

# The Definition of Person: Boethius Revisited

## *Some Objections*

*Persona est rationalis naturae individua substantia.* So runs the classic definition of Boethius.<sup>1</sup> But is it a definition that is still of value? Or, to put it another way, is this the sort of definition that will serve for a philosophy of persons?

Certainly it is not Boethius's definition that is operative in contemporary discussions about persons.<sup>2</sup> Those who debate, for instance, about abortion and whether foetuses are persons tend to have in mind as constitutive of persons various features such as capacity for relationships with others or for self-valuation.<sup>3</sup> Those who say foetuses are persons mean only that they potentially possess such features. Again, those who speak of the moral dignity of persons have in mind their capacity for recognising and following moral rules, or something of the sort. One might say that the Boethian definition is implicit here insofar as it is rational nature that grounds these features of persons. But this would make the Boethian definition at least incomplete because it does not make explicit those elements of person that are uppermost or central in its use. If we are to define 'person' in such a way as to capture this use the Boethian definition will not do as it stands.

There are other problems with the definition also. It does not mention anything about pleasure or the capacity for enjoying certain kinds of pleasure, which at least one recent writer has claimed is what is really the sign or sufficient condition of being a person.<sup>4</sup> Also it does not mention anything about the bodily or the physical, yet this seems central to our idea of persons. There are some, indeed, who argue that without reference to body the notion of person or personal identity over time is incoherent.<sup>5</sup> One might say in

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<sup>1</sup> "A person is an individual substance of a rational nature." The definition is given in Boethius's *Liber de Persona et Duabus Naturis*, ch. 3.

<sup>2</sup> It is notable that the most recent article on persons in *The New Scholasticism* rather summarily dismisses Boethius: D. O. Dahlstrom, "Personal Pleasure", *The New Scholasticism*, LX, 1986, pp. 276-277. I respond to this article later.

<sup>3</sup> See, e.g., J. Harris, "In Vitro Fertilisation; the Ethical Issues", *Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 33 (1983), 224-226.

<sup>4</sup> See fn. 2.

<sup>5</sup> See the essay by A. J. Ayer and the introduction by A. G. N. Flew in Flew, ed., *Body, Mind and Death* (New York, 1964); also G. Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (London, 1949); T. Penelhum, "Personal Identity" in Edwards ed., *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (New York, 1967); and most recently, G. R. Gillett, "Disembodied Persons," *Philosophy* (July 1986), 377-386.

reply to this that the omission of reference to body in Boethius's definition is to enable us to use it of angels and the deity who have no bodies. But, first, one should not allow theological demands to distort the philosophical data, and if philosophically 'person' makes no sense without the physical, theologians will have to find some other term to express what they mean. Second, the absence of any mention of the bodily and an explicit reference to the rational only runs the risk of fostering a dangerously false view of the human being, giving the impression that the emotional, the imaginative, the artistic, the historically embodied, are not as integral to person as the rational. So if a notion of person that will ground a philosophy of person is what is in question here, the Boethian definition is clearly not the one required.

The comments so far are critical of Boethius with respect to what he omits. But other objections arise over what he includes, for it is evident that his definition is squarely within traditional metaphysics. This is signaled above all by the term 'substance'. The philosophy of empiricism, which is still very influential, particularly in analytic philosophy, has rejected the notion of substance as unintelligible, because it has no counterpart in experience. If person is to be analyzed this will have to be done in terms of the various psychological experiences, united together by memory or desire or some other principle of continuity, and understood as connected with a body (either by identity or at least causally) itself understood in terms of spatio-temporal continuity.<sup>6</sup> This is all that is necessary to ground or explain our concept of person, and mention of substance is wholly unnecessary, not to say problematic.

Perhaps a more radical rejection of Boethius's substance-ontology comes from Heidegger. According to him, traditional metaphysics has only served to cover up and obscure those primary showings-forth that need precisely to be uncovered. The lived experience of being persons or *Dasein* does not show forth substance or reason, but such existentialities as anxiety, moods, fallen-ness, guilt and temporality. To interpret the being of person in the purely theoretical terms of traditional metaphysics is to end up with an impoverished, not to say radically distorted, account.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> D. Parfit is one of the more radical here. He equates the identity of persons over time with that of nations over time. All there is is physical and psychological connectedness or continuity. *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford, 1984), esp. pp. 274-280.

<sup>7</sup> Dahlstrom, *op. cit.*, pp. 276-77.

One need not follow Heidegger through all the complexities of his thought, nor need one maintain that in his account of *Dasein* he meant to give an account, partial or complete, of the human person. What is important to note is the shift of emphasis he effected, and the way this has altered the approach taken to the question of person by those inspired by him. For, it is said, if one reflects on what is really first for us in our everyday experience, one will begin to see the force of the idea that what we are as persons shows itself to us in our projects, our plans, our hopes and fears, our joys, our boredom, our dealings with tools and things available to use, our escapings into the comfortable anonymities of the 'they', our being stretched out, through these features, from, to and in time; in short our preoccupation with, and care for, the fate of our own being. This, it is said, is the great merit of the Heideggerian analysis for the philosophy of person: he opens up a wholly fresh perspective. And this is something the Boethian definition cannot hope to emulate. Boethius, one might say, is just not in the same conceptual space; he belongs to a different focus of philosophical attention and one, moreover, that blinds and obscures for us those primal realities of our lived being that Heidegger has made it possible for us to recover.

One can see just how bad Boethius's definition is from this perspective by noting that all the things that form our lived experience would, when put into Boethian terminology, be labeled accidents. This makes Boethius's definition appear quite perverse. What is prior and more significant it relegates to a category that is inferior and secondary (for 'accident' ontologically is posterior to substance). Any philosophy that makes what is essential to person to be non-essential must be hopelessly wrong-headed. It has not even reached to the level of discerning what it is that needs to be analyzed.

### *Some Answers*

Boethius's definition is, however, not as hopeless as all this makes it appear. First of all, it is difficult to see how one can get rid of the idea of substance. The terms of traditional metaphysics also have their roots in basic phenomena of experience. Indeed substance is meant in such a way as hardly to beg any questions against Heidegger and his followers. It is drawn from the simple recognition of the being-there of things, or from the fact that

things *are*. Persons *are* just as are trees, dogs and stars. Of course the way these things are differs from one to the other; and it may be that persons *are* in a sense that is so different from the way non-persons are that the analysis of them ought to be conducted quite differently. But none of this is prevented by calling persons substances. All that this means in the context is that when talking about persons we are talking about original realities, or things that are in their own right and are not moments parasitic on something else that is in its own right (as say the colour of the dog *is* only by being *of* the dog, and not otherwise). It is evident that those who speak of persons are speaking of such original beings, even if they do not expressly say this.

But whatever one may say about Heidegger and Heideggerians, it seems evident that empiricist accounts of person are in need of a notion of substance. The reason for this derives from the phenomenon of time. Time is divided according to moments as extension is divided according to points, but it is not divided *into* moments, any more than extension is divided *into* points. For a moment has no duration and a point has no extension, and one will never get any duration by adding moments just as one will not get any extension by adding points. Moments and points are the divisions of duration and extension, not their parts; so that time is what lies between moments and extension what lies between points. In the case of time this means in particular that to be in time is not to be in a moment (nothing exists in a moment) but to be during moments. If one continually pares down time to the simply present, that is the present 'now' without past or future, the present contracts into ever smaller durations (this minute now, this second now, this millisecond now) until it vanishes altogether into the total absence of any duration at all. So if what is in time is not in a moment but during moments, then it is not in the present moment either but *through* the present *from* the past *into* the future.<sup>8</sup> In other words whatever is must endure through time and through the change that time measures. But notoriously Hume, the archetypal empiricist, denied that anything existed *through* time; time for him is the succession of discrete sense-contents or impressions and ideas.<sup>9</sup> A discrete sense-content, because it is not successive, cannot on his premises be in time or temporally extended. It exists, if it

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<sup>8</sup> Compare here Heidegger on the 'ekstases' of Dasein: *Being and Time*, section 68, especially page 339 of the German edition.

<sup>9</sup> *Treatise of Human Nature*, book 1, part 2; for his view of personal identity see book 1, part 4, section 6.

exists, in a single moment; which is to say it does not exist at all. So if person is explained as a succession of conscious states in this sense, then it will be dissolved into nothingness. It does not help either to posit the body as the locus of these contents, because body too is analyzed into a collection of ideas and impressions that are just as fleeting. If person is to be at all (or indeed if anything is to be) it must be something that is not such a collection. It must be something or a collection of somethings that endures through time.

But what is it to endure through time? It is to be identically the same now as then or later, and hence to be the same despite any changes that happen between the now and the then and the later. But once one has admitted that a thing can remain despite changes occurring in it, one is no longer obliged to say a thing is the same now as then because there is a chain of events, experiences or whatever, that can be traced in a continuous succession from then to now; one can be more bold and say it is that which endures or can endure throughout the successions. In that case the thing is not the succession but the subject of the succession of changes. So a person is not a collection or succession of experiences but that which (successively) has them. And this is no other than what is meant by substance.

Once this is admitted it is easy to admit individual substance. Indeed those who speak of persons typically stress that persons are individuals, unique and irreplaceable. This is in fact one of the features of persons most insisted on. So as far as this goes the notion of persons as individual substances seems hardly objectionable. In fact it seems to be precisely what is presupposed as an unanalyzed given in the other notion of person. For it is individual substances that are the beings characterized as capable of self-valuation, personal relationships, moods, fallen-ness and so on. Even if it is not said, this is what is implicitly being talked about. Boethius's definition at least has the merit of making it explicit.

But this is still not enough to preserve that definition as it stands. After all it relegates those features regarded as constitutive of persons to the realm of accidents, and ignores any reference to body, while making reason paramount or basic to everything else peculiar to persons.

To take reason first, part of the difficulty here is in the narrowness with which reason is generally understood nowadays. Reason ought not to be construed as identical

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with the instrumental and mathematical reason of the physical sciences. Reason is fundamentally the capacity to be aware of or to know whatever there is to be aware of or to be known, and to order actions, traits of character, emotions accordingly. Reason's range is only limited by the range of knowables. If one confines the knowable to the scientific or the mathematical, one is left with a pretty narrow idea of reason.<sup>10</sup> Paradoxically it is those who most object to reason in this sense who also do most to preserve it, for they are operating precisely with this notion of reason when they reject it as too narrow to capture or to base the fullness of the human being. So they say, for instance, that beauty, goodness, dignity, and so on are not part of reason because they are not knowable—they are objects of feeling or imagination or intuition or something of the sort. Thus they reinforce the relegation of reason to the hard 'objective' reason of modern natural science. But this cannot be the notion of reason that Boethius is using, for this narrowing of reason is a phenomenon of post-medieval philosophy. The 'reason' of the classical tradition is as much involved with the beautiful, the good, the lovely, and things loved (for reason in some sense loves its objects, at least to the extent they are lovable), as it is with the mathematical or 'factual'; indeed perhaps even more so.<sup>11</sup> It is reason that brings about the fullness of the human being because it opens up persons to the fullness of what is; without it emotions and feelings and intuitions would be blind or empty.

Here one should note that the same will apply to pleasure also. If the capacity for certain kinds of pleasure is to be seen as the mark or sufficient condition of persons, we have to specify what pleasures are. Kinds of pleasures are distinguished according to the kinds of activities or experiences that are pleasant.<sup>12</sup> In other words the activities are a better guide to what a person is than the pleasures. But the kinds of activities are those that Boethius's notion of reason is meant to capture. Hence even this appeal to pleasure to describe persons really points back to Boethius and not away from him.

One might say, therefore, that the dispute over the suitability of reason to capture

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<sup>10</sup> Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* is a *locus classicus* here. Of course he did not think that the objects of science and mathematics were the most important or the only things. But he did, in the *Tractatus*, think they were the only things, besides logic, one could reason and talk about. On the other hand the logical positivists of the Vienna Circle and the A. J. Ayer of *Language, Truth and Logic* thought not only this but also that science, mathematics and logic were the only things simply. They lacked Wittgenstein's mysticism.

<sup>11</sup> A classic expression of this is Plato's *Symposium*.

<sup>12</sup> As Dahlstrom really admits, *op. cit.*, pp. 280-281.

the human and everything belonging to the human should be less about whether there is more to the human than reason, than about whether there is more to reason than the 'hard' or 'cold' reason of modern science. Boethius certainly thought there was and that is why he, along with most other ancient and medieval philosophers, used reason to explicate the character of the human being. It is not at all obvious that he was wrong.

Still this leaves untouched perhaps the most serious objection to Boethius's definition, namely that it relegates to the accidental precisely those features of persons that emerge in lived experience as distinctive of them. Our 'being' lies, not just in mere existing, but in the exercising of our existence, in the actual living out of what we are; and this actual living, will in Boethius's view, belong to the category of accidents. Yet surely it is precisely here that we find what is most important about persons. What is most important is made least important by Boethius.

This criticism is based on a rather mechanical interpretation of the substance/accident distinction, an interpretation that treats accidents as if they were some sort of separate entity stuck onto substance like external bits. But this is quite erroneous. Substances do not have accidents in some external fashion, they are through their accidents (one should not forget that, even in the classical and medieval tradition, the substance/accident distinction, though regarded as necessary and real, is nevertheless an abstraction made by the mind from within what in reality is a single whole). Accidents are the ways of substance, how substance expresses itself; they are not things in themselves; they are of substance and substance is in accidents. In that case substance without its accidents, its expressings, is incomplete and imperfect; for it is through them that it is articulated in the ways of its being. This is especially so in the case of activity and operation. A thing's acting is not its substance in the sense that it would cease to be if it ceased to act (persons do not cease to be persons when asleep or resting), but it is the exercising of its substance, the actual bringing into the open the latent capacities inherent in it. And without this bringing into the open, substance would remain barren and fallow like an unsown field. Operation and activity, with their concomitant pleasure (the lived being of person, if you like), are in a sense the flowering flourishing of substance, that for which substance is, by which it is formed and in which it is completed.

In this sense to talk of accidents is not to talk of the inferior or lesser, for truly to

speak of accidents is to speak of substance, but substance understood as articulated and perfected through its ways of being, not as bare standing out from nothingness. If substance by itself is first in the order of mere existence, substance as formed through its ways of being is first in the order of perfection and completion.

But if this is so why not state this in the definition of person, that it is not substance that is being talked about but formed and articulated substance? The answer is clear enough. To do this would imply that only perfect and actually energized persons are persons, and that would be absurd, for it would mean that young humans or humans asleep were not persons. In fact even those who advert to such features as capacity to value life or enter into meaningful relationships with others talk of the capacity to do this, not the actual doing of it. And the same will apply to all the features of lived experience, for those who talk about lived experience as central to the idea of person are not claiming that one is always enjoying this lived experience, or that the experience is present all at once and not given successively over time. What they are claiming is that a person is through these experiences, or that it is by these experiences that one is able to identify those capacities (i.e. the capacity for this sort of experience) that distinguish persons from non-persons. So all one should need to do to identify persons is to identify substance along with this capacity or collection of capacities. But surely this is just what Boethius intends in speaking of rational nature, for he intends this to be the root or ground of the lived experience of person, i.e. that dimension of this substance that makes it this sort of substance and not the substance that a tree or a stone is.

Since the whole discussion of abortion and whether and to what extent fetuses and neonates are persons hinges on the terms ‘potential’ and ‘capacity’, there is no reason to think that Boethius’s definition is irrelevant here. In any case what needs clarifying is the various kinds of capacity or potential, and what sort of closeness to actual exercise of them is required to constitute a being as a person. This is an involved question, no doubt, but it contains nothing fatal to Boethius’s definition.

One might still object that Boethius’s definition is defective on the ground that it says nothing about the body. One could, of course, easily remedy this by adding ‘bodily’ or ‘animal’ to ‘rational’ in the definition. Then one will get a definition of the human being that will not run the risk of ignoring all the consequences for the human being of its being

physically embodied, for these will be forced on one's attention as soon as one starts analyzing what it is to be an animated reasoning body. Also one will not run the risk of incoherence, if trying to identify person without reference to body is incoherent.

So why not add this to the Boethian definition from the beginning? A main reason not to do this is to avoid begging any questions about the necessary connection between reason and body. Maybe these two things are not separable, or maybe we cannot conceive them in separation; in which case one can state this. But until this is known (and it is not known a priori), there is no reason to force an answer. Besides, if reason is the root of what makes these bodies (human bodies) to be persons, or grounds those features that pick out persons from non-persons, then wherever other rational beings are found they too must count as persons, and the term will be applicable, at least analogically, to them as well. Perhaps some of these beings will not have bodies, or will have different bodies, for is there anything, in the idea of reason as such that requires it to be connected to human bodies or even to body at all? It would be premature to beg the question and confine the personal to the human. If we were to find that reason is indeed confined to body, then we could state that and say that only embodied reason is possible. But this would be a discovery about reason; it would not be something that strictly belonged in its definition (just as having angles equal to two right angles does not belong in the definition of triangle, though only such triangles are possible). So reference to body should not put in the definition of person either. Still it is person as it presents itself to us in human persons that is first and most clear to us; and if one is going to get any concrete grasp on the phenomena one is going to have to focus on the human and hence the bodily. But this does not require us to change the definition, unless we want to confine it to definition of human person. If so it is easy to focus Boethius's definition so as to achieve this. The value nevertheless of the definition as it stands is that it is capable, if the evidence points that way, of being applied beyond the human, and so of admitting analogical extensions.<sup>13</sup>

There is one final point about the notion of rational in the definition of person that is worth making. Because this is intended so broadly it is in principle capable of embracing

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<sup>13</sup> Compare Aristotle's definition of soul in *De Anima*, book 2, chapters 1-4, which is capable of analogical extension or concentration depending on whether one is talking of soul as such or particular sorts of soul, as vegetative, sensible or intellectual soul.

all of that which belongs to persons. But more exclusive definitions that locate person in some feature like the capacity to form and follow the moral law, or to recognize others and their dignity, or to value life, or in temporality, or moods or anything of the sort, run the risk of missing something that does belong to persons and ought to be included in one's understanding of them. For instance, these notions of person (and most others in current philosophies of person, with the possible exception of the notion based on pleasure) focus on the practical and the moral side of person, playing down the contemplative and the leisurely. But why should not these features also be integral to being a person, or even more integral?<sup>14</sup> Why limit person in this sort of way to begin with? Paradoxically, it is not Boethius's definition (which could include all the above as well as a lot more) but various modern alternatives that are most likely to distort the phenomenon of person, or narrow it down to exclude part of the rich variety that is really there. It may be that some features are more distinctive or central than others, but if they all belong, then they should not be excluded, explicitly or implicitly.

In conclusion then, I think it may be said that Boethius's definition is by no means an obvious non-starter for the philosophy of person. In fact in many respects it may be the best one. In which case a philosophy of person grounded on that definition is going to be more accurate and more compelling than others. It will also direct attention back to key ideas such as nature, reason and substance, that are in particular need of close analysis, and which may yield more fruitful results than even the term 'person' by itself, or any of the moral and other features mentioned earlier. Such a philosophy of person may prove to be a better way to sort out the problems of person than any current alternative.

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<sup>14</sup> cf. J. Pieper, *Leisure the Basis of Culture* (New-York, 1952).