

## Person

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The concept of person is associated with *intensional* questions about the individuality, transtemporal identity, constitution, normativity and rationality of a subject. *Extensional* questions arise as to whether all humans are persons and whether there are also non-human persons. In the history of philosophy, three paradigms can be distinguished: (1) The ontological definition of the person as “an individual substance of a rational nature” (Boethius). (2) The self-consciousness-based definition of the person as a being that “can conceive itself as itself” (John Locke). (3) The moral-philosophical definition of the person as “an end in itself” (Immanuel Kant). In current analytical debate, the focus has shifted to the relationship between bodily organism and person. The theory of animalism (Eric T. Olson) states that persons are essentially animals and that mental or psychological attributes play no role in their identity. Constitution theory (Lynne Baker), on the other hand, attempts to define the person as a natural and at the same time self-conscious being: the bodily organism constitutes the person without being identical to it. Rather, it forms with it a “unity without identity”. A promising candidate for conceiving the natural-rational unity of the person has emerged recently in the concept of the “person life” (Marya Schechtman).

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### 1. A history of concepts and problems

The etymology of the word “person” points us towards antiquity. “Persona” means in Latin the “mask” of an actor (cf. the corresponding Greek term πρόσωπον, *prósopon*). Subsequently, “persona” was understood to mean the role that a person plays in society (on the history of the term see Fuhrmann 1989: 269). A definition of the genuinely philosophical concept of the person is difficult. However, we normally associate it in *intensional* terms with the notion of a bearer of rights and dignity, of individual existence and trans-temporal identity, moral accountability, rationality and freedom. The concept of the person is located at the interface of theoretical and practical philosophy. We can ask (onto)logical questions about the constitution of persons: what does the identity of a person consist in over the course of time, when our body is constantly renewed physically? How do body organism and person relate to each other? But we can also ask about the extension of the concept of person: are infants and

comatose people persons? Are all humans persons? Are only humans persons? Are there non-human persons?

A convincing theory of the person must give answers to the following three problems. (1) The logical identity problem: how can the person’s numerical identity be explained over time? (2) The ontological unity problem: how should the relationship between the self-conscious person and the animated bodily organism be understood? (3) The normative dignity problem: to what extent can new-borns and people without self-consciousness already be regarded as persons without having to rely on a species-chauvinism (“speciesism”), i.e. the thesis that personality only exists in the form of a human being? (See Singer 2002: 6.)

### 2. Person as individual substance (Boethius)

One of the first influential attempts to define the person was made by the late-ancient philosopher Boethius. He developed his concept of person against

the background of the theological question of how many natures and persons Christ has. Boethius refers to the concept of nature: “Nature belongs to those things which, since they exist, can in some measure be apprehended by the mind” (Boethius [c. 515] 1968: 79). This comprehensive concept of nature includes physical and incorporeal substances as well as accidents. Boethius defines substances as that which “underlie the rest and offer support and substrate to what are called accidents” (ibid.: 89). Persons can in turn be defined by the fact that they are natural-individual substances endowed with reason. This includes humans, but also angels, and not least God, while animals are natural-individual substances lacking the faculty of reason. Boethius thus defines person as an “individual substance of a rational nature (*naturae rationalis individua substantia*)” (ibid.: 85).

After Boethius, Thomas Aquinas further defines the individual person of human beings by focusing on their capacity for reason: “in a more special and perfect way, the particular and the individual are found in those rational substances which have dominion over their own actions; and which are not only made to act, like others; but which can act of themselves (*Sed adhuc quodam specialiori et perfectiori modo invenitur particulare et individuum in substantiis rationalibus, quae habent dominium sui actus et non solum aguntur, sicut alia, sed per se agunt*)” (Thomas Aquinas [1265] 2014: QQ 29). Thomas thus emphasizes the subjective character of the person, which consists in the person’s capacity to determine themselves, i.e. that they are a free subject.

### 3. Person as self-conscious subject (John Locke)

The modern debate about the person takes place against the background of the mind-body problem, famously formulated in René Descartes’ philosophy. According to Descartes, a strict distinction must be made between physically-extended things (*res extensae*) and those entities that are determined by the exercise of self-consciousness (*res cogitantes*). This of course makes the question of how physical and mental things can interact with each other all the more pressing.

The phenomenon of self-consciousness is of central importance for Locke’s concept of person.

According to Locke, person is “a forensic term appropriating actions and their merit; and so belongs only to intelligent agents capable of a law, and happiness and misery” (Locke [1690] 1997: 312). Locke develops his concept of person in the context of an investigation into identity and diversity and the “existence of things themselves”. He distinguishes three kinds of identity on the basis of three kinds of individual transtemporal existences: (1) material bodies, (2) living beings or organisms and (3) persons. The identity of material bodies consists in the identity of their parts or elements: “but if one of these atoms be taken away, or one new one added, it is no longer the same mass, or the same body” (ibid.: 298). “In the state of living creatures,” Locke argues, “their identity depends not on a mass of the same particles” since “the variation of great parcels of matter alters not the identity” (ibid.). A living thing gets its identity solely from the fact that its material element “has such an organization of parts in one coherent body, partaking of one common life (ibid.). It is this organization which “makes the same” living thing (ibid.). A human is also such a living being, according to Locke: their identity consists “in nothing but a participation of the same continued life, by constantly fleeting particles of matter, in succession vitally united to the same organized body” (ibid.: 299). Central to the identity of persons is their consciousness, i.e. their capacity for self-reflection. For Locke a person is “a thinking intelligent being, that has reason and reflection, and can consider itself as itself” (ibid.: 302). Awareness of one’s own actions and perceptions is the criterion for personal identity: “by this everyone is to himself that which he calls *self*” (ibid.). For Locke, this means the mutual ontological independence of substance, living being and person: “it being one thing to be the same substance, another the same man, and a third the same person,” then “person, man, and substance, are three names standing for three different ideas” (ibid.: 300). In terms of the unifying function of consciousness, there is thus a structural analogy to the corresponding principle of living beings: “different substances, by the same consciousness, (where they do partake in it) being united into one person, as well

as different bodies, by the same life are united into one animal, whose *identity* is preserved, in that change of substances, by the unity of one continued life" (ibid.: 303). Here, of course, the question arises as to how precisely the person *qua* self-consciousness is related to their living bodily organism. Another problem is that if we follow Locke's approach, people who do not have self-consciousness cannot be regarded as persons. For this reason Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, departing from Locke, made personal identity dependent on the attribution and co-remembrance of a community of persons (see Leibniz [1704] 1996: 237).

#### 4. Person as moral agent (Immanuel Kant)

Immanuel Kant's concept of the person differs from the approaches considered thus far in that it is closely linked to moral-philosophical principles. Kant develops his concept of the person essentially with reference to the moral law of the categorical imperative: "So act that the maxim of your will could always hold at the same time as a principle in a giving of universal law" (Kant [1788] 2015: 28). He distinguishes expressly between "person" and "personality". While "person" means the naturally-rational being that exists empirically according to the laws of nature, he defines "personality" as "freedom and independence from the mechanism of the whole of nature" (ibid.: 71). The person is "subject to his [sic] own personality insofar as he also belongs to the intelligible world" (ibid.) Alongside humans' natural disposition, this purely intelligible structure of personality is their "second and highest vocation", which they "must regard with the greatest respect" (ibid.). In contrast to Boethius, for whom the concept of nature was intimately connected with that of the person (person as "an individual substance of a rational nature"), Kant's "nature" becomes almost the counter-concept to the person, the realm of heteronomy opposed to that of personal-rational autonomy. By shifting personality into the intelligible realm and detaching it from nature, it can no longer be understood as something individual and distinguishable, but is, *qua* pure practical reason, a general, purely rational and supersensible structure. Personality can only be individuated by the empirical person. It is therefore

nothing other than "humanity in its person" (ibid.: 72), which is "holy" and an "end in itself" (ibid.). The dignity of the person consists in having a consciousness of the moral law, being able to classify maxims as good or evil, and being able to freely choose one or the other alternative.

#### 5. Person as psycho-physical individual (Peter Strawson)

In his major philosophical work *Individuals. An Essay in Descriptive Metaphysics* (1959), Peter Strawson makes a distinction between two kinds of metaphysical thinking – revisionary and descriptive metaphysics – that is important for his definition of the concept of person: "descriptive metaphysics is content to describe the actual structure of our thought about the world, re-visionary metaphysics is concerned to produce a better structure" (Strawson 1959: 9). Strawson wants to analyse the concept of the person on the basis of a descriptive metaphysics and he concerns himself with "establishing the central position which material bodies and persons occupy among particulars in general" (ibid.: 11). Strawson thereby tries to show that "in our conceptual scheme as it is, particulars of these two categories are the basic or fundamental particulars, that the concepts of other types of particular must be seen as secondary in relation to the concepts of these" (ibid.). Other types of particulars, for example events, can only be identified by recourse to material things and persons. We must therefore "acknowledge the primitiveness of the concept of a person" (ibid.: 111). Strawson is particularly interested in the relationship between mental and physical predicates of an individual, spatiotemporally identifiable person. In contrast to the concept of a pure ego, a thinking substance, Strawson argues that the concept of the person is "logically prior to that of an individual consciousness": "the concept of a person is not to be analysed as that of an animated body or of an embodied anima" (ibid.: 103) and "does not divide into unconnected subjects" (ibid.: 112). Thus, for Strawson, the person represents a unit of mental and physical predicates that cannot be reduced further. In this context he distinguishes between (material) M predicates such as "weighs 10

stone” or “is in the drawing-room” and (personal) P predicates such as “is smiling”, “is going for a walk”, “is in pain”, “is thinking hard”, or “believes in God” (ibid.: 104).

Despite all its advantages of not reducing personality to materiality, the problem with Strawson’s concept of person is that it leaves the specific personhood of the person insufficiently defined. Animals also display M- and P-predicates: they exist in identifiable positions in space and time and can have phenomenal consciousness of pain. In this context, the American philosopher Harry Frankfurt makes a pertinent criticism. In his important essay *Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person* (1971), he writes: “what philosophers have lately come to accept as analysis of the concept of a person is not actually analysis of *that* concept at all [...]. It does violence to our language to endorse the application of the term ‘person’ to those numerous creatures which do have both psychological and material properties but which are manifestly not persons in any normal sense of the word” (Frankfurt 1971: 5). It thus seems that ontological talk of persons is not possible without recourse to the concept of free will.

## 6. Person as animal (Eric T. Olson)

According to Eric T. Olson’s theory of animalism, the human person is nothing more than a living being of the species ‘human’: “when I say that we are animals, I mean that each of us is numerically identical with an animal. There is a certain human organism, and that organism is you. You and it are one and the same” (Olson 2003: 318). As persons we are animals, and essentially animals, in a non-derivative way. However, the theory of animalism does not say that human animals have exclusively biological and no cultural characteristics. Olson does not want to rule out the possibility that human animals could also appear in completely different ‘roles’: “an animal can have properties other than being an animal, and which don’t follow from its being an animal. Our being animals does not rule out our being mathematicians, Frenchmen, or Roman Catholics” (ibid.: 321). According to Olson, “animal” is a “substance concept” (Olson 1997: 121) and “person” subordinate to it. In terms of the living organism of a

person, the psychological criterion of persistence appears merely as “a temporally accidental attribute” (ibid.: 122).

While Olson’s animalism is able to solve the logical identity problem bequeathed by Locke, it is nevertheless unable to explain substantial personal identity, which it views as a mere organic accident. After Olson it would therefore need to be asked whether personal identity might be found precisely in the specific form – the “characteristic organization” (ibid.: 137) – of an organism; in the case of human beings, the freedom and intersubjective relationships which differ qualitatively from animal organisms.

## 7. Person as constitution (Lynne R. Baker)

At present, one of the most well-elaborated theories of personal identity, one which seeks to do justice to both the ontological and practical identity of persons, has been developed by Lynne R. Baker within the framework of her “Constitution View”, which in many respects ties in with Locke’s distinction (see Baker 1999: 161, footnote 3). Baker’s ontological foundation is biology (see Baker 2005: 26), though she adds that this biological basis is epistemically too under-determined to explain the specificity of personal identity (see ibid.: 37). Baker’s Constitution View (see Baker 2000: 91–117) states that living body and person are (contra animalism) not identical, yet neither (contra Cartesian dualism) do they represent two ontologically separate things (ibid.: 57). Decisive for the status of a person is not the (human) body constituting it, but a specific mental qualification, which Baker defines as the capacity for a first-person perspective. As soon as an organism develops a first-person perspective, a new entity appears in the form of the person, whereas from the animalist point of view personality is a mere refinement of organic life. This new entity of the person, constituted by their body organism, is not a separate entity situated next to or ‘above’ the body. Both the body and the person constituted by it have a first-person perspective – not in the sense of doubling, but in the sense of a different, adverbial mode of having. The person possesses the first-person perspective in a non-derivative, privileged way, whereas the body

constituting the person possesses it only in a derived, so to speak ‘second hand’ way, for instance in the form of a parallel cerebral activity. Accordingly, some mental states of a human person, such as hoping for a particular future event, are irreducible and primarily personal in nature, whereas mental states such as pain are irreducible and primarily organic in nature (see *ibid.*: 117). The specific unity of the person consists in the fact that their body constitutes them ‘from below’, while the person ‘embraces’ them ‘from above’. Through this reciprocal ontological coupling and interlocking, Baker tries to conceive a maximum unity of the person with their body, without having to grasp this relation as identity (see *ibid.*: 55). However, a question remains as to how two substances, body organism and person, which have different criteria of identity, can coexist and coincide in the same place at the same time.

## 8. Person as life form

In current debates, the notion of ‘life’ has emerged as a promising candidate for understanding the natural-rational unity of the person. Robert Spaemann has provided important groundwork for this. According to Spaemann, persons are formally characterized by the fact that they “‘have’ their nature, rather than merely ‘being’ it.” (Spaemann [1996] 2006: 203) “Fundamental biological functions and relations are not apersonal; they are specifically personal performances and interactions” (*ibid.*: 239). Persons do not exist for themselves, but “form a system of relations in which each is uniquely situated in relation to every other.” (*ibid.*: 185) Spaemann defines this intersubjective association as a “genealogical connection with the ‘human family’” (*ibid.*: 240).

According to Marya Schechtman, special qualities are not like a list which, when added together, make up a person, but rather a holistic context in which the person is integrated (Schechtman 2014: 7). Schechtman distinguishes her approach both from Locke’s identity theory and from Baker’s constitution thesis by attempting to define the identity of the person with recourse to the concept of life. For her, it is

not enough to characterize persons as morally accountable entities; this criterion of identity must in turn be grounded, namely in a concept of life: “to be a person is to live a person life; particular persons are individuated by individuating person lives; and sameness of person over time is defined in terms of the sameness of a person life” (*ibid.*) According to Schechtman, personal life is only possible in an intersubjective network: “Being brought into the form of life of personhood may be described as being accorded a place in person-space” (*ibid.*: 114). Schechtman, however, does not go into detail about how exactly this personal life is to be understood: is it an organic-natural life or a social life in the sense of a “second nature”? It can thus be considered a challenge for the current debate to develop a sustainable concept of life that does justice to the complexity of the concept of person.

## 9. Person in (bio)ethical debate

The concept of person is of particular importance in current (bio)ethical debate. This is because persons are regarded as beings who possess inviolable dignity and therefore enjoy special protection (see Article 1 of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Germany). In light of this normativity, the question of the intension and extension of the concept of person gains particular significance. For example, the question arises as to whether fetuses or people with severe dementia still fall under the concept when they do not possess certain personal attributes such as self-consciousness. In particular, the question of the beginning and end of human life becomes a central problem of bioethics (see Quante 2002: 16). The view that humans are persons solely by virtue of their affiliation to a particular biological species, whereas living beings of other species are not, has been described and criticized by Peter Singer as “speciesism”, in analogy with the concept of racism: “Speciesism [...] is a prejudice or attitude of bias in favor of the interests of members of one’s own species and against those of members of other species” (Singer 2002: 6). Thus a challenge remains for philosophical research to develop a concept of person that assigns absolute dignity to all human beings without promoting speciesism.



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