

# Person

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## 1. Introduction

"Person" is a very ambiguous word (as most of our words when isolated). The outstanding vagueness of the terms used in philosophical discourse, like "action" or "mind", is an essential characteristic of language that provides the set upon which philosophy relies. Indeed, inquiries into certainty, objectivity and many other important metaphysical problems would never arise if this indeterminacy were not present in language. The history of philosophy as such can be considered as a quest for meaningful statements on which we can ground our judgment. This search for certainty has an ethical dimension, since it discloses what we have in common and what we cannot share. An important feature of this ethical dimension is that the investigation of "certainty" is, at the same time, a struggle against arbitrariness. However, we must be careful while engaging into this exploration, by refusing to analyze or equate certainty with goodness or correctness. The danger of this attractive analysis is evident in our religious and political history.

I believe that Wittgenstein can help us in elucidating some of these difficult issues. The problem of the identity of persons, or what constitutes a human being, pervades through philosophical texts. The general strategy of this paper is to link the issue of certainty, as explained by Wittgenstein, with the concept of person.

## 2. Wittgenstein's Distinction between Bedrock and Ground

The following remarks are the basis of my discussion about *bedrock* and *ground*.

"And the bank of that river consists partly of hard rock, subject to no alteration or only to an imperceptible one, partly of sand, which now in one place now in another gets washed away, or deposited." (Wittgenstein 1972, 15e-99).

"It might be imagined that some propositions, of the form of empirical propositions, were hardened and functioned as channels for such empirical propositions as were not hardened but fluid; and that this relation altered with time, in that fluid propositions hardened, and hard ones became fluid." (Wittgenstein 1972, 15e-96).

"Doesn't one need grounds for doubt?" (Wittgenstein 1972, 18e-122).

"The difficulty is to realize the groundlessness of our believing." (Wittgenstein 1972, 24e-166).

"Foundation" or the German "grundlagen", "sense data", "the given", "impressions", are names for something wrongly called "ground". Why does Wittgenstein think this is wrong? For him, *bedrock* (or the limit to our inquiries), is different from *ground* because a ground can be known; it is something that *speaks for* something else: we can *doubt* about it, we can be right or wrong, we can look at it as a hypothesis, etc... "Bedrock" is something we just reach (*unconsciously*) where we find silence and attitudes. The hypothesis of the mathematical continuum and our

awareness about the fact that we cannot talk with animals are examples of this lack of knowledge and justification.

Wittgenstein's *On Certainty* might be considered as a strategy to show how our certainty is never related to knowledge. It makes us face a crude *fact*, a very different one from Russell's knowledge by acquaintance (*familiarity with things as an epistemic relation*). We can even say that it is more an *attitude* than a *fact*.

"The child learns by believing the adult. Doubt comes *after* belief." (Wittgenstein 1972, 23e-60).

"I might suppose that Napoleon never existed and is a fable, but not that the *earth* did not exist 150 years ago." (Wittgenstein 1972, 26e-186).

## 3. Persons and Rights

I think *bedrock* or our *worldview* is a path for action (which means that it is ethical in all instances). If we are Aristotelian in this respect, action as such is impossible without such a pathway, which is provided by thought. Our freedom depends on the possibility of conceiving different paths for action, thus reshaping our beliefs and attitudes. It seems that justification and judgment (or critique) is what makes us initiate the process of changing our attitudes and commitments. To have a unique worldview is to be enslaved and plunged into absolute determination. The tension is then to know how and why the *hardened* sections of bedrock change, as well as which are shared by humankind and which are cultural.

We need particular worldviews to interpret the *world* as well as to act through choices we make in particular scenarios. My identity as person is determined by my story (or standpoint, determined by my worldviews, which provide options for my actions). To use Robert Nozick's expression, the "closest continuer" of me is my story (Nozick R 1981, *passim*). So what does it mean that I share a unique story (or bedrock) with humankind and at the same time that I am free to act by reflecting on different possibilities and consequences of my actions? Empirical statements seem to be independent of my story. That my body will not suddenly evaporate and that I will not wake up tomorrow in the body of a different person is part of my certainty for action and thought. It is important to draw our attention to the fact that the very scenario itself, the very possibility of entertaining into these thought experiments is based on further assumptions, like the linearity of time and the gap between mind and body. Is this a worldview I share with humankind? Any answer (positive or negative) to this question seems to be problematic. This indeterminacy is important to make clear why justification comes to an end.

Although Wittgenstein suggests that this tension can never be answered, nor can we find any ground to know or doubt about bedrock, I think there is a way in which we can show how bedrock operates with respect to the concept of person through the notion of human rights.

Human rights are the minimum conditions under which human dignity is supposed to be reached or at least guaranteed. Human dignity refers in this case to

circumstances and not to actual humans. Although human rights claim for universality, their specificity (for example in a given judicial decision) reveals some anxieties between worldviews. We can focus in the well known tension between the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. There are some human rights (like the right not to be tortured) which might be considered as absolute, in the sense that if they clash with another human right the decision must be made as privileging them. For example, we cannot entertain the idea (or the thought experiment) of torturing people for the sake of preserving freedom of expression or the right to be informed.

These are concerns within the same worldview, namely, the liberal and individualistic worldview of the ICCPR. However, there are clashes between worldviews within human rights, such as the clash between the right to preserve cultural identity with respect to the right to property, (as in the case of communal tribes) or bodily integrity and the cultural tradition of circumcision or other forms of mutilation or deformation of the body as elements of identity or attachment to a particular society. We can say that, at the end, our notion of conceivability (the realm of the imaginable where we can find paths for our action) depends to a great extent on our ethical convictions and beliefs. This is why we say it is unimaginable to torture babies just because we find it amusing. But how is this related to our incapacity to talk with the Wittgensteinian wood sellers or about the fact that the chair will not evaporate and that objects continue being *the same* through time. As Wittgenstein pointed out, it seems that the most plausible approach to the problem is that belief has a stronger role in our life than what we normally suppose.

Going back to our discussion about human rights, we can consider the clash of worldviews as one which is essentially ethical. The dispute between individualism and communitarianism, Kantian based normative moralities, utilitarianism and moral skepticism are all forms of alternatives to avoid, as much as possible, conflictive pathways for action. Nevertheless, these few alternatives are not as rich as they claim, because we shall finally realize that our notion of freedom is exactly the opposite to the construction of a single worldview.

#### 4. Persons and Aspects of Persons

If we force an analogy between aspect dawning (as used by Wittgenstein in *Philosophical Investigations*) and worldviews, we can find in the discussion of human rights some aspects of what is a human being. It is important at this moment to recall that when we start doubting about bedrock (or trying to justify it) we are in the domain of nonsense (a domain that exists only in jokes). But why does this seem not to be a joke like "I know I am in pain" or "I know I am here"? The appalling image of torture is not nonsense nor is it something we can justify. Although it seems within the things we can know, it nevertheless *stands fast* for us.

The violation of the right not to be tortured or to bodily integrity seems beyond any explanation. We cannot justify circumcision (whether feminine or masculine) whereas we can believe that it makes us part of something bigger than us. However, we can justify that it is impossible to privilege any right above the right not to be tortured. So it is essential to our notion of *person* to privilege some rights over others (in some manner of

justification) but also to have a *bedrock* account of what is to be human as it stands fast for us.

Human dignity seems to start with the notion of inviolability of the body and the preservation of our integrity as individuals. Other rights, like property or freedom of expression are somehow part of our dignity, but because of some inexplicable situation we are prone to say that they are contingent, we can justify their repression for the sake of the basic rights of dignity. The problem is that, this very notion of dignity relies on a series of unjustifiable beliefs, for example, that my body continues through time and that it is a unity. We cannot argue against this and this is why it is so fundamental for us nowadays (although it has not always been the case). This elementary character of these basic rights seems to be linked with our metaphysical convictions. It seems nonsensical to discuss whether this is related or not to the unity of mind and body or rather to the gap between these entities. It is just part of our bedrock. We know that because our discussions on these topics create thought experiments that are either jokes or nightmares. There is nothing more to say about our notion of person.

If we try to consider different aspects of persons to characterize them, like their juridical nature (being a *subject* of rights and obligations and not a *mere object* of them) we will fail in grasping what is at stake, since to *know* what is *exactly* to be a person is something we cannot *really know*. For instance, we share our juridical nature with corporations and governments (since we attribute to them some sort of mind and body). We can push this further and say that we attribute to animals and to God such a mind set; some sort of body or mind with intentions, or at least with feelings.

To conclude, we might say that the current speech on human rights, their justifiability and the issues of philosophy of mind related to the *problem* of mind and body are misleading attempts to determine something that is undeterminable, historical and absolutely contingent; something that simply stands fast for us: a set of possible worldviews that constitute a particular complex of pathways through which my action is determined; which constitute my very essence as an individual human being with particular commitments and convictions.

#### References

- Nozick R, 1981 "The identity of the Self", *Philosophical explanations*, Harvard University Press.  
Wittgenstein L, 1972 *On Certainty*, New York: Harper & Row.