

What are persons? Reflections on a relational ontology of personhood

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One crucial aspect in which my reflections rely on **Heidegger**:

Questions of ontology are not to be confined to nature and natural properties of things.

One crucial aspect in which my theses rely on **Schelling**:

To be a person is not by *having* a certain nature, but by *dealing with* having a nature.

Main theses

(1) The concept 'person' apparently is neither a pure natural concept nor a mere attributional one, i.e. a concept which applies to something by voluntary ascription of function, role or status; instead, it combines and unites certain traits of both. On the one hand, there must be an *ontological* foundation in all cases in which we rightly attribute 'personhood'; on the other hand, one legitimately wants to include or, respectively, exclude singular cases in which such qualifications are undoubtedly missing or fulfilled, respectively, such as, e.g., coma patients or (say) trained dolphins.

(2) The well established philosophical way to ground ontological concepts on *natural* properties fails with regard to persons: We cannot, on the one hand, define the concept in terms of the natural growth, the essence and generation of the individuals in question, and on the other hand, be willing to include cases which definitely haven't such properties or even are members of different species.

(3) The ontological foundation of personal existence always is to be looked for in a certain *form* -- established in a sufficiently general way -- of *biographical modes of conduct* (however, not biologically invariant modes of conduct) in living beings of a specific kind and qualification.

(4) Personhood is ontologically founded in a highly general, internally complex, and, thereby, consistently life-shaping *life form* of a plurality of individuals who biographically participate in this form of life.

(5) That this general mode of conduct is a *form* means, that it is not at the disposition of each singular member of the filiational association whether their associated way of life instantiates that form or not and whether any member participates -- at least passively -- in this form of life or not.

(6) The formal basic pattern of this life form is independent of the biological and species-specific properties that the living individuals in question by nature exhibit as a burden of their existence.

(7) There are three elements on which this form is based, which are independent of the biological species of the members of the filiational association: (a) the abstract equality within the filiational association as a group of individuals sharing the heritage of life; (b) the distinct identifiability (firstly by its unique position and secondly by its natural and acquired properties) of each member within such a filiational association; (c) the specific and formal manner of interaction that always includes a certain pattern.

(8) The life form in question consists in the sufficiently general consideration and permanent perception of the difference between the unique position someone occupies within the filiational association and the particular natural and acquired traits someone has as a specific individual within this group.

(9) The mentioned pivotal pattern of the life form is, that each member of the filiational association, that is able to represent itself has to co-represent all other biographically relevant members of conformal associations.

(10) Person, therefore, is every individual that lives in an association with similar individuals that are interlinked through filiation (of, at least, first order); thereby, their coexistence is qualified by the fact that each of its members that is able to represent itself also has to co-represent all other members of conformal associations according to their relevance with respect to its own biography.

(11) *Representing* oneself -- i.e., being able to differentiate between what is not only my interest in general, but *one* such interest in my position and, thus, in relation to other positions -- *this* involves a *multi-positionality* in my conduct when attending to my interests and in all my other doings that has only been alluded to and that is in principle open-ended.

(12) The formulation that someone who is able to represent herself 'has to co-represent others' is not to be read as a normative demand but rather as a description of a (morally neutral) *situation* such as, e.g., the description that a driver has to keep the vehicle on track or that one has to stock up on food and drink before the holidays.

(13) The life form described here only makes those who belong to it susceptible to or particularly receptive for norms that can hold as 'just'. But the life form in itself neither constitutes a natural norm or a norm built into the 'nature' of, e.g., humans; nor is the meaning of what counts as 'just' or 'unjust' predetermined by the nature of the beings that are persons.

(14) Who is *not* able to represent herself in an association structured in this way is co-represented by others thanks to the existing life form in the manner just described; she thus certainly and, *ontologically* speaking, correctly is a person.

Summary

Even though the concept of 'person' brings together and unifies certain traits of both, it neither seems to be a pure natural concept nor a mere attributional concept. What suggests its similarity to a natural concept is the fact that for an ontological reason -- i.e., a reason that is not at disposition of those who judge -- being a person pertains irrevocably to all individuals to which the concept applies; what speaks against such an understanding of 'person' is the fact that natural concepts, qua natural kinds, are substance-constitutive, while the concept of person is not expressive of a natural kind and not substance-constitutive for naturally existing individuals. Its similarity to an attributional concept consists in the fact that, occasionally, we ascribe the status of person to someone even if no feature or not all features that define the unambiguous standard of person are fulfilled. Still, we do not assume that persons are only elevated to the status of personhood thanks to this attribution or ascription; instead, we assume that they are persons for an ontologically preset reason even if they do not fulfill the specified standard features. Our further analysis has shown that not only naturally given (biological) properties of *singular* living individuals, but also biographically acquired properties of *various* individuals within a filiation association -- insofar as they only produce the formally stable pattern of a continuously existing life form of the respective association *together* -- can provide a reliable ontological foundation for the consistent classification of each member as a person. As the life form in question is species-independent and as it is grounded in purely formal elements of the association that founds it, it is not restricted to the human or any other natural species; instead, it theoretically can occur in all filiation associations of living individuals that fulfill the respective formal features. In particular, three formal elements are related to one another by the personal life form: (1) The abstract equality (in kind) of the living individuals within the scope of this form; (2) the fact that each individual of a filiation association is identifiable in two ways due to, on the one hand, its concrete properties and, on the other, its unique position within the association; (3) the continuous widespread perception and consideration of the ambiguous identity of each member in the shape of the contingently biographical life praxis of many. This perception occurs in accordance with the ubiquitously recurring pattern of representation according to which each member of the association *that is able to represent itself* also *has to co-represent others*, i.e. members of its current association and of conformal associations corresponding to their biographical relevance for the individual in question. This pattern of realized representation, which finds its expression everywhere and in practically all of the members' biographical modes of conduct, is a personal life form built upon the association as a whole that covers *all* its members -- and this includes those who, for whatever reason, are unable to represent themselves -- and, thus, enables them to exist as *persons* for preset reasons not at disposition of those who judge.