Personhood as human nature & the personality of God

In his essay >On Human Nature< Roger Scruton (S.) defends as a philosopher the double thesis that the concept of a person is central to our understanding in general and that personhood is the nature of humans. At the same time he evidently sympathizes with Roman Catholic faith and, at least in a hesitating way, admits of the personality of angels and of God (46). Such a position is bound to incorparate conceptual tensions and my critical discussion will concentrate on the conceptual and leave out the more specific moral and cultural-critical elaborations of S.'s account.

I.

This is one way in which the double thesis is rendered:

> When we refer to rights, deserts, and duties; what we owe to each other; and such fundamental ideas as freedom, justice, and the impartial spectator, we are making use (directly or indirectly) of the concept of the person, which provides the shared perspective from which we address virtual all such issues. Human communities are communities of persons …
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> ...getting clear about the concept of the person is, for us, an intellectual priority. Those who build a universal political doctrine on the foundation of human rights are in need of a theory that tells them which rights belong to our nature – our nature as persons – and which are the product of convention. That theory will be a theory of persons. … (108)

Its first part is the stressing of the centrality of the concept of a person. Its second part – talk of „our nature as persons" – in S. seems to be an implication of morality because of the reference to human rights. But in fact S. from the start invests the concept of a person as bearer of rights, deserts, and duties and does not seem to see any requirement to distinguish between levels in the concept of a person. He therefore – like most anglophone philosophers having written about it – does not reach bedrock in the clarification of the concept, which is where, when having reached it, conceptual clarification must start.

The concept of a person is one of the (two) basic anchors in our understanding.[1] At the foundational level it is a formal one corresponding to the concept of an object. 'Object' is a nominalization of the indefinite pronoun 'something'; correspondingly 'person' is a nominalization of 'somebody, someone'. The conceptual system we operate in our ordinary language is built on the contrast of these formal concepts.

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1 Peter Strawson, in the 3rd chapter of his *Individuals* (1959) was the first in recent times to defend the categorical status of the concept of a person. Although he insisted to make a logical point (ibid. 99) his characterization of the concept remained an epistemological one: „The admission of this category as primitive and underived appeared as a necessary condition of our membership in an non-solipsistic world." (ibid. 246)

Wittgenstein, in the *Tractatus,* characterized formal concepts by two marks (4.122 sqq.):

(1) In a formal notation formal concepts have to be represented by a variable, not a functional expression; (2) a formal concept is already given with each of its instances. (4.126)

Wittgenstein exemplified this only with the 'pseudo-concept' ('Scheinbegriff') of an object. (4.1272) Therefore he did not realize that 'object' and 'person' as expressing formal concepts differ markedly in a central feature. Wittgenstein argued that 'object' never is used correctly as a material concept because the question of the number of objects (in a room, for instance) cannot meaningfully be raised, because it cannot be sensibly answered. (4.1272 e/f; cp. TLP 6.5) But 'person', according to this test, can be used as expressing a material concept as well, for the question of the number of persons (people) in a room always has a definite answer.

Already as expressing the formal concept 'person' therefore is in need of a mark to distinguish it from 'object'. For both expressions are alike in representing a variable for individuals ('particulars') and can as such be substituted for one another. The mark implicitly used in our conceptual system to distinguish 'person' from 'object' is speech, the command of language. For persons are essentially bearers of their personal name. Personal names basically are instruments to address (call, refer to) a living being linguistically. And the use of such a kind of expression would be irrational without the expectation that in face-to-face situations the addressee can answer the address, if she will. Therefore 'person' as a formal concept means 'language using animal'. Aristotle was on the right track with his definition of a human being as ζῷον λόγον ἔχον, but he did not yet have the concept of a person.

To give an idea of the wide implications of this elucidation of 'person' as expressing the formal concept let me elaborate a bit.

Certain uses of many general expressions in our language express formal concepts, function as variables (for instance, all the names of cultural spheres with expressions used without a grammatical article: art, science, sports, politics etc.). Formal concepts collect items already classified by other (material) concepts to encompass everything belonging to the aspect demarcated by the formal concept.

In our normal understanding there is an internal relation (a relation not possible not to exist) between 'person', 'language' and 'world/reality'. The connection is quite simple as soon as one has become aware of it. Persons are language using animals. (Natural) Languages are universal media of expression and representation, because they are, as far as possible, self-explaining media. If in other media of expression humans use – for instance: painting, sculpture, dance – something is unclear or difficult to understand, one has to speak, use the language, to try to get clear about it. But if something linguistic is unclear, language itself must do duty for clarification. The basic question

then is the one Wittgenstein opened his *Blue Book* with: What is the meaning of … (the) word? The general formal answer Wittgenstein gave is: The meaning of a word is what the explanation of its meaning explains. (*PI* para. 560). That's how language is basically a self-explaining medium, and, being indispensible for clarification everywhere else, the only universal medium there is.[2]

Now, what is given to persons as the speakers of a language is the *World*, everything that can be represented and as such be understood. *Reality* is given to persons in the *true* propositions of their language; the false propositions contain what is possible (in other situations) or what is impossible (senseless). The negatability of propositions demands both expressions for the totality of what can be understood (sense; *World*) and what there is (reference; *Reality*).[3] In conventional philosophy, these formalities would be called metaphysical, but to the Wittgensteinian metaphysics is nothing but a shadow of grammar – of the rules of sense of everything that can be understood.

What about 'person' as expessing a material concept? The definition of the material sense of person, is, I contend: *A person is* an *acting* and *language-using animal*, which is essentially *evaluating itself*. The marks 'acting' und 'self-evaluating' are implied in 'language-using' in way to be elucidated in a moment. But before let me note this: That there is an implication from 'language-using' to 'acting' and 'self-evaluating' is presumably the reason, why it is difficult to demarcate the formal and the material uses of 'person'.

The mark 'acting' is connected with 'language-using' as follows: A natural language essentially is a propositional language (as contrasted with a 'signal-language'). Speaking it is a (normative) practice in the Aristotelian sense of that term, using a particular proposition in a speech-act is an action (a poiesis in the Aristotelian sense).

Aristotle's distinction between πραξις (praxis) and ποίεσις (poiesis) is the anthropological specialization of a distinction ramifying widely. It is build on the distinction between incomplete and complete movements in Aristotle's *Physics*. This was Aristotle's form of distinguishing between *processes* (corresponding to *practice*) und *events* (corresponding to *actions*). The formal distinction between the two is that processes do not come with an internal criterion of identity whereas events do. In temporally determined discourse this distinction again is a counterpart to the distinction between *masses* and *things* in spatially determined discourse; masses and things show the same

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2   The expression 'universal medium' was, to my knowledge, coined by the logician Jean van Heijenort in his paper 'Logic as Language and Logic as Calculus' (*Synthese* XVII, 1967, 324 sqq.), but I explain it differently.
3   In TLP Wittgenstein has both expressions, but, for reasons connected to his explanation of the alethic modalities, determined them conceptually in the opposite way – wedding reality to sense and the world to truth and reference. The pro and cons of both conceptual dispositions do not belong here. Cp. my German paper >Person, Sprache, Welt' on www.emilange.de.

formal difference.[4]

Of course, not all practice and action is immediately linguistic. Therefore the mark 'acting' is a wider, more encompassing characteristic than 'language-using'. But there is a conceptual argument that only language-users can be agents in the full sense. For *acting* is behaviour *for a reason*. A reason is *something that can be said for* the behaviour from the perspective of the agent. In last recourse it must be possible to ask the agent for his reason. And putting questions essentially is a linguistic affair. The many qualifications to be made here I leave to the reader.

'Self-evaluating' is implied in 'language-using' as follows. Propositional utterances essentially are evaluable with respect to right or wrong (true or false; satisfiable or not). A person must be sensitive to critique and evaluation by other speakers.[5] S. makes the point that „personhood is a way of *becoming*, not just a way of being." (110) True enough, because at birth we are not yet persons, although we are given our personal name then. We become persons by growing up, learning the language, and take on the (rules of the) orders of practice and action that structure our culture. We are in full command of our language not before whe have become able to correct ourselves in cases of slip or error. Therefore persons are self-evaluators already as mere speakers of their language. That the self-evaluation of a person reaches much farther than to linguistic cases is due to the fact that persons as becoming are unavoidably in search for meaning. The meaning of someone's life is the acceptability of his overall mode of living to the one himself that leads his life.[6]

The character of self-evaluation extends retrogradely to the character of a person as an acting animal. For actions can be understood as resulting from the choice between options. (Even if there are no plural options there always is the option between acting and not acting.) The choice of an option means that the chosen one is (now) desirable or right and therefore to be executed. The linguistic expression of the choice is a declaration of intention in the 1st person: 'I shall (want to) do x (now)'. That this implies a self-evaluation is shown by a somewhat strenuous reformulation: It is good (for me, now) to be an x-doer.

Self-evaluation, therefore, is the over-arching characteristic of a person, because it permeates acting and the use of language.[7] If this is correct it contrasts with S.'s explication which sees I-you-relations as constitutive for personhood. (50-70; 98 sqq.; 110) This conceptual disposition partly explains why S. from the start conceptualizes a person as a bearer of rights, deserts and duties.

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4   Curiously S. notices only the latter distinction, l.c. 80-2.
5   He becomes a speaker partly through the evaluation by others. As S.puts it with respect to virtue: „The disposition is acquired through imitation and the awareness of being judged." (103)
6   I've made a case for this explication in ch. I of my German book *Das verstandene Leben*, accessible on www.emilange.de.
7   This is, of course, a generalization of Harry Frankfurt's conception of a person characterized by dsires of different orders ('Freedom of the will and the concept of a person'), corrected by the critical points made against the focus exclusively on desires by Gary Watson ('Free Agency').

These are connected to what I called the orders of practice and acting – conventions, morals and the law. But the concept of the person as a bearer of rights etc. is of higher order than the basic conceptual level to which my explication refers. Of course, even on this level, I-you-relations are foundational in becoming a person; but having grown up to adulthood (ideally) is equivalent to the person having become autonomous vis-à-vis all relations. The linguistic case is paradigmatic: The full command of one's language demands to be able to correct oneself (to have become a *self-evaluator*).

II.

On S.'s account of the relevance of I-you-relations for personhood some elaboration of critique is needed. But before that let me comment in short on one general trait of design in S.'s essay.

Throughout it he leads a campaign against naturalistic positions – evolutionary biology and ethics, functionalism, utilitarianism, psychoanalysis, marxism etc. Confronting them he feels the need to mobilize traditional philosophical tenets („I remain wedded to the old call of philosophy"; 66):

> Our world, unlike the environment of an animal, contains rights, deserts and duties; it is a
> world of self-conscious subjects, in which events are divided into the free and the unfree, those
> that have reasons and those are merely caused, those that stem from a rational subject and those
> that erupt into the stream of objects with no conscious design. (25)

At the same time S. remains undecided on what a person really is:

> Taking a sober look at the many attempts to describe some part of what is distinctive of the
> human condition – the use of language (Chomsky, Bennett), second-order desires (Frankfurt),
> second-order intentions (Grice), convention (Lewis), freedom (Kant, Fichte), selfconsciousness
> (Kant, Fichte, Hegel), laughing and crying (Plessner), the capacitiy for cultural learning
> (Tomasello) – you will surely be persuaded that each is tracing some part of a single holistic
> accomplishment. (44)
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> …
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> Maybe personhood is an 'emergent' feature of the organism in that way: not something over
> and above the life and behavior in which we observe it but not reducible to them either. (31)

'Maybe … not something over and above … but not reducible' – isn't this expressing nothing but embarassment? And is it different with the apparently unavoidable theoretical all-in catch-words 'emergence' and 'holism'?

To the naturalistic positions S. could have given a much shorter shrift, had he tried harder to get

clear about the *concept* of the person. Whatever naturalists like to profess doctrinally concerning human beings and persons, as speakers of the language in which they address us they have to stick to our normal concept of a person, not only in order to understand this or that, but to understand themselves. For in laying out their doctrine they use propositions to make truth claims ... and to do this they have to be self-evaluators. It is just inconsistent, at least pragmatically, to understand 'animal' in 'language using animal' as 'brute'.

Now – what of I-you-relations? To stress them seems to have become an intellectual epidemic disease since Kripke propagated (the misinterpretation of) the community-view of Wittgenstein's views on rule-following.[8] An actual semantic proponent of this is Robert Brandom, whose pragmatics in book-keeping terms in *Making it Explicit* is built on focussing on I-you-relations. Brandom's views have the advantage to express clearly the conception of language-use going with the focus on I-you-relations. Language for him is not a means of coming to reconciliate and share different views, options or projects, but predominantly a means to navigate between our different views and projects.[9]

What is deficient about the focus on I-you-relations can in a first step be put grammatically: it leaves out 'he', 'she', and 'it', the 3rd person, and thereby the interdependence of the grammatical persons in literally every language-use. The expression 'person' was given the grammatical application already by grammarians in antiquity and one of them, Marcus Terentius Varro (living in the 1st century BCE) put the doctrine succinctly in a way that already demonstrates my interdependence-claim: *personarum natura triplex es(se)t, qui loqueretur, (ad quem), de quo*.

In modern times Kant underlined the interdependence of the grammatical persons in our practice of judgement, when, in § 40 of his *Critique of Judgement*, he stated three maxims of enlightened thinking: (1) thinking oneself („Selbstdenken"); (2) thinking in place of everybody else („… an der Stelle jedes anderen denken"), (3) Thinking consistently („mit sich einstimmig denken"). Especially important is the second maxim. It implies that in making a judgement and raising a truth claim the proponent orientates himself on the idea of judgement, on what everybody well-informed and of good will could claim under comparable circumstances. That means he is orientated on a third person.

What Kant explicated concerning the practice of judgement is a version of Adam Smith's

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8   Saul Kripke: *Wittgenstein on rules and private language* (1982). That the community-view is a misinterpretation was shown by Baker&Hacker in *Scepticism, Rules, and Language* (1984). Cp. My 'Übereinstimmung bei Wittgenstein', in: Angehrn et al. (Eds.), *Dialektischer Negativismus*, Frankfurt am Main 1992, 82-102 (accessible also on www.emilange.de)

9   This is most clearly spelled out in the first part of a two-part interview Brandom gave to an Italian interviewer. The interview is on you-tube. I discussed his deficient treatment of grammatical persons in >Grammatical persons and semnatical ideas< on my web-site and on academia.edu.

impartial spectator (cp. 90 sq.) transferred from moral to cognitive judgement. This again translates to non-assertive language-use, because not only in view of truth and reference, but already in view of sense and understanding a speaker must orientate himself on what the other can understand and, presupposing a shared language, his best option to do so is to say what everyone (every 3rd person) could say under comparable circumstances.

That certain 'yous' are especially important to us in friendship and love (and S. has to say a lot of interesting things concerning love and sex), is immaterial for the clarification of meaning and concepts. But I suspect that it is a secluded reason for the pervasive isolation of I-you-relations from their context in the interdependence of grammatical persons.

<div align="center">III.</div>

I-you-relations may not be conceptually constitutive for persons, but certainly an I-you-relation to an object (objects) of reverence is constitutive for religious faith.

We live in societies with predominantly monotheistic denominations. For them their faith consists in believing in one god, God. But conceptually, 'god' expresses a sortal concept, because the expression admits of grammatical articles and the plural. Even Christian faith needs the sortal concept to express the apodosis of its 1st Commandement: 'no other god*s* beside me'. Monotheism always is polemical against polytheism. But the grammatical price to pay for believing in one god only is the indeterminacy of the concept of God. In different contexts it takes on the different semantic roles of call (exclamations, curses), name (prayer), concept (theology) and metaphor (for what Schleiermacher took to be the essence of the religious mind – infinite dependency). At the beginning of Christian faith is the prayer of Jesus of Nazareth, who in it addressed his Father. This certainly is an I-you-relation. But – , regarded conceptually, of a metaphorical kind. Because in normal linguistic addresses the addressee can answer. God does not answer, at least not in a publicly audible way. As Wittgenstein pointed out, God can be heard answering a prayer only by the one who prays, only if '*you*' are the addressee.[10] But to an ever growing number of persons in our societies God does not speak any more.

Being addressable in prayer is the only conceptual connection of god-talk with talk about and with persons. For persons are basically animals (not brutes), language using animals. God cannot be consistently thought of as an animal, because animals die, God, in spite of Nietzsche's ungrammatical doctrine, does not and is said to be eternal (immortal). Persons can be addressed in language and answer publicly audible, God is addressed in prayer, but answers only to the believer

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10 Cp. the last remark in *Zettel*.

and not publicly audible. Persons have to evaluate themselves constantly to uphold self-control, God as value itself ('the highest good') cannot be thought of as self-evaluator etc.etc. God is 'a person' in such an etiolated, faded sense that it must almost be considered as metaphorical – seen from the perspective of our normal conceptual system.

If it is the philosopher's task to clarify and state explicitly, what we all know and do implicitly in leading our lives and speaking our languages – for which task St. Augustine's reflective question 'what is time?' was taken as the paradigm of a philosophical question by Kant and Wittgenstein alike[11] – he can only speak critically about the 'concept' of god, not 'positionally'. S. in his essay, does not distinguish sufficiently between the two ways of talking.

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11 For Wittgenstein cp. *PI* para. 89; for Kant cp. 'Deutlichkeit der Grundsätze …' (1764), A 80. What both considered as paradigmatic for philosophical questions is the quandary Augustine confessed to find himself in: si nemo ex me quaerat, scio; si quaerentem explicare velim, nescio. (*Confessiones* XI, XIV)