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**THE PERSON AS A TYPE OF REALITY:
THE MAN BEYOND INDIVIDUAL**

Abstract¹

The notion of *person* acquired a specialized use in modern times, under the impact of the constitution of humanist sciences. The superposition of some significations of this notion has led to many different and, sometimes, confusing usages. The origin of the notion comes from patristic times, and a careful investigation into how it was constituted and shaped within this horizon it can provide the opportunity to establish a different understanding of man. This paper aims to discuss the type of understanding that has characterized the Eastern Christian approach in describing the individual as a *person*. And, beyond that, the paper evaluates the implications of this understanding of person as a type of reality, as Reality.

Keywords: man, person, reality, Eastern Christianity, Byzantinism

The stringent need for a positive discourse and an analytical perspective has led human sciences to a certain instrumentalization that has lost holistic perspectives and the original meaning of the notion of *person*. In fact, no discipline from the field of humanistic sciences offers a description of man starting precisely from the understanding of man as a person. This is so because the notion appears to be too vague, too much deprived of the positive dimension required by a specialized discourse. The more restrictively the concept of person was used, the more difficult it was to preserve an acceptation that would cover the entire understanding of the human dimension. In the modern attitude of the knowledge a crucial predisposition was implicitly present: the need for rigor and exactitude.

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Experiments were required in order to know the features of nature. The validity of any experiment depends on certain reference points that would ground the expression of any conclusion regarding the objectivity of a process, a state, or a certain aspect of reality. These reference points were expressed in measurement scales and any estimation implied metrical descriptions in almost all cases. Difference in degree or number has become for us the privileged mode to describe the characteristic features of the real. This way of understanding reality has inevitably extended to the description of humans. Since, as biological beings, humans are part of nature, it was considered that they too can be described by various ways of quantification. The enthusiasm that marked the end of Renaissance and the beginning of modernity in this project to quantify the data specific to human beings reached its peak in the nineteenth century but it started declining in mid of twentieth century. This decline did not affect the progress in refining instruments for the positive study of humans (on the contrary, this progress followed an exponential development trend); but it affected the faith that humans can be totally described in such a way. Our age is dominated by the need to measure, as an element that grants the sufficiency of any investigation. This imperative, which ceaselessly governs science, has been enforcing a distant attitude towards religious discourse, which was deemed ineffective because it does not quantify. The recent rectification of the vision on man by accepting the validity of religious experience and of the value of the discourse of spiritual tradition has made it possible, for the first time, to acknowledge other ways to estimate and evaluate in science. The crucial question is if these alternative ways to evaluate man can somehow meet the current need for rigor, and preciseness. Although it has not implied quantification, spiritual experience, especially the experience that we call mystical, has implied discursive needs that could separate what is genuine from what is false, the true path from paths towards deception. This is why this kind of search for precision has mainly had a practical character. This is also the site where the discourses of spirituality and of science meet on a common ground: that of the concrete, of the phenomenon.

In establishing the reference points that marked the constitution of a term of such complexity we have to start from how they were shaped, and especially from the path that originated the terms that will play a key role in fine-tuning the notion of person. The history of the constitution and fine-tunings of the term *hypostasis* is complex and there are various modern interpretations of the reasons that determined its use, for the first time, with reference to another understanding of man by the Fathers of Cappadocia in

the fourth century after Christ². This indicates a different understanding of the notion of man from the perspective of Christian revelation. The notion of *hypostasis* was used at the time of classical Greek philosophy and during Hellenism as the equivalent for *ousia*, but subsequently it acquired various shades of meaning that enforced a certain understanding of the essence of reality. Beyond this, the Cappadocians will achieve a genuine and significant change of meaning in the use of the term. On the other way, the term *prosopon* was part of the vocabulary of old Greek, and it signified the part of the head right under the forehead – what we call today face. Yet it was especially used to mean *mask*, as part of the props that actors in the ancient Greek theater used. It is known that from the perspective of Greek philosophy one cannot find the grounds to argue for the real essence of free human act, because what obsessed the mentality of Greek antiquity was the order and harmony of a world that was, essentially, *cosmos*. For the Greeks who lived during that age, the order of the world necessarily stood under the power of an order that was conceived rather from a logical perspective, which allowed no deviance from the laws of the harmony of the whole.

Greek tragedy exploited the conflict between man's attempts to act according to his own will, to avoid his destiny and disregard the will of Gods, although this attitude is necessarily doomed to failure; the closing scene of ancient tragedy always recorded the fulfillment of necessity. We are concerned here with what could be termed *limited freedom*, a phrase that represents, in fact, a logical contradiction. What matters is that the actor of tragedy feels the significations of the state of freedom, and steers – though in a limited and unsuccessful way - towards assuming the state of a *person*, characterized by freedom, uniqueness, and non-repeatability. The mask, in the acceptance of ancient tragedy, proves to be a superimposed element and not something that pertains to his true being. However, this dimension of *prosopon* was exploited by the Fathers of Cappadocia in order to confer the desired dimension to the understanding of the personal modality of existence of God in Trinity and of people. The spectacular leap was that of identifying *hypostasis* with *prosopon*. This is how the “face” acquired an ontological dimension – whereas previously it had been simply a mask. Thus, a double and mutual clarification of the meanings that the two terms needed to have in the new Byzantine spiritual horizon is performed. What is more, the semantic enrichment almost totally transforms the functions of *hypostasis* and *prosopon*.

² St. Gregory of Nyssa, St. Gregory of Nazianz and St. Basil the Great.

The Byzantine thought will deepen and re-signify the understandings of *prosopon* by highlighting the etymological implications of the term. This is so because in Greek, *person* is made up of *pros*, which means *towards, to, in the direction of*, and *ops* which means *glance, eyes, appearance, looks, face*. Is implied here is the dimension of direct, immediate report: relation. In this reinterpretation, *prosopon* excludes the possibility to understand the person as an individual as such beyond and outside of what we call relation. The depth of the personal mode of existence is indicated precisely by relation as specific difference, and it excludes any attempt at statistical understanding of individuality. The hypostatical dimension of the human individual and of God can only be understood as *hypo-stance* that is always becoming an exit and a relation towards the other. What is proper to the person is to be always outside itself, to be constantly steering towards something else. According to Yannaras, the Patristic ontological content of the person is represented by absolute alterity as existential difference from essence. The person is characterized by absolute alterity, by uniqueness and non-repeatability, yet this alterity cannot be conceptually expressed and framed; alterity must be lived as a concrete act, as non-repeatable relation.³ The experience of the *other* in a face-to-face relationship is the only and exclusive way to know him in that which is proper to him. What we encounter here is more than simple transmutation of meaning in the terms that begin to designate the *person*: words are used on another level. Yet the way to operate the distinction is not conceptual, because with the Trinitarian way of understanding divinity, it became clear that concepts have a limit in designating what lies beyond Creation, and this is when words started to have the role of *sign*, of a symbol of a reality.⁴ The person must be understood especially as *report* and as *relation* and it defines a *report* and a *relation*. The semantics of the word excludes the possibility to interpret the person as individuality per se, outside the space of the relationship. The perspective opened by this type of thinking, which will mark the discursive grounds of Eastern Christian spirituality, is one that resorts to other symbolic codes, and the dominant aspect is that of the *apophatism of the person*. One can argue that we find here a central articulation of the thesis of

³ Christos Yannaras, *Person and Eros*, Trans. Norman Russell, Holy Cross Orthodox Press, Brookline, 2007, p. 20.

⁴ Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, St Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood, 1976, p. 75.

spirituality, as well as the basic content of the difference from the Western cultural model. The later focused, with the development of scholastics, on the *apophatism of nature*.

The distinction between free will and freedom had a massive influence on many elements of Western philosophical thought, such as ethics and theological discourse, as well as on the whole Western cultural model. Dumitru Stăniloae indicates the limits of a certain understanding of the specificity of man's freedom, of the human ability to exercise the act of freedom, which has prevailed in the Western cultural model. He specifically refers to the solution described by Augustine in the understanding of the nature of freedom, when free will is invoked as the central element. What Stăniloae deemed to be a weak point of this description is the thesis of the neutrality of free will in relation to good or evil.⁵ This perspective implies the question: in the encounter between divine grace and liberty, which one will prevail: man's freedom or divine grace? If freedom prevails, if it is decisive, it somehow decides alone, for itself. If divine grace prevails, freedom is somehow forced into choosing the good. Both cases show a "weak" description of freedom; one cannot postulate the exercise of full liberty as a radically human act. Father Stăniloae argues that there is no such thing as absolutely neutral freedom, or free will. In man on his own, given the weakness of his nature or will, freedom easily goes towards evil deeds, or has a hard time resisting temptations towards evil. It cannot decide on its own towards an exclusively good deed. Free will, or absolutely neutral freedom, is an arbitrary construction of our thought.⁶ Eastern Christian understanding of man undertakes the study of human being by stages; it does not talk about humans and humanity as such but about stages and existential situations that humans have gone through, in which they find themselves and that they will reach. This is the demarcation point from the understanding of man inaugurated by modernity, an understanding limited to the static description of his *nature*. This description has its roots in metaphysics rather than in science, because it aims to describe that which is stable and *essential*. The recuperation of eastern perspective is very productive nowadays not just for philosophical discourse but also for the orientation of scientific research. In fact, the broader issue that needs clarification is how a certain doctrine on the person can be relevant for

⁵ Dumitru Stăniloae, *The Experience of God. Orthodox Dogmatic Theology*, Vol. I, Holy Cross Orthodox Press, Brookline, 1994, p. 124.

⁶ *Ibidem*.

contemporary science. Why such a preoccupation should not remain the domain of humanities, of a field such as ethics? Whereas one can bring arguments to support the relevance of the data of such anthropology for neurosciences, their contribution to border sciences, such as cosmology or quantum physics seems unclear. Yet such a discussion is valuable only when the general framework of the presupposition underlying it is revised, mainly those presuppositions that imply the possibility to approach the notion of person from the perspective of psychology or ethics but not from the perspective of ontology. In the twentieth century, Dumitru Stăniloae emphasized the need of such an understanding of one's personal mode of being, and, what is more, he gave a remarkable description of the implications of this vision. When man is understood as a modality of personal existence, he is not just a simple piece in a universal aggregate that is guided by immutable laws. The positivism that dominated the way to do science over the last three centuries, and whose influence is strong to this day, could not lend man anything more than the role of a ring in a chain of determination that is under the strict command of the causal laws of nature. This vision could hardly find a meaning to the notion of human freedom, and it has inevitably abandoned it to an approach that is ontic weak, namely the approach of ethics and, potentially, of psychology. So the notion of person could not be considered under any aspect of scientific research. As far as classical science is concerned, guided as it is by the rules of positive experiment and of its verifiability, *personal reality* as a mode of interaction with the world cannot even be considered. Yet, contemporary border science is in the situation to resort to what lies beyond the visible, when it must offer the description of a certain reality that eludes conventional scientific explanation. It increasingly takes into account the elements pertaining to the "data" of the personal mode of existence and influence. To a certain extent, medical, psychological, or advanced research in neurosciences, could describe the influence that man can have on the world or on himself by spiritual practices. The contemporary recuperation of the Eastern Christian perspective on the person can have significant consequences on sciences, especially in their border zones, because this vision presents an understanding of the person which supports explicitly a totally different dimension of the personal mode of existence. In this space the person is described as "active" on the ontic level, as having a radical influence on the created reality.

This understanding can also offer a different answer to the question about human freedom, to the question of how this freedom can be described

and understood. If the signification of freedom were to go beyond the borders of moral and moralizing discourse, then a consistent description of the effectiveness of the person's influence must be offered, from the perspective of the relationship between freedom and determinism. One question should be answered first: how can the status of a person, and the framework of the personal mode of existence, are described. We have already pointed out that the static description of a person, or the description in terms of an essence, is excluded. The person is not a static reality; it is something that can be intuited. However, what we might call *dynamism* in this case is not exactly simply to describe or framed. This dynamism is not similar to flux or flow; it is something more radical, an ontic dynamism. The person is a reality that "does not stand put" in its very fundamental grounds. It "moves," i.e. it "is in the making"; it becomes that which it was not. Man is not; he *becomes*, for he is called to go beyond himself, to be united with a nature beyond himself and all creation: to be united with God and, to a certain extent and with a certain meaning, to become God. The apophatism of the person is a phrase that must be interpreted in the light of this latter statement. The language of negation is more appropriate when one aims to talk about something that ceaselessly makes oneself and is beyond oneself in union with something above the self. Yet one must add that this calling and this proper feature of the person does not point to a single path, because everything is discussed within the limits of identity, of the unrepeatability, of unity. Nothing else exists but concrete persons and the concrete, unique and unrepeatably experience of each of them. Yet the communion between man and his Creator implies the paradoxical union of different natures. Man cannot remain man anymore. This situation invites a lot of things to say and to think of; at least as much as such a paradoxical situation can be put into words. This deification of man means that what we call freedom is not something that has been simply given to man; it has degrees, and levels, that correspond to this human-divine communion that is dynamic and existential. Although man, as personal reality, has freedom by his very constitution, the manifestation of this freedom supposes something more or something less; it supposes a certain way of becoming actual that cannot be presupposed beforehand. Or, when human powers are degraded, when the effects of the Fall become manifest, the actualization of freedom is limited; it is marked by the limit of the inauthentic, of the improper. The specific notion of *betterment* (understood as a process), typical for Orthodox spirituality, implies this way of increasing freedom. This is why the path towards perfection is a central topic in the texts of Orthodox spirituality. Yet this

progress, or *betterment*, as it is termed, as gradual acquisition of a deeper freedom, implicitly supposes an increasing unfettering from limits and determination.

It becomes necessary to clarify the term *determinism*, according to its function in various contexts. Its current use is today connected to how the laws of nature are manifested. Yet when this concept is used in connection with the discussion about the person, it cannot have the same meaning, because in that which is proper to the personal mode of existence one cannot talk about the existence and manifestation of laws, the structuring of personal existence in agreement with some previous determination. And yet, as we have already stated, the notion of perfection implicitly contains the idea of progress in freedom and therefore, of a passage from *less* to *more*. Certainly, this understanding of freedom means more than the possibility to exercise choice (although the latter is implied); it implies a mode of being that is corrupt in its possibility, a situation of being. Let us not forget that the notion of person must not be associated, in any way, to the soul or the spirit, because it is a reality that equally comprises the body. There are numerous examples of how the Fathers of the Church saw and described the person as complex and full reality, from which corporeality cannot be excluded. Thus, Saint Gregory of Nyssa envisioned human freedom in interaction with different parts of the human person and he explained how the body is connected to the mind and to free choice. Gregory envisioned the human person as a compound of various parts, each with its own dynamism. Among them, the highest is the intellect, whose main activity is the contemplation of various objects and their discrimination, especially the discernment between good and evil. Yet since the intellect is simple, the *aria* that includes the irrational soul is quite complex⁷. This irrational soul is linked to the body; it is a manifestation of the impulses of the body. According to Saint Gregory of Nyssa, the human person is thus created so as to take part in all levels of material, immaterial and divine reality⁸. The change of Adam's state after the Fall took place in the body; the body underwent change and addition, which equally implied the presence of a limit that had not been experienced before. This limit means, on the one hand, to live the duration that means inevitable flow towards death; on the other hand, it is a limit to man's possibilities of

⁷ Verna E.F. Harisson, *Grace and Human Freedom According to St. Gregory of Nyssa*, The Edwin Mellen Press, New York, 1992, p. 172.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 177.

interior and exterior manifestation. This exterior limitation, which is translated in all human needs for survival – for this is the condition of the thickened body, of the *garment of skin* as a state of perpetual dying, means subjection to the laws of nature. *Genesis* indicates that this was not man's original state; it therefore falls under the province of the improper and the inauthentic. According to exegesis in Patristic literature, the Fall of man, who had been nominated to rule over all Creation, brought about another state of the world, of the cosmos, affecting its each and every last stone. This conditioning that man, via his thickened body, starts to receive from nature is, after all, an effect of his own deeds. The fallen man's actual life on the earth means suffering and the pursuit of deliverance. This state has concrete consequences in man's complex relationship with what is called nature, and which includes his own corporeality. Christ's embodiment means the possibility to restore man's humanity, but only as something potential. This restoration becomes real in the concrete case of each man not identically, but in agreement with the characteristic features of the uniqueness of each personal exercise of the freedom *to be*. The restoration must not be understood as man's return to that which is proper to him, to his lost existential state; this change *leads to another relationship and another way to exercise his influence on nature and on creation*. This change of relationship must be understood as *real* and not symbolic, as one that produces real and concrete effects in nature. The Patristic texts highlight the fact that this is how man opens endless possibilities to bring about change and novelty in nature. This does not imply the flouting of nature's laws and rationality, but contributing to actualize the potencies that it contains and that otherwise would have never become manifest. The patristic vision on the world is that it was created as *a setting*, as the *site* of encounter between persons. The world does not have a meaning and a purpose in itself; it exists with a view to creating deeper and more effective possibilities for encounter between persons. This is so because the person is the reality of the highest degree of existence, because she is aware of her existence and of the existence of persons and things. Thus, the determinism of nature, the existence of some laws of physical reality, is not an eternal given; it was modified when Adam fell and it encounters continuous changes by the exercise of man's act of freedom, especially of the man who is on the path of restoration.

When we talk about the rationality of the world we give a more adequate expression to the purposes for which the world received its existence, a world which cannot have, under any circumstances, a purpose

and a meaning in itself, or could simply exist. If there are limits in Creation, and if they are not due to man's Fall, then the understanding of the limit must be positive: it is a limit that creates the possibility of communion, of the encounter, and that proves to engender an infinity of possibilities. Man's aim is definitely to overcome conditionings; this fact is apparent in the whole historical behavior of humanity. Throughout his whole history on the Earth, man has attempted, by all means, to go beyond his conditionings, dependences and limitations. The fact that he does science pertains to this need as well. According to Maximus the Confessor, man has a high calling: to mediate and to unite. The byzantine author sees that man is called to consistently integrate the macrocosm with the microcosm, the objective perspective with the subjective one, in a common vision of spiritual *transitus*. The natural tension in the macrocosm between sensitive and intelligible reality must be mediated in the human microcosm via the spiritual vocation that is proper to the man of ascetic practice and contemplation⁹. This mediation and unification asks for an *actual* change in reality, at all levels, for a subtle modification of a constitutive element in each of the terms of mediation. But there is yet another dimension: *theosis*, the Greek name for deification. The man is being deified, meaning that in some way he overcomes the limits of creation, and thus he has access to a knowledge that is beyond the world frames. But the consequences of this experience are much more ample, they imply the whole human being even the body. There are changes also in the references to the world, in the way we interact with it, so that we could talk about a *real* influence of man upon the world through his inner changes and not through the external direct actions or things.

It has become clear that what was understood by *physical reality* a century ago is just one aspect of its contemporary understanding. As Bernard d'Espagnat say, it becomes now increasingly clear that our senses do not reveal the real issues as they are. Occurrence of a reference to the action of human in fundamental axioms physics is sometimes stated explicitly, but it is often implied. This means a departure from the claim of objectivity of classical physics¹⁰. Nowadays, scientists admit that there is an

⁹ Paul M. Blowers, *Exegesis and Spiritual Pedagogy in Maximus the Confessor. An investigation of the Quaestiones ad Thalassium*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, Indiana, 1991, p. 131.

¹⁰ Bernard d'Espagnat, *On Physics and Philosophy*, Princeton and Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2006, p. 18.

informational level of matter, that information structures reality in a certain register. For classical physics, the statement that the human person, through her free acts, can influence matter in any way, was incomprehensible. This influence could, by no means, be proved by the type of measurements that Physics used in that time. Yet nowadays, quantum physics and neurosciences begin to come up with evidence of the influence that mind can have on matter. The current moment is one for the mutual opening between, on the one hand, theology in general, and Eastern-Christian spirituality in special, and science, on the other hand. Contemporary theologians resort to the texts of Christian tradition, also under the influence of the extraordinary scientific discoveries of the moment, and read Patristic statements about man and the rationality of creation under another interpretation grid. Scientists, in their turn, change their attitude towards the text of the Scriptures or towards Patristic literature, ceasing to consider them a collection of symbolic statements at the most, that do not apply immediately to the concrete physical reality, to its states and evolution. Eastern hesychasm proves to be such a discourse, that discusses the levels of reality and the diverse types of works that support it, be they created or non-created; the hesychast texts are an excellent opportunity for closeness between the discourse of sciences and the discourse of spirituality.

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