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THE DISCOVERY OF THE PERSON

When the invitation came to me from the Registrar of the University of Madras to deliver this year the Śrī L. D. Swamikannu Pillai Endowment Lectures, I felt humbly grateful for the undeserved privilege of addressing the worthy company which would assemble here and, beyond the trustees of this endowment, my gratitude turned towards the great scholarly gentleman whose love for truth it perpetuates for our common benefit.

The subject of my lectures is the concept of the Person, its emergence and discovery, its obscuration and loss, and its rediscovery in our times. Upon the person are focused the studies and concerns of the philosophers and the priests, the psychologists and the sociologists, as well as of those responsible for maintaining the rights enshrined in our Constitution and fulfilling the promises born from our adoption of democracy. But the concept of the person is a highly complex and perfectible one. It is loaded with consequents derivable from it which affect the very direction of our life for our weal or woe. It will, therefore, be no idle enquiry to study the course of its ascertainment from ancient times to our own century.

1. Emergence of the term 'Person' in Greek and Latin Antiquity

Long before the adoption of the term 'person' men had ways of designating those subjects which they held to be intelligent and responsible agents. For this they used proper nouns and pronouns or other indicative expressions. But the Greeks and Romans had the particular habit of referring to the whole agent by mentioning his most prominent aspect or the part of his individuality which appeared most directly engaged in a given manifestation or behaviour. Thus Homer sings of "the abominable wrath of Achilles" (rather than of the irate Achilles,) of "the will of Zeus," of "the destiny" or "the honour" or "the shame"

Lectures delivered at the University of Madras under Sri L. D. Swamikannu Pillai Endowment, 1969-70. Permission to publish is gratefully acknowledged.

of his heroes and he speaks of their "liver" or their "thorax" or their "arms" as responsible for their prowess in battle. Hesiodes and Lycurgos use the term 'body' (*sōma*) to signify an individual, as we still do in English. Pythagoras and Plato play on the similarity between *sōma* and *sēma*, body and tomb, and hook up on this pun philosophies which exalt the universal and disparage the particular. Against Plato, Aristotle vindicates the individual existent as the paragon of reality and calls it "primary or first substance" (*prôtê ousia*) in opposition to the "secondary substance" which is merely conceptual. For him, the "first substance" is *hypostasis*, i.e., subject, but this term is not yet specialized and he uses it to mean all possible sorts of subjects, substrates, supports, suppositis or subject-matter. Thus Greek thinkers have met early with the problem whether individuality is something superficial or deep, a negligible or an important value, a property of parts or of the whole subject.

The next development concerns the term *prosōpon* which Polybios (200-120 B.C.) seems to have been the first to use in the sense of person. Its first meaning is 'face' since a face consists of that which is found "near and around the eyes" (*pros* + accus. of *ops*) and it was quickly used to designate the made up faces or masks of the Greek theatre. Its Latin cognate *persona*, which is perhaps of Etruscan origin, was popularly understood to indicate the utility of those masks as loudspeakers. But the first function of such masks was to present in an immediately recognizable form the various roles or *dramatis personae* of the tragedy or comedy. Here again, a part, the mask, stood for a whole personage and impersonation. The *prosōpon Basileōs* or *persona Regis* began really to signify, almost in our own sense, the person of the king, the king as king. But this implied a differentiation between the personage and the actor who sustains him, between the social figure and the empirical man. The Stoics tried to suppress this subtle difference with their theory that the world is a stage set by God and each man has been entrusted with a part to play on that stage. As given by God each such part constitutes the very nature, temperament and destiny which make a man what he is. Thus for the Stoics the *prosōpon* or *persona* is not an impersonation taken up by a man but rather his very individual essence; it is this very man as constituted by God. Of course, such a personality is

mysterious and reveals surprises to its owner himself as it unwinds and develops under the omniscient guidance of the divine Producer. The Stoic conception is religious, interiorizing, holistic and dynamic but it depends on a too simple notion of divine Providence and, hence, fails to secure for man the full measure of his dignity.

In the law-courts, on the other hand, *persona* has entered the juridical vocabulary precisely to express the kind of dignity which the law recognises. From the end of the 2d century A.D. the *persona* is the subject of legal rights, i.e., concretely, the Roman citizen. The slave, on the contrary, is a *non-persona*, being deprived of any right. However, a new religious influence, that of Christianity, is already at work, though still in the underground, to vindicate the rights which every man, be he even a slave, owns by nature and, hence, inalienably.

About the same period, Plotinus is reviving Platonism and his concept of the human being is not at all holistic. According to his analysis, man is made of body, soul and spirit, causality being the link which unites these three. But "it is in the spirit (*nous*) that we are mostly ourselves; that which comes before is ours, (not we). . . We are up there, directing the animal from that top." (*Enneades*, 1, 1, 7). Plotinus goes back to the primitive meaning of *prosôpon* and compares men under the influence of the discursive reason to "a number of faces (or masks) which are turned outwards though inwardly they are attached to one head. . . But if one of us, like one of these faces, could turn round either by his own effort or by the aid of Athênê, he would behold at once God, himself and the whole" (quoted by Caird, II, 296).

Thus what Plotinus contributes to this evolution is a dimension of religious depth which links man more radically to a less anthropomorphic God than the one of the Stoics. But he tends to reduce personality to its spiritual centre whereas the Stoics' view tends towards a larger integrality.

2. The Individual in Indian Antiquity

Before taking up this Western development to its next stage, it will be enriching to enquire about the views which paralleled it in ancient India.

Here also the individual usually referred to by proper nouns and pronouns, among which the reflective pronoun *ātman* is destined to a great philosophical career. What is more interesting is that the Indian mind manifests early a bent towards reflective analysis and discrimination (*viveka*) which, applied to this term *ātman*, transfers it from the outer to the inner man. While *ātman* does not cease completely to designate the gross body or its main part, the trunk, it progressively comes to designate in turn the complex of life, made of breaths (*prāṇa*), the complex of the senses (*indriya*), each one of the great intellectualising functions (*manas*, *ahaṁkāra*, *buddhi*) or their whole complex (*antaḥkaraṇa* or *manas*), up to the innermost reaches of knowledge (*viññāna*) and bliss (*ānanda*). This kind of analysis pursued by various thinkers whose formulations differ but it is systematized in the doctrine of the five sheaths (*pañca-koṣa*) of which man is comprised, as found in *Taittirīya Upaniṣad*, 2, 1-5. The first sheath, the gross body (*annarasamaya*), is said to be filled with the second (*prāṇamaya*), the second with the third (*manomaya*), and so forth. Each inner sheath is said to be other than, interior to, and the *ātman* of its containing sheath. Śaṅkara will add that it is also higher than it. Man is thus conceived as a hierarchy of *ātman*s whose inner imbrication resembles that of the Chinese balls. We may remember here that the Indian conception of human society is also essentially hierarchical as opposed to equalitarian.

The same *Taittirīya* text designates man as the *puruṣa*. Like the Latin *persona*, *puruṣa* is probably of non-aryan origin and its etymology is uncertain but its basic meaning seems to be 'male being'. Popular etymologies connect it with the ideas of whole and all-inclusiveness. The mythical *Puruṣa* of *Ṛgveda*, x, 90 is the cosmic male Giant from whose sacrificial dismemberment the whole world has originated. We learn from the *Brāhmaṇas* that the brahmanic sacrifice is meant to reintegrate symbolically this Prajāpati who is the Whole (*Sarva*) and thus to secure the integrity and wholesomeness of the world and of man who by it becomes also all (*sarva*).

This idea of plenitude or integrality should not be neglected. In the *Brāhmaṇas*, it directs the search for affinities (*bandhu* or *bandhutā*) between the three realms of the sacrifice, of the

cosmos or macrocosm, and of man the microcosm. The powers at work in the sacrifice are set in correspondence and even identified with the *devas* who preserve the order (*ṛta*) of the cosmos and with the inner functions discoverable in man. The sages of the *Upaniṣads* continue this search for such connections and do not hesitate to call man's senses and higher inner functions *devas* or *devatās* or *puruṣas* as well as *ātman*s. Here again they introduce the idea of hierarchy and the resulting picture of man is that of a city (*pura*) rather than that of a monad.

Yet, the sense of man's unity asserts itself too. Reflection upon the three states of waking, dreaming and dreamless sleep suggests to those thinkers that the lower functions which first appeared to be separately active though ruled by the higher ones in the waking state do in the other states return to their ruling functions and merge within them, and these in the heart or in pure consciousness or in bliss. The practice of *yoga* further suggests that these functions which we first grasp as psychological are also cosmogonical. *Yogo hi prabhavāpyayau* (*Kaṭha Upaniṣad*, vi, 11) : "Yoga, indeed, is emanation into existence (*prabhava*) as well as resorption (*āpyaya*)". Hence, the unity of man results from causality, and this causality is that which characterises the inner causes, variously called *pradhāna*, *upādāna*, or *ātman*. Śāṅkara will later explain that in their ascending ladder each such cause is "higher, more subtle, greater, and more 'inner *ātman*' than its emanation" (*para sākṣmatara mahattara pratyagātmabhūta* : *Kaṭha Upaniṣad*, iii, 10-11).

Thus man appears as a field of cosmogonic forces and these forces are no longer the *puruṣas*, *devas* and *devatās* who, in earlier texts, appear to act as efficient causes, but rather the emanating and resorbing inner causes which *yoga* suggests.

However, man is aware of himself as agent (*kartṛ*), patient (*bhoktṛ*) and knower (*jñātṛ*). This gives rise to other pictures of man. As knower and witness he is the "knower of the field" (*kṣetra-jñā*). As conscious enjoyer and responsible agent, he is the rider of the body-chariot, led by the buddhi-charioteer towards a goal which is the supreme *Puruṣa* or *Ātman* (*Kaṭha Up.*, iii, 3-11). The relation of man as knower and rider with this supreme *Puruṣa* towards whom he journeys but who also

somehow inhabits, pervades, impels and illumines him, exercises the minds of the upaniṣhādic thinkers.

The analogy of the wheel indicates the progress of their reflection. In *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Up.*, i, 5, 15, the hub of the psychic wheel is the finite *ātman*. In *Bṛh.*, ii, 5, 15, the wheel is psychi-cosmic and its hub is the infinite *Ātman*. Similarly, it is the highest *Prāṇa* in *Chāndogya Up.*, vii, 15, 1 and the greatest *Puruṣa* in *Pr. śna Up.*, vi, 6. Finally, in *Śvetāśvatara Up.*, i, 6, the finite *ātman* is the wild goose (*haṁsa*) fluttering about in the universal wheel whose Impeller is the One God favoured by Whom the *haṁsa* passes to immortality. In the parable of the two birds, which *Śvet.*, iv, 6, adapts from *Rgveda*, I, 164, 20, the witnessing is totally attributed to the divine *Ātman* and the fruit-eating to the finite *ātman*. Thus, in the later upaniṣadas, the two *ātman*s are neatly distinguished.

But their relation is very intimate : “ Of the measure of a thumb, the *Puruṣa* abides within the *ātman* ” (*Kaṭha Up.*, 4, 12). The two are unborn, minute and great ; however, the inmost *Ātman* (*Antar-ātman* of 6, 17) is “ more minute than the minute (*ātman*) and greater than this great (*ātman*) ” (*Ib.*, 2, 20). Just as the active functions emanated from *prāṇa* and were periodically resorbed into it, so also the finite *ātman* is originated from the supreme *Ātman* and is to return to Him. How ? Through knowledge favoured by His grace. This is but an application of the conception of the inner cause which underlies many upaniṣhadic statements. Any inner cause transcends its effects but is also immanent to them ; they originate from it, abide and subsist in it, and are resorbed into it (cf. *Tait.*, iii, 1). The inner cause is the innermost reality of its effects, though it transcends them and is not resolvable into them.

To sum up, man is not an entity closed upon itself but rather the play-field of a hierarchy of psychic-cosmic functions at the top of which stands the divine Energy-Consciousness which is Fulness, Existence and Bliss imperishable. His individuality radiates from his self-awareness which posits him as an ‘ I ’ (*aḥam*) encountering a world of objects and responsibly active in their midst. But he can discover that his very individuality is, as it were, open upwards and shot through with the transcendence of a

universal Ātman-Brahman apart from which it has no consistency and towards which it is directed to find there its blissful fulfilment.

However, its consistency is hardly holistic since it resides in the unity of layers or sheaths linked by inner causality. Yet, in the upanishadic conception of this causality, these layers are resorbable into their inner cause and, therefore, not altogether perishable. But in Buddhism the analyzability of the individual is much more radical and the unity of the *dharmas* or elements which constitute him is due to the special causality of *karman*, to the exclusion of any *ātman*. The resulting doctrine hardly gives place to any positive conception of personality.

3. The Christian Adoption of the Term 'Person'

Coming back to the mediterranean world, we have now to consider the development of the concept of person in the hands of Christian thinkers.

At the centre of the Christian experience was a man, Jesus of Nazareth, who had exhibited extraordinary knowledge and powers. He had presented himself as the Son of God as well as the Son of Man. He had appeared to synthesise in himself both the divine and the human attributes in a most intimate way and without flaws. What was he? A mere man in whom the inner presence of the Creator in all his creatures had attained special transparency? Or a holy man raised by divine grace to adoptive sonship? Or, as he claimed, the original and eternal Son of God, made man to partake with all men his unique Sonship?

The answer of most of the Christian believers was the latter assertion which they called the "Good News" or Gospel. It is in their effort to spread it that they got hold of the term 'person' and some other terms and endeavoured to give them a higher precision.

The Greek and Latin culture contained pairs of terms, the notion of which was still floating and ambiguous. These pairs were : *prosōpon-persona*; *hypostasis-substantia/subsistentia/subjectum/suppositum*; *ousia-essentia/substantia*; *physis-natura*.

In Greek, the term *prosōpon* was currently retaining its ancient denotation of : face/mask/role/character/aspect, whereas

in Latin its cognate *persona* was fast becoming used in the sense of *subjectum juris* (subject of rights, citizen), first by the law-courts, then by the ordinary people. Among the Greeks, it was the term *hypostasis* which was acquiring this meaning of *persona*, whereas its Latin cognate *substantia* only meant for the Latins essence (Gk. *ousia*) or substance or nature (Gk. *physis*) for which they also used *natura*. Hence, for a long time there was a lot of haggling about the correct terms between Greek and Latin Christian theologians.

Finally, during the IVth century A.D., they agreed to say that Christ was, in Latin, one *persona* in two distinct *naturae* or *substantiae*, in Greek, one *hypostasis* in two *physeis* or *ousiae*, i.e., one person uniting in himself two complete but distinct and un-mixed natures, the divine and the human. Similarly, they declared that God the Unique is one incomplex Essence or Substance (*Ousia/Substantia*) in three Persons (*Hypostaseis/Personae*), Father, Son and Spirit, each identical with the divine Essence but distinct through their mutual relations.

This precise application of the term *persona* or *hypostasis* to Christ and to God clarified indirectly its application to man and opened up the field to Christian humanism. Indeed, man was created in the image of God and, therefore, every man must be said to be a person in the proper sense of the term. Personality would no longer depend on the rights granted to some by positive law but was something ontological and inherent to human nature. It was the burthright of everyone, whether citizen or slave. The proclamation of this dignity was to have great consequences for the emancipation of man from all kinds of oppressions and for the whole development of Western culture and even for the destiny of all mankind.

Around 500 A.D., Boetius formulated an imperfect but, nevertheless, highly successful definition of 'person'. Properly speaking, he said, the term 'person' designates "any individual substance possessed of a rational nature." We shall see later on the corrections which this definition demanded but, imperfect as it was, it sufficed to provide a solid conceptual root to the new humanism.

To conclude this first lecture, we may enuntiate a few main features of this personalistic humanism :

(1) In opposition to classical Greek thought, which is dominated by the ideas of universality and of the ordered *cosmos* in which man plays but a lowly part, it puts the central emphasis on the unicity and dignity of every human being and of his relation to God.

(2) The individual human being is no longer a crossroads where several participations in general realities meet (matter, ideas, etc.) but an indissoluble whole, of which the unity is prior to the multiplicity because it is rooted in the Absolute.

(3) It is not the abstract tyranny of a Destiny, or of a heaven of Ideas, nor it is an impersonal Thought indifferent to men's individual destinies that reigns over them, nor even a Stoic Producer of the world drama. It is a God who is himself personal, albeit in an eminent degree. It is a God who through love brings men into existence; a God who offers to each person a relation of unique intimacy, of participation in his divinity; a God who affirms himself not at all by what he takes away from man but by granting man a freedom analogous to his own.

(4) The profound purpose of human existence is not to assimilate itself to the abstract generality of Nature or of the Ideas, but to accept to become exalted and divinised.

(5) To this transformation each man is freely called. Liberty is constitutive of his existence as a created person.

(6) This absoluteness of the person neither cuts him off from the world nor from other men. The unity of the human race is for the first time fully affirmed and doubly confirmed; every person is created in the image of God; every person is called to full citizenship in the Kingdom of God, which is the Kingdom of divine Love.

In the next lecture, we shall see, first, how the medieval schoolmen improved Boetius's definition of the person, and then, how it became obscured and lost to the detriment of mankind. In the third lecture, however, we shall assist at the rediscovery and enrichment of the conception of the person in our own times.