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HOW MIGHT WE APPLY THE TRINITARIAN NOTION OF ‘PERSON’ TO MERE HUMANS?

A b s t r a c t. Theological reflection along with the discernment of Church councils during the first seven centuries of the Church’s history led to a remarkable and original notion of ‘Person’ which finds a place at the heart of the Christian profession of faith. We believe in one God in three Persons and in the Son of God, the second Person of the Trinity, who unites in himself divine and human natures. Such a conception of Person applied to God did not result in a similarly profound re-thinking of the personhood of human beings other than Christ, that is, mere humans. But what might be the outcome if such a translation were to be made? This article explores that possibility, highlighting three features of the theological understanding of divine Persons: divine Persons *cannot be conceived* in positive terms; divine Persons are *utterly singular*; and divine Persons have reality *only in relation to each other*. While at first glance the translation does not look promising, it is argued that a deeper analysis suggests otherwise. Upon that basis, the article examines some of the implications of such an understanding and in doing so, introduces the concept of ‘semblant’ as a necessary mediating concept between those of ‘person’ and ‘human nature’.

Keywords: person; nature; self; relationality; singularity; semblant.

INTRODUCTION

The theological concept of ‘person’ and its complementary notion of ‘nature’ were developed through early church teaching on the Holy Trinity and the Incarnation. Persons in this case referred solely to the Father, Son and

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Holy Spirit while ‘nature’ expressed the unity of the Godhead and encompassed those attributes which were shared by the divine Persons. The later history of this theologically derived notion of ‘person’ took a different turn, moving away from the early complementarity of nature and person in order to embrace the notion of human person for which complementarity seemed ill fitted. In this new conception, ‘person’ was subsumed under the category of ‘nature’. A human person came to refer to the full human reality, body and soul, while a more general notion, aimed at accommodating both divine and human personhood, as famously expressed by Boethius, thought of a person as an individual substance of a rational nature.

One might ask, however, whether it is possible and fruitful to develop the initial, complementary concept of ‘person’ in a different direction, that is, so that it covers not only divine Persons but also mere humans. Does it give a coherence to the area of theological anthropology beyond that afforded by the classical, nature-based concept of ‘person’? Here I attempt to set out a conceptual framework for the application to humans of the concept of ‘person’ as it was developed with the theological controversies of the early Church—or at least according to one reading of that process. I first take note of the features of the theological notion of personhood and test whether human persons might be understood in the same or similar terms, taking into account the difference between divine and creaturely existence. I then draw comparisons with the traditional concept of ‘person’ as it has been applied to human beings to show that the former version is to be preferred. I conclude with comments which draw out some of the implications of this theological notion of person.

1. WHAT ARE ‘PERSONS’ AND ‘NATURE’ AS USED IN CONCILIAR TEACHING ON THE HOLY TRINITY AND THE INCARNATION?

1.1. The Holy Trinity: Persons and Nature

The key words used from the Council of Constantinople (381) onwards are *hypostasis* and *prosopon*, translated into Latin as *subsistentia* and *persona*. They, of course, are used to refer to the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the three divine persons. *Physis* (in Latin, *natura*) and *ousia* (in Latin, *substantia*) are the terms used to describe the qualities of God in his unity. Reading the

core dogmatic documents,¹ we find attributed to the divine nature such qualities as ‘eternal,’ ‘all-powerful’ and ‘all-knowing.’ Since the divine Persons share in the one Godhead, they too are described in the same terms, e.g. “The Son is eternal.”² However, when treated ‘individually’ as it were, the Father as Father, for example, and without reference to the one Godhead or the divine processions, we find that it is negative or relational terms which are used. The Holy Spirit is not the Father or the Son; The Father is the Father of the Son, the Spirit is spirated from the Spirator(s) (i.e. Father and Son).³ We might say that, while it is true that God *in his nature* is a mystery to us, at least we can make some sense of the notion of ‘divine nature’ through such attributes as ‘omnipotence’ or ‘perfect goodness.’ On the other hand, with the idea of divine Person *as Person*, the mystery is of another kind since we have no way of giving it any substantive content. The Persons are not positively describable; they are radically singular such that even the category of ‘person’ is not given any content; and the relationships between Persons are also described in unique ways.⁴

The question arises then: if ‘person’ is a mystery to which we cannot provide any positive content apart from relationality, how then are we to make sense of any connections which the concept has with other non-person concepts such as that of nature? One such bewildering connection is that which affirms that “God is three Persons in one nature.” How many are the failed attempts to grasp this statement of faith! The difficulty here suggests

¹ The early trinitarian statements are few, with Christological matters quickly taking over as the centre of attention after the beginning of the fifth century. The clearest articulations of the doctrine of the Trinity are, in fact, found in Spanish synodal texts, especially those held at Toledo over the ensuing centuries..

² For example, Synod of Rome (382), *Decretum Damasi*, 24, in Heinrich Denzinger, *Compendium of Creeds, Definitions, and Declarations on Matters of Faith and Morals*, 43rd ed. (hereafter DH), ed. Peter Hünermann (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012), 176: “Anyone who, while saying that the Father is God, that his Son is God, and that the Holy Spirit is God, divides them and means (several) gods and does not say that they are God on account of the one Godhead and might that we believe and know to belong to the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit ... he is a heretic.”

³ Cf. First Synod of Toledo (400?), *Symbolum Toletanum*, 2 (DH 192): “If anyone says and [or] believe that God the Father is the same as the Son or he Paraclete, let him be anathema;” Eleventh Synod of Toledo, *Profession of Faith*, 15, 17 (DH 528): “In the relative names of the Persons, the Father is related to the Son, the Son to the Father, and the Holy Spirit to both . . . For the Father is Father not with respect to himself but to the Son . . .”.

⁴ For a discussion of these three aspects of divine Personhood, see Colin Patterson, “The Holy Trinity: Between Mystery and Analysis,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 20 (2018), 3: 381–401.

that not only is the notion of 'Person' itself a mystery, but so, too, are statements that *link* 'Person' to other non-Person concepts such as nature. The confusion surrounding the 'three Persons in one nature' belief would then be seen to issue from ignoring the mysterious character of the link, and thus from the resulting assumption we make, that Persons are entities in some way, just as 'nature' is. In that case, 'three equals one' is bound to flummox us, for the reason that we are failing to acknowledge the mystery in statements that link divine Persons to the nature of the Godhead.

One might object, however, by pointing to the conciliar teaching about the divine processions. Here we have clear statements linking Persons and nature. For example, the Nicene Creed affirms: "We believe . . . in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God, born of the Father before all time, . . . begotten, not made, of one substance with the Father." The Son is *begotten of the substance* of the Father. In trying to make sense of this we are immediately confronted with difficulties. What does 'begotten' mean here? The contrast with 'made' implies that any subordination of Son to Father is to be rejected. But then, if the Son is begotten from the *substance* of the Father, then in some sense He is derived from the Father, and that suggests His subordination to the Father. And even though the phrase 'before all time' aims to forestall any sense of time in relation to the begetting, 'begetting' simply makes no sense without some notions of 'before' and 'after', active and passive and thus a prior Begetter and a posterior Begotten.⁵

In view of these difficulties, we might consider an alternative approach. This would hold that, rather than treating procession statements as incorporating the notion of 'Person' into the language of substances as seems to be the case, instead we understand the doctrine of the divine processions as serving a function of confirming the truth that, despite the 'conceptual chasm,' as it were, between the notion of 'Person' and that of 'nature,' the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are truly one God; that is, being three Persons does not undermine the divine unity. The three Persons are indeed one nature, each in their own way. But further, from the teaching on the divine processions we can

⁵ On these points, cf. Eleventh Synod of Toledo, *Profession of Faith*, 28, 29, 33 (DH 531, 532): "(28) Nevertheless, these three Persons are not to be considered separable since, according to our belief, none of them ever existed or acted before another, after another, without another. (29) For they are inseparable both in what they are and in what they do, because, according to our faith, between the Father who generates and the Son who is generated . . . there has not been an interval of time when the one who generates would precede the one who is generated . . .;" "(33) it is impossible to understand one Person without the other; one cannot conceive of the Father without the Son, nor can the Son be found without the Father."

also conclude that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are singular and singularly related to each other, rather than simply names or indexes for some kind of more general or abstract reality. The distinctive modes of procession for Son and Holy Spirit (begetting, spiration) point to this distinctiveness, as do the names revealed to us for the Persons (Father, Son and Holy Spirit). In this reading, the teaching of the divine processions does not offer a clarification in terms of ‘substance’ language of the relations between the divine Persons, but rather assures us of the reality of the tri-unity and the genuine singularity of the Persons.

If this is the case, then, we are still able to affirm our key conclusion that, any statement linking the mystery of the notion of ‘Person’ to the nature of the Godhead, shares in that very mystery.

2. WHAT ABOUT THE INCARNATION? DOES CONCILIAR TEACHING ON THIS TOPIC SUPPORT WHAT HAS BEEN ARGUED ABOVE?

The central question that was addressed by the Council of Ephesus (431) and the Council of Chalcedon (451) was the relationship between the divine Person, the Son of God, and his human nature. Two distortions of the Catholic faith had to be resisted: one which sought to preserve the unity of Christ—that the divine and human natures were truly united—but at the expense of one of the natures, invariably the human; and the other which fully affirmed the complete integrity of the two natures, but in such a way as to compromise the unity of Christ. This latter defective teaching required of the Church that it affirm in the strongest possible terms the complete unity of the two natures, yet in a manner that did not compromise the integrity of each of them. The approach of the Council fathers was to say that this unity was a particular form of unity which it called ‘hypostatic’—we might translate that as ‘personal’—and to identify that union of natures with the Person of the Son of God. How did conciliar teaching further characterize that union? How did it connect the second Person of the Holy Trinity to the union of the two natures? Again, in a way similar to its trinitarian teaching, it offered no positive affirmations but settled for negative statements—the hypostatic union exists ‘without confusion, without change, without division, and without separation.’ In relation to Christ’s human nature, conciliar Christological teaching attributed both a complete body and soul. No part of Christ’s soul—and this means no function of a human soul—was to be identified with any

operation of the Person of the Son of God. Again, we can see that the same complementarity between person and nature applied.

Now complicating matters somewhat was the teaching of the *communicatio idiomatum*, that whatever could be said of Christ in his human nature, e.g. that he walked dusty roads of Palestine, or washed his disciples' feet, was to be affirmed of the Son of God as the one subject of all Christ's human actions but also all of those deeds which called for use of his divine powers. It was necessary to assert the truth of this way of speaking about Christ because otherwise we would end up with a divided Christ, with the human nature performing acts appropriate to his humanity, and miracles and special insight into the heart of man being attributed solely to his divine nature; in other words, we would have two subjects. And yet language which expressed the sharing of divine and human characteristics by the one Person in Christ would seem to be a case of giving content to the relation—in a *non-mysterious* manner—between the Son of God and his humanity, that is, between a divine Person and nature, in this case human nature, something which, as we noted above with the divine Trinity, we could not do.

Many theologians of those times thought that this was possible, that a *philosophical* analysis of that relation could be articulated so as to help to clarify matters. Yet, as later, and valiant but failed attempts by the medievals showed, no satisfactory analysis could be offered and one must therefore wonder whether, for Christology, it is even possible to do so, given these failures. It seems that always Christ's human nature loses out to the divine subject; something of that nature has to be set aside. The typical manner of describing the link was to think of the divine Person as the supposit to which the human nature is joined. Whereas, for entities other than Christ, the supposit and the properties joined to it are treated as belonging to the one substance, in the singular instance of Christ, this was not the case, with the supposit here belonging to the Person rather than to the human nature. From this understanding, further accounts of the relation, including cause-effect and part-whole, were developed. For example, Christ the Son of God *caused* the human actions which the disciples could observe. As noted above, however, proposals of this kind invariably led to the criticism that the human nature of Christ was in some way less than that of other humans. In the case of this example, Christ's human actions would always be externally caused unlike the internal causation which is generally assumed to be the case with actions of mere humans.

One way to avoid these difficulties is to take special note of the approach of the early Church councils—or rather what they refused to do—and that

was not to „fill in the blanks”, not to give a philosophical account of just how it was that the Person of the Son was the ‘subject’ of the human actions of Christ. If this conciliar practice is at all instructive we might draw the implication that it is, in fact, not appropriate to provide descriptions of the relation between the divine Person of the Son and His human nature, for the same reason that it was not fitting to do so in relation to Persons and divine nature in the Holy Trinity. Persons are mysteries, and we might reasonably conclude that the relations between Persons and nature are also mysterious.

3. HOW MIGHT WE APPLY SUCH NOTIONS OF ‘PERSON’ AND ‘NATURE’ TO MERE HUMANS?

3.1. The Situation at Present

The theological tradition has lived a long time with a model of humans which speaks of soul, the immaterial part of our nature (embracing the strictly intellectual dimension), and body, that is, our material side. Together these two ‘principles’ have been understood to make up one reality, one human person. Magisterial teaching has adopted this understanding of personhood, and certainly in our time, this manner of speaking is justified in light of the contemporary tendency to separate body and soul, to diminish the full unity of the human being, or in the language of this article, the human person. Yet it is also clear that, within this framework, human nature and person do not stand in the same kind of relationship as is the case when we talk about the triune God. Of course, the Church’s Magisterium is not bound, in its own statements about the human person, by any particular philosophical foundations, however, it is commonly assumed that it has committed itself in some sense to conceptions of soul, body, person and nature that view persons according to Boethius’ definition, i.e., a person is an individual substance of a rational nature. Here the emphasis is on the unity of human persons.

This is a long way from the Person-divine nature relationship that has been set out above, and what it means is that some serious re-structuring will be called for if we are going to apply the notion of ‘person’ as it was developed in relation to God, so as to bring to bear its truth to the personhood of mere humans. We recall that, in this perspective, rather than relating, in a specifically philosophical manner, person and nature as we find it in the Boethian definition, in trinitarian theology and Christology the relation has been affirmed—the three divine Persons are one God—but not conceptually

articulated. Still, we might ask, what would things look like if we followed this latter path in relation to mere humans.

In this case, the first thing we notice is that ‘person’ becomes a rather rarified, spiritual notion, unlike the case with the traditional understanding of the soul. In the former case, the intellect and will do not form part of the notion of ‘person’ since, as we have seen, any such ideas when applied to God fall on the side of nature. And we can go further and say that, on this view, there is nothing of our human nature that we can attribute to it as person. As a consequence, we find that the notion of ‘human nature’ now embraces both the material *and* the immaterial elements of the traditional schema. Human nature, then, is now viewed as being open to a deeper scientific scrutiny; we have no need to bracket out aspects of our nature (intellect, will) from such examination since our dignity as humans resides primarily—although not exclusively—in our spiritual, personal ‘side’. This personal dimension, in its obscurity, can, however, be illuminated by relating it to the person of Christ. For as was proclaimed at the Second Vatican Council, ‘The truth is that only in the mystery of the incarnate Word does the mystery of man take on light . . . Christ, the final Adam, by the revelation of the mystery of the Father and His love, fully reveals man to man himself.’⁶ In other words, although the Person of Christ is divine, if we carefully consider Christ in his personhood and in his human nature, we will be able to see more clearly the anthropological structure of mere humans in their fullness. We will endeavour to now elucidate that structure in the light of Christ.

4. HUMAN PERSONS: REVEALED AND HIDDEN

In his relationship with the Father, Christ showed himself lovingly obedient, submissive to the Father’s will, committed to communicating to his disciples all that the Father had given him. All of these, we note, are not things we would attribute to the Son as divine Person, since as such He is not subordinate to the Father in the manner that these characteristics imply. Rather, in acting this way, Christ was showing clearly his human nature, a created nature that is subordinate to the Father. And yet, while we do not have access to the relationships between the divine Persons within the immanent Trinity, we might reasonably guess that how the Son and Father relate

⁶ Vatican II, *Gaudium et spes*, 22.

to each other—at least from our limited and accommodated human perspective—is in some way hinted at in what we observe when Christ interacts with his heavenly Father. Abstracting, as it were, from the aspects I have mentioned, that is, removing the dimensions of subordination, we have as an irreducible residue, the love for the Father shown by the Son. What we observe in Christ is the kenotic form of the love between Father and Son.

I want to propose that we can see, in a similar way, the truly *personal* in us humans when we act in the same way as Christ acted in relation to His Father, that is, if we live in a manner which is lovingly obedient to the Father. That, of course, can only happen by the grace of God; the New Testament refers to it as ‘being in Christ’. More specifically, we show ourselves to be more like *persons* to the extent that we are ‘in Christ’ or participate in the relationship between Christ and the Father. Within our earthly life, this participation manifests itself in the way we act towards our fellow human beings, a mode of relating we call ‘love’. Of course, we will only show complete love and full likeness to Christ in the age to come, so our expression of our personhood is always only partial in this life however saintly we are. If this idea has merit, immediately we need to forestall a specific concern: is it the case that we are only persons insofar as we love? In response to this, two points are important to highlight here.

First, at this point we observe that, while our personhood is only *manifested* in our Christlikeness, we are actually given the capacity to do so at the time of our coming to be human, that is, at conception. Thus, simply in virtue of our being humans we possess the dignity of persons from the outset through this capacity for love, which is unique among animal species, even though we are not in a position to display signs of our personhood until we are able to love according to Christ’s love. Here we note a significant difference from the Person-nature relationship within the divine Trinity. In the Trinity there can be no priority for either the Threeness or the unity—both are eternally present. In humans, by contrast, nature has a temporal priority since, for much of the life of an individual, human nature can express itself, (e.g. prior to the age of responsibility, during periods of dementia) often without any evidence of the presence of a person.

Second, we are hampered by a Fall-induced disorder in our human nature which also limits this expression of personhood. While we have the full capacity for personhood at the time of our coming-to-be, we require the assistance of divine grace to move us in the direction of its complete expression when we are fully ‘in Christ.’ This grace is first a gift of the sacrament of baptism, but also of the other sacraments. In less certain and hidden ways,

it can also work within the lives of those who have not yet explicitly responded in faith to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

In view of this, it becomes clear that, according to this understanding, it appears that human persons as such are largely obscured from our view; we do not observe them apart from the indirect evidence of actions which demonstrate graced, obedient love in Christ. Yet, given that such love can come about only from the 'intrusion' into the fabric of this-worldly processes, that is, from divine engagement within salvation history which reaches its high point in the incarnation of the Son of God and of the redemption he wrought for mankind, we can see the *theological* rather than the philosophical sense of the notion of 'person' as it is presented here. Merely human persons are truly spiritual realities, and we gain this insight by extending the Christological teaching of the early Church.

4.1. Person or Nature—to Which Does the Self Belong?

Contrary to the classical understanding of persons, rationality in this framework does not belong to the 'essence' of human persons. This is not to deny the importance of such a characteristic of human beings since a sufficient level of intellectual capacity is a necessary condition for the expression of personhood. The faculty of reason, as is the case for the incarnate Son of God, belongs to human nature but to affirm this is immediately to raise the question of the status of the subject of the operation of human reason, the subject in fact of any human action, passion, or experience. Are we to locate the self, the human mind, or consciousness, along with reason itself, in human nature rather than in the person? According to the scheme proposed here, the short answer is 'yes', each of these elements of human existence belongs to our nature, not to our personhood. To see how this makes sense, we might observe that, to the extent that we consider the self, the mind and other similar concepts as abstracted from the experiences of individuals, that is, as belonging to a common reality, we might in principle—and very likely in actuality—be able to grasp the mechanisms by which they come into existence and operate within our lives. Certainly, we have experiences as selves which are incommunicable to others, e.g. our particular experience of the colour 'yellow' or a distinctive form of pain, and for that reason, these cannot enter into the territory of common and observable reality. Yet, as linkages between subjective experience and brain function grow increasingly close with more intense empirical scrutiny, it is likely that we will be less persuasive in arguing for the transcendent distinctiveness of the self, con-

sciousness and the like. Neither these features of humans nor that of rationality are beyond the scope of naturalistic analysis and as such are to be viewed as part of human nature rather than of persons. This is in line with the Christological affirmation that Christ's intellect and will belong to his human nature. (But see below for qualifications to this statement.)

5. THE SHARED CHARACTERISTICS OF HUMAN AND DIVINE PERSONS

So far, I have discussed persons in relation to human nature, but I have said little about persons themselves. I will now do so, looking to the model of divine Persons as a way of entering into the topic. Recall that the notion of divine Person could be described apophatically or in terms of negation as (a) not to be confused with the divine nature, and (b) as radically singular, or not belonging to a category of divine Person (even though human speaking we need such a category). The other thing about divine Persons we can state, on the basis of conciliar teaching, is that they exist solely in relation to each other. And since we humans cannot conceive of binary relations between Persons when there is only one divine nature—for humans, relations between two persons are always linked to two particular natures or bodies—it seems to be the case that we must think of the *relationality* between Persons also in an apophatic sense, that is, as not conceivable in terms of natures or entities. When it comes to Persons, we are reduced to speaking purely of „realities”—and even here in an accommodated sense. Every philosophical description is excluded.

Taking account of these three ways of (negatively) conceiving of divine Persons, let us now consider these same three aspects as they might apply to human persons. First, the mutually exclusive distinction of person and nature in relation to mere humans we have already described and so we need not linger over that. The second apophatic quality, radical singularity would seem to follow from the affirmation of the mutually exclusive distinction between person and nature; we cannot attribute any positive, natural qualities to persons, and thus there exist no such qualities for any two persons to share. For this reason, we are justified in proposing the radical singularity of human persons.

Now, it is with the third aspect of the notion of divine Persons, their essentially relational existence, that we seem to run into problems since our human selves look to be closely tied to our bodies which themselves are not,

of their very essence, in relationship with other bodies. Thus, as bodies, given a certain level of intelligence, we are able to live by ourselves, say, as a hermit. It is understandable, then, that we should think that our persons too, just like our bodies, can operate outside of relations with other persons.

However, I would argue that, according to the notion of human person proposed here, personhood is indeed truly relational. We can see this if we consider that indications of the presence of a human person come to light when someone acts truly according to the mind of Christ, participating in the obedient love which Christ showed towards the heavenly Father. Such love is always directed towards the Father and shows itself, in the context of earthly life, as love for one's neighbour. We can see here the inherently relational dimension of these indications of the presence of human persons.

In the previous section, the reader will have noticed that I used two distinct meanings of 'person', one as the term is commonly understood within anglophone Western culture, and that quite different meaning which is proposed here. Now while there are certainly persisting uncertainties associated with the former meaning, at least in a broad sense we know what we are talking about. However, the latter meaning of 'person' is by comparison much more obscure. As I have argued, this is because many of those features which we associate with the everyday concept of personhood, such as rationality, selfhood, and such, are, according to the alternative notion, to be assigned not to persons but to human nature. And yet, despite this seeming obscurity, it is true nonetheless that the apophaticism in relation to the divine Persons does not hinder us from relating *personally* to them; we are able to worship the Father, through the Son in the power of the Holy Spirit. That is, each divine Person is addressable. This is due to the fact that we already possess, in our everyday understanding of persons, with its cognate notions of self, mind, consciousness and the like, a schema that is closely related to the theological concept of Person proposed here. Let us consider further this relatedness.

One of the characteristics of persons as understood in its everyday sense is that we habitually and unwittingly treat human utterances and actions as though they issued from outside of the causal texture of reality. For example, when I say that last night I saw a full moon, a listener will take it for granted that I have been able to stand outside of the events of nature, observe them, and utter a statement that communicates as a truth something *about* that event. It is as if we believe that utterances and actions actually commence new causal chains. In fact, we are so used to this mode of thought that when someone endeavours to live by denying this conviction, we usually

find that in their attitudes and actions, they shed qualities such as truthfulness and helpfulness that have traditionally helped bind us together as communities.⁷ We assume and rely upon this sense of ourselves, and the assumption of nature transcendence, as we might call it, would appear to be essential to the maintenance of society. This apparent capacity to stand outside of nature—even though I have argued that such cannot be the case—is a feature which is similar to the idea of person as ‘not-nature’ which is proposed here.

Another attribution we make to persons in the everyday meaning of that word is that they are unrepeatable. To see how this is the case, we might consider a thought experiment that imagines an evil scientist who kidnaps a man’s wife and, in order to keep her for himself, produces an exact replica of her (down to the last atom) which he offers to the man as a replacement for his wife. We would envisage that the husband would not accept as his wife the replica that was offered. We might reason that shared experience or shared history can never be repeated, yet these form part of the relationship between the spouses. From this we might conclude that in our everyday understanding, a person is more than simply a particular form belonging to a potentially multi-membered class. For this reason, we conclude that we are fundamentally unrepeatable.

However, in my discussion of divine Persons, I went a step further and argued that there is, in the strict sense, not even a category of ‘Person’ to which the Father, Son and Holy Spirit belong on the basis of some common natural feature.⁸ It is this more radical singularity which we attribute to both

⁷ Kathleen D. Vohs, and Jonathan W. Schooler, “The Value of Believing in Free Will Encouraging a Belief in Determinism Increases Cheating,” *Psychological Science* 19 (2008), 1: 49-54; Roy F. Baumeister, E.J. Masicampo, and C. Nathan DeWall, “Prosocial Benefits of Feeling Free: Disbelief in Free Will Increases Aggression and Reduces Helpfulness,” *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 35 (2009), 2: 260-268; Davide Rigoni, Gilles Pourtois, and Marcel Brass, “‘Why should I care?’ Challenging Free Will Attenuates Neural Reaction to Errors,” *Social, Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience* 10 (2015): 262-268; Davide Rigoni, Simone Kühn, Giuseppe Sartori, and Marcel Brass, “Inducing Disbelief in Free Will Alters Brain Correlates of Preconscious Motor Preparation: The Brain Minds Whether We Believe in Free Will or Not,” *Psychological Science* 22 (2011), 5: 613-618; Tyler F. Stillman, Roy F. Baumeister, Kathleen D. Vohs, Nathaniel M. Lambert, Frank D. Fincham, and Lauren E. Brewer, “Personal Philosophy and Personnel Achievement: Belief in Free Will Predicts Better Job Performance,” *Social Psychological and Personality Science* 1 (2010): 43-50. But see also, Azim F. Shariff, Joshua D. Greene, Johan C. Karremans, Jamie B. Luguri, Cory J. Clark, Jonathan W. Schooler, Roy F. Baumeister, and Kathleen D. Vohs, “Free Will and Punishment: A Mechanistic View of Human Nature Reduces Retribution,” *Psychological Science* 25 (2014), 8: 1563-1570.

⁸ Of course, one might posit a logical feature which the divine Persons possess in com-

divine Persons and human persons that does not find a match in our everyday notion of unrepeatability. This is perhaps because for us, all persons have bodies, and our individual bodies belong to the category of ‘human bodies’ since, regardless of how distinctive they are, they still possess features common to human bodies. We cannot—or rather do not typically—think of persons as radically singular in the sense in which I have used that phrase.

What about the third quality of relationality? At first glance, it would seem that our everyday notions of personhood, of self, consciousness and other similar concepts are not treated as inherently relational (i.e. to other persons). Thus, we think thoughts about impersonal situations, and we act in the world without reference to other persons. And yet this non-relational concept of persons is increasingly being questioned by research which points to an alternative understanding. Consider some recent work in the field of consciousness. Neuroscientific work in the past two decades has highlighted two forms of consciousness, one, shared with many other species, which is aware of things like bodily sensations, e.g. hunger, pain, itching, non-describable bodily experiences, and the other, probably limited to humans, which is essentially a social awareness, or a consciousness which has as its object other minds.⁹ More specifically, this latter consciousness can be understood as a form of information processing whose medium is thought or language in communication with other persons, either present to the individual or as constructed in their mind. Put in simple terms, with consciousness in this sense, we are always “talking” with other people, whether it occurs out there in the external world, or inside our minds, engaging conversation partners of whom we are typically not even aware.

On this account, our dominant mode of existence as selves, that is, our *social* consciousness, is necessarily *relational* in a way quite different from how the folk psychology of our culture portrays it. Recall that Plato and Aristotle both held that humans ultimately seek after the fulfilment of *eudaimonia*, which we might translate as an active happiness. Certainly, our relationships with others, in this view, are central to the achievement of *eudai-*

mon, for example, each is a reality, each belongs to the class of ‘not nature,’ and such like. (But not the category of ‘each is in relation’ since even the relations are radically singular.)

⁹ Bjorn Merker, “Consciousness Without a Cerebral Cortex: A Challenge for Neuroscience and Medicine,” *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 30 (2007): 63-134; George Northoff, and Jaak Panksepp, “The Trans-Species Concept of Self and the Subcortical-Cortical Midline System,” *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 12 (2008): 259–264; Lawrence M. Ward, “The Thalamic Dynamic Core Theory of Conscious Experience,” *Consciousness and Cognition* 20 (2011): 464–486.

monia. As Aristotle expressed it, man is a social or political animal. And yet however central to this goal, sociality is still only a means to *eudaimonia* which itself is a non-relational, active state of the individual. In the alternative view presented here, consciousness of the form specific to humans is essentially social, at its heart a relationship with other persons, and as such the means-end connection as it is found in Aristotle is reversed so that impersonal purposes are in fact ordered to personal ends (though often unconsciously so). Such goals include being attached to others through long-term bonds, belonging to and identifying with groups, making a name for ourselves in the estimation of others, seeking a right relationship with God, etc. So, it is at least possible, and I would argue likely, that with this third feature of Persons/persons, there is a relationality to be observed in how our selves, our consciousness, our minds operate in some way parallel to that spoken of in relation to the divine Persons of the Trinity.

Returning now to our comparison between selves and human persons, we can see that the likeness between such a self and a person is quite close: both look to be not amenable to positive natural description, both are unrepeatable, and both can be understood as relational in their very constitution. And yet, alongside these similarities, we must recognize significant points of difference. Human selves look like they are beyond positive natural description but, in all likelihood, this is not the case. They are unrepeatable but they are not *radically* singular as are persons. They are likely to be, in their essential operations, relational but not in the truly ineffable manner of relations between the divine Persons. To take account of these similarities and differences, we need a new term, one which will point to the likeness between persons and person-like concepts such as mind, self, consciousness and other similar words, but at the same time not confound what are truly distinct concepts. I have adopted the term ‘semblant’ to refer to the class of concept which includes person-like terms. Semblants are like persons but are not persons. This is so not least because they, unlike persons, can at least in principle be described and explained in natural, empirical language.

To use this term is more helpful than it might seem at first glance. We must keep in mind that the notion of a semblant is theological in the sense that it is consequent on a theological concept of ‘person.’ The concept of ‘person’ proposed here, though it has precursors in non-theological discourse, nevertheless emerges, in its specific meaning, from within the development of the doctrine of the Holy Trinity. In extending its application beyond that context and using it for human beings necessarily brings it into confrontation with culturally shaped concepts that map similar semantic terrains, concepts

such as 'self,' 'consciousness' 'mind' and related terms. In the process of enculturation of the Gospel, the theological notion of 'person' will take over from a notion such as 'self' the role of reference concept, and thus there is necessitated a way of conceiving the new connections between these terms which share similar meanings. The notion of 'semblant' is one way of categorizing those connections.

The other value of the notion of 'semblant' is that it links to a broader, 'sacramental' understanding of how God engages with His creation. Consider how the Church reads the Scriptures. From early in the time of the Church, believers have discerned profound links between the events, the institutions, the images described in the Old Testament and their fulfilment in the New Covenant. This manner of reading the Scriptures is called typological and pervades the structure of liturgical text selections as well as prayers in the Church's worship. The basic idea behind types is that Old Testament elements possess specific likenesses to their fulfilments in New Testament realities. Thus, components of the sacrificial system of the people of Israel are types of Christ's sacrifice on the Cross. But these connections are not viewed as having occurred randomly or fortuitously; rather are they seen as part of the divine ordering of history such that in God's providence the people of the New Covenant are able to observe His mighty hand throughout salvation history. In short, that which is more readily observable is able to serve as a sign or herald of less visible realities, and in accord with the divine foreknowledge, to be part of the process of bring about these realities.

We see a similar mode of divine engagement in the sacramental economy at the heart of the life of the Church. In this, sensible things and actions serve to point to invisible realities and through sacramental actions these realities are made present in virtue of Christ's promise to do so. Surrounding this sevenfold dispensation of sacraments is the broader sign-system of sacramentals which proposes that visible objects and actions can, through the prayer of believers, mediate the grace which they signify.

It is within this broader understanding of sign (type, sacrament) as a central element of God's relationship with His creation that the concept of 'semblant' is intended to find a place. In the case of the semblants of self, minds, and such like, we are firstly to acknowledge that they fit properly within the realm of nature rather than person, but more than that, they possess characteristics which allow them to serve as signs pointing to a deeper reality which is that of persons. And perhaps, more than mere signs, they might also work as channels through which the non-believer can be brought to an awareness

of how he or she too could enter the economy of divine Persons, human persons and of the mediator between the two, Jesus Christ.

6. HUMAN NATURE: KNOCK-ON EFFECTS OF A REVISED NOTION OF 'PERSON'

If we accept such a profound change to the way the human person is to be understood, it should come as no surprise to find that a number of traditional ways of thinking about persons and nature would require some adjustments to the way they are described. I have chosen two such matters to briefly discuss: first, how are we to describe human actions in relation to persons? Second, how should we understand the coming-to-be of human persons?

6.1. Are our Actions Directly Attributable to Persons or to Nature?

One of the—at least superficially—counterintuitive implications of the doctrine of the Trinity is that the divine Persons do not act separately, as one would expect of individual human persons. For us, it is of the very “essence” of personhood that a person, at least under normal circumstances, can carry out actions as an individual. With the divine Persons this is not the case; rather we are to think of divine actions as issuing from the nature which is common to the Persons. The Father acts but only as God, and similarly with the other Persons. Indeed, all those characteristics that we hold to be part and parcel of personhood, such as intelligence, will, compassion, etc. are to be attributed to the Godhead, to Persons as divine, but not to Persons as Persons since there is nothing positive other than relationality that we can say about them as Persons.¹⁰ Of course, this is difficult to comprehend if one strictly applies the theological notion of ‘Person’, and so the faith teaches that it is appropriate to attribute specific actions of salvation history, or God’s engagement with the universe more generally, to specific Persons, e.g. the Father creates all things, the Son redeems us, the Spirit dwells in the Church. This,

¹⁰ The tradition has spoken of particular Personal modes of common divine action such that the Father acts in a paternal manner, the Son filial and the Spirit in a manner particular to his Personhood. The temptation has been, however, to fill out paternity in terms of fatherly characteristics, and likewise the other Persons, with the result verging on tritheism with three deities distinguished by natural attributes. It is the case that the Son, for example, acts filially, i.e. as the Son, but this cannot be any more fully described.

however, is not to be done at the expense of overshadowing the truth that all divine actions are actions of the Godhead.

What about the actions of human persons? Where do they fit according to the alternative perspective? With us, we know that human behaviour, as distinct from actions, is part of our animal nature in the sense that it can be studied and explained more or less in terms of natural biological and human processes. Actions, on the other hand, which have traditionally been viewed as issuing from persons, according to the alternative view, are not to be attributed directly or as such to persons for the reason that persons are a mystery and so we cannot think of them as entities to which positive features and actions can be attributed. It is only insofar as our actions express a form of relationality, in particular, only when they participate in the obedient love of Christ for His heavenly Father, that what we do manifests our personhood. All other aspects of the acts we perform are best understood as manifesting the activity of our selves, our consciousness, our soul, and such like. And since these are semblant realities, and as such belong to our human nature, our actions, too, are the outworking of our human nature, effects of the natural processes of our bodies. When I say, "I travelled on a train" it is primarily the self (semblant) which did so, my person—potentially at least—only participated in the action.¹¹ Thus, it is possible that my going on the train was part of a series of genuinely moral actions, e.g. to rescue someone from harm and to do so with pure motives, that would point to that which persons do (as participating in the loving obedience of Christ in relation to the Father) but this does not contradict the belief that as an action considered apart from this purpose, my going on the train is, at least in principle, comprehensible in natural terms.

6.2. Origin: How is the Coming-to-be of Persons to be Understood?

In considering persons and human nature as they 'operate' together and complementarily in our actions, nothing was said about how that unity and complementarity came into existence. We need then to ask the question: how

¹¹ Strictly speaking to attribute actions to a person is problematic since persons as persons do not possess their own identifiable characteristics which individual actions would imply. We do confess that the Father sent His Son, for example, but this is in the manner of an appropriated statement like many other doctrinal affirmations surrounding the Incarnation. Always we need to be wary of tendencies in the direction of tritheism. Similarly, we do speak of merely human persons as participating in actions, but with the awareness of the conceptual "cutting-of-corners" that this involves.

do persons and nature begin and conclude their 'shared' existence? We recall the essentially mysterious character of our concept of 'person' which prevents the attribution of positive ontological qualities. This implies that not only do we not speak of persons in terms of substance and accidents, but neither can we conceive of how they might be 'inserted' into the realm of natural realities. This has the strange consequence that when we speak of the coming-into-being of human persons, we must do so in quasi-mythical terms. In the case of the natural being of individual humans, we say that biologically they are the 'product' of their parents, and we can readily give an account in broad terms of the process by which this occurs. In the case of the *personal* existence of that same individual, we must resort to a way of explanation that proposes a kind of 'interruption' into the causal texture of nature. One way of doing this—with appropriate adjustments—is to draw upon traditional and magisterial teaching in this area. This has most recently been articulated by Pope Pius XII in 1950 when he wrote about the immediate creation of the soul infused in the body at conception. If we adapt the notion of soul as it is interpreted by this magisterial teaching so as to remove from it the faculties of intellect and will, we might reasonably translate it as 'person' in the theologically derived sense. So, what might appear as rather awkward teaching designed to affirm the distinct existence of the human soul within the context of evolutionary biology can be interpreted as preserving the 'non-natural' reality of human persons. What about those elements that were stripped from the notion of 'soul', the intellect and will, how do they arise in the 'coming-to-be' of a human being? They emerge as part of the natural processes of ontogenesis, or the outworking of genetic and environmental processes. From where do persons arise? Not from natural processes; and given their mysterious character, we can only say that, in a quasi-mythical way of expression, they have no pre-existence and come 'into the world' directly and immediately created by God.

Having said this, I would offer a few comments about the actual moment of personal 'coming-into-existence' in relation to human conception. The classical view is that the very moment of conception, when the sperm breaks through the zona pellucida of the ovum, is the instant when a distinct human being comes into being and simultaneously becomes a person. This approach relies upon the assumption and possibility of affirming an absolute discreteness between the time when only an ovum and sperm existed, and that when fertilization produced a new human being. However, the assumption of contemporary science, to date well justified, is that natural processes can always be conceived as continuous rather than discrete. This makes the usual view

of the moment of the coming-into-being of a person problematic since it is highly likely that there is no actual, precisely defined time abstracted from the continuous process of fertilization when it makes sense to say, „Here and now, at this precise instant, a new person is infused by God.” Besides, if that were the case, then researchers would be able to identify, with virtually unlimited precision, the actual point of infusion. But since persons (and souls) are ‘discrete’ realities, that is, they either exist or they do not exist, it is not—even in principle—possible to co-relate the two simultaneous events, fertilization (a biological process) and personhood (a theological event).

The alternative approach, on the other hand, has the advantage of being able to keep distinct the moment or better, the process of fertilization from the creation of personhood. The former is in principle examinable without limit, whereas the latter ‘process,’ since it deals with the mystery of persons, of their coming-to-be, and of their relationship with human nature, cannot be so specified. All that is known is that prior to fertilization of a particular ovum, there was no person, but *at some time*, from fertilization on, there is a person. In fact, there is no surefire and incontrovertible *empirical* evidence of the presence of a person in a human being but our assumption is always that from the moment of fertilization a zygote is to be respected as fully human and personal.¹²

CONCLUSION

The concept of ‘person’ achieved through the early conciliar efforts drew upon contemporary vocabulary and understandings in order to apply them to Christian teaching about God. Notions such as that of hypostasis and prosopon, however, had to be adapted and refined so as to be useful for this

¹² The document *Donum vitae* published by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in 1987 discusses the question of the personal character of the human embryo and concludes as follows (Part I, 1): “Certainly no experimental datum can be in itself sufficient to bring us to the recognition of a spiritual soul; nevertheless, the conclusions of science regarding the human embryo provide a valuable indication for discerning by the use of reason a personal presence at the moment of this first appearance of a human life: how could a human individual not be a human person? The Magisterium has not expressly committed itself to an affirmation of a philosophical nature, but it constantly reaffirms the moral condemnation of any kind of procured abortion.” Here the document hovers between affirming and avoiding the philosophical truth that from the first instance, a human embryo is a person. However, in the end, it concludes that *morally* we are bound to treat it as such.

purpose. This essay has examined the possibilities of their reverse application, from Trinitarian and Christological uses to that of mere human persons. It has been argued that much might be gained in pursuing this task, not least by ironing out some of the distortions that have arisen as a result of the widespread adoption of the Boethian definition of person. Other benefits include the following: the concept of a human person, rather than sliding inexorably into the morass of scientific explananda, can now be restored to its rightful status as genuinely spiritual, and as intimately bound up with the Incarnation and the life of the Triune God; formerly dominant concepts such as the self, mind and consciousness can, in consequence, be given a less exalted and more truthful status as semblants, as likenesses of something more fundamental; finally, the possibility now exists, at least in the field of the study of human beings, for a less conflictual and more mutually respectful relationship between the realm of natural sciences and that of theology. Yet, it is clear that many other implications of a theological concept of person will need to be explored. How might the beginnings of mankind be understood according to this understand? What other concepts, apart from those mentioned here, i.e. self, consciousness and mind, would fall within the category of semblant and how might that categorization affect the way we think of them? In the idea that human persons are most apparent in their participation in the love of Christ for the Father (in the power of the Holy Spirit), what are the implications for our understanding of moral actions? These are some of the matters that would need to be considered.¹³

Also worthy of reflection are the broader flow-on effects that relate to the way theological anthropologies exert their influence on cultures. Within Western culture, for example, many political issues of greatest controversy such as abortion, euthanasia and gender identity reflect (usually) subterranean conflicts of a theological/ideological nature. I have argued that the standard theological anthropology, based as it is primarily on the unity of human beings, needs re-balancing so that the profound distinction that exists between persons and nature is taken into account. Ultimately, a culture grounded on both the unity of human persons (here persons as the whole human being) *and* the foundational distinction between nature and person (here persons as the spiritual, non-natural reality of human beings) has much to offer. As Ratzinger noted of the latter notion of ‘person,’ “it is precisely the meaning

¹³ I have pursued some of them in my work, *Chalcedonian Personalism: Rethinking the Human* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2016).

of [the notion of person in Christ] to call into question the *whole* of human thought and set it on a new course.”¹⁴

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¹⁴ Joseph Ratzinger, “Concerning the Notion of Person in Theology,” *Communio* 17 (1990): 439–454 at 449.

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JAK TRYNITARNE POJĘCIE „OSOBY”
MOŻNA ZASTOSOWAĆ DO ZWYKŁYCH LUDZI?

S t r e s z c z e n i e

Refleksje teologiczne oraz rozróżnienia podjęte przez sobory w pierwszych siedmiu wiekach historii Kościoła doprowadziły do powstania niezwykłego i oryginalnego pojęcia „Osoby”, które znajduje się w samym centrum chrześcijańskiego wyznania wiary. Wierzymy w jednego Boga w trzech Osobach oraz w Syna Bożego, drugą Osobę Trójcy Świętej, który łączy w sobie naturę boską i ludzką. Taka koncepcja osoby zastosowana do Boga nie przyczyniła się do równie głębokiej refleksji nad osobowością istot ludzkich innych niż Chrystus, czyli zwykłych ludzi. Co jednak stałoby się, gdybyśmy podążyli tym tropem myślowym? Niniejszy artykuł bada tę możliwość, podkreślając trzy cechy teologicznego rozumienia Osób Boskich: Osoby Boskie *nie mogą być pojmowane* w kategoriach pozytywnych; Osoby Boskie są *całkowicie pojedyncze*; oraz Osoby Boskie posiadają *rzeczywistość tylko w relacji do siebie nawzajem*. Choć na pierwszy rzut oka taki zabieg myślowy nie wygląda obiecująco, to jednak głębsza analiza sugeruje, że jest inaczej. Na tej podstawie artykuł bada niektóre z implikacji takiego rozumowania, wprowadzając przy tym pojęcie „semblantu” jako koniecznego pośrednika między pojęciem „osoby” a pojęciem „natury ludzkiej”.

Słowa kluczowe: osoba; natura; osobowość; relacyjność; pojedynczość; semblant.

Tłumaczenie Rafał Augustyn