

HISTORICAL PSYCHOLOGY OF PERSONS: CATEGORIES AND PRACTICE

Kurt Danziger

Introduction

The fruit of research never falls on previously untilled soil. Not only are there likely to be previous relevant findings, but the target of the research will have a label that incorporates a certain pre-understanding of its nature. The discipline of psychology tries to discover new knowledge about objects that it identifies in terms taken from the common language, terms whose present meaning was established sometime in the past.¹ In doing so, the discipline helps to change that meaning, but the change always begins with what was received from the past. Acknowledged or not, the shadow of past transformations of understanding hangs over present-day innovation, circumscribing the conceptual alternatives available for consideration, limiting the direction of steps towards a different future.

Shadows of the past vary greatly in their depth and intensity. Many of the objects that attract current psychological attention are not all that old in terms of human history. Test intelligence, cognitive dissonance and post-traumatic stress disorder, for example, are inventions of the twentieth-century, and claims that they were always there, though unacknowledged, require somewhat arbitrary historical speculations. 'Persons', on the other hand, have been recognized as objects worthy of explicit conceptualization for a very long time. The term and its cognates are among the few in modern psychology – 'memory' being another – that have a really deep history. A *specifically psychological* understanding of persons emerged relatively late in that history and was effectively superimposed on rich layers of alternative meanings. The relationship between these levels is so murky that serious doubts have been expressed about the usefulness of 'person': 'The term itself is already a thoroughly abused concept.....The list of meanings itself could provide us with a judicial and political history of the English language.'²

Rather than throw up their hands in despair, most psychologists simply ignore the problem and get on with their empirical work. Raw empirical data always require interpretation before they acquire any psychological meaning, an interpretation that depends on verbal categories with a semantic history. When personality researchers publish their findings they are assumed to contribute to our knowledge about something that is already believed to exist, something already identified and given a label with a certain sense in common language use. The knowledge in question is assumed to be about something identified as 'personality' and not as the immortal soul or as the moral character, to mention only two possible but implicitly rejected alternatives.

Some of those who were most active in founding a viable field of personality psychology, notably Gordon Allport, were only too well aware of the need to differentiate the new psychological conceptualization from various historical alternatives. But once the field

became established historical amnesia took over. This has had two unfortunate consequences. First of all, some of the most distinctive characteristics of personality psychology simply became taken for granted, incorporated in instruments whose use transformed conceptual questions into technical issues. As a result, some of the most basic assumptions of the field disappeared from view. Secondly, as in so much of the discipline, the line separating the new approach from what went before was drawn so sharply that much of what might have been productively assimilated was abandoned to other disciplines or simply consigned to oblivion.

In the last section of the present chapter I address the first of these issues. The earlier sections attempt some illumination of the second issue. However, given the multitude of meanings attached to 'person', it is necessary to set some boundaries. In principle, everything that has ever been implied about the nature of the human individual, for example in works of poetry or drama, could be considered part of the history of this concept. Philosophical or medical works might also carry such implications, even when they do not directly address the topic.

One way of hewing a path through this labyrinthine and potentially boundless territory is to use the history of a key word and its cognates as a marker for explicit use of the concept and as a thread to follow changes of use over time. This does not always work, but it works reasonably well for 'person', with one noteworthy exception: At a certain point, the history of 'person' virtually disappears into the history of 'self'. As I have previously given some consideration to this topic³ I will deal with it lightly here. For earlier periods, using the Latin 'person' as a historical marker avoids questions of translation and interpretation that would be inappropriate in the present context and are better left to specialist publications.

The history of concepts, especially over longer periods, does not typically follow one uninterrupted course. More usually, there are interruptions, replacements, new beginnings, and above all, there is not one line of development but several that may or may not meet. Concepts of the person are no exception. Over a long period there were several new starts that added additional layers of understanding to a category that was always complex. Even in Roman times, persons were defined in two different though related contexts, legal and moral. Subsequently, other kinds of person became important, and each section of this chapter provides hints regarding their most significant characteristics. These changes on the level of understanding were usually accompanied by corresponding changes in social practices often linked to legal, religious, medical, and scientific institutions. But this is not an institutional history, and so I have limited myself to drawing attention to changes in *literary* practices involving personal documents, especially autobiographies, and to a crucial scientific practice considered in the final section of the chapter.

Legal persons

Because of its concern for definitions and its close link to social practice legal discourse provides a useful entry point to the history of the concept of 'person'. In medieval Europe and beyond, legal discourse was strongly indebted to basic principles of jurisprudence that had been codified by the Emperor Justinian in the sixth century AD.⁴ One of the basic concepts enshrined in Roman law was that of the legal person. Though not unchanging, this understanding of 'person' provided a relatively stable cultural presence against which later developments had to assert themselves. At the end of the seventeenth century the philosopher John Locke, whose writings ushered in a new era for conceptualizing the human individual, still referred to 'person' as 'a forensic concept'.

The Justinian Code was itself based on the work of earlier Roman jurists who had developed a set of fundamental concepts that enabled them to systematize the collection of specific laws handed down from previous generations. Many of the relevant pre-Justinian texts have been lost, but an important one was rediscovered in the nineteenth century. Around 160 AD its author, Gaius, had formulated the classical juridical trinity by indicating that 'all the law which we use pertains either to persons or to things or to actions' (*de personis, de rebus, de actionibus*).⁵ Laws provided a formal regulation of potential conflicts involving these three fundamental entities. The legal person was not a standalone concept but part of a network of concepts designed to represent those aspects of the social order that were the target of formal regulation and legal sanctions. These targets might be actions, as in the case of theft or murder, they might be things that could be inherited and possessed, or they might be persons who assumed obligations involving other persons.

In this context the criterion of personhood was the capacity to enter into obligations in such a way that one could be held legally responsible for fulfilling those obligations. For this reason young children were not held to be persons. They were 'minors' under the guardianship, *tutela*, of designated adults, usually a father, who was responsible for them and their actions. Women also had the status of minors. So the status of 'person' was far from being a universal human characteristic. Slaves (of whom there were many) also lacked this status. They were not minors (who had some rights) but mere possessions that could no more enter into legal obligations than could a domestic animal. However, slaves could be freed through the deliberate choice of their owner, and in due course a freed male slave might even become a legal person. Personhood was something that males could attain, sometimes by good fortune, though more usually by reaching the age of maturity. But when was that? When one could be held responsible for one's obligations, the criterion stipulated. Legal decision making demanded a distinct threshold for personhood but it was not easy to reach agreement on the marker of that threshold. Some authorities favoured chronological age, others the bodily signs of puberty.⁶

In this context the concept of the person singled out a particular minority of the human population as the privileged bearers of special rights and obligations. This minority was also politically privileged: In ancient Rome they had the status of citizens of the state, and within their household or 'dominion' they exercised complete authority. Legal personhood

was also part of the political order, though after the disintegration of the Roman Empire the politics of personhood became more fragmented. They also became more complicated because of the growing influence of a Christian Church that functioned as a second source of law, canon law. The Church was committed to a doctrine of universalism that attributed to each and every human individual an immortal soul. In the long run, this meant loosening the exclusivity of the status of personhood and gradually extending some of its benefits to previously excluded categories of people.

Moral persons

Positive law assumes the existence of some sense of right and wrong among those it covers. Ideally, its appeal is to existing concepts of what is just and what is not, and when it conflicts with those concepts it will be ignored or opposed. It often arises out of an existing moral order, and the sanctions it provides are meant to uphold that order whenever it is flagrantly threatened.

In the case of Roman law we can get quite a good idea of the moral order within which it originated because the period just before and during its systematization produced a significant body of literature dedicated to moral education, literature that was respected in its own time and sometimes influential many centuries later. Moreover, much of it has survived. Some of this literature contains references to the concept of the person, providing us with the context for a crucial change in the use of the Latin term *persona* that had previously referred to the masks worn by actors on a stage. By the first century BC the theatre was becoming a metaphor and the term is given a more general meaning that is closer to 'social role' than to an actor' mask.

The most explicit and most influential example of this development is found in a book of advice directed at his son by the Roman politician, writer and philosopher, Marcus Tullius Cicero (106-43 BC). The title of the book is usually translated as 'On Duties' but, as a recent translator points out, 'On Obligations' provides a better rendering of the essentially moral connotations of the original.⁷ This is no quibble, because it is all too easy for the modern reader to overlook the fact that, once it left the theatre, 'persona' was for a very long time a term of moral philosophy.

The observation that an actor puts on different masks to play different roles on stage initially served as a metaphor for the way in which each individual faces different obligations in relation to different aspects of the human condition. In this vein Cicero tells his son that in the conduct of his life he, like others, will have to pay attention to four kinds of responsibility. In the first place, he ought to conduct himself as a rational human being, not as a creature governed by impulse. Secondly, he needs to take into account the special features of his own make-up and to realize that being true to oneself entails different things for different people. Wise actors do not always opt for the best plays but for those most suited to their talents.⁸ Third, the social circumstances of our lives, being born rich or poor, noble or commoner, assuming public office, these all impose particular obligations on us that should be respected. Finally, we have to recognize that our own life

choices create situations that bring new obligations with them. This happens when we decide on a certain career, for example.

Cicero's attempt at guiding his son is useful for alerting us to the gulf that separates the modern meaning of 'persona' from its ancient meaning. The term is still in use today to refer to the way individuals present themselves in a particular social situation, to the their literally playing a role. At times this simply amounts to faking it. But this is not what Cicero is advising his son to go in for. Quite the contrary, each of the four *personae* he mentions involves some serious moral purpose. What he takes from the theatrical analogy is not that the actor wearing a mask is some sort of fake but that the same actor is obliged to conform to different requirements in different roles. Each role entails its own set of obligations; the role requirement is given with the role. That is why the idea of a role can serve as an illustration of moral obligation.

What is also important for this understanding of 'persona' is the notion of perfectibility. Actors can play their roles well or badly. Some play them superbly. As an actor on life's stage one ought to perform as well as possible, always trying to improve. This principle sets the tone of the guide books of moral education. For the Stoic philosophers, whom Cicero followed, life offered constant challenges for moral improvement.⁹ This is not a significant component in the modern understanding of 'persona' but it was critical for the moral understanding of the person as actor.

In this understanding, moral values were experienced as part of the world, not as an individual preference. There is no private subjective stage from which an autonomous self regards the world beyond. The individual person is always embedded in some set of public obligations: 'no aspect of the person was 'private' in any way meaningful to modern westerners.'¹⁰ One's own individuality is not the source of one's values but the source of one set of shared obligations among others. Our individuality does not define us but should be morally respected.

The lives of others could function as models of upright conduct or as bad examples. In his advice manual Cicero frequently refers to historical figures whose lives and deeds provide specific illustrations of the principles he propounds. A similar intention is also evident in early examples of the genre of biography, though in this case it is the illustration that occupies the foreground and the moral lesson which forms the background. In his collection of *Lives* Plutarch¹¹ presented the stories of notable individuals in such a way as to make their actions signify qualities of moral character that could provide lessons for the reader. Only relatively recently did the tradition of moral biography yield to the more modern form that employs a more subjectivized narrative.¹²

In contrast to biography, the genre of autobiography could hardly be said to exist in classical antiquity. In his monumental effort to cover the history of this genre George Misch could find only eight cases that might be regarded as autobiographies for all the centuries of Greek and Latin antiquity.¹³ Most of these were 'speeches in self-defence', that is to say, extended descriptions of the circumstances of their lives offered way of excuse, exculpation, or denial of responsibility by individuals who had been publically

accused of serious transgressions.¹⁴ Such documents are similar to biographies in that there is an attempt to present an individual life as a whole, but such presentations typically take place in a moral or legal context.

Persons of substance

Morality and the law were not the only contexts in which the original meaning of 'persona' was significantly extended. The term was used in texts on rhetoric, an important field in classical antiquity, and also in grammar, where three "persons" were distinguished with respect to the use of verbs: the speaker, the one spoken to, and the one spoken about. This analytic usage was generalized to the interpretation of literary and philosophical texts, for example the Platonic Dialogues, where identification of the persons implicitly playing a role in certain verbal interactions made a difference to the meaning of the text.

This rather specialized usage appears to have played a role in the early development of a field in which questions of 'person' and 'personality' were to become quite prominent, namely, Christian theology. For a religion whose doctrines relied heavily on sacred texts in a foreign language (Hebrew) the closely related questions of correct translation and exegesis were inescapable. Because in the relevant religious texts divinity takes on at least two forms, father and son, and probably three (the Holy Ghost), the relationship among these forms became a matter of supreme interest for Christian theologians. A religious institution that was fast becoming centralized and autocratic required an explicit dogma against which heresy could be defined, and questions about the relative status of the three forms of divinity soon became central for the early Church Fathers. As they had often been trained in pre-Christian techniques of text analysis, they easily adopted a formulation of these questions in terms of the 'persons' of the divine. Trinitarian dogma eventually became crystallized in the formula *tres personae – una substantia*, three persons one substance - also rendered as one nature.¹⁵ Related debates addressed the dual aspect of Christ which was described in terms of the union of human and divine natures in one person.

In mediaeval theology the category of 'person' was explicitly limited to individual creatures with the gift of rationality: humans, angels and God. An essential attribute of human individuals was their immortal soul, and this led to an emphasis on the internal unity, the indivisibility, of the human person.¹⁶ Echoes of this emphasis survive to this day, though its origins are not always recognized.

Though all humans might be granted a soul, their personhood could be qualified. For example, a text dating to 1234 is reported to have stated that it was 'through baptism in the Church of Christ that a man becomes a person.'¹⁷ More generally, human personhood was regarded as imperfect though potentially perfectible. It was very much a matter of degree rather than an invariable human attribute. In confessional texts individuals constantly compare themselves to persons more perfect than themselves, to saints and to other exemplary figures from sacred or sometimes secular literature.¹⁸

One might say that the key variable for personhood was now *worthiness*. Imperfect beings could be accorded various degrees of worthiness, depending on their moral conduct and their social standing. It was a quality primarily attributed to certain classes of people, with individuals being able to claim worthiness on the basis of their actual or potential membership of these classes. In secular texts, 'person' carried a connotation of social standing, generally involving elevated rank and due respect, but occasionally the opposite. It defined individuals in terms of their place in a hierarchical network of social positions, not in terms their unique characteristics. Persons had a singular existence, but this was not defined in terms of what set them apart from others, their individuality, but in terms of the way in which they exemplified generally valued human qualities.¹⁹

Persons apart

Although earlier conceptions of the person never died out completely, particularly when supported by legal or religious institutions, their prominence gradually declined as a new understanding of the term emerged. Speaking very broadly, this new understanding can be characterized as individualistic, though there were many facets to that, and these did not develop in any synchronized manner, with regard to either place or time. There is a huge literature of potential relevance to this development, but there are certain aspects that must be regarded as particularly significant for the later emergence of specifically psychological conceptions of personhood.

First of all, one encounters an enhanced sense of the separateness of each individual. By the seventeenth century this receives explicit, even radical, expression in a new way of depicting the basic relationship between people. This, in the rather sweeping summary of one French scholar, is 'the epoch in which the individual discovers his isolation'.²⁰ In earlier times it had generally been taken for granted that participation in a life shared with others was the natural state of human beings. Individuals were always embedded in social 'circles' of family, kinsfolk, citizenship, friendship, authority relations, and so on.²¹ Social status entered into the definition of personhood, as we have seen. In reflective discourse there was a respect for traditional authority that seems misplaced to the modern reader but was often little more than an expression of solidarity with a particular intellectual community. By way of contrast, René Descartes (1596 - 1650), the prominent seventeenth century philosopher, does not write as a member of any community: he reports on his own introspective efforts to work out a viable philosophical position and invites his readers to try out these thought experiments for themselves.²² As one might expect, his philosophy is much less concerned with social being than with what goes on within each separate individual.

His contemporary Thomas Hobbes (1588 - 1679), on the other hand, was very interested in working out the social consequences entailed by the essential separateness of each individual. In doing so, he provided a view of the person that was very different from what had gone before. People are naturally solitary, he claims: 'Men have no pleasure (but on the contrary a great deal of grief) in keeping company'.²³ Human behaviour can be entirely explained in terms of mechanical processes within separate individuals whose natural relation to each other is one of 'war of every one against every one'. People

always want what others have, so they live in fear of each other. However, they are rational enough to grasp that they could escape this state of constant inter-individual strife by coming to some mutual arrangement for limiting their naturally anti-social tendencies. As a result, they enter into 'bonds' or contracts reciprocally restricting their power to harm others or obliging them to render certain services to others. This is how individuals are able to live with each other. Peaceful social co-existence is based on contract, not on people's inherently social nature.

In this model all speech is individual speech and all action is individual action. A person is defined as the owner of the words and actions that belong to him (Hobbes does not consider women). He may enter into 'covenants' with other persons regarding these possessions, as he would with any other possessions.²⁴ He may also delegate another person to speak or act on his behalf in return for specified services rendered by the other person.

The idea of defining persons in terms of their ability to enter into contracts with other persons was not new, as we saw in the section on legal persons. But relationships governed by formal legal concepts and requirements had remained a relatively small part of the domain of social relationships that linked people to each other. Kinship, a common language, a shared symbolic world, and group loyalties are just some of the frames for human relationships that existed without any involvement of legal concepts. What was new and shocking in the Hobbesian world was the claim that contract was the basis for *all* interaction among individuals, insofar as that interaction was not antagonistic. By expressing this claim in a particularly forthright and brutal way Hobbes provided a useful foil for arguments purporting to show its limitations. But there was always a lingering suspicion that it did describe, if not a universal human condition, at least a set of beliefs on which many people act much of the time in commercial civilization.²⁵ One did not need to be a Hobbesian to see the world as populated by separate competitive individuals, each an owner of personal qualities and capacities that could become the objects of contractual arrangements with other individuals. One's identity as a person would then be quite separate from one's social relationships.²⁶ In broad cultural circles beliefs of this kind became increasingly taken for granted, and Hobbesian assumptions are readily detectable in contemporary psychology.²⁷

Psychologically significant post-Hobbesian developments of social contract theory are usually associated with the names of John Locke (1632 – 1704), and Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712 - 1778). Both accepted the original and fundamental separateness of individuals but, far from being Hobbesian mechanisms, their individuals were endowed with a complex inner life. Increasingly, it is this inner life that comes to dominate conceptions of the person until well into the twentieth century.

After asking what 'person' stood for, John Locke provided an answer that relied on a term that had only recently been introduced into the English language, namely 'consciousness': 'For since consciousness always accompanies thinking, and it is that which makes everyone to be what he calls self and thereby distinguishes himself from all other thinking things, in this alone consists personal identity, i.e. the sameness of a rational being: and as far as this

consciousness can be extended backwards to any past action or thought, so far reaches the identity of that person'.²⁸

Here, being a person was defined, not in terms of an individual's social being, as had been the case in the past, but in terms of inner, private being. What makes me a person is my constant awareness of myself as the same conscious entity now and in the past. On this view, moral accountability does not define personhood but is itself a consequence of acting consciously. Individuals are to be held responsible for their actions only insofar as they acted in full consciousness of what they were doing.

In the years preceding the appearance of Locke's *Essay* members of some Protestant sects had already been promoting a marked inward turn of religious experience.²⁹ And there had been many examples of soul searching among Christians before that.³⁰ But Locke's philosophy was a secular one. The conscious self he posited as a person's core was not to be equated with the Christian immortal soul. It was a this-worldly phenomenon open to empirical inspection like any other natural phenomenon. Not surprisingly, Locke's views were taken very seriously in the course of the European Enlightenment but aroused resistance among defenders of more traditional doctrines.

The secular inward gaze had the potential of developing in two very different directions. One could adopt Locke's own sharply analytical attitude to private experience and dissect consciousness into its elements. That was the path of David Hume and a long succession of (mostly British) associationists. But on this path the individual person tended to disappear behind a curtain of general psychological laws that applied to everyone. Far more consequential for later conceptions of the person were the preoccupations of a complex cultural phenomenon that became known as Romanticism. Several of these preoccupations became part of a common understanding of personhood that persisted long after Romanticism's ascendance.

What remained was first of all an insistence on the *singularity* of individual experience that ran counter to virtually all previous discourse on the subject of the person. Of course, people had long been aware of the fact that no two individuals had exactly the same feelings or precisely the same personal qualities. But those had been regarded as rather trivial matters, not at all the sort of consideration that might affect one's conception of what it meant to be a person. Very few individuals had ever written accounts of their lives that a post-Romantic reader would recognize as genuine autobiographies. Some had written accounts of their deeds and public achievements, others of their religious lives. But almost always the focus had been on the *exemplary* nature of their experience, not on its *unique* nature. This applied even to figures such as St. Augustine (354-430 AD) who had the writing skills of a good autobiographer but who used them in his *Confessions*³¹ to illuminate his religious conversion and his beliefs so as to provide a guide for others to follow.

Rousseau's *Confessions*, published in 1782, are utterly different.³² He is quite fascinated by his own individuality, by the unique quality of his life and person, by the nuances of his inner life. Nor does he have any great deeds to dwell on; quite the contrary, he was a miserable misfit and he revels in it. What gives value to his person is an essential

individuality that is there, irrespective of any social entanglements. Nor is this individuality to be confused with the Christian soul, for Rousseau was neither a religious person nor was he 'confessing' to a religious audience. He was simply giving expression to a soon to be generally held belief that to be unique was not an exceptional quality bestowed on 'great men' but an essential aspect of common personhood.

Closely linked to Rousseau's highly developed sense of individuality was his awareness of his past. He takes his readers through the experiences that were important to him over the years, even the early ones. These were not matters that had any public significance; he relates them because they illustrate what kind of person he came to be. Though an essential core is implied, his individuality is not presented as something fixed but as something that can only be understood as a developing over a lifetime. In this respect too, his autobiography marked the appearance of a new dimension in common conceptions of personhood. Human individuals were increasingly felt to be characterized by their history, by the unique succession of events and experiences that had formed them. Alongside the much older idea of a public and collective history there now emerged the notion of a private history that each and every person could lay claim to.

There had been older accounts representing personal experience as a path to a religious goal, an outcome taking individuals *beyond* themselves. In the late 18th century and beyond individuals became increasingly wrapped up in their own history. Only now did autobiography develop as a recognized literary genre with its own conventions and clichés³³. Childhood was paid a hitherto unheard of degree of attention and early memories began to be taken seriously. Self-disclosure was no longer unseemly.³⁴ Having a potentially revealing inner, private life became an important part of being a person.

The life history that now identified a particular person was always thought of as something to be *narrated*: its coherence was the coherence of a narrative. It could be looked to for help in making sense of a life, not only one's own life but also that of others. In the course of the 19th century psychiatric case histories slowly began to take on some of the characteristics that had become common in autobiographies. In its early days psychiatry, especially German psychiatry, preserved the moral significance of the revelations uncovered by probing life histories. But such tendencies were soon submerged by the medical imperative of ordering personal lives in terms of the categories of 'symptoms' and 'diseases'.³⁵

The medicalized person

By the end of the nineteenth century there was widespread recognition of a kind of person that had been unknown a century earlier, a person with a personality disease. Certainly, there had long been people regarded as mad, and sporadic attempts had been made to keep them from interfering with decent citizens. But even in the eighteenth century, madness was only gradually coming to be regarded as primarily a medical problem. In any case madness, defined in terms of an individual's loss of reason, placed the afflicted in an altogether different category from ordinary humans, whose capacity for reason had been a defining feature of personhood since antiquity, recognized even by the likes of Thomas Hobbes. The

mad were a category apart, aliens among human persons. Their sad fate was likely to call for religious rather than medical ministrations.

Gradual secularization of human affairs favoured the medicalization of madness, and in due course that led to the emergence of physicians who specialized in the care of the insane. Initially, this branch of medicine was closely linked to special institutions for the segregation of the insane, asylums, but in the course of the nineteenth century some doctors, often identified as neurologists, began to treat people with 'nervous complaints' in their regular consulting rooms.³⁶ This represented a major breach in the wall separating the insane from other people, for here were patients who had not lost their capacity for reason but were unable to use that capacity to repair seriously disturbed personal lives. Once they had consigned themselves to medical care such patients would have their situation described in terms of the already common medical categories of diseases and their symptoms.

For some time, this form of medicalization could continue without creating any problems for the definition of personhood. An individual could easily be regarded as a rational and moral being who was simply unfortunate in being plagued by some disorder located in his or her nerves. However, during the latter part of the nineteenth century some alienists in France, and then in America, began to publicize a kind of disorder that seemed to affect the personality as a whole and not just some specific function. These were cases of so-called alternating or multiple personality, where the same individual would at different times manifest completely different personal characteristics, attitudes, modes of expression, emotional tendencies, preferences, memories, and so on.³⁷ Often, a particular personality exhibited at one time would appear to have no knowledge of the same individual's alternate personality exhibited at a different time.

These were extraordinary phenomena, but their effect was greatly magnified by the fact that their existence was not kept hidden in obscure medical publications but broadcast to an appreciative lay audience by members of the medical profession and by accomplished popularizers, such as T. Ribot, whose *Diseases of the Personality* reached a broad audience in several languages.³⁸ In days gone by, the phenomena of alternating personality would have received a supernatural interpretation, but now they could be accepted as part of the natural world to be elucidated by scientific medicine.

Those elucidations quickly led to a rupture in what had become the orthodox western understanding of personhood, the selfed person. According to this widely accepted Lockean orthodoxy, the coherence of the self that formed the core of personhood depended upon the continuity of conscious memory. Whenever I think and act I am aware that it is I who thinks and acts, and this awareness provides the thread that holds my thoughts and acts together as those of one and the same person. So went the Lockean mantra. But in alternating personalities the thread was clearly broken. What might be happening?

Whatever the specific details of the explanations offered by medically trained experts (and a few others), the Lockean conception of the person had to be changed. An early view, linked to the prominent French philosopher and clinician, Pierre Janet (1859-1947), turned a label for the new phenomena into an explanation: dissociation.³⁹ Denying the continuity, the

mutual accessibility, of all self-conscious states it regarded the person as an assembly of mental contents with more or less permeable boundaries between them. Going much further, Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) proposed a division of the mind into the familiar conscious part and a much larger unconscious part. Some of the latter was accessible to consciousness but most of it was protected by a strong barrier that could only be penetrated under special conditions, such as occurred in dreaming or under the influence of particular psychotherapeutic techniques.⁴⁰ The self was reduced to just a part of this organization of the personality, and only some of it was conscious. Far from offering a universally valid concept of the human individual, the image of the consciously selfed person had become a difficult ideal imperfectly realizable by a minority prepared to invest considerable time and effort.

In the early years of the twentieth century a new concept of the person was fast gaining credibility. The quality of unity, long the essence of individual personhood, was no longer to be taken for granted. In its place there appeared a variety of constructions that had in common a view of the person as fragmented into diverse segments whose communication with each other was always problematic. The identification of these segments varied, as did the account of their relationship to each other. In the most influential cases, including those of Freud and Carl Jung (1875-1961), the segments of the personality were not seen in one plane but as stacked on top of each other, with more power concentrated at the lower, generally unconscious, levels. Instead of unity, a dimension of *depth* was now an essential characteristic of personality.⁴¹ Sometimes, as in the Freudian version, the deepest layer had a biological basis.⁴²

What was absent from these conceptions was any faith in the pre-established harmony among the segments constituting the person. At best, a degree of harmony lay at the end of a long process, but the normal state of affairs was one of internal conflict that could easily become manifest in perpetual unhappiness, personal crisis, uncontrolled action, and diverse individual oddities identified in the language of medical symptoms. The boundary between madness and the essential rationality of the ordinary person had become frayed to the point of disappearance.

The dissected person

Even at the height of its influence the depth psychological conception of the person was far from being the only model on offer. A major reason for this is to be found in the extraordinary fractionation of knowledge that began in the 19th century and continued at an accelerating pace thereafter. There was of course a huge increase of systematized public information, but this accumulation depended on a division of labour among many groups of knowledge producers, each of which specialized in a particular kind of product. One after another, these groups broke away from older, much broader and looser associations to form the 'disciplinary' structures familiar to us today. In each case this entailed a sharpened focus on a delimited subject matter and a commitment to particular norms and practices of investigation that varied among disciplines. This was a highly efficient way of facilitating the accumulation of knowledge, but it also led to its dispersal among diverse groups that generally had little incentive for communicating with each other.

Economists, historians, sociologists and psychologists, to name only the biggest groups in the human sciences, were able to develop and maintain separate conceptions of the person to suit their particular agenda. The fact that major disciplines often fragmented internally tended to compound the problem.

Ironically, psychology as a discipline was about the last of the human sciences to make room for the person. For the founders of experimental psychology the human person was not on the agenda. Their interest was strictly in *general* regularities of human functioning, such as visual space perception, sensory judgment, reaction time, and so on. Persons did not exist for them as potential objects of investigation. *Individual differences* in psychological functions did exist, but these were treated as error terms: what was psychologically significant was the general regularity of individual experience and action, not the differences among individuals.⁴³ Yet, about half a century after its emergence, the modern discipline of psychology did find room for a sub-discipline, identified as 'personality psychology', that elaborated its own concept of the human person. For that to happen, *inter-individual* differences would have to be reconceptualized as a source of information about individual persons.⁴⁴

This depended on dissecting human personality into distinct components that were common to all individuals. The Romantic vision of the person as a unique whole would have to be replaced by a more anatomized image of the individual as an assembly of characteristics shared with other individuals. In the 19th century, phrenologists, and later graphologists, had already worked with distinct components of the person that could be assessed by specialists. Enhanced social mobility had opened a new spectrum of occupational choices that would benefit from reliable knowledge of an individual's specific characteristics.⁴⁵ But the earlier attempts at providing such knowledge remained qualitative and never gained scientific respectability.

A technological advance laid the basis for a *science* of individual differences.⁴⁶ As part of his life-long effort at establishing a science of heredity, Francis Galton (1822-1911) turned the focus of social statistics from the *average* person to the inter-individual differences that existed between persons. He and his acolyte, Karl Pearson (1857-1936), worked out relatively simple techniques for analysing these differences, provided of course they were formulated quantitatively. If one had several measurements, e.g. of visual acuity, strength of hand grip and speed of reaction, from the same set of individuals one could obtain statistical correlations among these measures based on the inter-individual differences within the set of individuals. At the beginning of the 20th century, Charles Spearman (1863-1945) was already applying these techniques to analyzing tests of intelligence. An important personal quality had been measured and identified. Could something similar be achieved with other personal qualities? There was never any doubt about the real existence of intrinsic qualities ascribed to socially separate individuals, the problem was how to isolate and identify them as potentially scientific objects.

Measuring quantitative differences between individuals always required some scale on which all individuals of interest could be assigned a position. That meant selecting personality components which could plausibly be regarded as common to all these

individuals. Physical characteristics, such as height and weight, provided the prototype for such components, and the simple psycho-physical measurements used in Galton's 'anthropometry' hewed closely to these models. The challenge for a Galtonian science of personality was to find components that were psychologically more significant and yet could be made to fit the requirements of the technology.

One way of meeting this challenge was to turn from attempts at direct measurement of personal performance to the analysis of language about personality. Here the term 'trait' played a key role. Like 'personality', this was not a widely used term in English at the time the 'new psychology' got off the ground. But, promisingly, its use straddled the moral and the scientific realm. One spoke of character traits, but the term also occurred in biology, especially the new science of heredity and its ugly sister, eugenics. An early systematic attempt at producing a collection of trait names resulted in *The Trait Book*, published by the Eugenics Record Office in 1919, which contained a list of about 3,000 traits 'that might conceivably be hereditary according to the principle of unitary characteristics'.⁴⁷ With this kind of use the term was acquiring a meaning that was far more radically elementaristic than its use in the context of human character could ever be. A person's character was understood to constitute some kind of whole, so that any of its 'traits' would be one feature of that whole. For the then science of heredity, on the other hand, a unitary trait was the expression of a somatic element that had an existence irrespective of any superordinate organization. When Gordon Allport made traits (or rather trait names) the basis of the new psychology of personality he indicated these units were to be seen as features of a whole and not as independently defined elements. However, his view did not prevail, and the most influential version of personhood associated with this branch of 20th century psychology took a radically elementaristic form that was historically unique.

In this construction of 'personality', human individuals each possess a large number of discrete attributes that are identifiable by the fact that natural languages have words for them. By further assuming that such attributes do not change their identity because they form part of a different collection of attributes in each individual, and are also measurable, it becomes possible to assign a value for each individual on each attribute or trait. This generates a set of individual differences that can be analyzed by means of classical Galtonian techniques and their later developments. The mathematical analysis yields a somewhat indeterminate mathematical result that must be subjected to non-mathematical criteria and then given some meaningful and relevant interpretation in order to be regarded as evidence for the existence of 'personality factors' common to all human individuals. Agreement on what these are was not easily achieved, but in the late twentieth century a degree of consensus emerged that there were just five, no more and no less.

Modern psychology also accommodated personality studies that did not follow this path but shared conceptions of the person with some of the older traditions already discussed. Depth psychology inspired much work in the earlier phases of personality psychology, and a turn to life history writing emerged later.⁴⁸ However, within twentieth century psychology, a truly novel conception of the person is to be found only in the approach that became established as the 'taxonomy' of individual traits.⁴⁹ In this case, certain assumptions about

natural language provide a basis for defining individuals by their place in a linguistic network.

Empiricists in the natural sciences have usually begun with things (or phenomena) and then given them names or provided verbal descriptions, usually according to some system. However, since the emergence of personality psychology as a distinct sub-discipline in the nineteen-thirties many of its most prominent representatives have pursued empiricism of words as the royal road to a knowledge of persons. Gordon Allport believed that 'men experience a desire to represent by name such mental processes or dispositions of their fellows as can be determined by observation or by inference'.⁵⁰ Therefore, culling from a dictionary 18,000 words that might conceivably be applied to persons seemed to be a worthwhile undertaking.⁵¹ Allport and others condensed the list of applicable words and employed it as a basis for naming attributes on which individuals could rate themselves or others. Individual differences obtained in this way could then be analysed as described above. Half a century later, the rationale for this path of nominal empiricism had become more explicit: 'Those individual differences most salient and relevant in people's lives will eventually become encoded into their language; the more important such a difference, the more likely is it to become expressed as a single word'.⁵²

Single words are the elements of dictionaries. Indeed, in this conception the dictionary functions, not only as a source of material but also as a silent metaphor for the individual person. Dictionaries break natural language into a list of separately defined units, much as the taxonomy of traits analyses a living personality. In both cases there is a problematic relationship between a dissected anatomy and a functioning whole, natural language in the one case, and individual personality in the other.

Languages, of course, are not collections of separate written words. They involve structural features, overlapping semantic fields and pragmatic functions. Correlations in the application of linguistic units are therefore to be expected, not least when people use language to talk about each other. Treating such correlations as an unproblematic reflection of the thing talked about implies a hidden linguistics that reduces language to its representative functions and ignores its internal coherence.⁵³ It also implies a pre-established conception of what is to be discovered when one investigates persons scientifically.

Looked at in a more distanced historical perspective, the striking feature of much of twentieth century personality psychology is the strength of its faith in the objective reality of whatever it is attempting to uncover. From its beginnings, this endeavour was spurred on by the conviction that the techniques of Galtonian science would yield a significant body of non-trivial, non-artefactual psychological knowledge about the single human individual as an entity. Such convictions are by no means rare in the history of the human sciences, and without them little might ever be achieved. In the late nineteenth century, for example, there was such a conviction about the promise and achievability of a science of memory, and that certainly brought to light some things that were previously well hidden. Some philosophers refer to this kind of conviction as 'deep knowledge', a sort of knowledge of what to expect before there is any real knowledge.⁵⁴ One might think of it

as a knowledge niche. A confluence of deep cultural traditions regarding individuals, a more recent fad for outing 'personality',⁵⁵ a loss of moral certainties, faith in the power of dissection and of measurement, competition among disciplines, these and other factors seem to have produced a niche in which a novel conception of the person could flourish.

Notes

¹ K. Danziger, *Naming the mind: How psychology found its language* (London: Sage, 1997).

² H. J. Stam, 'The dispersal of subjectivity and the problem of persons in psychology', in W.E. Smythe (ed.), *Toward a psychology of persons* (Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, 1998), pp. 221-44 (p.241).

³ K. Danziger, 'The historical formation of selves', in R.D. Ashmore and L. Jussim (eds.), *Self and identity: Fundamental issues* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 137-59.

⁴ 'From the eleventh century to the eighteenth and even beyond, the main feature of legal change in western continental Europe was the Reception of Roman law.' A. Watson, *The evolution of Western private law* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), p. 193.

⁵ D. R. Kelley, *The human measure: Social thought in the Western legal traditions* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1990), p. 49.

⁶ T. G. Leesen, *Gaius meets Cicero: Law and rhetoric in the school controversies* (Leiden: Nijhoff, 2010).

⁷ P. G. Walsh, 'Introduction', in M. T. Cicero, *On obligations* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), p. xvii.

⁸ M. T. Cicero, *On obligations* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), part I, p. 114.

⁹ P. Hadot, *Philosophy as a way of life* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995).

¹⁰ T. J. Reiss, *Mirages of the self: Patterns of personhood in ancient and early modern Europe* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), p.237.

¹¹ Plutarch, *Roman lives: A selection of eight Roman lives*, transl. R. Waterfield (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); and also *Greek lives: A selection of nine Greek lives*, transl. R. Waterfield (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

¹² C. Gill, *The structured self in Hellenistic and Roman thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

¹³ G. Misch, *A history of autobiography in antiquity* (London: Routledge, 1950). This translation covers only a relatively small part of the author's life work on the history of autobiography.

¹⁴ A. Momigliano, 'Marcel Mauss and the quest for the person in Greek biography and autobiography', in M. Carrithers, S. Collins and S. Lukes (eds.), *The category of the person: Anthropology, philosophy, history* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 83-92.

¹⁵ St. Augustine, *On the holy trinity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956).

¹⁶ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* (New York: Benzinger Bros., 1947).

¹⁷ A. Gurevich, *The origins of European individualism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), p. 90.

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- ¹⁸ M. Carruthers, *The book of memory: A study of memory in medieval culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).
- ¹⁹ Gurevich, *Origins*.
- ²⁰ G. Poulet, *Studies in human time* (New York: Harper, 1959), p.13.
- ²¹ Reiss, *Mirages*; also C. Gill, 'The ancient self: Issues and approaches', in P. Remes and J. Sihvola (eds.), *Ancient philosophy of the self* (New York: Springer, 2008), pp. 35-56.
- ²² R. Descartes, *A discourse on the method of correctly conducting one's reason and seeking truth in the sciences*, transl. I. Maclean (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006, original published 1637).
- ²³ T. Hobbes, *Leviathan* (1651), chapter 13.
- ²⁴ T. Hobbes, *Leviathan* (1651), chapter 16.
- ²⁵ For 18th century elaborations, see E.J. Hundert, 'The European Enlightenment and the history of the self', in R. Porter (ed.) *Rewriting the self: Histories from the Renaissance to the present* (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 72-83.
- ²⁶ M. Hollis, 'Of masks and men', in M. Carrithers, S. Collins and S. Lukes (eds.), *The category of the person: Anthropology, philosophy, history* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 217-233.
- ²⁷ J. Martin and J. Sugarman, 'A theory of personhood for psychology', in D.B. Hill and M.J. Kral (eds.), *About psychology: Essays at the crossroads of history, theory and philosophy* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2003), pp. 73-87.
- ²⁸ J. Locke, *An essay concerning human understanding* (New York: Dover, 1959), Book II, chapter 27, p.449. The excerpt is from the second edition originally published in 1694.
- ²⁹ Well known English examples are provided by Richard Baxter (1615-91) and John Bunyan (1628-88). Their writings were analyzed from a perspective that is particularly relevant in the present context in K.J. Weintraub, *The value of the individual: Self and circumstance in autobiography* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), chapter 10. For a more general account of 17th century tendencies to privatize attempts at achieving salvation, see especially N. Luhmann, 'The individuality of the individual: Historical meanings and contemporary problems', in T.C. Heller, M. Sosna and D.E. Wellbery (eds.), *Reconstructing individualism: Autonomy, individuality and the self in Western thought* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1986), pp. 313-325. The emergence of autobiography as 'a cultural practice' and its relation to earlier practices, such as diary keeping, is covered in M. Mascuch, *Origins of the individualist self: Autobiography and self-identity in England, 1571-1791* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996).
- ³⁰ This aspect is stressed in M. Carrithers, 'An alternative social history of the self', in M. Carrithers et al, *The category of the person*, pp. 234-56.
- ³¹ St. Augustine, *Confessions*, transl. H Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991). On Augustine's narrative talent and the way he employed it, see J. Olney, *Memory and narrative: The weave of life writing* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1998).
- ³² Rousseau, J.-J. *The confessions of Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, transl. J.M. Cohen (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1953).
- ³³ L. Anderson, *Autobiography* (London: Routledge, 2001).
- ³⁴ M. Sheringham, *French autobiography devices and desires: Rousseau to Perec* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993).

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- ³⁵ G. Verwey, *Psychiatry in an anthropological and biomedical context* (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1985).
- ³⁶ J. Goldstein, *Console and classify: The French psychiatric profession in the nineteenth century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).
- ³⁷ Among numerous historical accounts of these developments, see especially I. Hacking, *Rewriting the soul* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995); and G.P. Lombardo and R. Foschi, 'The concept of personality in 19th-century French and 20th-century American psychology' *History of Psychology* 6 (2003), 123-42.
- ³⁸ T. Ribot, *Les maladies de la personnalité* (Paris: Alcan, 1885).
- ³⁹ P. Janet, *L'automatisme psychologique: Essai de psychologie expérimentale sur les formes inférieures de l'activité humaine* (Paris: Alcan, 1889).
- ⁴⁰ S. Freud, *Introductory lectures on psycho-analysis* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1922). This is a translation, by Joan Riviere, of lectures delivered at the University of Vienna in 1915-17 that represented Freud's first extended public systematization of his ideas. The Freud literature is of course enormous and only its existence can be hinted at here.
- ⁴¹ The term 'depth psychology' seems to go back to the Swiss psychiatrist Eugen Bleuler (1857-1939), Freud's exact contemporary, who also invented the term 'schizophrenia'.
- ⁴² F.J. Sulloway, *Freud biologist of the mind* (New York: Basic Books, 1979).
- ⁴³ K. Danziger, *Constructing the subject: Historical origins of psychological research* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).
- ⁴⁴ With very few exceptions, the sub-discipline of personality psychology long ignored the social embeddedness of personhood and avoided the study of individual lives. It quickly distinguished itself from its disciplinary rivals by relying very heavily on the statistical analysis of individual differences. See N.B. Barenbaum and D.G. Winter, 'History of modern personality theory and research', in O.P. John, R.W. Robins and L. A. Pervin (eds.), *Handbook of personality theory and research* (New York: Guilford Press, 2008), pp. 3-26.
- ⁴⁵ R. Cooter, *The cultural meaning of popular science: Phrenology and the organization of consent in nineteenth-century Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).
- ⁴⁶ For a detailed critical account of this development in relation to conceptions of the person, see J. T. Lamiell, *Beyond individual and group differences: Human individuality, scientific psychology, and William Stern's critical personalism* (London: Sage, 2003).
- ⁴⁷ G. W. Allport, *Personality: A psychological interpretation* (New York: Holt, 1937), p.236.
- ⁴⁸ Three broad conceptual approaches are identified in D.P. McAdams, 'A conceptual history of personality psychology', in R. Hogan, J. Johnson and S. Briggs (eds.), *Handbook of personality psychology* (San Diego: Academic Press, 1997), pp. 3-39. For a recent overview of the history of this field, see F. Dumont, *A history of personality psychology: Theory, science and research from Hellenism to the twenty-first century* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).
- ⁴⁹ In this historical study I exclude developments of the last two decades. For an historically important overview of the lexical taxonomic approach, see O. P. John, A Angleitner and F. Ostendorf, 'The lexical approach to personality: A historical review of trait taxonomic research' *European Journal of Personality* 2 (1988), 171-203.
- ⁵⁰ Allport, *Personality*, p. 304.

⁵¹ G.W. Allport and H.S. Odbert 'Trait names: A psychological study', *Psychological Monographs* 47 (1936), no. 211.

⁵² John et al (note 48) p.174.

⁵³ C. Taylor, 'Language and human nature', in C. Taylor, *Human agency and language: Philosophical papers I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 215-47; F. de Saussure, *Course in general linguistics* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1959).

⁵⁴ Hacking, *Rewriting the soul*.

⁵⁵ The 20th century was marked by a culture of personality chatter. Everyone, not merely persons of great accomplishment, was now assumed to have a 'personality' easily described in words. Adjectival check lists for purposes of personnel selection appeared early. Entertainment and self -help literature regularly invited its consumers to engage in exercises of self-rating and self-evaluation. Talk about personal characteristics that previous generations would have considered inappropriate, embarrassing or unseemly was now everywhere. In this respect the modern cultural history of 'personality' resembled that of sexuality; see M. Foucault, *The history of sexuality I: An introduction* (New York: Random House, 1978).