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BEING A "PERSON" - AN ABSOLUTE METAPHYSICAL FACT

Among people who are given to thought and reflection no other serious or sustained question has as much universal puzzle-appeal or interest-appeal as the question of the nature of person and its self-referential character.

The present article is about what it is to be a person, to think of oneself as an 'I'. It is not about the ways people think of 'me', and how they use these ideas in identifying me and shaping my distinctive characteristics. Let me start off by quoting two influential contemporary philosophers on the question under review and see if they help at all in analysing the personal perspective I as a subject have.

- i) One of the most misleading representational techniques in our language is the use of the word 'I'.¹
- ii) 'I', in my use of it, always indicates me and only indicates me. 'You', 'she', and 'they' indicate different people at different times. 'I' is like my own shadow; I can never get away from it, as I can get away from your shadow. There is no mystery about this constancy, but I mention it because it seems to endow 'I' with a mystifying uniqueness and adhesiveness.²

Paçe Wittgenstein, I would like to submit that a person is someone who can have thoughts and

experiences, whose natural expression uses the word 'I'. A prime feature of personhood is self-consciousness and this depends on a certain unity. Except in a very few pathological cases, a person has an indivisible mental unity to a high degree. A perusal of the vast literature produced in this century in the field of mental philosophy will confirm the fact that the modern way of thinking of a person is mainly as someone with states of consciousness. The idea of the unity and uniqueness of each person is part of what is expressed by the religious belief in the reality of soul. It is commonly understood at some level by anyone who thinks that a friend is less replaceable than a car or a piece of furniture. I suggest, then, that to be a person is to have a single stream of I — thoughts. Accordingly 'I' does refer to some mental entity in the Cartesian sense³ discovered by deeper introspection. However, some philosophers have expressed a more general doubt about what it can refer to. Ludwig Wittgenstein, for example, said in the *Tractatus* that the subject that has thoughts does not exist. But he has expressed this in a very subtle and round-about manner. Let me here quote the passage in full:

If I wrote a book called *The World as I found it*, I should have to include a report on my body, and should have to say which parts were subordinate to my will, and which were not, etc., this being a method of isolating the subject, or rather of showing that in an important sense there is no subject; for it alone could *not* be mentioned in that book.⁴

He in fact likened this to the way the visual field may contain no clue that it is seen by an eye. Indeed Wittgenstein cannot avoid the use of the world self or soul in this context and therefore we read a cryptic remark like this: 'My attitude towards him is an attitude towards a soul. I am not of the opinion that he

has a soul'. (Philosophical Investigations, Blackwell, 1959, P.178). His point, in part, is that those attitudes which go with the idea of people as having a special kind of value are not dependent on belief which is more fundamental than them -- the belief that human beings 'have souls'. The character of Wittgenstein's view might be brought into clearer focus if one asks the following question: Is Wittgenstein saying that there is no such thing as the soul but that does not matter so far as our idea of people as having value goes? Well, I would not be inclined to put the matter in that way, but the answer to this question does depend on how the word 'soul' is being used. If by the word 'soul' is meant in the Cartesian sense "That invisible, intangible part of a person in which thoughts, emotions and so on take place" then Wittgenstein is denying that there is such a thing; on his view, it is the human being -- that extended, solid being that others can see-that thinks, gets angry and so on. However, to deny that the soul is part of a person in that sense is not in itself to deny its reality; just as to deny that the shape is part of a vase, that the smile is part of a face or that the beauty is part of a landscape is to deny the reality of shapes, smiles or beauty. Wittgenstein is at least not forced by his rejection of ontologically dualist picture to conclude that all talk of the soul is misplaced; and that conclusion is not one by which he was at all tempted. ⁵

There are several considerations which make the Cartesian dualist view of persons an attractive one but I will give a central place to one factor. We think of people as having a special kind of status and value; we think of them as being in some way marked off from the rest of nature. This point might also be expressed by saying that we think it is appropriate to have certain moral attitude towards others: to feel about and treat them in certain ways. What I have in mind here covers a wide range of ways of thinking and behavior. For example, we

think it appropriate to feel pity towards other persons in certain circumstances -- when, that is, they are in pain. We feel gratitude or resentment towards others when they have acted in certain ways; that is to say, we mind how others treat us in a way in which we do not characteristically mind about the behaviour of inanimate objects, and, perhaps, most animals. In view of this, the basic objection that arises against any variant of physicalist⁶ or scientific materialist theory of man is this: it might be asked how this special attitude can possibly be in place if people just are only observable, tangible lumps of matter. Certainly if persons are mere lumps of matter like sticks, stones or cars, then the special attitude of which Wittgenstein speaks will be out of place and totally unwarranted.

Another objection against Wittgenstein's position can be sounded out like this: 'You talk about attitudes. But is there no question of truth here? We want to know whether the soul is a reality. Wittgenstein seems to leave us in a position in which we can say no more than that some people think in this way and some people don't. But surely the important question is: Who is right?' Now probably Wittgenstein held that it was not the business of philosophy to answer this question; and he even held that it was a confusion to think that there was any room for the idea of being 'right' or 'wrong' about such matters. I cannot, I am afraid, agree with Wittgenstein in this. Most of us would not speak of 'souls' in connection with cows or dogs. My attitude towards a cow is not an attitude towards a soul. And this distinction by itself tells a lot about the nature of human beings. Wittgenstein, it appears to me has tried to use philosophy to escape from philosophy. This obviously cannot work. The means of escape from philosophy must themselves be non-philosophical. The non-philosophical way out is to abstain from philosophical inquiry on an unprincipled basis; that is, to abstain from philosophy

without holding up that abstention as having a validity, as revealing something, that philosophy ought to recognize. It, so to say, judges philosophy externally, not internally. Unprincipled abstention terminates or avoids⁷ philosophy out of boredom or exhaustion or disinterest or in order to do something else. But unprincipled abstention neither says nor shows anything about philosophy that philosophy must recognize, and so cannot serve any serious thinkers' purposes.

Finally, Wittgenstein and many contemporary writers (Ryle and all other linguistic/analytical philosophers included) in making such unincisive and cavalier remarks as cited above on the nature of personal identity, 'I' and soul have only indulged in what Richard Rorty⁸ has aptly termed as "non-foundational conversation". Linguistic philosophers like Ryle have confined themselves to the linguistic nuances or 'talking' aspects of these time-honoured questions, and have tried to prove various usages and terms pertaining to these as mere externalized meaningless and contentless speech-acts. The linguistic affinity between these philosophers' expression "talk" and Rorty's "conversation" is clear to any thoughtful reader and I am sure all serious seekers of truth will agree with me that their analyses are nothing more than 'non-foundational conversation'. The urgency and paramount importance of the issues, on the contrary, demands that philosophers should treat them in a 'foundational' manner. They call for deeper reflection and exploration of metaphysical argument and to this I now turn in the sequel.

The fundamental question about personal identity has seemed to many philosophers to be the question of what makes a given set of experiences, experiences of one and the same person. The problem of

personal identity, as discussed from Locke ⁹ to the present day, is that of clarifying the principle that determines one's identity amidst changing experiences; that is to say, what it is that helps to identity, in spite of lapse of time and the changes it may have wrought, a person as the same particular one we knew before. The problem, in other words, can be reduced to the question: in what sense is the mind a unity? what makes a person A who owns experiences Z the same person who owns experiences X? what justifies us in calling two experiences, separated by an interval of time, experiences of one and the same mind. The short and most convincing answer to this problem is that there is a single persisting self which owns both experiences. The Cartesian substantival self explains this in the most convincing way, and also in a manner which validates the experience of identity felt by each person in his own case. The self as the non-bodily substantival subject of experiences and mental states constitutes the core or nucleus of a man's continued identity. This also explains the quite familiar employment of the word 'person' in the sense of a possession, as when we speak of 'my person', 'his person' etc. Locke defined 'person' as "a thinking, intelligent being, that has reason and reflection, and can consider itself, the same thinking being in different times and places; which it does only by that consciousness which is inseparable from thinking, and seems to me essential to it." For him, accordingly, 'person' and 'self' became nearly synonyms in their meaning and usage. It is to one and the same entity that we refer when we use the locutions self, mind, soul, subject of experience and conscious agent. According to Locke, identity of a person is simply identity of consciousness, so that I remain the same person if I am conscious of being so, even though my body should change drastically and be diminished through age, disease or amputation. A man, as against the person, is a certain sort of living (physical) organism whose

identity depends on its biological organization and physical attributes. He draws the conclusion that if it is possible for the same man (that is, a man who is the same man in the sense that there is bodily continuity) to have at time t_1 one distinct consciousness and at time t_2 another distinct consciousness, we could not speak of the man as being the same 'person' at time t_2 as he was at time t_1 . It is, therefore, the identity of soul or self that makes a man the same man.

Since the thoughts, feelings, images and other mental experiences a person or self has, are transitory and keep changing, philosophers who maintain a serial or Humean view face the problem of explaining what Hume calls the "bond that unites them." Hume's view is known as the 'bundle' view since it maintains that the mind is 'nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual flux and movement'. the problem is to explain how events are related so as to belong to one bundle rather than another. Hume suggested that they are related by resemblance, contiguity and causation, but in the Appendix to his Treatise ¹⁰ he admitted that he had failed to account for the real simplicity and identity of the mind. As a matter of fact there is a curious unreality about Hume's discussion of whether we can observe any real bond between the perception (experiences and mental states) of a person. Obviously this question cannot be raised unless one can already distinguish himself from others, i.e. has consciousness of his own self-identity. In other words, Hume was asking whether there is any uniting bond among those perceptions that belonged to one person. But why should this question puzzle him if he can already distinguish between those perceptions that belong to, are owned by, one person and those that belong to another? In asking his question, Hume was assuming that the

perceptions which persons are alleged to consist of are somehow known to be in parallel strings, so that the only question remaining is what unites those perceptions that belong to any one string.

From the standpoint of Cartesian self as the persistent subject of experiences, the problem of the unity of a person is a spurious problem. There is an argument against the possibility of consciousness dividing, based on our inability to imagine this from the inside. Descartes held that 'we cannot conceive of half a mind', and argued that 'when I consider the mind, or myself in so far as I am merely a thinking thing, I am unable to distinguish any parts within myself. I understand myself to be something quite single and complete.'¹¹ There is a unique and simple 'self' which each person is able to detect and observe within himself; it is the determinant of one's personal identity. The identity of a person is the identity of an abiding substantial self. There is in the self a note of novelty and creativity, a free will, an ability to control the eventual course of one's experience. The self is intuitively given and is a simple particular; it is irreducible and defies analysis. The unity of the self is not to be found in the sum of its states. The contemporary analytic philosophy which sprang from Hume's atomism or associationism stresses the changing nature of the self and altogether ignores its permanence and substantial unity. Analysis involves the disarticulation of a reality whose unitary character is destroyed when its components are separated. It is like the little boy who wants to find out what makes his toy work and ends up defiantly facing a heap of loose nuts and bolts. On the contrary, when we use such phrases as 'same person as me', 'I', 'my mind', we mean that there is such thing as one identical mind, and not that there are only series of feelings and experiences. The person or mind is one and the same entity, the

substantial subject of experiences. We certainly talk as if it were my mind which hears, my mind which thinks, my mind which wills; in short my mind is some entity of which my mental states and acts are states and acts. Hume's view of the self is clearly wrong and misleading. On his view, we should have to hold that, when I say that I or my mind, am seeing this paper or thinking those thoughts, what I mean is that my seeing and my thinking are, each of them, one among the mental acts which constitute me or mind. And it does not seem to me that this is what I do mean. When I say that I am seeing this room now and saw another yesterday (and I am sure that I really am and really did), I mean to assert quite a different sort of relation between me and my seeing, than that the latter is a part of me — one member of a collection of acts which constitutes me. Even a philosopher like Gottlob Frege, who did pioneering work in mathematical logic, could not but accept this metaphysical position. For example he writes: " The sense impression I have of green exists only because of me, I am its bearer. It seems absurd to us that a pain, mood, a wish should rove about the world without a bearer, independently. An experience is impossible without an experient. The inner world presupposes the person whose inner world it is."¹²

Moreover, even on Hume's view of personal identity, there still remains the problem of saying what kind of relation it is that all my mental acts have to one another, which constitutes them 'mine'.¹³ They most certainly have some relation to one another which we express by saying that they are all 'mine', some relation which distinguishes them from the mental acts and states of other people. And, if we consider what this relation can be, this consideration also seems to me to point to the falsity of Hume's theory. What I seem to know, when I know that all my mental acts are mental acts of mine is that they all have a peculiar relation to

some other entity which is me. I seem to know that their relation to one another consists in the fact that they all have the same relation to this other entity, viz., myself: I don't seem to be directly aware of any other relation which they all have to one another.

No bundle theory has yet withstood criticism. Accounts of personal identity in terms of resemblance, contiguity, or causation are too weak because it is merely an empirical fact that only events in the same mind tend to be so related; it is not impossible for mental events to be so related and still be states of, or events in, different minds. A brief mention of Ayer's position will elucidate my point here. In 'The Problems of Knowledge' Ayer, while considering the question of the relation that unites mental events to individual selves, states that "on the one hand, I am inclined to hold that personal identity can be constituted by the presence of a certain factual relation between experiences. On the other hand I doubt if it is meaningful to talk of experiences except as the experiences of a person; or at least of an animate creature of some kind..." Ayer does not think that the circularity involved here is vicious. It shows, he thinks, "that we could not understand what is meant by an experience unless we could not understand what is meant by being a person; but... to understand what is meant by an expression does not entail that we can give a satisfactory analysis of its use." In my view, however, Ayer's account is not only incoherent but also gravely misconceived. The incoherence is apparent from the fact which he himself notes that in his account, "the relation between experiences... must be logically necessary" since the position which he is here trying to establish as conceivable entails the theory that a person is a bundle or collection of experiences or properties, which as he correctly notes earlier in the chapter,¹⁴ any property which individuates a person can be denied to

this person without contradiction, and so, he thinks, belongs to the person only contingently. Despite denying that the circularity involved in his account is vicious, Ayer concludes towards the end of his discussion that he has "not succeeded in discovering any relation by which the constituents of Hume's bundles would be adequately held together." ¹⁵ I think, therefore, that the only plausible view is the Cartesian theory according to which I am an entity, distinct from every one of my mental acts and from all of them put together; an entity, whose acts they are; which is that which is conscious when I am conscious; and that what I mean by calling them all 'mine', is that all of them are acts or states of this same entity. It is the ego, the 'me', the subject which is conscious and active while experiencing.

The facts clearly favour the Cartesian substantialist view. It is actually observed that the self has a degree of stability that contrasts with the constant flux of experiences. These experiences seem to be states of the self. The observation of the permanent character of the self has rightly been considered proof of its substantial nature. Its permanence, in the sense of constant presence, seems to be an undeniable fact: we can actually never discover an experience that does not belong to subject self. Despite changes of moods, we say that we are dealing with the same person whom we met last year. We mean that, though our friend has changed a great deal in appearance (something bodily or physical), he has not been replaced by another individual. So the unity and continuity of the same individual seems to require a persistent self. And indeed the immediate data of our consciousness does reveal to us a single and continuous self, assuring us that inspite of the changes we are the same person. Our intimate intuitions tell us that the self is a unity, a substantial particular, and not an amorphous mass of a disconnected

experiences—an identical real particular, and not an intermittent series of transitory states.

Many philosophers ¹⁶ writing today in the field of mental philosophy would strongly resist an attempt such as this to insert a wedge between the concepts 'person' and self. Indeed they would prefer to avoid the word 'self' altogether, and discuss the problem exclusively in terms of the word 'person'. Their approach is based on the contention that there is no distinction between identity in one's own case and identity in the case of others, and hence that an understanding of the identity of persons in general is *eo ipso* an understanding of one's own identity. This approach—let me call it the 'person-approach'—is part and parcel of a programme of deliberate reversal of Descartes's approach to epistemology. According to the philosophers of person approach, we learn all there is to know about self—identity by understanding in what the identity of other persons consists. It connects personal identity with questions of identification. Its point of view is exhibited in the question, 'what must we take a person to be if we are to achieve successful referential identification (as we are)?' It would follow on this approach that if referential identification of persons depends on identification of their bodies, then we must take a person to be at least a bodily X. It is clear, however, that this approach is primarily concerned with the identity of other persons and only derivatively concerned with the identity of oneself. As persons, we are aware of each other, but we are also aware of ourselves. We possess self-awareness. The problem of self-identity, then, is the problem of the identity of the self of which each has this awareness. For an external observer to identify me as a person is to note some of my bodily or physical characteristic. But for me the matter is quite different. The fact is that to myself I am more than just 'this particular', a mere instantiation of a general description. To view me in such a way is to

de-individualize me, in the sense that my significant individuality is reduced to a general description. From my own point of view, therefor, the most important element in my individuality is not my characteristics (something physical), but rather what has them, namely, myself. The problem of personal identity then, as I see it, is the problem of accounting for the identity of the conscious subject qua conscious subject. On this theory, in each person there is to be found a mental (or spiritual) substance which is the subject of his mental states and the bearer of his personal identity. The self or soul is not only logically distinct from a particular human body with which it is associated; it is also what a person fundamentally is.

To sum up: what Descartes and Kant have in common is the belief that "I" refers to a self or ego, that is not reducible to anything bodily, or to my experiences, or to any combination of the two. Despite the elaborate expression leading thinkers gave to this idea, it is not just a philosopher's theory. It is a view which many people are almost intuitively inclined to hold. It obviously has something in common with belief in the soul, found in Islam, Christianity and other religions. In most religio-philosophical doctrines that do not include the resurrection of the body, the soul is needed as the bearer of immortal life. It is a belief that comes to us very naturally, and it may be that the soul, the Cartesian ego and the noumenal self arise from a common origin. It is intuitive and prephilosophical conviction that tells us that each one of us is an individual ego. Modern media and means of totalitarian administration, on the other hand, define individuals as members of groups. The private project and inner life is denied any reality. Insofar as a person accepts this impersonal definition of himself, he is no longer free to exist as an authentic individual and to surrender himself to God.

REFERENCES:

- 1) Ludwig Wittgenstein: *Philosophical Remarks*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, p.11
- 2) Gilbert Ryle: *The concept of Mind*, London, P.125
3. I take it that the Cartesian view of a person is quite well-known to a student of philosophy. According to it a live human being is composed of two parts: a body and a mind or soul. The first of these is material, the second an immaterial entity.
4. L. Wittgenstein: *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, translated by D.F. Pears and B.F. McGuinness, London, 1961, proposition 5.63 ff.
5. The French philosopher Simone Weil formulates the matter in a way of which Wittgenstein might have approved – (I quote from memory): “The soul is the human being considered as having value in itself”.
6. Ryle’s position as expounded in *The Concept of Mind* boils down to a physicalist theory with regard to mind and mental states.
7. It has reference to the phrase “method of avoidance” which belongs to John Rawls. See his *Philosophy and Public Affairs* (1985), p.231.
8. Richard Rorty: *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, (1991) pp.5-10 *passim*.
- 9) John Locke: *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, (ed.) A.C. Fraser (Oxford University Press, 1894) Chapter 27, para.9.
10. *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L.A. Selby-Bigge, (Oxford University Press, reprinted 1955) Book I, Part 1v, sec. 6.
11. Descartes: Sixth Meditation, in the *Philosophical Writings of Descartes* translated by J. Cottingham et al, Cambridge, 1948 Vol.2, Page 59.
12. Gottlob Frege; *The Thought-A Logical Enquiry*
13. A.J. Ayer: *The Problems of Knowledge*. (Penguin Books, 1956) Ch. 5. Sec. II pp. 196-198. Other quotations in this paragraph are also drawn from the same section.
14. A.J. Ayer, *op. cit.*, p. 184.
15. A.J. Ayer, *Ibid.*, p. 198.
16. P.F. Strawson is the most prominent among these philosophers