
CATEGORICAL VIEWS OF PERSONHOOD AND THE MORAL IMPLICATIONS

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ABSTRACT

The focus of this study is to critically analyse the conception personhood from diverse scholars with the moral implications. The study employed the philosophical technique in dealing with those elements involved in the concept of person. It is a qualitative research design, as such the study also made use of descriptive method in analysing the useful data gathered on personhood. In the course of the study, it was found out that the concept as well as the moral attributes is dynamic; cutting across diverse disciplines. Therefore, the moral aspect of human being is a pointer to his dignity, self-worth, individuality, and uniqueness of man.

Key words: *Person, personhood, moral, moral implication*

INTRODUCTION

A person is a comprehensive name given to man's being, a name expressing his entire reality in a precise and unequivocal way we say that he is a person. This term is uniquely attributed to man, and can never be use for plants or animal; and in like terms personhood is the quality or status of being a person. Historically, the concept "person" marks the line of demarcation between pagan and Christian culture. In Latin culture the common meaning of the word "*persona*" and its Greek equivalent "*prosopon*" both commonly means that of 'disguising'. Disguising literally means a masquerade, which logically means that, a person is the man behind the mask. Thus, for example, when Seneca states the "*nemo potest personam diu ferre*", he wishes to say that "no one can carry the disguise for a long time". There was no word in existence either in Greek or Latin to express the concept of person (Mondin, 1991).

The pagan culture did not recognize the absolute value of the individual as such, but made their absolute value depend essentially on class, rank, wealth and race. The institution of slavery does not offend the highest spirit of this era. The ancient man is swallowed up by the city and the family, subjected to a build destiny which is without name superior to the gods. Christianity, in the midst of all these uncertainties brings to light a decisive notion of the person. The singularity of the person, unique, unrepeatable and the dignity of a person is the concept Christians used to change the ancient uncertainty of a person. Gradually, this Christian concept of a person succeeded in making inroads and penetrating the pagan culture, it profoundly changed paganism, giving birth to medieval and later modern culture; which was in turn wholly saturated with Christianity values (Mondin, 1991). Today, the concept person as affirmed by Christianity is no longer shared in many circles. However, many thinkers objected the concept "person" to intend

the uniqueness, unrepeatability, absolute value, and sacredness of the individual, but assign to the concept either a philosophical, sociological, psychological, ethical, or biological meanings.

DEFINITION OF TERMS

Personhood: A person is a comprehensive name given to man's being, a name expressing his entire reality in a precise and unequivocal way. This term is uniquely attributed to man, and can never be used for plants or animals. Personhood is the quality or status of being a person (Isaac, 2023).

Morality: The term 'morality' originated from the Latin word '*moralis*' or '*mores*' meaning custom or habits. Morality seems to point to the relationships between human beings (Thiroux, 1996). Morality hence is not situated in the domain of inanimate objects like cars, tree or gun, but in the domain of human interactions; it is concerned basically with interactions among human beings, providing rules/principles by which people live (Onwochei, 2002).

Society: Individuals in groups do not exist in isolation, but exist and interact with other members of the group, and these interactions follow some laid-down patterns of behaviour that are acceptable to the group. All these interacting individuals and groups, and their activities exist in a larger set-up called society. Society, therefore, refers to the whole range of social relationships within the set-up. In other words, society embraces human beings, their activities and relationships to one another and in relation to their natural and social environment (Ezewu, 1982).

Implication: A possible future effect or result of an action, event, decision e.t.c. It is a suggestion that is not directly but that people are expected to understand or accept (Longman Dictionary, 2001).

SEMANTIC TRANSFORMATION OF THE CONCEPT "PERSON"

Ontological Concept: The concept of person as a singular, unique and unrepeatable is a conquest of Christian thought. However, the Christian concept of the person has undergone semantic transformations, which is a sign of the profound crisis cutting across modern culture. In the 14th century the ontological conception of the person as it was elaborated by Severin Boethius and then otherwise perfected by Thomas Aquinas with his doctrine of the *actus essendi* (the principle of incommunicability) was a definitive conquest, and was used without reserve by all philosophers who believed in the possibility of metaphysics.

Severin Boethius was the first to furnish an adequate conception of a person in the ontological perspective. Boethius conceived a person in one of his theological treatise as the person is an individual substance of a rational nature. From the Boezian conception results that person means not only single individual, nor simply substance, nor simply nature. Single individuality, in fact, cannot also belong to the accident; to make room for the person, nature nor do substances suffice. Thus, not even the union of individuality, nature and substance make a person; these elements even belong to a stone or a cat, which are not persons. In order to adequately define a

person, it is necessary to add to the three elements rationality. This is the specific different that distinguish man from animal.

Aquinas simplified Boethian conception by introducing his concept of a person as a ‘rational subsistent’. With the term subsistent the Aquinas replaces what Boethius had expressed with the three terms individual, nature and substance. However the subsistent itself does not yet constitute the concept of person, it must be applied only to rational being, not to plants and animals. According to Aquinas, there is a distinction between a person and nature, as there is between the whole and its parts: the person is the individual and concrete man, in all his concreteness, uniqueness, and unrepeatability, while human nature is only a part of the person. The person, as the totality of the individual being embraces three elements: the substantial form (soul), the substantial forms, and the act of being (*actus essendi*). The formal constitutive of the person is given by the last element, because the act of being is the maximum perfection, and it is what confers actuality to substance and all its determinations (Ede, 2005).

The *actus essendi* gives to the person the property of incommunicability; by virtue of such an act it becomes complete in itself. The person, as specifies by Thomas, enjoys three-fold incommunicability; first of all, the individual who is a person cannot communicate with other things as a part, being a complete totality; secondly, he cannot communicate as the universal communicate with the individuals. Thirdly, is that the person is something assumable because that which is assumable passes in the personality of the assumer and no longer has its own personality. Instead, the capacity of assuming does not go against the concept of person. Because of this incommunicability, the person distinguishes himself both from essence and nature (Mondin, 1991).

Psychological Concept: A metaphysical concept of a ‘person’ was totally abandoned by Rene Descartes, for he set out to build a new foundation for the concept “Person”. The reason given by Descartes to make such a radical change is that it is not possible to attack the great problems of metaphysics if one does not first surpass the obstacle of the value of our knowledge. The problem of the person, is logically seen by Descartes in this perspective, and in effect he defined the person as ‘*cogito, ergo sum*’, I think therefore I exist. The ‘I’ consists in self-consciousness. On this argument one can concede three things of Descartes:

1. Intellective knowledge, reason is an essential requisite of the person.
2. Self-consciousness is a distinctive prerogative of man. For example animals know, but only man knows of knowing.
3. Then, one can attempt the psychological concept of a person. But, this is a risky concept for two reasons; first, because if one does not succeed in positively resolving the problem of doubt, then the concept of person remained blocked: Secondly, for identifying the person with self-consciousness leads to the concession that he who does not exercise self-consciousness remains deprived of personality. In such away, babies who have not yet reached the age of reason, the sleeping, and the comatose would no longer be or would not yet be persons.

For these reasons, Descartes' psychological conception of the person which does not carry with it an ontological conception is considered absolutely unsatisfactory. By transforming the person from an ontological to a psychological fact, Descartes has opened the door to a series of either grave diminutions or of enormous exaggerations of the concept of person. The major diminutions are those of Hume, Freud and Watson; meanwhile, the most exasperating exaggerations are those of Fichte, Hegel and Nietzsche (Mondin, 1991).

Dialogical Concept: The dissolution of the concept of a person which has found room in modern thought has also had frightening consequences on the political and social plane. Monstrous atrocities such as the extermination of the Jews and Palestinians, race discrimination, the manifold manipulations of man through science and technology. The new barbarism that has hit humanity has led many contemporary philosophers to reflect anew on the person so as to evidence his dignity and value. The most representative of the dialogical conceptions of person are Mounier and Buber. Mounier (1964) has condensed his philosophical thought into a famous and auspicious volume entitled "*Personalism*". In this essay he takes a position against the empiricists, the psycho-analysts, and the idealists and against all those philosophers who have made of the person a simple psychological phenomenon, something absolutely subjective and individualistic. This is not only unacceptable for him but also an absurd. For the person cannot be resolved either in thought or in consciousness (much less the unconscious), but is conceived instead, as "incorporated existence", "incarnate existence". The most prominent properties for those who consider man dialogically as Mounier (1964) does are;

1. Vocation: 'Every person has such a meaning that he cannot be substituted for in the place he occupies in the universe of persons'.

2. Action: The life of the person is incessant action, "it is the research until death for an anticipated, longed-for unity that is never realized".

3. Communication Encounter with Others: The first movement revealing a human being in the prime of infancy is a movement towards others; the baby of six to twelve months of age, leaving vegetative life, discovers himself in others, recognizes himself in some attitudes regulated by his gaze at others. It is only later, at about three years of age that he will have his first wave of conscious egocentrism.

The struggle in favour of the person, according to Mounier (1964) is the fundamental task of our times. To struggle for the person means to struggle against those innumerable forms of alienation which risk annihilating man and destroying him spiritually. However, Mounier (1964) specifies that, to struggle for the person means at the same time to struggle for the community, because the true community is the personal one where the most profound bond is in the interiority of the incarnate existences living in communion, vibrating in unison, and tending to the realization of a justice that frees millions of the suffering and the poor from debasement and humiliation. The community of persons is the community of the neighbour, of the 'I', and of others capable of realizing "We".

Martin Buber has the merit of having given more rigors to the dialogical concept of the person. He has done this by countering the rapport man has with things with the rapport that he entertains with others. While the former assumes the character of possession and monopoly, the latter has essentially the character of dialogue. But there are other aspects that distinguish the two different types of rapport, of which the most important are; the rapport between man and things – experimentation, objectivity, and utilization and free will. The other is the rapport between man and others – encounter, presence, love, freedom and being.

In the former relationship structure, man lives on the shoulders of things, alters them, uses them, possesses them, governs them, and then he also assumes this behaviour towards his peers, then He and You also becomes a species of the “thing-person”, with which one disposes as one wishes. In this type of rapport, the person is no longer a person, but is treated as a thing. Buber admits that “Without the ‘I’ and thing rapport, man cannot live. And yet he who lives only by the I-t is not a man. It is indeed man, and therefore also the person, who interests himself with another in such a way as to completely understand and respect his I”. I have my origin from my relationship with the thou: When I become ‘I’, then I say Thou (Mondin, 1991).

Global Concept: A global conception of the person includes four fundamental elements: autonomy in being, self-consciousness, communication, and self-transcendence. Thus, the person can be defined as a subsistent gifted with self-consciousness, communication and self-transcendence. Every human being, living in this planet, small or big, masculine or feminine, white or black, Christian or Buddhist, are gifted with these supreme qualities. And by virtue of subsistence he is distinct from all others, through self-consciousness he recognizes himself as unique and unrepeatable but at the same time free, social and perfectible; through communication he enters into rapport with others, in love, friendship and sympathy. But also a rapport of aversion, hate and hostility; through self-transcendence he is called to surpass all the confines with which pace and time seek to block his ascension, as he attempts to penetrate the realm of the absolute and eternal.

WESTERN CONCEPT OF PERSON

Heidegger (1962) did not mince words in his assertion that “No epoch has had, as ours has had, notions so numerous and varied of a person, yet in all these, a person still assumes so problematic an appearance in the category of beings”. According to Mondin (1991), a person is the supreme question in the existence of things. Questions about the earth, air, the moon, the sky, the stars, the water, atoms, cell, etc., even God, acquire relevance only with reference to the being of a person. A person is a being so vast, so varied, and so multiform, that every definition demonstrates itself too limited. In other words, the mystery of a person constantly transcends himself in all that he thinks, says, projects, desires and produces.

However, there have been several attempts to proffer a definition of a person by some philosophers: person is seen by Aristotle as a “rational animal”; Descartes sees him as “a thinking reality”; Soren kierkegard identify him as “the anguished being”; for Karl Marx, it is

“the economic being” (Ede, 2005). Heidegger came up with “the existent cum symbolic being”; While Sigmund Freud speaks of “the erotic being” Sophocles says he is “chained Prometheus” (Ede, 2005). Plato speaks of him as “a fallen Soul”Gabriel Marcel says it’s “the problematic being”; While Genlen speaks of “the cultural being”; Philo see him as “an image of the logos”; Origen says he is “an image of God”; Thomas Aquinas speaks of him as “a rational subsistent”; for Pascal he is “a thinking reed”; Spinoza identifies him as “a mode of the substance”; while Nietzsche sees him as a “will of power ”; Cassirer says he is “alienated essence” (Ede, 2005). Mounier and Scheler (1964) speaks of him as “incarnate spirit”; Bloch came up with “utopic being”; Sartre says he is “a possible possibility”; for Paul Ricoeur, he is “the fallible being”; in Bertrand Russell’s reductive analysis the person is reduced to a collection of sensory impulses. Blaise Pascal sees a person as a weak, corrupt and miserable creature dominated by self-love and unable to save himself from his predicament; though Marsilio Ficino and John Pico della Mirandola view a person as a “Microcosms” in which the splendour of God is revealed in miniature (Ede, 2005).

The conceptions of a ‘person’ are different and somehow conflicts with each other in means. Thus, returns us back to the fact that there is no universally accepted conception of a person. Philosophers held unique but different view about: Who a person is? Some school of thoughts, over the years, has proffered their views on: Who a person is? The Reductionist views human beings on the same plane as primary sense data. For the Idealism the person tends to get absorbed into the One. The Marxists view a person as a product of social forces. The Darwinians view him as a product of competitive forces in nature. Existentialists view a person as the product of his own freedom and choice. While scientists on their own part refer to a person as essentially a product of mechanical and electro- chemical parts working together, in other words, a machine (Ede, 2005).

PERSPECTIVES OF PERSONHOOD

1. Biological Perspective: The word ‘bios’ is from Greek roots meaning ‘life’ and from it derives biology, which is the study of life. The biological perspective of the human being views a person in relation to nature as a being who could be accessed through the use of the knowledge of the structure and the physiology of the human body, its embryonic development, and the pre-historic, historic and fossil records (Scheller, 1984). Such a study present us with person as possessing a generalized and well developed brain which makes him supersede all other living organisms, giving him a first-hand place in the animal kingdom. The neuro-scientific view of a person takes its roots from this perspective.

2. Psychological Perspective: Psychological is the study of human behaviour. Psychologists have grouped factors which affect human behaviour into four, which they say are responsible for reshaping the human personality, and thus define a person. In this light also, different psychological schools e.g psychoanalytic, behaviourists, personality constructs etc postulate a person in relation to the theories they expound. Depending on which approach is adopted, a

person is seen as “reactive and goaded by inner drives, or as goal seeking” (Honer and Hunt, 1987). Neuroscience also has some amount of reference here in.

3. Sociological Perspective: This refers to a person as “social” and as the smallest irreducible unit of society. A social person has both the inclination and need for association with other persons, and that is what a person is. If we go deeper into the relationship between a person and society which is reciprocal, we reach the process of socialization. It is the affirmation of the “self” that makes this possible, and philosophers situate such an affirmation as an activity of the mind. Thus, the mentalist aspect of a person comes into play (Ede, 2005).

4. Ethical Perspective: Ethics, the branch of philosophy which deals with the morality of human actions, attempts to depiction of person from a consideration of the way a person ought to behave. In other words, a person could be assessed from the standard behaviour to which he ought to conform, or the moral principles underlying human actions. These principles are universal, immutable and accessible to all. In this regard, “conscience” comes into play, and here again, we can find the extra-physical reality as the mind to make this possible. Hence, the mentalist views of a person, like that of Rene Descartes, find a bearing within this perspective (Ede, 2005).

5. Theological Perspective: Theologians say that a person is “*an imago Dei*” (image of God). Patristic writers of the early Christian period like St. Justin Martyr, Origen, Gregory and St. Augustine, all expound on the creation of the world and human being as totally dependent upon God. God is the source of all being. A person, is a created being, possesses his being in being, its unity, its unity, truth and goodness by participating in the being of God. They see human person as essentially made up of body and soul, and the soul is that which links him to God. Thomas Aquinas is one among other advocates of this view (Ede, 2005).

MORAL IMPLICATIONS OF PERSONHOOD

The state of being a person cannot be understood without the moral aspects. In fact who a person is, is inseparable from morality. Hence, the subject matter of morality is human conduct and precisely those actions which are performed consciously and wilfully (Thiroux, 1996). The reality of human conduct refers to moral elements which are considered internal to the person. Motives, dispositions, attitudes, intentions all belong to moral being and constitutes part of person’s moral identity. Human conduct is the totality of attitudes and motivations, on account of which a person usually prefers certain moral conduct as to another. It makes possible a well-founded, though not infallible prediction of a person’s comportment in certain situations, virtue as well as views, positive as well as negative dispositions. Thus human conduct is the totality of all the internal activities within a person that influences his behaviour and over which he has a certain control.

Person and Conscience: Animals have no conscience and act by instinct (not willed), as such morality cannot be attributed to them. The outcome of Human being actions can be judged on moral guide lines to be good or bad. Morality is the quality of human conduct in terms of its

propriety or impropriety, fairness or unfairness, justice or injustice, virtue or vice. That person is a moral being therefore means that he is a being conscious of moral standard, of the ethical qualities of his actions in terms of good or bad. He is a being conscious and convinced of the fact that some courses of action are right and ought to be done, while others are wrong and ought to be avoided or indifferent and may be pursued or not. This is the understanding of a person as a creature endowed with moral conscience.

Conscience can be defined as the practical judgement of a person's intellect on human conducts as good to be done or as evil to be avoided (Fagothey, 1976). Conscience informs a person's moral obligations and urges him to fulfil them; human conduct includes fundamental dispositions, intentions, motives and above all his fundamental option. Human conduct also has a deeper ground for a person's concrete moral decisions and actions. Human conduct informs actions. Actions on their part also have effects on human conduct. Aristotle rightly observes: "We become just by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate acts, brave by doing brave acts" (Peschke, 1999).

Person and Responsible: To be a person is to be a responsible being. Since morality is only attributed to human being, then a person should be hold responsible for his action or inaction. The concept of person as the subject of action logically leads to the conclusion that responsibility is a necessary attribute of a person. Responsibility for human action presupposes freedom of action. Thus accountability for human actions is impossible except within the context of human person operating with freedom of choice. A person aptitude to conform to the law his nature in self-consciousness and self-determination constitutes his dignity as a person. Freedom is the distinguishing mark of his nature, for it reveals his spiritual essence, with its capability of self-integration in the good (Messner, 1957).

CONCLUSION

From the above analysis on personhood and moral implication, it is obvious that the concept is still undergoing slow but steady changes both in meanings and implications. This does not only point to the dynamic nature of human person, but as human with inherent capacity to create, control, take responsibility, manipulate and constrain phenomena for his benefit first, then to the society. The study is very crucial not merely for understanding human beings, but helps us to acknowledge that understanding human beings from their various socio-cultural background is key, if man and society must experience harmony, progress and development.

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