

PERSONALITY IN HISTORY

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THE title of this essay requires immediate modification. In fact it is concerned with one cultural movement, one historic process, which in spite of constant and recurring crises may be termed continuous. The so-called civilisation of the West,—Mediterranean in origin, and now, at least in a superficial and technological sense, world-wide in extent—provides its historical background. The purpose of the essay is to view the history of this culture in terms of personality.

Two questions at once suggest themselves: What is meant by history? and What is personality? By history is here meant an interpretative inquiry concerned with human activity—a description derived from Collingwood, but not understood in quite the same way. This description has at least the value that it forces the mind to consider the second question. For what is human activity but the exteriorisation of mental and moral processes which have their root in the person? No sooner has this been asserted than a doubt arises: What is meant by saying that human activity is the activity of a person?

This third question makes it clear that some attempt must be made to describe what is meant by person and personality. Person is here taken as signifying, as Boethius said, an individual substance with a rational nature. Now it is true that this definition can give rise to a lengthy and technical discussion, but it can also be interpreted in a few quite simple statements. 'Person' is derived from the Latin *persona*, a word which can mean a mask, outward appearance, or different rôles played by the same individual. This word, translated in Greek as *prosopon*, after a good deal of discussion came to be used among Christian thinkers for what they called a 'rational hypostasis'. By this last term they meant a concrete individual or objective reality. This is exactly what Boethius meant when he stated his classic definition. A concrete individual with a rational nature; embodied mind, reason incarnate in a being among other like beings. It is this being a person, this existing as a rational 'one', that is the ontological presupposition of what is termed human activity or of the human event. 'Person',

then, in this strict sense stands for all that is involved in a being being human in such a manner that it is distinct from all less perfect beings and also is one among others in so far as human nature is concerned. On the other hand, what we rather loosely call personality stands in common usage for the mask presented, or the rôle played, by whatever supports the superficial ebb and flow of activity.

The two terms are in fact complementary, but it is rare that both are allowed to have a real reference. They must be examined in their historical place in terms of western culture.

In the Pentateuch the word *prosopon* is used to translate the Hebrew word for 'face', obviously a concrete way of expressing that indefinable but very real relationship which the phrase 'personal presence' tries to express. This word 'face' provides a valuable starting point. For the primitive community group, man in most of his activity is but a face, an individual face which the tribe or group presents. His personality is expressed in a tribal manner, through the channels of sacrosanct custom or ritual. For all his attraction and charm, the primitive is a child, he acts as a member of a 'we' group rather than as a 'I'. Individualism is taboo, and for the genius or leader, religion or death are the only possible paths.

No doubt the ontological basis is present; they are persons, but personality is not present as a fully self-conscious value so far as the cultural pattern goes. It finds its expression in group thought, in group activity. True enough, in almost all primitive societies there are privileged sections which arrogate to themselves a more specialised and more highly developed rôle in which some form of personality is allowed a more distinct part. A more generalised form of this is found in initiation rites by which the youth becomes a full member of the tribe and thus a participant in its tradition and custom.

It is perhaps in the great river civilisations that we can first discern an advance, a progression which reveals some of the horrors of progress. To take the case of Egypt: at her head the divine figure, the child of the sun destined for immortality, and, beneath, the *fellahin*, the people, the children of the earth, who pass into nothingness or to the shadows. The king with his full personal life, is fully a person but in a unique and crushing manner. No doubt the Marxist is right when he tells us that all this was due

to economic causes, this theocratic totalitarianism which raised up the pyramids to the memory of tyrants. None the less a value had been released, though the price was heavy. In the feudal age of Egypt the God of the underworld comes into his own, and in the cult of Osiris a future and significance is given even to the agricultural proletariat. Nevertheless this movement finds, save in the strange case of Ikhnaton, its expression in ritual and myth.

The implications of being a person are still obscure. It is the Greek who breaks through and reveals a hitherto undiscovered dimension. To use Gilbert Murray's phrase, after the era of primal stupidity, Zeus, the sky God of mind, both creative and disruptive, comes to trouble the world.

It cannot be denied that Socrates' quest for virtue and Plato's vision of transcendent good imply a fully developed notion of the responsible rational person. The wise man of Plato and the unanimous man of Aristotle are self-conscious rational beings, even sophisticated in the good sense. They are 'persons' finding the true goal in membership of the *polis*, their enjoyment in virtue and science.

Harmonious though the vision of the Greeks was, they were none the less oppressed by the complementary aspect of a harmony of rhythm and return, the sense of the catastrophic, which for some appeared as Fate and for others found expression in the orgiastic cults. The feeling was only too well founded, for Hellas failed to solve the problem of both the internal and the external proletariat. The dehumanised helot of Sparta and the slave in the mines of Athens, as well as the barbarian beyond Macedonia, were never assimilated or even allowed to glance at the vision.

Aristotle, for instance, untrue to his own principle that man as such was a rational and social animal, taught quite clearly that there were natural slaves, and justified the institution, with all its degradation, on the grounds of expediency. Again, for him the barbarian was not quite human; the 'nigger' in fact, began at Salonica.

This aristocracy of talent and wealth fell before the half-Hellenised Alexander, who has a claim to be considered as the first individual in history; the *polis* and the world are the objects of his will. He is Alexander, and as the hero genius sweeps away the old half-divine kings of Persia. For the first time, perhaps, in history we catch a glimpse of the figure of a man who, at least in

theory, has nothing to check him—a type which has persisted in the political history of the West.

One of the most important consequences of this sudden spread of Greek culture is the growth of the Stoic school. No longer is the *polis* the unit, but the world. All men are full of the immanent divine reason; the barbarian and the Greek stand equal; cosmopolitanism is the key word. The state is set up by common consent on the basis of a community of interests.

Yet even now the full implications are not seen. The slave groans in the mines or in the galleys, and whether in the Hellenistic world or in Roman Italy vast masses of the population have no rights before the law. A slave is one who is the property of another and who is subject to compulsory labour without enjoying its fruit. For both Greek and Roman the slave, on whom their civilisation rested, was a '*res*', a thing before the law, for a person was a being who had full legal rights. For the Roman he was human, but not a person. Exploitation of man by man reaches its furthest limit in the institution of the gladiatorial slave. True enough, some like Seneca protested, while ordinary decency, and the institution of the freed-man blunted the edge of some of its harshness. But the real interest of the situation lies in the fact that society had before it definitions and a teaching regarding man which by implication condemned these institutions, but it refused to face the consequences.

A rational being endowed with intellect and will, hence free with a right to choice, at least of the good; an 'I' with dignity and responsibility, creative in the moral order. Never a thing, rather an artist, complex, warped, holy or bad, genius or fool, but always a man. Someone who plays a part of his own, of which he is author and in which he takes the leading part. How clear it all seems in theory. Understood aright it is Liberty, Fraternity, Equality. All men equal before the law, with equal rights. Yet history says it is not as easy, not as clear as that. We wax indignant over the institution of Greek slavery, and Engels is right when he calls us hypocrites.

The story of man's realisation of his dignity and his refusal to admit that dignity could be continued at length, but it must be briefly summed up. The Middle Ages never fully solved the problem of the serf, yet all the great medieval writers rejected the notion of a natural slave. The topic is too general for discussion

here, but even its bare mention does provide an indication which can be filled out by particular examples from other ages.

During the high tide of the Renaissance, when scholars were glorifying man as adult, fully self-conscious and master of himself, in the great century of Catholic Spain, the age of Ximenes, St Teresa, St John of the Cross, Lope da Vega, Cervantes and Velasquez, it was possible for intelligent Spaniards to assert that Indians did not have souls. Why? Because it was much more expedient to regard them as animals. True, Paul III denounced the enslavement of the Indian, las Casas fought for them, and Vittoria defended their rights, while the Council of the Indies legislated in their favour. None the less the exploitation continued.

The Anglo-Saxon cannot sit back and enjoy the pleasures of criticism. Where the Latin enslaved, the Anglo-Saxon tended to obliterate; perhaps he was kinder, probably he was racially more self-conscious, but in the end he was just as ruthless. England has a fine record in the matter of the slave trade, but it should not be forgotten that at first she did very well out of it, as the history of Bristol and Liverpool indicates, and the power of the West Indian interest in eighteenth-century Parliament suggests. The evil fruits born of the trade in black ivory are still with us. In this context it is interesting to observe how arguments drawn from the immediate interests of a social group can muffle moral principles.

Patriotic historians make much of the Glorious Revolution of which the political writings of John Locke are a classic expression in the realm of ideas. In spite of the great and valid principles which inform the Whig tradition, the emphasis laid by Locke on the preservation of lives, liberties and estates as the rationale of the commonwealth led, in the manner in which it was understood, to a substitution of the divine rights of freeholders for the divine right of kings. The game laws and the manner in which the Enclosure Acts were enforced are a gloomy commentary on the political practice of an age very conscious of its 'reasonableness'. The development of the Whig idea, under the rather brittle secular influence of the Enlightenment, coupled with the cult of simplicity, produced the Declaration of the Rights of Man. Against such a background the Liberal Democracy of the nineteenth century flourished. All ancient and irrational customs were to be swept aside. Reason and the laws of nature were to be the

only court of appeal. The age of confidence and scientific conquest; if only all the traditional lumber was swept aside the order of nature would reassert itself and in the absence of restriction the individual would find fulfilment. Universal suffrage, freedom of contract and a third factor, delightfully described by Cobden: 'We advocate nothing but what is agreeable to the highest behests of Christianity—to buy in the cheapest markets and to sell in the dearest', were in some mysterious way going to ensure that everything was all right. The great age of personalities and of machines, of high-sounding idealism and of slums; how was it that it remained so blind?

These generalisations are only half-true, for it was also a great age of protest. The Syndicalist denounced the State, men like Bloy raged against the criminal respectability of their age, and in the name of the dispossessed, those who had no stake in society, Marx and Engels formulated a new theory of history. All the revolts, all the movements, however foolish or perverted, were movements of persons starved of rights. The tragedy of it is that the passionate protest of the dehumanised has been canalised into a movement which involved a mystique of the collectivity.

History tells us no more, simply the ebb and the flow. Brute facts and tentative suggestions, no solutions.

In practice three positions emerge doing battle with one another. The liberal for whom the person is the supreme value. The Marxist for whom the person, conditioned by environment and circumstance, is subordinated to the whole in such a way that the rights of the whole are always to be preferred. Lastly the sophisticated, or merely craven, attempt to renounce all responsibility and hide one's head in the Absolute or suburbia.

Of set purpose the most important line of development has been left unmentioned. Its main lines can be merely indicated, but it is contended that here alone is a viewpoint from which the problems of history can be seen in their true perspective.

The history of Israel is a conversation with her God. It may be taken as a general principle that it is in relationships between persons that personal self-consciousness develops, and it is in terms of her realisation of the overwhelming personality of Yaweh that Israel captured the leadership of the religious world. The true depths involved in being a person are, in fact, only revealed through communion with God. History shows that the efforts of

man to fulfil the implications of his personality have always failed when he has striven to answer the problems apart from the Creator.

Revelation provides the key. The assertion of the ego, of self-centred will, against God, is the reason for the Fall and remains the characteristic of all human activity which claims to be independent of God. Once the primary relationship between God and man is sundered, all other relationships are infected. Man, it is true, remains good, but he cannot keep a sure grip on good; his mind is ever prone to fall victim to half-truths. The doctrine of original sin provides the explanation of the manner in which the question presents itself; the Incarnation provides the answer. God utters his Word to man, and in Christ, concrete and personal, the way for man is given. The utter simplicity of the basic pattern of the life of a man united to God through Christ should not blind us to its difficulty.

'Thou shalt love the Lord thy God and thy neighbour as thy self' sounds simple enough. It is not difficult to see that if it be carried out the polarity between individual and state, Order and Liberty, is transcended. Why does it remain as an ideal only? Largely because we fail to realise that the command of the New Law is not a mere form of words; it is rather a description of a relationship with God, a communion based on God's recreative activity through Christ. If the soul submits to the bearing in upon it of grace, it enters into a new dimension in which a true relationship to other men is achieved. What causes us to hesitate is the prudence of this world—a very different thing from supernatural virtue. We delay because we count the cost in terms of what must be left or broken if we are to put on the yoke of Christ.

The wall of the Temple is cast down, there are no divisions in Christ; nothing but persons free in the liberty of the sons of God. The issue is not faced if the sick and those in prison are forgotten, if there is a gap between us and the weak and oppressed. Whatever material or economic forces play upon it, however it is influenced by cultural patterns, the person finds his true meaning in the Church. Once he loses touch with the Creator he falls a prey to that worship of the self-sufficient self which, by its futility, leads directly to a reaction in favour of the collectivity. Once he abandons Christ he wanders in a maze, a perplexity, for the meaning of being a person is not given in any of the activities of this world but is only discovered in its richness before God.

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