THE NATURE OF THE HUMAN PERSON

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1. Questions

Contemporary developments in technology have taken questions about the origin and the termination of human life out of the arena of mere academic discussion and have made them instead matters of daily concern, or even, unfortunately, unconcern. But this only makes the theoretical issues more urgent, and among them one of the most basic is the question: just what is a human person? This is often reduced to: What does it mean to be human? But this form of the question omits the word "person" and this word is the focus of a good deal of mystification today. I propose therefore to treat the topic in two parts, firstly on the person as individual, and secondly on the person as human.

I. THE PERSON AS INDIVIDUAL

2. Individuality of a Person

Despite much puzzlement[1] over the notion of person, and the assumption by many that the notion has changed a good deal over the centuries, I am satisfied that it is a simple and a remarkably stable notion in common usage, and even in technical usage, especially if kept distinct

from notions connected with other terms, such as "personality".[2] A person is a distinct human being. Being a person is what makes possible a definite answer to questions such as: Who are you? Who is that? Whose voice is that? Since he is a distinct individual, a person is more than a part of something as is an arm or a heart, while at the same time different from a group, such as a family or a team, whose parts are united under one aspect but are themselves individuals distinct from each other. The test is whether the unification governs a whole range of diverse parts and functions, or whether there is unification only under a few aspects, leaving other centres which have a much more notable unity — these are the individuals.

3. Person and nature

The word "nature" is used for what a thing is or how it operates or how it is constituted, so the traditional distinction between person and nature can be expressed briefly as the difference between the answers to the questions "Who?" and "What?" as applied to the same thing. A person possesses a nature. His nature doesn't make him a person but the sort of person he is. It gives him a set of powers and a way of influencing the world or of being affected by it.

4. Non-personal individuals

For ordinary pruposes, by "person" we mean a distinct individual human being.[3] But there can be persons who are not human, provided they have an intellectual or rational nature. Thus it is appropriate to apply the word "person" to an angel or to God the Father, to the Son or to the Holy Spirit, but that need not concern us here.

The limitation to a particular type of nature (human, or at least rational), which certainly accords with the ordinary usage of the word "person", suggests that there are distinct individuals that are not persons, and that is certainly the case. A reflective analysis can back up common usage here. There are individual plants and animals, and probably individual crystals and molecules, and even individual electrons can be freed from the atoms of which they are parts.

Some of the questions about persons are concerned more with their nature than with their individuality, but there are other questions that concern precisely their individuality, and such questions will have parallels in the realms of plants and molecules.

5. Beginnings and divisions

The question as to when life begins or ends, for instance, is more manageable when rephrased as the question

about when a new distinct individual started to exist or ceased to exist. This applies to molecules and to plants as well as to human beings. Beforehand there was just one plant of a certain sort at hand. Now there are two. Beforehand there was one living plant. Now there are none. A single willow tree was growing by the bank of the river. A cutting is taken from it, inserted in the mud and soon there are two willow trees there. An explanation of such an event gives us the principles for solving such supposedly difficult philosophical problems[4] as that of the origin of human identical twins, and even the possible merging of early embryo twins to form a single baby.

The fact is that individual things, at all levels, are constantly being divided, thus producing new individuals. That is simply the sort of world we live in. A cake can be cut and a portion separated from it. Matter (which is essentially spread out in space[5], as distinct from spirit which is essentially unifying) allows of division, and so matter underlies the possibility of historical continuity between individuals. Part of what was the cake is now the separate portion. What remains of the cake still has a sort of unity, though somewhat different from what it was before the division. The portion, too, has its own unity, comparable to the sort of unity that the cake had and has, though different

in size and in shape. A new unity has emerged. There are now two units where before there was only one.

Not that a cake has a very striking unity. A molecule has a more intelligible, more central, more ordered unity, which is expressed by the chemist in terms such as bonds and distances and angles and charges and spins. If it is divided we get two or more separate and independent unities — those of atoms, or, through combination with other matter, of other types of molecule.

6. New lives

With an amoeba the basic issue is the same though the case is very different. The central intelligibility (or focal unity) is much more striking, not only because it unites parts that are changing in an apparently much more disordered sort of way, but also because the amoeba can divide spontaneously, and even more remarkably, retains after division quite the same sort of unification as it had beforehand, unlike the cake, which loses its shape after a portion has been cut from it. And in the part cut off a new centre of unity has emerged, which was simply not there before the initiation of the division. One thing has become two things, and two things of the same type as each other and as the mother amoeba.

The organizational unity that has such powers is sufficiently different in kind (not just in degree) from the unity of a cake or of a molecule to deserve a special

name, and, of course, the special name that we give this unity is "life".

Life is wonderful, and there is much about its conditions and its mode of operation that is still unknown to us, but we would be wrong to think of it as something quite mysterious or not subject to analysis. Its manifestations are obvious enough — development, growth, nutrition, healing, adaptation, reproduction — but do not forget that these all belong to a single individual thing, and indeed that each of them makes sense only in the light of the drive to keep this single being in existence, in spite of the enormous changes that occur in it, the discontinuity between it and its environment, and the variations in this environment.

Reproduction doesn't quite fit into this account of what life is, so we have to widen it to include a drive to prepare another thing of the same sort that might continue living when the parent is worn out and unable to hold itself together in that organized unity which is its essence. Allowing for this wider sense we can define life[6] as the unity involved in the co-ordination of a variety of parts and functions directed at the permanence of the single individual to which they belong and of its race. A living being is a single individual thing that operates with such a level of co-ordination.

then? Again the problem provides no great difficulty philosophically. One of the twins has died, that is, its soul has left its body, and the body has been taken over by the other twin and comes under the influence of the soul of this other twin. Something similar happens every time a man eats an oyster or a bean shoot. The man's soul takes over and reorganizes the material that was previously under the control of the soul of the particular oyster or bean. A closer analogy, if required, can be provided by cannibals. Objections to the traditional account of the origin of a human person that were based on twinning or even on recombination have nothing significantly new in them. It has been known for a very long time not only that one person can give birth to another, but also that one person can eat another.

II. THE PERSON AS HUMAN

8. Levels within human nature

Moving now from questions involving the individuality of a human person to questions involving the humanity, we have to give an account of what it means to be human, and to show how human nature can be clearly distinct from, and higher than, merely animal nature, which in turn is not just a chemical process or a machine.

This last problem is solved by a philosophy of distinct levels[8] of beings, in which each level is ruled by an autonomous science, whose laws retain all their value in each higher level, but do not determine the laws or events of the higher level since a new set of laws is superimposed there, with new basic terms that are not appropriate at the lower level. A diagram may help to clarify this view.

				Men
			Animals	Transcendental Psychology
		Plants	Psychology ———	Human psychology
	Molecules	Biology ———	Psychobiology ———	Psychobiology
Particles	Chemistry ———	Biochemistry —	Psychochemistry ——	Psychochemistry
Physics —	Molecular physics —	Biophysics ——	Psychophysics ———	Psychophysics

SCIENCES AS ON LEVELS, AND FIELDS WITHIN EACH SCIENCE

9. The philosophy of levels

Each line on this chart gives a series of fields within one autonomous[9] science. All these fields are governed by the same laws and involve the same basic terms. They differ only in the source from which they gather their materials, and any particular science tries to prescind from such concerns as sources of materials, so any relation-

ship concerning those sources is, from the point of view of that science, coincidental.[10]

Each column on the chart lists all the different autonomous sciences that have to be used in a full study of the sort of things that are named at the top of the column.

The names applied here to all the fields of the sciences are schematic, and are not intended to correspond exactly with common usage. They are models or ideal fields of study, though an attempt to identify and distinguish them strictly could in some cases be quite helpful.

Chemistry, for instance, deals with atoms and their compounds and the reactions between molecules. Moving across the same line, biochemistry does the same, but happens to have larger molecules to deal with, which it analyzes and tries to synthesize by methods proper to chemistry. Psychochemistry concentrates on the sort of chemicals that are found in nerves and brain and sense organs.

On the next line above, biology deals with life and death, growth and nutrition. Psychobiology deals with the growth, energy supply to, and healing of, the sense organs and brain, and their adaptation in varying situations.

On the next line psychology is concerned with the operation of the senses, especially as experienced in

consciousness.[11] Human psychology similarly deals with the senses and memory and imagination, but insofar as these provide material for insights, or help preserve or communicate insights already gained.

On the highest level we have transcendental psychology[12] which goes beyond the organization of words and diagrams and images to the drive of wonder, the focusing of understanding, the absoluteness of assent, the initiative of decision, and investigates the ways in which these operations depend upon each other.

Going down the right hand column we see that a full description of a human person requires the verified theories of transcendental psychology, of human psychology, of psychobiology and of areas within chemistry and physics. This is more complex than saying that a man is made up of body and soul, but seems to me to be also a good deal more enlightening, and helps to spell out something of what might have been meant by "body" anyhow.

10. The level that is purely human

What is most central to being human? I would like to suggest as most basic a characteristic that goes back to Aristotle[13] and Aquinas[14] but was not fully exploited by them or their followers, a characteristic that is highly regarded, but nevertheless rarely mentioned[15] in an analysis

like this, namely, wonder or inquiry or the power behind the asking of questions. In other words I want to suggest that the most human thing about man is that man is wonderful.

This central characteristic of what it means to be human is both more basic than any of the usually cited characteristics and yet in full harmony with them. These characteristics would be related to such activities as thinking, intelligence, being rational, reasoning, communication, symbol using, creativity, as well as the more specific "lateral thinking" of Edward De Bono[16] and "tacit powers" of Michael Polanyi.[17]

Each of us is wonderful in the sense of being full of wonder. We are the wondering ones. We have a desire to know, an attitude of inquiry, and this is completely open, directed at the whole of being. We want to know everything about everything, and indeed this very attitude already sets us in contact with the whole of reality. All the further knowledge that we acquire is merely a matter of drawing the lines and filling in the details within this. The key to the philosophical problems of knowledge lies only in this radical openness of the human spirit, with its active orientation towards everything that is. And so we find that the human person is wonderful in the more ordinary sense of the word as well, as something unexpected, something different from the other things that we know, something powerful and able to cope with what otherwise would have seemed impossible.

And yet, despite such a difference, a difference which marks the gap between spirit and matter, this act of wondering and this one who wonders are not unknown to us. Each of us is present to himself, without anything like attention to self, in his efforts to look and to listen, in his questions, his insights, his affirmations, his decisions. This multifaceted presence to myself is consciousness.

Prior to any naming of myself or any articulate question about myself I already have an enormous mass of unsorted data about myself, and much of it includes that element of wondering. Consciousness is not yet self-knowledge, but is the material which, when subjected to intelligent questioning, can yield knowledge of self. One part of that material accompanies the very questioning or wonder itself.

11. The articulation of wonder

Questions themselves are articulate. They enshrine wonder, but they are also the product of wonder — a wonder that is prior to any articulation and deeper than anything that it contains. We can find out a great deal about the human person by classifying and comparing various types of questions, expanding a little the classification once given by Aristotle.[18]

Basic spiritual drive	Articulation in questions	Type of answer	Component object	Overall object
Wonder	Will I?	Decision	A product	Being (reality)
	Whether...?	Yes	A fact	
	What? Why? How?	An insight	An intelligible possibility	
	Where? When? Which?	Places, times, individuals	Data	

ELEMENTS AND STRUCTURES OF TRANSCENDENTAL PSYCHOLOGY

I wonder where and when and which and who as on the bottom line in the figure, and so am directed to answers concerning places and times and distinct individuals.

I wonder what and how and why, and so am stimulated to exercise my creativity in seeing fresh possibilities, making suppositions, formulating hypotheses and theories, grasping order and intelligibility, seeing the point.

But possibilities are not always facts, so I go on to wonder whether, and following that drive I check and verify and ascertain and judge and in the light of this I assent and affirm. This wondering-whether is what leads to that wonderful word "yes", or to the less wonderful but equally strong word "no". And a genuine "yes" justifies the strongest use of that ubiquitous word "is", reaffirmed in a phrase like "It is so." This puts me into contact

with is-ness or being or, more simply, reality.

Finally, I wonder will I, and go on to decision and action.

From this we can see how wonder is full of meaning. "What?" leads to all possible concepts and theories. "Whether?" leads to all that is real. And "Will I?" leads to all the meaning[19] that is expressed in making and doing, and so to all our manufactured goods, and cultivated and harvested products, and tools and technology, and contracts and promises and legal arrangements and political systems and cultural achievements. Each human person is wonderful — full of a wonder in which he is reaching out to all that is.

There is an extremely simple sign of wonder satisfied in that very human action — a smile.

12. Skills can be potential, but persons are actual

The psychologist Carl Rogers, who founded client-centred therapy, wrote a book entitled "On Becoming a Person".[20] It has much to say about education at the tertiary level as well as the use of discussion in developing a mature and integrated personality. But I doubt if he would say that those who have not been through his process are not yet persons, in the sense of genuinely human individuals.

Nevertheless, his title reminds us that our human characteristics can be developed even late in life. Should we say then that a person becomes human only at matriculation, or when he gets his doctorate, or at that stage of intellectual, moral and religious conversion described by Lonergan which many of our greatest thinkers have failed to reach? The reasonable answer is to think of such achievements, like learning to talk and to walk and to smile, as developments of human potential in an individual who was already human and had the capacity in normal circumstances to grow in such directions. Serious confusion can arise out of calling a young child "a potential human person". The child is already a human person. He is a potential surgeon or philosopher or even rock singer because each of these is involved in a development (or corruption!) of human nature, but a person is an individual who possesses a human nature, the sort of thing that has the capacity to wonder and understand and judge and decide and act. To deny humanity to those who have not yet fully developed this capacity, or to those who are not actually at this moment exercising their intellectual powers is to restrict personhood well below its ordinary or reasonable meaning.

13. Can a sleeping person be murdered?

That would require us to hold, for instance, that no one is a human person while asleep, so that if your

victim happened to be sleeping you could kill him with far less moral guilt than if he had been awake. Professor Singer mentions the difficulty[21] that Michael Tooley has with the case of those who are asleep, but I do not think that he has himself faced squarely up to this problem in his own treatment of infants as less than persons.[22] He insists that "one cannot plausibly argue that a fetus is either rational or self-conscious",[23] adding that "the newborn baby is on the same footing as the fetus",[24] clearly on the grounds that neither the fetus or the baby is <u>at that moment</u> acting rationally or consciously, and so he holds that neither of them fits the definition of a person as "a self-conscious or rational being", even though they both will, at a later time, act in this way if we do not interfere. The same logic applies to the man who is asleep. He is, at that moment, not acting consciously or rationally. And we have to take Singer's logic seriously. He admits, for instance, the logical equivalence of abortion and infanticide — a point that few of those supporting abortion fifteen years ago were ready to admit. Will we soon find similar philosophers using the fact that a victim was asleep as a defence against the charge of murder? Or should we hold now, as people have always held, that infants are human persons because the normal growth of a child allows, before long, the exercise of rational powers?

14. Early direct evidence of being human

This mention of rationality leads back to the wonder that we have seen to be its most basic root. I have said that this underpins each of the more secondary criteria that are commonly used to discern the presence of intellect. Language and logic and reflection and method and order are skills that we learn as we grow. But they are empty shells without the drive of our desire to know. And there are many other, far less formal, activities in which such inquiry is expressed and can be recognized. I would like to suggest that there are signs of wonder in the eyes and the movements of a child a few months old that we do not find in a cat or a dog or a horse or even a well-trained chimpanzee.[25] And it seems to me that the smile of a baby frequently has the function of so many of our adult smiles — to express the great satisfaction of one step in the partial fulfilment of wonder, through a new insight, seeing the point, grasping some order in what previously seemed so very strange.

15. Defective human persons

There are, of course, defects and disabilities, but there is no indication that these occur on the level of the human spirit. All the evidence suggests that the defects are on the physical or chemical or biological or neural levels. In some of these cases the impact of the force of

wonder is dramatic, as when Helen Keller, unable to communicate by sight or hearing, finally understood that a particular tactual movement was meant as a sign for water, and she not only exploded in excitement but sought eagerly the meanings of other signs and so commenced her intellectual learning process that eventually enabled her to assimilate a considerable amount of human culture and to participate, despite her disability, in the wide world of human meaning. Today there are, in Australia, programmes for the regular education, even to the level of joining the work force, of those who are born both deaf and blind. And it seems that special pre-school programmes for children with Down's syndrome prepare many of these to cope with primary school at a normal age.

The claim that mentally retarded children are not really human persons seems to be highly retrograde and obscurantist now that we see great strides in such fields as chemotherapy, surgery, physiotherapy and specialized education facilitating the flowering of fully human powers in people who were once accepted as being seriously mentally defective. To be fully human ourselves we must continue to encourage the expansion of research into the causes and treatment of these disabilities.

16. The end of life

What of the other end of life? Bodily life ceases when the various organs are no longer able to function together as an integrated whole. The definition of death recommended recently by the United States President's commission for the Study of Ethical Problems in Medicine and Biomedical and Behavioural Research as either heart and lung cessation or irrevocable cessation of all functions of the entire brain, including the brain stem seems reasonable, in view of the fact that the brain is the centre of integration of adult activities. It is to be hoped that some such formulation will help in the always tricky business of determining the actual time of death.

But what is the very significance of death in a human person — a person with a spiritual and therefore immortal soul? Death marks the end of the opportunity that the spirit has to draw upon the resources of eye and brain and to direct many bodily processes. In taking these opportunities the human mind or spirit can reach new understanding, new truth, new decisions and commitment and so can work towards a genuinely human maturity.

The most valuable achievement of any human being is the final integration of his human personality. Killing

oneself is a rejection of any further stages in this human achievement, a refusal to hope that one might reach a deeper peace or understanding or gratitude or love. Killing another person robs him of any such possibility. Even a person in a coma may be progressing towards a more mature mental state. The occurrence of moments of lucidity just before death is an indication that such a possibility does sometimes exist in fact. Stepping in and preventing that possibility by directly intending a death, whether as a dominant or as a subordinate aim is as serious a wrong as any other murder.

17. Conclusion

I have tried to indicate those elements of human nature that are involved in our common use of the word "person", to show what is most basic in this humanity, to relate these spiritual elements of wonder and intelligence and decision to the other levels of activity that belong to a human being, in a way that allows for autonomy as well as transcendence, and to clarify the aspect of distinct individuality that is included in the notion of person but often neglected in theories about what a person is, and I have indicated how these notions could be applied to some current issues. I hope you will agree with me that each human person is wonderful, in the ordinary sense of being a marvellous product of creation as well as in the neglected sense of one driven by wondering.

FOOTNOTES

1. For instance, Dr. Bernard Towers says "again one is left puzzling" in a letter to The Tablet, 20 June 1970 p.599, in which he states the problems considered in sections 6 and 7 below.

2. This word can indeed be used for "what makes a person a person", but is used much more often for characteristics of one person that differ from those of another, i.e. for something about his nature.

3. Aquinas (S.Th. I q.29 a.1) accepted Boethius' definition of person as "an individual substance of a rational nature" (De duabis naturis, Ch.3, ML 64.1343). For ordinary non-theological purposes the only rational nature we know is human.

4. J.F.Donceel is particularly disconcerted by these problems in his Philosophical Anthropology, New York, 1967, Sheed and Ward, p.440-5.

5. The traditional definition of matter is by "extension" — what has parts outside parts. The opposite to matter is "form" which is intelligibility or order. Spirit is a more extreme opposite to matter — that intelligibility which is not intrinsically dependent on matter. This is sometimes thought of as a negative definition, but spirit has its own direct experiences — when we wonder, grasp the point, assent and decide — and so can be known quite positively. Recent discussions, in which the experience of understanding, and hence the notion of intelligibility have been neglected (as Professor R.L. Franklin notes in "Knowledge, Belief and Understanding", The Philosophical Quarterly 31(1981) p.193-208 at p.199) have been at a loss when dealing with spirit. See, for instance, Keith Campbell, Body and Mind, New York, 1970, Doubleday, p.19-25.

6. Without a philosophy of change and levels, which allows for the "emergence" of new central intelligibilities, biologists tend to hold either that a living being is a mere mechanism or that life exists somehow even in an atom. One who neatly avoids these exaggerations is E.S. Russell in The Directiveness of Organic Activities, Cambridge, 1945, C.U.P.

7. Nowadays we tend to keep this word for humans. But Aristotle and the scholastics require a soul wherever there is life. They speak, for instance, of the soul of a tree. But only spiritual souls are immortal.

8. See Bernard Lonergan, Insight, London, 1957, Longmans, p.254-7 and 437-42 on "explanatory genera". Others who introduce this notion are Michael Polanyi, Personal Knowledge, London, 1958, Routledge & Kegan Paul, and Errol Harris, The Fundamentals of Metaphysics in Science, London, 1965, Allen & Unwin.

9. One of the main arguments for reductionism, especially in the forms of mechanism (against anything special about life or consciousness), of determinism (against freedom of the will), and of that form of rationalism that denies any divine revelation, is based on the assumption that the laws of physics (or "science", or nature) would be violated, and so become worthless, if life, consciousness, free-will, or the divine communication were accepted. Hence the importance of this theory of levels, which insists on the autonomy and permanence of the laws of physics and the other sciences, while pointing out the possibility of sets of laws on higher levels which are independent of the lower laws and do not disturb them.

10. Lonergan puts it thus: "there is a series of levels of operation with each higher level making systematic what otherwise would have been merely coincidental on the previous level. It follows that there can be distinct, autonomous, yet related departments of science" (Insight, p.616, cf. pp.205, 256, 257, 439, and Method in Theology, London, 1972, Darton, Longman & Todd, p.241). Michael Polanyi similarly says "Lower levels do not lack a bearing on higher levels; they define the conditions of their success and account for their failures, but they cannot account for their success, for they cannot even define it" (Personal Knowledge, p.382).

11. The term "consciousness" is taken here in its ordinary meaning, as what is lost when one is knocked out or anaesthetised. Freudians and some political activists use the term for what below (at the end of section 10) I call "knowledge of self", which involves some understanding and articulation of the mere data on self that are presented in consciousness. Strangely enough, their terms "subconscious" and even "the unconscious" come quite close to what I have called "conscious". See Lonergan's interesting note 5 in Method in Theology, p.34, and Hugo Meynell's note 17 in "Transcendental Psychology" Heythrop Journal 21(1980) p.153-167 at p.163.

12. See Hugo Meynell's article referred to in n.11, Lonergan, Insight, p.274-5, 279, and "Cognitional Structure" in Collection, Montreal, 1967, Palm Publishers, p.221-239, Method in Theology, p.6-20.

13. The first words of Aristotle's Metaphysics are "All men naturally desire knowledge", and in the second chapter of that work he says "It is through wonder that men now begin and originally began to philosophize".

14. Aquinas' metaphysics of knowledge ascribes the main drive to the intellectus agens (intellect in operation), cf. Summa Theologiae I q.79 a.3-5, and what he says of this makes most sense if it is taken as what we experience as wonder or inquiry.

15. Notable exceptions, besides Lonergan, are Emerich Coreth, Metaphysik, Innsbruck, 1960, Tyrolia, and Malcolm Clark, Perplexity and Knowledge, The Hague, 1972, Martinus Nijhoff, and The Need to Question, Englewood Cliffs, 1973, Prentice Hall.

16. Edward de Bono, Lateral Thinking: A Textbook of Creativity, 1970, and his many other Penguin books.

17. Personal Knowledge. See note 8 above.

18. Aristotle, Posterior Analytics, Book II, Ch.2, and Lonergan's commentary in Verbum, London, 1968, DLT, p.12-16.

19. See Lonergan, Method in Theology, Ch.3, "Meaning", and "Dimensions of Meaning", in Collection.

20. Carl R. Rogers, On Becoming a Person, London, 1961, Constable.

21. Peter Singer, Practical Ethics, Cambridge, 1979, C.U.P., p.82.

22. Practical Ethics, p.124, 126, cf. 117.

23. Practical Ethics, p.117.

24. Practical Ethics, p.124.

25. Practical Ethics, p.94.