Eidos 1 (3) 2018

A JOURNAL FOR
PHILOSOPHY
OF CULTURE

DOI: 10.26319/3913

Richard C. Prust
St. Andrews University (North Carolina)

Finding Our Way Back to the Personal through Etymology

Abstract:
Modernity has made "person" a problematic term. By tracing the etymology of several common words whose origin pre-dates the scientific revolution – "intend," "know," "moment," "deliberate," and "true" – we can discern some of the sensibilities upon which a systematic recovery of the personal might best be based.

Keywords:
etymology, person, pre-scientific

Among the greatest joys of my intellectual life over the decades has been participating with a diverse cast of enthusiasts in the International Conference on Persons. We are diverse because there are many perspectives and methods we bring to the topic of persons and we are enthusiastic when we need to defy the consensus among contemporary thinkers that one cannot r e a s o n about "persons." To be sure, we personalists have common sense on our side. People in real life, no matter what their philosophical commitments, think they are being reasonable when they distinguish personal relationships from impersonal ones, when they hold some people personally responsible and some not, and when they accord at least some of them with certain personal rights. So, the fact that affirmations of personhood in everyday life puzzle those who study human behavior systematically is something puzzling in itself.

This paper addresses the intellectual squeamishness concerning the being of persons and tries to show how the intellectual commitments militating against identifying them resulted from a fateful turn intellectual history took about 400 years ago. It was then that Westerners began applying the categories and assumptions of scientific reasoning to the study of persons. One need not disparage the innumerable social and behavioral scientific truths that have enriched our understanding of human life to draw attention to a debilitating propensity in modern thinking that undermines the authority of common sense in matters concerning persons.

To see what went wrong, and how we can get our reasoning back on track, we are going to consider some shifts that took place about that time – shifts in how we use certain words – and we are going to trace the problem "person" is thought to pose today to them. Many of the words we commonly use in reasoning about human behavior have a history that predates the scientific revolution. Tracing the development of a few of them can, I think, remind us of how we intuitively know w h o people are, that is, know them personally. More than that, as we are going to see, tracing this development can even suggest the rudiments of the pre-modern kinds of reasoning we actually use to identify persons; patterns of inference that modernity cannot accredit. By listening for these early meanings, we can discern some of the sensibilities upon which a systematic recovery of the personal might best be based. The five words we will consider are "intend," "know," "moment," "deliberate," and "true." If you read their respective entries in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (and that is my only source here), you will find a rich history behind every one of them. But since our purpose is only to take notice of how the current, critical, scientifically influenced usages tend to occlude the sensibilities manifest in the original ones, we will attend exclusively to those changes.

"Intend" and "intention" (or "intention's" etymological doublet "intension") started life by indicating a "stretching into." A voice straining to reach a high note, for instance, was called the singer's "intention." That aspect of the word's origin still seems congenial, phenomenologically speaking. The other morning, when I intended to catch the 8:20 bus, I felt a certain stretching toward that end in how I moved when the alarm went off, in how I forced myself out of bed earlier than usual, in how I hurried through the morning news, and in how I forwent a second cup of coffee. There was a proprioceptively palpable tension in my movements as I pushed toward making that bus, and when I said, arriving at the bus-stop at 8:19, "that was tense," people standing there knew just what I meant.

The point is that, in intending to accomplish anything we move mindbodily into its achievement, not necessarily with the degree of visceral awareness felt by someone running late, but with a sense of pushing toward that accomplishment. I am adopting the word "mindbodily" here, not only to emphasize the somatic dimension of intentional behavior, but to draw a contrast with how the term has come to be used in academic discourse. The shift can be characterized as one from the mindbodily to the mental. In many discursive contexts, "intention" ceased to designate the mode of somebody's inhabitation of the material and social arena that is his active place in the world and designated instead something he did mentally. That tended to cut the word off from its root: there is no possibility of stretching in one's mind since, as Descartes taught us, minds and the thoughts that populate them have no extension and so cannot be understood to stretch.

This shift had a number of consequences. First, it invited us to relate an intention to the act it intends as its cause, which in turn had the consequence of putting someone's intention before his action rather than in it. Although there has been some recent pushback against taking the intention out of the act itself, particularly by some followers of Elizabeth Anscombe,[1] it seems fair to say that the dominant view in philosophy construes intentions as antecedent mental states or events whose relation to the actions they determine is causal.[2] Just as abstractly, phenomenologists came to represent an intention as an object of thought, and logicians came to use the word to distinguish the meaning of a term from its extension.

Another consequence of de-somaticizing the term was that we cultivated the tendency to ignore a further fundamental intuition about our intentional being as persons. It invited us to entertain our intentions as though they each have a discrete significance, a significance that can be captured as a category of action. Individuating

1) Elizabeth Anscombe, *Intention* (1957, 2nd ed. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1963).

2) Kieran Setiya. "Intention," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2015 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta. https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2015/entries/intention.

intentions that way distracts us from appreciating the most obvious thing about our intentional lives, that our intentions are not normally discrete in the significance they have for us at any given time. When I stretched my movements toward catching the 8:20 bus, I did so in getting up when I did, in skimming the news the way I did, and in eating breakfast as fast as I did. In each of these intending moves I was satisfying my intention to follow the news and to caffeinate myself sufficiently, as well as to catch the bus. Moreover, the reason for my tending the way I did was that I was also intending to be on time for a job interview. That more comprehensive intention also governed what I understood myself to be doing. So, any account of a person's intention that defines it as having a single "object" militates against appreciating the semantic complexity of a multi-intentioned agent's active awareness. It thus prevents us from appreciating the very richness of the active awareness that distinguishes a person from less complex agents.

My second example of a modern shift in usage is the curious history of the verb, "know." In derivation it stems from the same root as "can," a cognate status we can hear in the German words *kennen* (to know by acquaintance) and *können* (to be able to). English, alas, developed in a way that severed the connection between "know" and "can." The verb "know," says the OED, has "had a vigorous life, having also occupied with its meaning the original territory of the word wit, German *wissen*. . . ." So, while German preserved the can/*können* connection and adopted an entirely different word, *wissen,* for mental knowing, English kept things ambiguous by using the same word for both. All this was established well before modernity, but it set the stage for the eventual invasion of the *kennen*/can type of knowing by the disembodied protocols of the *wissen*/wit type of knowing. The hegemony of *wissen* knowing was thus promulgated as the only reasonable way of knowing persons. It is as though the explicit object of a person's active awareness was liberated from his mindbodily active awareness, whereupon personal mindbodily knowledge was replaced in the canons of what counts as reasonable, by an impersonal mind's-eye kind of knowledge.

The effects of this shift were wide-ranging, but there was one that was particularly pernicious. It had to do with the way we were led to think of a person's interactive life. The hegemony of mind over mindbody in the realm of the personal meant that we could not, "strictly speaking," ever know another person. We found ourselves saying things like, "I can't possibly know what is going on in your mind, and since you are what you intend and you intend in your mind, I can't really know you as a person." If we constrained what counts as "knowing" this way, we could easily be persuaded that reasoning about people's intentions is hopelessly problematic and that (at least in scientific contexts) we should stick to reasoning about their observable behavior.

Happily, whatever our intellectual proclivities, we all live in the world mindbodily. More to the present point, we all live in a social world of shared intentions when we interact. Our active knowing of one another arises convivially. It occurs by virtue of jointly moving a shared project toward completion, one that we accomplish together by accommodating one another's movements.[3] The knowledge that interactors have of one another is "how" knowledge of a choreographic kind. And when they share the intention to comport with one another's multi-intentioned life as a coordinated whole, it seems reasonable to call their knowledge personal.

The word "moment" did not so much undergo a shift in meaning, but rather a shift in the balance between two usages present from early on. The etymologically foundational one derives from *momentum*, the Latin word for "movement." That use of "moment" indicates a movement that takes time. The homonymous use makes it

3) When I go to the barber for a haircut, she and I share the intention that a certain course of action will be followed. I know the moves I must make to satisfy that shared intention – to sit in the barber chair, explain what I want, enjoy a bit of small talk, pay up, and leave – and she knows hers – to listen to my instructions, to clip and snip accordingly, and to get my approval and payment at the end. We both know the course it will take and the moves we should make.

a "portion of time too brief for its duration to be taken into account." In that usage, the "moment" the lightning struck, the barn caught fire.

The sense derived from *momentum* has its home in thinking about mindbodily actions. The actions of persons move in time, and take time. Accordingly, mindbodily actions can be of great moment or little moment. When Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Declaration, he initiated an accomplishment that spanned generations, so that made it "momentous." But as the scientific era discovered the value of understanding causes and effects in nature, the second sense of moment — a moment as a point in time — came into prominence and then into dominance. When that punctual sense came to govern the temporal logic of discussions of people's actions, the volume of the movement represented by the characterization of the action dropped out of consideration. This meant something personally significant dropped out. Since characterizing an action specifies a volume of movement, at least relatively speaking, we are sometimes aware of doing something "big;" in saying that something someone did was "of little moment" we mean that it "didn't mean much." Ignoring the volumetric dimension of the meaning of our action truncates our awareness of its relative significance for the actor. This is often crucial for understanding him as a person, for when we signify an action by its intention, while thinking of that intention as a mental event, we ignore what is likely to be the greater (more movement comprehensive), personal meaning of his action.

To "deliberate" is to "weigh well." Remember Libra with her scales? She held two of them, presumably to balance something that had weight against something else that had weight. This makes good mindbodily sense: if actions have variable moment, presumably the moments of the various courses of action we are considering can be weighed against one another. However, when modern, critical thinking set in, intellectuals stopped talking about the relative moment of actions and deliberation came to be thought of as a process of mental determination. Since active awareness for Humean empiricists was reduced to experience, deliberation was reduced to the experience of associating experiences. For Kantian rationalists, deliberation was taken to be the application of principles. What gets lost in both readings is the intuitive rightness of describing deliberation as an act of weighing possible courses of action against one another.

These readings also deflect attention from the richness of the meaning of what our deliberation weighs. While I was straining to catch the 8:20 bus, it occurred to me that it might make better sense for me to slow down, enjoy my Twitter feed, have some more coffee, and call an Uber for the crosstown trip. But then it occurred to me that the fellow interviewing me for a job is obsessed with his and others' carbon footprint. He might be offended if I came in a private conveyance. In deliberating about this matter, I weighed the possible courses of action in terms of their promise for accommodating what I variously intended to do. I looked for the course that promised the greatest momentary actualization of my intentional life. Having done so, I decided to gulp my breakfast, and take the bus after all, because I determined that risking the professional satisfaction the job prospect held for me was a weightier matter than the loss of the momentary satisfactions my tighter schedule exacted from me.[4]

Finally, the word "true" originally applied to personal relationships, qualifying them as being of good faith and trust. People could be true or untrue to one another. A couple taking marriage vows would "plight their troth" or, later, under stress, form a "truce." This usage persists, of course. We all know what it is to be true to someone; in the language of the understanding of "persons" taking shape here, it means to have a mutual

4) Another etymological observation: "satisfaction" in its original sense is "making-enough," that is, making enough movement to achieve what one intends. Still another etymological observation: I made a determination of the relative i m p o r t a n c e of taking the bus by determining in my imagination how much momentary satisfaction each course – bus and Uber – would i m p o r t into my awareness of what I was doing. The ones that c a r r y - i n the most moment register as the most personally i m p o r t a n t.

commitment not to act against the way the other resolves his life. Anyone who is mature enough to have stable personal relationships knows how to do that. Yet, by the late 16th century, using "true" to apply to propositions rather than persons achieved greater prominence among scholars. Eventually, it led behavioral scientists to study persons by studying true propositions about them. The question this begs is whether the truth of a person's being can be rendered by some combination of propositional truths. I believe that our etymological reflections lead us to conclude that they cannot. To see why, we need to draw together what I find suggestive in our reflections so far.

We began by recalling that the tension in intention reflects its seat in a mindbodily negotiation of the physical world and other people in it. This led us to see that, as mindbodies, we stretch into the world with multiple agendas at the same time. Moreover, living as multi-intentional agents commits us to actualizing ourselves by accomplishing as much of what we intend as we can, and that means coordinating our intentional lives as well as we can. In as much as we project our coordination in moments of resolve, it seems reasonable to say that our recognition of w h o someone is orients itself in an appreciation of how he or she is resolved in acting.

We saw next that knowing another person is achieved convivially. When two people interact in a healthy, mutually moment-maximizing way, even on an impersonal level, they share an intention and move its satisfaction coordinately. When two persons interact on a personal level, their coordination accommodates one another's resolve, as well as their more limited shared undertakings. That is the sense of knowing used when the Hebrew Bible says that God "knew" Israel. It is also the sense conveyed in the narrower usage of knowing called (wink, wink, snicker, snicker) the Biblical sense of knowing. It is how characters of resolve come to know each other: by mindbodily partnering on one level or another.

Then we noted how the temporality of mindbodily agency assigns persons variable moment. Since the range of movement actualizing one person's intentional life can be greater than the movement actualizing another's, it is reasonable to recognize some persons as more momentous than others. Seen in light of the practical knowledge conviviality depends upon, it is also reasonable to recognize personal self-actualization as partly achieved interactively. When my barber and I have a healthy interaction, it is true to say that what she is resolved to do — make a living by cutting people's hair — is actualized, in part, by my moves, and my resolve — to get a haircut for the job interview — is actualized in part by her moves. By inflecting each other's movements, each in the service of his own resolve, we enjoy moments of movement imported into both of our active lives. This recovers personal being as porous to the being of others, instead of locked into an individual mind where modernity has sequestered it.

Persons, we said, deliberate, and we saw that by determining the path of resolve they use to coordinate their multi-intentioned lives, they determine the personal character which is their identity. So their deliberating is not just something they happen to do, but the imaginative act of determining who they are. Consider, in contrast, how interpreting deliberation as a mental operation forces one to adopt an anemic account of identity. For the Humean empiricist, it means tying a person's identity to a bundle of experiences. For those who take a Kantian approach it is to put only a set of principles at the core of identity. "When you deliberate," Christine Korsgaard writes, "it is as if there were something over and above all of your desires, something which is y o u, and which c h o o s e s which desire to act on. This means that the principle or law by which you determine your actions is one that you regard as being expressive of y o u r s e l f."[5]

Perhaps mental persons can plausibly be identified as experiences, or as the principles they act upon, but mindbodily persons, each active in a unique social and natural place, take more into account than experiences and principles. To actualize their greatest moment — their greatest actualization as agents — they have

5) Christine M. Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 100.

to weigh possible courses of action open to them in their distinctive active and interactive arenas, and project a course that they alone can project. This, I submit, better accommodates our sense that we are distinct in who we are, that we are unique individuals.

Finally, we saw that persons can be true to one another, or not. Now, we can see that they can also be true to themselves, or not. They are true to themselves when they are true to the resolute path their deliberation determines will actualize them with the most moment; and they are true to others in ways that enhance both of them as momentary beings. If the truth of persons lies in these relations — between one person and another, and between a person's actions and his resolve — it seems reasonable to say that telling the truth of who a person is cannot be grasped apart from knowing the truth he actively bears to himself and others. To put it another way: personal truth is the basis for truth about persons, and not, as modernity tries to insist, the other way around.

Bibliography

Anscombe, Elizabeth. *Intention*. 1957, 2nd ed. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1963.

Barfeld, Owen. *Saving the Appearances: A Study in Idolatry*, 2nd edition. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1988.

Korsgaard, Christine M. *The Sources of Normativity.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

Poteat, William. *Polanyian Meditations: In Search of a Post-Critical Logic*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1985.

— *Recovering the Ground: Critical Exercises in Recollection*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1994.

Setiya, Kieran. "Intention." In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2015 Edition), edited by Edward N. Zalta. https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2015/entries/intention.