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Home


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Issues

All Reviews

New Publications

Conference Reports

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Issues

All Reviews

New Publications

Conference Reports





Moritz von Kalckreuth: Philosophie der Personalität

Titel: Philosophie der Personalität. Syntheseveruche zwischen Aktvollzug, Leiblichkeit und objektivem Geist

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This valuable essay by Moritz von Kalckreuth develops in the theoretical space left free by the gradual disappearance of any metaphysical notion of personhood and personal identity from modern and contemporary thought. The critique moved by the English empiricists to the alleged substantial solidity of personal identity—made definitive by the transcendental dialectic of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*—reveals the need to think of the person, no longer as a soul (or some other thing-like entity) but in new, more dynamic ways: as a function or a relation, as a process based on emergent properties, as a particular way of the human self-experience, or by adopting still other approaches. Von Kalckreuth's text is not directly concerned with the historical reconstruction of the long-term process of overcoming metaphysics; rather, it explores the possibilities it allows in the context of twentieth-century German philosophy. In other terms, the dissolution of the Boethian concept of the person as *substantia rationalis individua* stands as a common, and sometimes unspoken, negative reference for subsequent, contemporary divergent lines of reflection on what it means to be a person.

Without pretending to exhaust the richness of the volume, I would like to focus on what is perhaps the main fracture line among the post-substantialist notions of the person it examines. It is the opposition between three German approaches on the one side (the phenomenological axiology of Max Scheler, the philosophical anthropology of Helmuth Plessner, and the *Neue Ontologie* developed by Nicolai Hartmann), and, on the other, some analytical theories of personhood (Peter Strawson, John Searle, Harry Frankfurt, David Olson, John McDowell). The time span of this opposition is the twentieth century, but behind the theses of the considered authors it is possible to guess debates of a much longer period. For example, how does one not perceive, behind Hartmann's idea of the person as form of the objective spirit, a solid link with classical German philosophy? The choice criterion adopted by the author for the continental conceptions he focuses on is also significant. They are all, in different ways, *Syntheseversuche*; that is to say, attempts to develop a synthetic theory of personality. Scheler, Hartmann, and Plessner sketch the contours of personhood by inserting it in the context of human life and action (the organic, bodily, emotional, and super-individual dimensions). On the opposite pole, analytical philosophy proceeds by discussing single distinctive traits of personhood; typically, analytical philosophers aim at evaluating the significance of the personal traits through mental experiments (i.e., through fabricated situations specifically devised to isolate them under controlled conditions).

In von Kalckreuth's book, the confrontation between synthetic and analytic approaches to personhood focuses on two key points. The first is the determination of what a person *is*, from an ontological point of view and with reference to other spheres of the anthropological reality (body, mind, emotional life, etc.). The second is the intersubjective, pragmatic phenomenon of the *recognition* of an individual as a person inside a given sociocultural context. In our discussion of *Philosophie der Personalität*, we will proceed by addressing the two key points separately, but without neglecting, when necessary, the links that keep them together as parts of a unitary enquiry.

The core of von Kalckreuth's book is the critical exposition of three ways of ontological determination of personhood: the theories of Scheler, Hartmann, and Plessner, which are discussed—with extensive textual and critical references—in the central chapters. However, the author does not limit himself to a mere introduction; the very choice to position a reasoned and synthetic study on analytic philosophy *before* these central chapters provides the reader with a valuable access key to the three *Syntheseversuche*. If (with rare exceptions) the ontological theories of the person proposed by analytical philosophy remains within the framework of a fundamental individualism, the three continental approaches are, instead, clustered together by the idea that personhood is a diffuse form of life, a collective dimension. In different ways, Plessner, Scheler, and Hartmann keep the approach of the German classical philosophy alive, according to which, for a given entity, the relations with other entities are *constitutive* and, so to speak, push their effectiveness right into the inner sphere of the entity, co-determining its essence. This approach contrasts sharply with the idea (that prevails, instead, in analytical approaches) that entities have a separate subsistence and relate with each other only in a second phase; in the ways made possible by their different properties.

When applied to the case of personhood, the difference between the two ontological approaches emerges with particular clarity. The analytical authors on which von Kalckreuth dwells move from the common-sense idea that a person is primarily an individual organism, and then ask themselves what requirements this individual entity must fulfil to be

considered a person. Following the line pioneered by Peter Strawson and Daniel Dennett, most of analytic philosophy includes, among these requirements, “the presence of mental states [...] that are structured in a logical-conceptual way and based on representations” (31). Such mental properties embrace language and communication skills, cognitive self-awareness and ‘I’ centeredness (Lynne Baker), presence of a sense of responsibility and the ability to commit to a coherent line of action, presence of a ‘theory of mind’, or the ability to place oneself from the point of view of other rational subjects, anticipating their reactions and moral judgments. More recent authors, such as Harry Frankfurt, translate this approach in a theory of volition, adding to the distinctive properties of the person the presence of second-level volitions. A personal entity not only wants to be a good friend, but also wants to maintain this volition into the future. A lesser number of authors include, among the conditions of possibility of personhood, non-rational and unintentional forms of relationship with the world, such as the embedding in an *umwelt* and the presence of pre-rational ‘body pictures’ and ‘body schemas’ (as in the embodiment theory by Shaun Gallagher). Here von Kalckreuth is very attentive to some recent developments in the analytic philosophy of the person attesting, among other things, that continental phenomenology is, indeed, exerting a valuable influence onto the analytic field.

Despite their variety, the analytical approaches remain unified by the common approach we have highlighted above: personhood is investigated as a property (sometimes, as an emergent property) of an individual entity whose subsistence and duration are ensured in other ways—as a single organism, or a human being. To this common approach, von Kalckreuth contrasts the ‘synthetic’ theories by Plessner, Hartmann, and Scheler, which (in different ways) explore the possibility that the person is, indeed, an entity endowed with ontological autonomy, but that the root of his[1] autonomy is to be sought in its belonging to a collective dimension. The three authors develop this intuition in different ways, depending on their overall philosophies. In Plessner’s philosophical anthropology, personhood appears as a peculiar trait of a particular form of life, the ‘ex-centric positionality’ of the human being; that is, the double nature of human experience, both centred in the body and capable of assuming an external point of view ‘on the body’. The ex-centric position opens to the human being the possibility of seeing himself from the outside. The distance from the present self (with the

related phenomena of memory and anticipation) becomes a basis component of the world experience. With reference to a theory of the person, the most relevant element of this form of life is that it allows—and, at the same time, requires—the “access to oneself from the perspective of the other” (93). Plessner calls this condition *Mitweltlichkeit*, the constitutive belonging of the person to the ‘common world’ of the mutual references to others.

Coming to Nicolai Hartmann’s stratified ontology, the collective sphere of which the person is part, and which substantiates his very existence, is that of the objective spirit. With this concept—clearly Hegelian in its origin, even if integrated in a non-idealistic ontology—Hartmann means the tangible cultural context in which human individuals lead their lives: natural language, traditions, institutions, the corpus of religious beliefs, and other forms of worldview. “For Hartmann, persons are spiritual individuals—that is, individuals who do not exist in isolation each for themselves but are connected to each other. It is the objective spirit that allows this connection, through the common belonging of the persons to it” (132; translation mine). In Hartmann’s ontology, however, the phenomenon whereby the entity-person draws its ontological specificity from the belonging to a super-individual sphere—while remaining rooted in individual organisms—receives a more precise determination. It is, in fact, described as a form of *Überbauung*, or ‘super-construction’. *Überbauung* is a relationship between entities belonging to different ontological layers, in which the higher-level entity ‘rests’ on the lower level one without necessarily re-proposing its characteristics, and thus enjoying a real ontological freedom. The person is, for Hartmann, an actual entity, which, although depending on the lower layers (inorganic matter, the body as an organism, and the individual psychic sphere) for its factual existence, enjoys, however, a wide operational freedom. This freedom makes possible the full variety of symbolic and cultural forms that can be found on Earth—real points of concretion and re-elaboration of the personal life in a given historical place and moment. At the same time, inasmuch as he thinks of the person’s freedom as a freedom ‘in situation’, Hartmann’s conception of the person also takes into account the limits placed on the individual action, the resistance opposed to change by languages, institutions, systems of values, and the other subdomains of the objective spirit.

In von Kalckreuth's text, Plessner's *Mitwelt* and Hartmann's objective spirit are the first two forms of 'collective' ontological determination to be discussed. The largest space, a hundred pages altogether, is, however, dedicated to the *Syntheseversuch* proposed by Scheler. The main reason for this preponderance is explained by von Kalckreuth himself. If, in the works of Plessner and Hartmann, the explicit presence of the term 'person' is marginal, and the theses on personhood seem often interchangeable with those on the human being in general (an observation that is especially true for Plessner), Scheler proposes, instead, an articulated theory of the person. This theory varies in the course of his philosophical production, but some key features remain unchanged: the critique of rationalism (which, for Scheler, is an integral part of the rejection of Kant's formalism), the decided anti-substantialism in relation to personal identity, and, finally, the original definition of the person as a concrete unity of individual acts. The reconstruction offered by *Philosophie der Personalität* highlights Scheler's ability to investigate the person's emotional and relational aspects with an approach that, while remaining phenomenological, knows how to grasp the deep interdependence between the different processes of the inner life. In Scheler's view, the person is understood as the nucleus (*Kern*) of all possible emotional acts (of love, hate, attraction...) and decision-making processes of an individual human being. As reported by von Kalckreuth, the person is, for the inner and relational life of the single individual, what the "crystal formula" is for the concrete crystal. The metaphor, which stems from Scheler himself, comes from the natural world. Its applicability to the personal structure, however, is made possible by the fact that, in Scheler's vitalistic world view, nature is permeated with spirit, so that the hidden teleology that guides the crystal formation can serve as an explanatory figure for the unfolding of the personal core in the individual concrete acts.

It is clear, and von Kalckreuth explains it well, that Scheler's conception risks introducing a dangerous dualism into the theory of the person. On the one hand, there is the profound unity of the acts, that is the personal centre or nucleus; on the other, there is what Scheler calls the human person (*die menschliche Person*), the individual human being in his bodily singularity and in his capacity for agency. Incidentally said, neither of the two levels implies the existence of substantial entities—an assumption that would cause Scheler to fall into another, this one insoluble, form of dualism: person and concrete individual as two substances? The person as a substance and the concrete individual as an

accident? Scheler tries to maintain his theory of the personal life within the limits of phenomenological evidence, but as far as the ‚core‘ level is concerned, his phenomenological approach is constantly exposed to the risk of resorting to a kind of metaphysical intuition, to acts of ‚feeling‘ more than of ‚seeing‘.

As in the theories proposed by Plessner and Hartmann, also in Scheler’s thinking, the ontological discussion of the person is not limited to the investigation of an isolated individual entity but includes the recognition of the constitutive relationality of the person. This relationality takes the form of the belonging of the person to the *„umfassende Personengemeinschaft* [comprehensive personal community]”, or *„Gesamtperson* [general person]”. *Gesamtpersonen* are, for Scheler, national, cultural, or religious collective bodies supported by internal principles of solidarity and the adherence to a common axiological order (the modern phenomenon of mass society, therefore, hinders the formation of *Gesamtpersonen*). The admission of this kind of higher-level general persons is very problematic from the ontological point of view. Scheler, in fact, does not limit himself to affirming the personal character of the entities that make up the *Gesamtperson*, but seems to attribute personality and (to some extent) even responsibility and self-awareness directly to the collective body.

In von Kalckreuth’s discussion of the theories of the person by Plessner, Hartmann, and Scheler, the thought styles of the three thinkers emerge, so to speak, in filigree. Scheler appears as a passionate investigator of the person’s deep emotional life, but also as constantly exposed to the danger of falling into an elusive and hardly verifiable metaphysics of the profound; therefore, the solidity of his views is ultimately entrusted to the positive resonance effects aroused in the reader. Plessner and Hartmann, on the other hand, are representative of a non-reductionist naturalism, open to the possibility that the existence of personal beings does not break nature’s unity in any way. Personhood is, instead, an enrichment, respectively, of the organic life or the ontological reality. Hartmann’s approach, in particular, is an unceasing prompt to categorial precision and the sobriety of the enquiry—especially when it comes to sketching the different levels of reality co-existing around and inside the person.

Our presentation of *Philosophie der Person* has followed, so far, a possible hermeneutic line of the text: the search for the most convincing points of the continental theories of the person proposed by Scheler, Plessner, and Hartmann, in comparison with the analytic philosophies of the person. As mentioned above, this comparison pivots mainly on two key points: the ontological determination of the person (which we have just finished discussing) on the one side, and, on the other, the discussion of the intersubjective process of the recognition of an individual as person—with the strictly related issue of what happens when someone claims to be a person or vindicates for others the same status. It is this second point that we now need to address.

Most analytic approaches start from the assumption that the ontological determination of the person takes place on the individual level, while intersubjective processes intervene only at the later stage of the recognition or vindication of personhood seen as a social and juridical status. The continental theories of the person discussed in *Philosophie der Person* avoid this risk in a twofold way. First, as we have seen, they link the very ontological determination of the person to his belonging to a supra-individual sphere. Second, and more important with reference to our new issue, von Kalckreuth rejects the idea that the intersubjective recognition of an individual as a person could be a sort of screening (*Überprüfung*) of his ontological requirements of personality—as if, at each new encounter, we would screen the rationality, linguistic ability, self-awareness, moral values, and sense of responsibility of entities *prima facie* indeterminate. Von Kalckreuth underlines how, on the contrary, the recognition of a person consists in the immediate grasping of a phenomenological primary meaning, and of a meaning that, among other things, arises as a condensation or reverberation on the individual entity of a widespread personal context (the *Mitweltlichkeit* in Plessner, the objective spirit in Hartmann, the *Gesamtperson* in Scheler).

Von Kalckreuth does not dwell on this possibility, but it is clear that his criticism to the thesis of personal recognition as *Überprüfung* can be addressed not only to the analytic ontologies of the person (which, as we have seen, focus on the individual possession of language, reason, and self-awareness), but also to those continental ‘personalist’ ontologies that (still) base on hypothetical personal *Gestalt* or essences—uncertain heirs

of the substantial soul of the metaphysical tradition. In this kind of personalism, too, the attribution of the status of person goes through a kind of screening phase, the assessment of the presence of the personal essence. Other than the analytical positions, the *Überprüfung* tends, here, to ascertain the presence of traits that are 'essential' for all human beings (but maintains a rigid exclusion stance towards non-human animals). Leaving aside its possible usage towards continental essentialist theories, however, von Kalckreuth's criticism (supported by the authors he analyses) is very clear: when we are faced with a potential person, we do not evaluate requirements. There is no *Überprüfung* of originally impersonal entities. As human beings, we lead our life in a phenomenological space that is, so to speak, already predisposed to the emergence of something 'personal'. This emergence process is spontaneous, unplanned, and takes place in every society. At the same time, this phenomenal space is open to historical variables; 'filled' with different historical values and contents. Among the latter, the author notes, there is also the possibility of the socio-political deprivation of the status of person for certain categories, which is, however, nothing but an *ex post* annihilation of a primary meaning.

The view on personal recognition by the author of *Philosophie der Persönlichkeit* differs not only from the analytic, individualistic theories of the person, but also from those which, in chapter 3 of the first part of the book, are grouped as „postmodern critical theories“. In these theories, personhood would be the mere outcome of performative linguistic acts (such as the claim of oneself as a person), and thus, an only "apparently ontological category" (75; here, von Kalckreuth refers to Judith Butler's thesis). In other terms, according to the postmodern critical theories, the attribution of personhood would neither hide, nor rely on, any ontological, natural, or anthropological trait of the concerned entity, and the attribution of the status of person would depend exclusively on intersubjective recognition. The third position von Kalckreuth outlines, starting from his authors of reference (Scheler, Plessner, and Hartmann), is that the vindication of the status of person is completely independent by the recognition of individual requirements of any kind, but at the same time, does not rely only on pragmatic and performative acts (in this case, any subjectivity would be a person who, having the capacity to claim itself as such, actually does so). In the collective, 'widespread' ontological dimensions theorized by Plessner, Scheler and Hartmann, the processes of claiming and recognizing the individual as

person does not happen *in vacuo*. Performative acts are, obviously, always possible, but their very sense and their outcome depend on the relational space from which they come and into which they fall, and from the resistance they meet in already consolidated institutions, values, and cultural dynamics. That's why any new claim for personal dignity is effective only if it finds a way to adhere to the pre-existing obstacles, albeit to break them down.

From the phenomenological perspective adopted by *Philosophie der Personalität*, not every entity gives itself as personal. If, however, it is given in this way in the intersubjective sphere, then many discussions on its 'ontological eligibility' for the status of person turn out to be sterile. Consequently, the bioethical question of the status of fetuses, very young children, individuals in a vegetative state or affected by severe cognitive disabilities is also set differently—and differently not only with respect to the analytic theories of the person, but also (again) to the essentialist personalism of many continental bioethics (especially in the Italian context). In fact, it is not a question of verifying the absence or presence of individual personhood requirements, but of starting from the phenomenologically immediate understanding of the belonging of the individuals to a collective sphere of 'widespread personhood'. In the authors discussed by von Kalckreuth, the *Mitweltlichkeit*, the objective spirit, and the *Persongemeinschaft* are primary backgrounds of meaning; quasi transcendental schemes for the phenomenal constitution of the person. What must be questioned is not the reality of these schemes, but their relevance for the case-by-case understanding of which line of conduct is most oriented to justice. Incidentally said, approaches of this kind are difficult to apply to non-human animals, which are, from the phenomenological point of view, an extremely variable set of entities. They convey at times a strong impression of alienity, coldness, and 'impersonality' (this is especially true for animals who are phylogenetically very distant from humans, such as reptiles and insects), and at other times a decided closeness to personal modalities of interaction (just think of the high level of individual differentiation of the interactions inside a group of primates, in front of which the researcher spontaneously resorts to expressions such as the 'personal' preference or aversion of one member to another).

Adopting the well-known definition of Norberto Bobbio, the person is the “individual raised to value”.^[2] If this is true, it is also true that this statement can be understood in two radically different ways, depending on how the elevation to value is understood. Is this process, which takes place through the vindication of oneself as a person and the recognition by others, due to the fact that the individual already has in himself, ontologically, a higher component or ‘essence’? or, on the contrary, is it possible precisely because it does *not* own anything similar, because it is axiologically neutral and, therefore, offers itself to historical and social processes of valorisation? Here the three authors examined by von Kalckreuth diverge. Plessner’s anthropology and, above all, Hartmann’s ontology lead in the second direction (the individual as a natural being is axiologically neutral, which is a prerequisite for the assumption of personal value). As for Scheler, instead, we can speak of a further enhancement of an original axiological datum. By exposing their different positions and establishing a fruitful comparison with analytical philosophy and postmodern political thought, von Kalckreuth’s text helps the reader to orient himself in the debate on personhood and the theoretical relationship between individual and person—both central questions of contemporary moral philosophy.

[1] As possessive adjective and pronoun for ‘the person’ or ‘the human being’ we chose respectively ‘his’ and ‘him’, to avoid the connotation of neutrality and impersonality of ‘its’, or ‘it’. A greater accuracy would be obtained through ‘his / her’ and ‘him / her’, but this choice would make the reading harder. In our intention, however, the female form is always included.

[2] Norberto Bobbio. 1944. *La filosofia del decadentismo*. Torino: Chiantore, p. 119