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The Certainty Principle

Heisenberg's general idea of uncertainty has become a trope of every science, social science, and casual knowledge claim. It seeped down from theoretical physics through the social sciences, as "the problem of the observer," then to popular culture and finally into the daily vocabularies of the developed world. The effort simultaneously to know both the position and velocity of a sub-atomic particle became a symbol of the way that all of our efforts to know are disturbed by the very effort we exert in the task. Whether this is a reasonable extension of Heisenberg's principle is long since moot. The broadest possible application of this insight has become our common presupposition. From self-knowledge to social knowledge, to knowledge of nature, we have leapt from the certainty of Enlightenment science to postulated frames of reference, then to heavily qualified claims, and from there to Rortyan shoulder shrugs. Knowledge isn't what it used to be.

Still, something has been overlooked in all of our care filled back-peddling. The reason for our epistemic discontent is that we have been unable either to eliminate *or* to measure (satisfactorily) the effects of our own presence in the "knowledge calculation." But wait a minute. *If* our own effect upon our efforts to know is ineliminable and also irreducible, is it not, at this very high level of generality, a constant of some kind? And if the effect of our effort is a constant, and if every effort to set it aside or remove it fails, is that very fact not philosophically serviceable? I will not be so bold as to say that our own contribution to or effect upon all forms and contents of knowing can never, ever be controlled for or eliminated. But until we find a way to eliminate this factor in knowing, observing, describing, and measuring, it is a *functional* certainty.

I do not mean that we have learned nothing at all about how to handle this "constant." With a big enough database, from the Myers-Briggs to the Human Genome Project, we can certainly compile enough data along various axes to have something close to inductive certainty regarding the values we pursue and retain, or at least those values that lend themselves to measurement and repetition. And there is good reason to believe that these numerous axes will multiply, clarify, intensify and become more useful as every science grows. But to *eliminate* the human factor, as observer, as object of knowledge, and as condition for the possibility of

knowing, as valuer, as desirer, as anticipator, as rememberer, as interpreter, as receiver, as actor, as giver, as taker, as measurer, and as reflective presence, in short, as all-seeing eye, is not, at this stage, an option for philosophical criticism.

The question is whether the idea of "person" is the best term for the collection of modalities and powers listed above, and ten thousand more. Not all of our authors agree on this point. Professor Cottingham throws down the gauntlet, and all of our other authors take it up in some way. Cottingham traces the widest current philosophical use of the term "person" to the assumptions that reigned from Descartes to Locke and found their mature articulation in Kant. The analytic philosophers who dominate our current discourse in English have been quibbling about personal identity for over a hundred years, using the blunt instrument they call "conceptual analysis," including wild thought experiments –zombies, brains in vats, and all other manner of fantastic suppositions. The results have been discouraging. When these not so subtle doctors have finished operating, with tools more closely akin to jackhammers and steam shovels than to scalpels and surgical clamps, one need not wonder that the patient is dead before the meaning of "person" is located. Cottingham rightly disapproved of the Cartesian subject as person, and not one of our contributors treats the term "person" as applying to a Cartesian-style subject.

The effect of Cartesian-Lockean ideas about "person" have a number of negative consequences beyond their epistemic impenetrability, however, not the least among them being ethical and moral shortcomings. Cottingham argues that the term "human being" avoids the pitfalls of separating body and mind, along with the host of moral and political problems that accompany the idea that our human moral center is disembodied. But Cottingham follows the word "person" from a starting point in the *Oxford English Dictionary* and no further back than its Latin root. Such authorities certainly govern use and proximate history, and there can be no disputing that Cottingham speaks from the standpoint of both common sense and common usage.

On the other hand, Richard Prust answers Cottingham more or less directly, from the same sources and the same uses, seeing the same problems and reasons for the problems. But Prust reaches conclusions incompatible with Cottingham's. The idea of "person" is far from a dead letter; it is the key to the ethical door and the restoration of common sense about both scientific and moral knowledge. All one needs to do is catch the bus. I think that where well-known philosophers of sincere disposition and a lifetime of accomplishment, such as Cottingham and Prust, come to such an impasse, work remains to be done.

Our other contributors tend to use the term "person" in a more specialized or reconstructed sense than the first pair of essays is concerned with. Only two or three of these writers would self-identify as "personalists," but all of them look upon the sort of problem placed before us by Cottingham and Prust as deserving of effort, even if that effort is certain to complicate the task of knowing. The philosophical movement called "personalism," originating in the time of Kant and moving through two centuries into the present, collecting some eminent names along the path –Schelling, Lotze, Newman, Royce, Scheler, Mounier, Buber, Lévinas, Macmurray, Marcel, Wojtyła. A number of these figures appear in the essays included in this special issue, along with others whose connection to the idea of "person" is less explicit, such as Cassirer. These philosophers may be subject to Cottingham's criticisms, but not in any simplistic way. The relation between what is meant by "human" and what is meant by "person" is one of inclusion for some of our contributors. Many regard the church (along with other institutions) as a person, while some hold that communities are persons, while cultures, ideas, animals, trees, even ecosystems are persons for some of our contributors. Biological human beings are, in such a view, simply an instance of "person," and not always the most interesting example.

Still, clearly the term "person" is thereby stretched over a massive field of denotation, and an even greater field of connotation. The meaning of the term and the idea is endangered. The equivalent of "person" shows up in many modern Western and near-eastern languages. The Romans interpreted the Greek term "*prosopon*"

as "*persona*," both designating the mask actors held on a stick to enable the audience to imagine the generalized character without the peculiarities belonging to the human being playing the part. The actor becomes the character by appeal to a generalized and stylized presence and presentation. The mask is both a concealing and an invitation to the on-lookers to imagine the necessary (and only the necessary) traits of character portrayed. There is a sort of characterological reduction required, and it could be classed as an aspect of the willing suspension of disbelief. But is this not what we must do when we see anyone's actual face? Does the mask do more than remind us of our common predicament? Must I not imagine you in order to know you? If so, then I must actively personalize you so as to imagine you rightly, it would seem.

The idea of person became a strike point for early Christian theology, since it could also be used to translate the Hebrew "*panim*." And thus was a nightmare of a conceptual tangle born. Concealing everything idiosyncratic about our human features, providing a "universal countenance," since (in principle) any could bear the stick and mask, and all do, the idea of a "universal man" was inevitable, and so was Jesus interpreted. In the New Testament, especially in Hebrews, not only is "*prosopon*" translated as "person," but so is "*ousia*" –the very pivot point of metaphysics. Such are the "persons" of the Christian trinity both masks and essences. Nine-hundred and eighty years of ecumenical church councils did not bring the idea of person to clarity, and it remains central to the church. It is not an accident that so many philosophers who become enmeshed in the problem of "person" are also followers of one of the major Western religions. James McLachlan's fascinating essay on Lévinas and Berdyaev can be read as a comparative adventure into the destiny of that argument. Perhaps another nine-hundred eighty years will bring Jews and Christians to a peaceable *eschaton*.

But what of the spectator, of the one who looks upon this countenance, this mask? In helping the audience pass, in imagination, to the general (and even the universal), the *persona* was not just any means, but the p r i n c i p a l means of transcending singular and particular concern, entering into what we now call "the human condition." It is and has been, for those we would call "humanists," the central mode of transcendence. Geometry can wait; let none without a theory of "*prosopon*," a "*panim*," enter here, we might place over our Modern academy. A lesson of this sort may be taken from the investigation included here in our Forum section by Professor Tałasiewicz. While he does not address the issue of "person" directly, his efforts to show that images are an active (albeit precognitive, perhaps even physiological) aspect of rationality contributes a great deal to our effort to understand how contemporary ideas about scientific rationality may be reconciled with older ideas about faith.

For those who, since Kant, have called themselves "personalists," the clear and unequivocal answer to the main question about this term is "yes." For all its vexing ambiguity, the term "person" goes further than any other in collecting the values we associate with dignity, honor, knowledge, truth, and, so they say, every other fundamental value, excepting only the precognitive values (such as feeling, pleasure, and perhaps beauty), and perhaps not even these. Since the idea of k n o w i n g definitely presupposes "person" (a k n o w e r who values the cognitive act) at a very basic level, the issue of whether there is any way around u s i n g this idea has concentrated itself at two levels, one theoretical and one practical.

For some complex reasons, humanity has been bent upon effacing itself by the aid of theory since Descartes (an aspect of the problem Cottingham raises), and having done so, thinks it achieves something purer, something unadulterated by the human act: a pure act of cognition, of knowing the way things really are. In short, we purify our cognitive act into something sinless, unadulterated by filthy error. To achieve this we must not judge in accordance with particularities, but only with the aid of necessary universals. Since Descartes, the scientific act of knowing must be pure, and redeems (substitutes for) what Christ once did but can no longer do for our fallen race. Something similar is at work in seeking a pure phenomenology, a fundamental ontology, or a necessary table of judgments for our pure reason.

Jared Kemling has attempted to re-articulate the theory of judgment that we inherit from Kant in such a way as to avoid the purification aspect of our reasoning act, while not only retaining "person" as our core idea, but placing it at the center of a kind of cultural phenomenology that provides an analogical view of ourselves from beyond ourselves. Along related lines, Matthew Z. Donnelly has contributed to the rehabilitation of the "image" as well as to framing a thoroughly temporal (hence practical) ontology that leaves intact the aspects of Husserl's project (after 1906) that can be placed in service of understanding the idea of person. His essay might even serve as a sort of formal ontology consistent with Kemling's phenomenology of culture. Neither attempts to press beyond the "mask" and into the inward core of the person, although one gets the sense from these suggestive papers that such a journey might be undertaken.

Practically speaking, the human race has been obliged to counter this universalization and necessitization with highly particularized, even idiosyncratic ideas about human individuality. There was a time when to be called "original" was a scathing criticism. Now it is the highest praise. The cult of genius, romanticism, and the dissolution of art into idiotic (in the true sense of that word) expression is something one can only admire (in the true sense of that word). Certainly there have been critics (one might name Irving Babbitt as among the loudest) who decried this undignified descent into ineffable singularized existence. But in singularity we find a logical surprise, which is a back door to universality. The *sui generis* person who spoils our knowledge is singular and hence functionally (in the logical sense) as unique as Socrates himself. Yes, we each must be so very incomparable that I do not know you and you do not know me, as essence, as necessary, even as species being. That is inconvenient. Your core is untouched by any effort I might make to get beyond that mask. Yet, without our effort to know you, our idealization of you from beyond you, you have no resources for knowing yourself.

Into the breach steps Eleanor Godway and her account of John Macmurray's personalism. Here we find directly addressed the concerns of Cottingham and Prust. The doubts about the modern self are confirmed, but the path forward is something they had not quite imagined (although the overlap of Cottingham's and Godway's criticism and concern, about faith and rationality, is nearly complete). Her short projection about what we ought to do is the opposite of Cottingham's idea. Readers will have to decide for themselves, in this case as in every other.

Still, "person" in the handling of Godway and our other intrepid explorers is not self, not subject, not ghost in the machine, neither essence nor non-essence. If the idea has a meaning, it lies in the effort we exert in imagining one another, and the use made by the patient of such agency to some sort of social awareness of himself or herself, and to adjust that awareness to the demands placed on us by our situatedness. There is no reason *a priori* to assume that institutions, communities, animals, and ecosystems are incapable of assimilating the ways in which they are experienced into the experience that constitutes their forms of order. Or at least, such cosmic personalists as Scheler will say so. My own contribution to this collection addresses the question of the very existence of the impersonal from Scheler's perspective, and it might be taken as a bookend to Cottingham's opening manifesto against the idea of "person."

Perhaps Eli Kramer's essay (included in the Forum section), which is on the role of the ethical genius in producing progress in culture, provides a way of thinking about the future as a suitable situation for persons. Kramer does not address that issue specifically, but as readers are turning over the essays that have been gathered to assess the idea of "person," the question of how and whether culture progresses is bound to appear. It certainly seems that instances we might point to of ethical genius have had the effect of raising our estimation of our dignity and our deservingness of respect. This sort of view isn't old-fashioned idealism, but it also isn't common sense. At least not yet.

We can be assured that the idea of person is not going away, but whether we become better at understanding it is an open question. We at *Eidos* contribute this set of essays to that task.