” (Otto, *Theophania. Der Geist der altgriechischen Religion*, 64).

⁴⁸ Zeller and Mondolfo, *La filosofia dei Greci nel suo sviluppo storico*, 105.