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Introduction

If you read our guide, *Introduction to Human Rights Philosophy*, you'll understand the importance of defining terms!

We're not going to go through the process of defining things again here, other than to repeat the essential point: defining and distinguishing terms is a key, and perhaps the primary task of the philosopher. We can't assume, in conversations about the person, human rights and justice, that our interlocutors share our understanding of the key terms we're using.

A common feature of debate and dialogue today is that people often talk past one another because, without realizing it, they're unconsciously relying on different definitions of the same words.

Consider for example a common debate found everywhere online: does God exist? Arguments go back and forth; people put up a variety of arguments for and against. *But nine times out of ten, the debaters are relying on totally different concepts of God without realizing it.*

In a certain sense, the concept of the human person is the most fundamental one in philosophy. Even when we're not directly talking about what it means to be a person, we're always relying, if only tacitly, on assumptions about the reliability of human reason and what it means *to know*. The branch of philosophy concerned with the acquisition and nature of knowledge, epistemology, hovers behind every discussion in philosophy.

When we're talking about things that are more directly related to what humans do or think, we're dealing with a philosophy of the person directly, even if this is not stated explicitly. Philosophical concepts about human activities such as thinking, speaking, working, moving or living and concepts that flow from human relationships, such as love, friendship, justice and dignity, all require a philosophy of the person to give these concepts depth and meaning. Any attempt to define human-related concepts without a conscious attention to the nature of the person almost invariably goes awry. Just as we wouldn't expect to understand cat food without understanding the nature of cats, or health without understanding something about biology, we shouldn't suppose we can understand justice and

rights without considering the nature of the person which gives meaning and value to these terms.

This is not to say that all we need to do to clear up philosophical debates about rights and justice is solve the person question and then expect everything to fall into place nicely. Even where there is fundamental agreement about the nature of the person - such as an agreement on the divine origins of human nature - there is ongoing discussion and debate about what this might entail and what the implications are.

But at the very least, identifying our philosophy of the person goes a long way towards clarifying our concepts of rights and justice.

Our philosophy of the person may not solve *all* these questions for us, but it has two strong advantages: first, it gives us a heightened awareness of the issues at hand; secondly, when we have even an incipient notion of person, we begin to understand the issues involved in defining and explaining rights and justice. Only then can we more readily identify where the common errors lie, and where to start looking for the solutions.

The primary focus of this guide is not to provide a sweeping survey of the philosophy of the person, but to highlight a particularly central question that emerges from discussions of the person namely, the origin of our Judeo-Christian heritage that has informed our understanding of what it means to be a person for a very long time in the West.

As with our last guide, it's worth remembering that this introduction can only touch upon some of the key issues and doesn't pretend to exhaust or cover all of the issues related to a philosophy of the person. It's a start, and we hope that it will inspire you to keep looking further afield.

1: The Origin of the Word 'Person'

Our English word, 'person' comes directly from the Latin word, *persona*, which in turn comes from the Latin verb, *personare*. The prefix *per* is Latin for 'through', and *sonare* means 'to sound'. Hence, the word person means, 'to sound through'.

Originally, the word referred to a *mask* that an actor wore on stage, and through which the actor spoke in order to make manifest a character on stage. Latin borrowed the term and concept from Greek drama; in Greek, the word for an actor's mask was *prosopon* and this gave rise to the term in philosophy and theology, *prosopology*.

It might seem, at first glance, a little odd to identify a person with a *mask*. In fact, this may seem to suggest that the person is hiding something! But the etymology reveals two very interesting features of what it means to be a person.

First, the actor's mask *reveals a character*. The audience was invited not to see the actor, but some person or allegory the actor was representing. The suspension of disbelief - the hallmark of any great theater - invited the audience into the thoughts and words of someone presented to them on stage through the mask. The mask, or face, removed the focus from the actor and placed the focus on the character.

Secondly, there is an element of the person which continues to remain hidden from us. What we see in front of us, the face that invites us into a relationship, is not the whole story or the sum total of the person we see. There is something deeper beyond what we can see, something that attracts us and draws us into a relationship.

Together, both of these features of the actor's mask recall for us that a person is essentially *relational*. Every encounter we have with another person is the beginning of a relationship; someone is revealed to me and I am drawn into their life through their presence and words. In other words, the person is an invitation into a relationship: the person is relational by nature. The Greeks called this feature of personhood *dyadic*: the person is at once an individual but also relational. Each person is revealed and made manifest in and to another.

The Relational Nature of the Person

John Donne's famous poem captures well the relational nature of the person:

No man is an island entire of itself; every man
is a piece of the continent, a part of the main;
if a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe
is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as
well as any manner of thy friends or of thine
own were; any man's death diminishes me,
because I am involved in mankind.
And therefore never send to know for whom
the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.

Everything about the human person indicates that we are oriented, by nature, towards relationships with others. When we try and think of the human person as a monadic, isolated unit, we run into all kinds of difficulties. The main 'ingredients' of what we consider to be key expressions of being human - thought and speech - require relationships to emerge and develop.

Language emerges in the context of relationships with others. Someone born on a desert island, cut off from any human interaction from the time of infancy (if that were possible) would fail to develop language; rational thought would then be severely hampered if not eliminated. The process which informs the way in which we use language, namely culture, is also relational. Our understanding of the world is filtered, at least in the beginning, through the beliefs and attitudes of the communities in which we are raised.

Physiologically, we are oriented towards relationships too. Our bodies are forward-facing, forward moving. We can see others as they are, but can never see ourselves as we are in the same way. Pictures and mirror-images of myself are facsimiles; only others see me as I am. Our biology is designed for reproducing the species and this too requires another to bring it to fulfilment.

I can never fully see the inner "I", the inner agent at the core of my thinking; I can never think about the thinking agent that I am. Each time I think of myself, I

turn myself into an object of thought and the thinking agent steps back into the position of thinker.

Often, our ideas of ourselves are incomplete or even inaccurate. It is through my interaction with others that I begin to understand the inner self that my self-reflection does not always reveal. How many times have we been shocked to discover that others think of us in a certain way that we never thought ourselves? “You’re so loud and noisy!” When enough people bring this to our attention, we begin to realize that we haven’t seen ourselves as others do.

We also seek affirmation from others when we are unsure of ourselves: “Do you think I’m impatient?” “Do you think I could do this job?” “Will your friends and family accept me?” We get a fuller picture of ourselves, a sense of identity, from our interaction with others and those closest to us.

Relationships are Key

The relational nature of the person is not only *one* key to understanding what it means to be a person - it is *the* key. Indeed, it is not possible to understand the nature of the person without considering it in the context of interpersonal relationships. We are, in a sense, actualized and manifest in relationships with others: our personhood emerges in these relationships; the person is in other words a relation by nature.

Ask anyone what they value most in life, and they will tell you that there is no greater good than love and friendship. Most of us would forego wealth and health for love and friendship. We feel completed when we are loved and love in return; the extent that we love and enjoy friendships is the extent to which we feel fulfilled. It is in the company of family and friends who love and accept children just as they are that young people flourish and grow in confidence. The person who is belittled, accused and cut off from the loving embrace of others becomes withdrawn, isolated and introverted.

There have been so many studies done that highlight the link between mental health and stable, loving environments that the link is uncontroversial. Nor do we need to rely on studies to confirm what is quite evident to both common sense and experience.

2: The Relational Nature of Rights & Justice

When we begin to understand that the human person is by nature relational, we begin to see that the expression of human nature also takes place within the context of those relationships too.

Justice, by its very definition, involves the relationship of two or more people; the notion of a ‘right’ by extension involves a contract between two or more people.

The health and value of expressions of justice and rights therefore must be considered within the context of healthy relationships, properly functioning communities and a coherent culture.

If a relationship is distorted, the expression of that relationship will also be distorted; there can be no authentic or coherent expression of rights or justice within the confines of a distorted relationship.

Consider for example the countless distorted societies and communities that fill our history books: the corrupt and disastrous regimes of Hitler, Stalin, Mao or Pol Pot. In states like these, the expression of justice and the respect for rights is made impossible and concepts of rights and justice are twisted to fit corrupt ideologies of the person.

These evil regimes were not born out of distorted concepts of rights and justice. They were born out of distorted and corrupt ideas about the nature of the human person. From that starting point, the corruption of rights and justice followed as a result.

We cannot frame concepts of justice and rights without framing that discussion within the question of what makes a healthy relationship.

Objectively Good Relationships

Is there an objective standard for human relationships? We have to assume that there is; otherwise, we’d have no objective standards for justice or rights. If the person and interpersonal relationships are nothing more than a matter of opinion, then the same will apply to the concept of justice and rights...and this

reality is played out time and time again in our history books. Ultimately, justice and rights will have no foundation in reality. If, on the other hand, justice and rights are based in something concrete and stable, we have to look for concrete and stable descriptions of interpersonal relationships.

Aristotle's Approach

Aristotle (384-322 BC) held that human relationships were ordered towards human flourishing. This philosophy, that the object of human activity is well-being, happiness or flourishing is called *eudaimonism*.

According to *eudaimonia*, whatever enables the person to flourish and fulfil his or her potential is considered to be the foundation of a healthy community. Peace, happiness, wealth, health and stability are thus all elements of the eudaimonic ideal.

Immanuel Kant's Approach

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) rejected eudaimonism as the basis for interpersonal obligations and justice.

Kant argued that well-being, flourishing or happiness could be a consequence of treating others well and engaging in healthy relationships with others, but this couldn't be the purpose of treating others well. If happiness was treated as the goal of justice, then people would become a means to a selfish end: I would treat others well not for their own sake, but for my own sake.

Furthermore, the problem with making personal happiness the goal of justice and relationships is that we don't really know what a right action will bring. In many cases, doing the right thing doesn't bring us happiness at all, but suffering. And I can't always predict what end my actions will achieve. They may bring about happiness, but I can't determine that goal with any certainty at the outset. And if I make my own personal happiness or flourishing the goal of my actions, then I am likely not going to do anything to help others if it involves personal loss to me.

For Kant, just and good relationships stemmed from an *a priori* obligation or duty. By calling this duty *a priori*, Kant wanted to suggest that the human person is motivated by a *natural* sense of justice that motivates us. We don't treat others well in order to achieve some goal; we treat others well because this is the starting point of the human inclination towards others. Our actions make sense when they flow from an obligation to the well-being or flourishing of others, rather than from a desire for one's own well-being or flourishing. In Kant's system, the focus is, at the outset, on the *other*, rather than on the *self*.

Kant expressed this ideal in his famous "categorical imperative": in everything we do, we should ask, could what I am doing be a *universal rule* for everyone? Would any reasonable person act in this way if they were in the same situation as I am in now? Would I be happy if my actions were held up as an example for others? Would I expect others to treat me the way I am treating them? "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you!"

Max Scheler's Approach

Like Kant, **Max Scheler** (1874-1928) agreed that good relationships and justice were *a priori*: a natural inclination to duty and the well-being of others.

But, unlike Kant, Scheler did not think that the duty to others or the *a priori* desire for the well-being of others could be cast in terms of a "categorical imperative" or universal law; such a rule was too abstract, Scheler argued. People do not operate very well according to abstract rules or ideals: we're motivated and confirmed in our *experiences*, not in our ideals.

For example, a football coach telling his players, "Go out there and give it your best! Give 100%!" will mean different things to different players. The inexperienced player may not be sure what giving one's best means; he doesn't fully understand the rules of the game, and he's a bit confused about what a quarterback actually needs to do. The experienced player on the other hand knows what a good player looks like on the field; he's got a role model in mind. A third player is not very good at maths or abstract thinking, and doesn't know how to equate "100%" effort to concrete actions on the field.

Humans, Scheler insisted, do not function according to “ideals” but according to experience. An ideal of something we’ve never experienced or had a taste of is just a fantasy. A desire to reproduce or maximise some good we’ve experienced on the other hand, is accessible and concrete.

The role of experience, Scheler argued, can’t be underestimated.

Our personal experiences teach us about what we value the most. We value family, love and friendship above phones and computers; we value our phones and computers above our socks and an old toothbrush. Whether we are conscious of it or not, we place things in a hierarchy of values.

Scheler was ultimately critical of Kant’s insistence on placing duty as the foundation for our behavior. Duty on it’s own is sterile. Kant doesn’t talk very much about love and affection, and duty doesn’t really capture these highest values in us very well. Just because something is my duty doesn’t prevent me from going above and beyond the call of duty to do something out of friendship and love. It might not be my duty to sit with a lonely stranger; but doing so may certainly answer to a higher call to love.

3: Person, Society & Culture

Our experiences and our valuations of things, people and events do not occur in a vacuum. Returning to our understanding of the human person as being relational at the core, we see that we filter our experiences through our cultural understanding of the world around us.

Most societies throughout history have placed family at the core of the human experience. Throughout time and place we find cultures that promote close-knit, loyal family structures. These family units extend beyond the most immediate members of the family to include relatives, in-laws and close associates.

These close-knit family units are the incubators of values. They are the place where children receive their primary education into the value of things. And the experience of this close-knit family unit is itself a confirmation for children of what is most valuable and desirable in life.

Socio-historical studies of these historic and traditional family cultures reveals a pattern of values than are common to most of them. These values include:

- Loyalty to members of the community;
 - Respect for elders;
 - Protection of the young;
 - Unity maintained through social etiquette and norms;
 - Concern for the land on which the family lives and derives sustenance;
 - Evaluation and assessment of “outsiders” (and where there is a perceived threat to a way of life, a rejection of the outsider’s values);
 - A code of ethics and system of laws or rules to maintain order;
- And, most notably,*
- Ritualization of these ideals, expressed in religious rituals, festivals, songs, poetry, drama and art.

It is in the context of this extended family, or community, that the person gains self-awareness and understands his or her own place in the world.

The extended-family unit, furthermore, is the microcosm of the state; families bond together to form towns and city states; these towns and city-states come together to form nations.

Together, the unified family-units reinforce the ideals and culture of one another; and the individual finds expressions within the stability of this environment.

Declaration of Human Rights

The UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 attempted to capitalize on these universal principles that most nations recognized as being born of these foundational principles.

In that respect, we could say that the Declaration achieved an important goal: reinforcing the values that the human race has, generally speaking, recognized as being the mainstay of civilization. What the Declaration didn't do - and arguably, couldn't do given its mandate - was to provide a rationale and justification for these foundational principles. That was left up to each nation on its own.

But to understand the person, and by extension the meaning and nature of rights and justice, it is important to examine those justifications.

The Justification of Western Civilization

The justification which Western civilization has traditionally relied upon to explain the human person within the context of interpersonal relationships in the family, city and state, is rooted in Judeo-Christianity. (There have, to be sure, been a number of competing philosophies in our history but by-and-large the Judeo-Christian has prevailed for the most part until quite recently. As this is only a brief introduction, we'll just focus on this central justification here).

4: The Person in Western Culture

The Book of Genesis contains the most fundamental and complete statement of the Judeo-Christian concept of the person: “*God made man in his own image, in his image and likeness he created him: male and female he created them*” (Genesis 1:27). This simple statement has formed the foundation for Western civilization’s concept of the person, and by extension, interpersonal relationships and society itself.

Over the centuries, philosophers and theologians unpacked this little statement and debated what it meant. The general consensus that emerged by the time the Medieval period rolled around was the following:

1. God is, by nature, relational: God is a ‘Trinity’ (Father, Son and Holy Spirit);
2. As we are made in God’s image, we too are ‘relational’
3. The human family, rooted in the inter-relationship of male and female, is a created image of the Trinitarian unity of God;
4. Each person is intimately connected and oriented to this relationship in God;
5. The eternal mind of God is implanted in each one of us; our inclination to justice and right (that *a priori* inclination) flows from God.

Richard of St Victor

We could draw on many philosophers or theologians from the history of the West to illustrate the way in which our culture always considered the nature of the person in this Trinitarian formula.

One who was particularly noted for his thoughts on the meaning of personhood was Richard of St Victor (d.1173). For Richard, the notion of person is bound up closely with the notion of friendship and love because we come from God. All things that exist participate in friendship—even rocks and snails—since all things derive their being from the one Life; it is this Life which gives “peace to

all things” - that is to say, *harmony*. Thus for Richard, friendship describes the state of being in harmony with, or having a proper alignment between a thing’s nature and the Source of that nature.

In his famous book, *The Trinity*, Richard says that the very nature of God is Love and Friendship. God in other words doesn’t simply “do” love and “have” friendships; God *is* love and friendship. In other words, love and friendship are not abstract concepts. They *are* God, and we are in God. The height of human friendship is thus modelled on friendship with God; and the height of human justice is modelled on God’s justice (given through the *Ten Commandments*).

Richard then goes on to develop this thought in his book, *The Mystical Ark* where he equates the concept of the person with both an “outer person” and an “inner person”. The inner person connects the individual to God more intimately and directly; and the outer person is how that inner person is manifest in relationships with others here on earth.

You can see why one of Richard’s favourite Bible verses is *Corinthians II, 4:16*: “So we do not lose heart; though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed every day.” This inner person is the origin of friendship because it is what participates in the Beautiful, the True and the Good (that is, God).

Richard has a lovely way of putting all these things, and he constantly comes back to love and friendship as being the highest ideals of the human person, and the very things that make us fully human. He is, perhaps, one of the best and most well-known of the medieval thinkers on this topic; but his philosophy is by no means unusual for the period, and is indeed quite a good summary of the Judeo-Christian thinking on the matter throughout the history of Western civilization.

We don’t need to go too deeply into the theology and philosophy of Richard and like-minded thinkers throughout the ages. It’s enough to note that the very concept of the person, rights and justice has been thought of this way in our civilization for hundreds of years: the existence of God has oriented our understanding of the person and explained our interpersonal nature.

Struggles with Pluralism

Today, we're in a bit of a bind when it comes to evaluating our Judeo-Christian heritage and traditional understanding of the person, rights and justice.

We now live in a *pluralistic* world, one which wants to make everyone feel at home and comfortable with whatever philosophy or non-philosophy they want to hold. And so we've become quite embarrassed of our Judeo-Christian roots, and we're constantly being told that this heritage is just a personal matter and has no place in the public square.

It puts in something of a bind because our entire judicial system, and appeal to human dignity and the value of the family, and so forth, is all rooted in this Judeo-Christian heritage. Our very understanding of person comes from this tradition and we've fought - both proverbially and literally - to preserve and protect these ideals throughout our history. We fought Hitler for this very reason, as everything he represented was abhorrent to what we held to be most self-evident.

We've certainly lapsed in our exercise of these ideals on many occasions throughout our history, such as when we engaged in slavery and racial segregation. But the very ideals we abandoned in moments like this were called up again to bring us back to our senses by people like William Wilberforce, Martin Luther King Jr., or Mother Teresa. Our Judeo-Christian set of values is a tradition that's served us very well for a very long time. And even when people want to argue against the tradition, they typically rely on these Judeo-Christian values of justice and right to do so.

Many argue that we've reached something of an existential crisis as a society today; we're unsure of our roots and often openly hostile to them. It's no wonder then that our concept of rights and justice are often muddled. In the rush to minimize and even eradicate our Judeo-Christian roots, we've not come up with anything better and, as several commentators have noted, potentially opened the door to something much worse.

Conclusion

If the human person is constituted in relation, we can draw a few conclusions from this premise.

First, we can see that rights could not be about *entitlements*; they would necessitate a simultaneous sense of responsibility. Freedom, which is what rights discourse typically focus on, must entail therefore an obligation to do what is right, not simply what we want to do.

Secondly, personal freedom will entail maximizing our nature, values and goals. If, as Max Scheler suggests, and as most of us indeed accept, love is the highest expression of what it means to be human, then it would follow that rights and justice ultimately are all about love.

Of course, this begs the question: *what is love?* (Haddaway never seemed to find an answer to this question!) The common perception of love today is that love is an *emotion*. It's worth noting that love was never conceived of in this way in our Judeo-Christian heritage. Love, according to this tradition, is an *act of the will*: an act of the will that seeks the highest good of the other. Love is essentially self-effacing, self-sacrificing. Far from demanding entitlements for itself, love seeks what is good, right and true. It wants what is best for the community and for others. Love, to put a new spin on Kant, becomes the categorical imperative. When it does, the person finds the fullest expression of being.

What happens we start to conceive of rights and justice within the context of love? They begin to look very different from what we're used to seeing in the news! Is it too idealistic to think of rights and justice in this way? Some do think so; but then we need to ask, "what are the alternatives?"