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The Person and Human Life

The Paradox of the Person

1.

In 2006, the cover of the December edition of Time magazine, traditionally dedicated to the person of the year, showed a photo of an illuminated computer, with instead of the monitor, a reflective, mirror-like surface, and in its center enormous letters spell the pronoun ‘you.’ In this way, whoever looks at it sees their own face reflected, promoted in fact, to ‘person of the year,’ as the text above it assures. The intention of the magazine is that of certifying, in this hyperrealistic way, the fact that in contemporary society no one exercises greater influence than Internet users, with their photos, their videos, and their statements. However, on a deeper level, the message lends itself to another, more unexpected interpretation since it splits onto two mutually opposed levels. On the one hand, declaring them ‘person of the year,’ situates every reader in the space of absolute centrality reserved for exceptional individuals, until now. On the other, and at the same time, it places them in a series that’s potentially infinite, to the point of making every one of their singular features disappear. It feels as if lending everyone the same ‘mask,’ ends up making of it the valueless sign of a pure repetition. It’s as if the inevitably contradictory [*antinomico*] result of an excess of personalization were to remove the subject from his place in the contraption of a machine that replaces him and pushes him into the faceless dimension of the object. After all, this exchange of roles, ingenuously or maliciously staged on the cover of Time, is nothing but the most explicit metaphor for a much broader and more general process. In times when even political parties strive to become ‘personal’ in order to make voters identify with the figure of the leader, any old gadget is sold by advertising as maximally ‘personalized’—adapted to the personality of the buyer, destined, even, to highlight it even more. Naturally, in this case, too, this results in reconciling the tastes of the public with models that are scarcely differentiated. The same paradox returns: the more one tries to extract the unmistakable characteristics of the person, the more one determines the opposite, specular effect of depersonalization. The more you want to impress the personal seal of subjectivity, the more you seem to produce the contrary result of subjection to a reifying apparatus [*dispositivo*].

Such a paradox acquires much more importance when, as happens today, the normative reference to the notion of person spreads like wildfire to all the domains of our experience. From juridical language, which deems it the only thing able to give form to the otherwise ineffective imperative of human rights; to politics, where it has long substituted it for the insufficiently universal concept of the citizen; to philosophy, which found in it a rare point of convergence between its analytical and its so-called continental components. In this sense, the appeal to the category of the person goes well beyond the personalist tradition, from Jacques Maritain (1882-1973) to Emmanuel Mounier (1905-1950), to Paul Ricoeur (1913-2005), which deployed it in a variety of ways, to include post-Husserlian phenomenology (in particular, that of Edith Stein (1891-1942)), neo-Aristotelian ontology, and, finally, the Oxford philosophical school’s research on personal identity. After all, the transversal character of that which is personal versus that which is not declared such is capable of linking even opposed ideological and cultural fronts, and is even more evident in the set of discourses recognized today on the horizon of bioethics. However much divided over everything—over the moment when life, qualified life, starts and when it finishes, and above all over who its legitimate proprietor may be—laypersons and Catholics agree on its ontological supremacy. Whether human life acquires the personhood at

conception, as the Catholics maintain, or only later, as the laypersons argue, it is the symbolic threshold and, as such, it is declared sacred or at least intangible.

2.

Before examining the antinomy that this causes, let us note the extraordinary success that makes the notion of person one of the most privileged of keywords--equaled only by democracy, perhaps--in our conceptual lexicon. Meanwhile, at its root there is an uncommon semantic richness, due to its triple matrix of theological, juridical and philosophical character. But to this first reason, intrinsic as it were, a second, perhaps even more cogent, historical reason may be added. It can be no surprise that the language of the person knew a moment of distinctive growth at the end of World War II, to such an extent that it became the linchpin of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This was a reaction to the attempt made by the Nazi regime to reduce human being to its naked, somatic component, which however, it interpreted in a violently racist key. Without establishing any direct filiation, such a political ideology, or better, political biology, constituted the paroxysmal point of fulfillment, and at the same time, the fatal twisting of a cultural strand that differs from, and is also an alternative to, the prevailing line of modernity's philosophico-political tradition, a strand we may define as 'biopolitical.' If the tradition had located thought and of political action's center of gravity in the free and rational nucleus of human existence, already from the beginning of the nineteenth century another thread of thought tended to valorize the unthinking corporeal element that constitutes its deep and unavoidable substrate. At its origin we can place the clear distinction made by the great French physiologist, Xavier Bichat (1771-1802), between a vegetative, unconscious life and another cerebral, rational type inside of every living thing. When a succession of authors, such as Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1880), Auguste Comte (1798-1857), and August Schleicher (1821-1868), would translate the biological researches of Bichat into different registers--philosophical, sociological and linguistic, respectively--variously maintaining the primacy of unconscious life over conscious life, they would open the door to a mode of thought that radically disputes the philosophical and political primacy of the component that's subjective, indeed, personal.

This mode of thought maintains that political organization depends, not on the voluntary and rational choice of individuals united in a foundational pact, but on the inextricable knot of strengths and instincts that are innervated in the individual body, and even more, in the ethnically determined traits of different populations. This cultural current was sustained first by comparative anthropology and later, from the second half of the century on, by a Social Darwinism that was inspired by hierarchy and exclusion. Naturally, for it to encounter the Nazis' murderous racism a series of nonlinear transfers, impossible to reconstruct here, were necessary. The most relevant is the displacement of the 'double life' principle from the level of the single, living individual, where Bichat had located it, to the entire human species, which was thus divided by thresholds, with different values assigned to them, between one zone for human characteristics and another, assimilable to the nature of beasts. In this way the animal was to become, rather than our common progenitor, that which violently divides man from himself, consigning a section of humanity to death in the same moment that it assigns another section of it to qualified life. It was this moment, in the thanatopolitical upturning of the biopolitical tradition, that determined a catastrophic turning point in the idea, and above all, in the practice, of politics, and the notion of the person was the first victim: rather than being inhabited by a spiritual nucleus that renders it intangible, the human body, now coinciding only with itself and with its own racial code, could be entrusted to surgery *en masse* in the extermination camps.

3.

This is the lethal drift that the philosophy of the person opposed in the aftermath of WWII. Against an ideology that had reduced the human body to its hereditary blood line, this philosophy intends to recompose the unity of human nature by reaffirming that its character is irreducibly personal. However, such a reunification of the life of the body and the life of the mind turned out to be difficult to achieve, because it is subtly contradictory with the category designated to realize it: the category of the person. Here is where the antinomies have been lying in wait since the beginning, continuously distancing the first goal proposed by the Declaration of 1948, that is to say, the effectuation of human rights valid for everyone. In fact, these rights that remained largely unheard of for an entire part of the world's population, still exposed to poverty, hunger, and death. Without calling into question the subjective commitment of the authors of the Declaration or that of all their personalist heirs, the underlying problem regards something we have hinted at already, the separating and reifying apparatus [*dispositivo*] implicit in the very notion of the person.

To recognize this apparatus, its genesis and its effects, it is necessary to go back to its three roots, theological, juridical and philosophical. What gives them a common logical structure, despite the obvious differences in their vocabularies and intentions, is an insoluble and contradictory combination of unity and separation, in the sense that the very definition of that which is personal, in the human race or in the single human, presupposes an impersonal or less than personal zone, from which the former draws its importance. In sum, as the biopolitical current inscribes the behavior of man in the density of his somatic nature, so too the personalist conception, rather than contesting the absolute prevalence of the body over the rational-spiritual element, limits itself to reversing the relation in favor of the latter. This tendency is clear in the Christian tradition, which, both in trinitarian dogma and in the doctrine of Christ's double nature, not only locates unity in the framework of distinction, in the first case, between persons, in the second, between the same person's differing substances, but also presupposes the fixed primacy of the spirit over the body. If, already in the mystery of the Incarnation, the two natures, human and divine, can by no means exist on the same plane, then this discrepancy is all the more obvious that when we pass to the double reality of soul and body, which constitutes the life of man for Christianity. For all that the body itself is not declared to be evil, because it, too, was created by God, it forever represents our animal side, and is as such submitted to the moral and rational guidance the soul, where only point of contact with the divine Person is rooted. As Saint Augustine affirms that the human being, "secundum solam mentem imago dei dicitur, una persona est" (De Trin. XV, 7, 11). This is why the same author can define the necessity of providing for the needs of the body as a "disease." After all, it is not a coincidence that the Catholic philosopher Jacques Maritain, among the authors of the 1948 Declaration, defines the person as "a complete master of oneself and of one's acts," only if he exercises full dominion over his enormous "animal side." Without being able to account for the extraordinary richness and complexity of Christian doctrine, and also for the sensitive differences of position among its interpreters, with respect to the subject at hand, for it, what renders man truly human is precisely the line along which he detaches himself from his own natural dimension.

4.

It is difficult to measure with precision the influences, probably reciprocal, that, in terms of the concept of the person, connect the first dogmatic Christian formulations and the Roman juridical conception. It is a fact that the theological dualism of soul and body (in turn, of mediated Platonic derivation) assumes an even more cogent sense in the distinction, presupposed in all Roman law, between human and person. In Rome, *persona* not only does not coincide with *homo* (a term frequently used to identify slaves), but constitutes the device used to divide mankind into well

defined categories and rigidly subordinates some of them to others. On one hand, the *summa divisio de iure personarum*, framed by Gaius and reformulated in the Justinian *Istitutiones*, includes every type of man, including slaves, who are technically assimilated to the regime of the thing. On the other, it operates by means of successive, linked divisions, initially between *servi* and *liberi*, and then within the latter term, between *ingenui* and *liberti*, divisions that have the task of setting human beings in a condition defined by reciprocal hierarchical difference. Within this juridical mechanism, which unifies men through their separation, only the *patres*, that is to say, those who have the faculty of ownership on the basis of their triple status as free men, Roman citizens, and individuals who are not dependent on others (*sui iuris*), turn out to be *personae* in the full sense of the term. Meanwhile all the others, situated on a scale of descending value from wives, to children, to creditors, down to slaves, are located in an intermediate zone that continually oscillates between person and non-person or, more bluntly, the thing: *res vocalis*, the tool with the ability to talk, is how the *servus* is actually defined.

To get to the bottom of this apparatus's functioning we do not need to fix our attention on only the distinction, or even the opposition, that in this way one comes to distinguish between different types of human beings, some placed in positions of privilege, others crushed in a regime of absolute dependence, but more so on the consequential relationship that passes between the one situation and the other: to be able to rightfully fall within the category of person one must have power, not only over one's possessions, but also over certain beings, themselves reduced to the dimension of the possessed object. The fact that this holds true even for children, and thus for every human being on their birth certificate, on which, at least in archaic law, is borne the law of life and death on the part of the father, therefore authorized to sell him, lend him, abandon him, if not to kill him, means that no one in Rome possesses the qualification of person throughout the course of his entire life. Some can acquire it, others are by principle excluded, while the majority pass through it, entering it or exiting it according to the wishes of the *patres*, as codified in the performative rituals of the *manumissio* and the *emancipatio*, which regulate the passage from the state of liberty to slavery and vice-versa.

From this perspective, the Roman apparatus of the person clarifies, not only the role of a certain juridical figure, but something that pertains to the general functioning of law, that is to say, the power to include by means of exclusion. As far as it can be enlarged, the category of those who enjoy a certain right is defined only by contrast with those who, not falling within it, are excluded from it. If it belonged to everyone, like a biological characteristic, language, or the ability to walk, for example, a right would not be a right, but simply a fact with no need for specific juridical denomination. In the same way, if the category of person coincided with that of human being, there would have been no need for it. Ever since its original judicial performance, personhood is valuable exactly to the extent to which it is not applicable to all, and finds its meaning precisely in the principled difference between those to whom it is, from time to time, attributed and those to whom it is not, or from whom, at a certain point, it is subtracted. Only if there are men (and women) who are not completely, or not at all, considered persons, can others be or become such. From this point of view, to return to the paradox we began with, the process of personalization coincides, looking from the other side of the mirror, with the depersonalization or reification of others. , In Rome, *persona* means whoever can reduce others to the condition of the thing. Just as, correspondingly, a man can be pushed into the status of the thing only in the presence of an other who is proclaimed to be a person.

Subjected Subjects

1.

The first, or at any rate, the most significant, occurrence of the concept of the person within the philosophical tradition is owed to Severinus Boethius (ca. 480-526), for whom this is

naturae rationalis individua substantia (*De duabus naturis et una persona*, 3). Here, notwithstanding the complex relationship of the term *substantia* to the Greek terms, *hypokeimenon* and *hypostasis* (the latter used to define the persons of the Trinity) the accent falls on the attribute of rationality, which reaffirms the distance from the body presupposed as much by the Christian tradition as by the Roman: what counts is the person's rational character, which pertains to the only mental dimension, and therefore does not coincide, but is superior to the biological element that subtends it. This obviously implies some relationship between the category of the person and what today we call the 'subject.' But this connection, far from resolving the paradox of the person, does nothing but accentuate it. For a very long period, lasting essentially until Leibniz (1646-1716), the meaning of the word *subiectum* is not dissimilar to what today we usually define as an 'object.' Indeed, beginning with Aristotle, this designates something like a support or substrate of essential or accidental qualities equipped with a receptive capacity: thus the exact opposite of a mental reality, that is, an agent of thought and action. From this point of view the subject, in the ancient and medieval sense, not only does not oppose the object, like the perceiver and the perceived, or like the inside and outside of a sphere, but is from the start taken in the sense of 'subject to,' rather than of 'subject of.' Now this is precisely the point of convergence where the philosophical definition of subject intersects with Roman juridical semantics, although modern juridical semantics is totally incapable of assimilating by due to its preoccupation with an objectivist notion of law. A passage by Gaius (*Institutiones*, I, 48) confirms this in a form that reintroduces the relationship to the category of the person: "*Quaedam personae sui iuris sunt, quaedam alieno iuris subiectae sunt.*" With this proposition, Gaius intends to say that in Rome some, properly defined people, are endowed with their own statute, while others are submitted to an external power. *Subiecti*, in this case, has the modern meaning of 'subjected,' [*assoggettati*] from which the term 'citizen subjects' [*sudditi*], was derived during the formation of the absolutist States: unlike slaves, citizen subjects consciously agree to obey the sovereign power that renders them such.

Here we've already exposed that dialectic, elaborated analytically above all by Michel Foucault (1926-1984), between subjectivity and subjection, which takes us back by another route to what we defined as the apparatus of the person. It is as if this diaslectic, at a certain point, incorporated the difference, and also the contrast, between the traditional passive meaning of *subiectum* and the nascent active meaning of *subiectus*. We may say that, inside every living being, the person is the subject destined to subject the part of himself not endowed with rational characteristics, which means the corporeal, the animal. When Descartes (1596-1650), who also had yet to inaugurate the modern semantics of the ego in the transcendental sense, contrasts *res cogitans* and *res extensa*, likening the mental sphere to the former, and the body to the latter, he reproduces, from yet another angle, the same effect of separation and of dominance that we have already individuated in the theological and juridical logic of the person. At the point, not even the passage initiated by Locke (1632-1704) and brought to completion by Hume (1711-1776), of the concept of the person from the sphere of substance to that of function, will be able to change things. Personal identity continues to reside in the mind, in the memory, or in a simple, subjective autorepresentation, and its qualitative difference from the very body in which it is installed is increasingly accentuated.

2.

The relationship between subjectivity and subjection, implicit in the juridical and philosophical declension of the person, was rendered quite transparent by Hobbes (1588-1679) by his decisive transposition of its apparatus on the terrain of politics. This passage, oriented by the absolute foundation of sovereignty, occurs along two argumentative trajectories that at a certain point intersect in a similar effect of separation. The first concerns the disjunctive relationship between 'natural people' and 'artificial people.' While the first autorepresent themselves using their own

words and actions, the latter represent the actions and words of another subject, or even of another non-human entity. As always happens in Hobbes, the logical conclusion entailed turns out to disrupt the preceding tradition: not only does the insoluble relationship inside every human being that forever held the physical body in relation with the 'mask' that it wore, that is to say, with the juridical qualification that was from time to time attributed to it, fail, but even the necessarily human character of the person is revoked. If the juridical constitution of a person is nothing other than its function of representation, this qualification can be granted to collective associations, too, and to entities of varied character such as a bridge, a hospital, or a church. Hence the rupture, by now complete, with the biological referent, from the moment that the representative mechanism allows, or rather foresees, the material absence of the represented subject. And even the logical primacy, asserted by Hobbes, of the artificial over the natural person.

But the even more meaningful element in the dialectic of personalization and depersonalization, to which we have often referred, is that, in the Hobbesian analytical system, not only can things be transformed into persons, but persons can also be pushed toward the dimension of the thing. This happens at the crucial moment in which we pass from the state of nature to the civil state, when the Person destined to represent all the others enters the scene, that is to say the sovereign, understood as the unity of all "in one and the same person" (Hobbes 1999: 118). Elsewhere defined as the "soul" of the body constituted by the subjects [*sudditi*], on one hand this soul transforms them from simple living beings into personal subjects [*soggetti*] capable, at least once, of deciding their own condition. On the other hand, and at the same time, it totally deprives them of personal autonomy, incorporating the rights that they had in the state of nature in exchange for the protection of their life. From that moment on the sovereign is the only one who can legitimately represent them, and thus, the only one who can technically define himself as a person. This process, bifurcated by the acquisition and confiscation of political personhood, finds its own epicenter in the paradigm of authorization, where each person authorizes the sovereign person, aptly defined by the ancient theatrical term, actor, to represent him. From that moment on not only is every person placed under the imperative of their own subjection [*sudditanza*], but, as the author of it, may not even complain should they suffer an injustice, which is also the case due to the only criteria for defining that which is just being provided by the same sovereign. The fact, then, that this subjection regards the public sphere of the citizen and not the private sphere of the human proves, from another point of view, how the mechanism of the person cannot function without dividing the unity of the living being in two: if the person has lost his own body, the body, in its turn, will not recover its own person [*persona*].

3.

After all, *l'ancien régime*'s jurists' explicit references to the *ius personarum* serve to confirm the fact that modern political philosophy, despite radical transformations of its lexicon, never burnt its bridges with the Roman division between person and man. For all of them, the axiom formulated by Donellus (Hugues Doneau, 1517-1591), or perhaps Vultei, (Hermann Woehl, 1565-1634), according to which "*servus homo est, non persona; homo naturae, persona iuris civilis vocabulum,*" remains undisputed. Despite the huge changes caused by the turn to natural law, which later merged into the German Pandectist movement of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a movement committed to granting equal rights to every man, the Roman *summa divisio* between persons and nonpersons seems to resist all repercussions. Robert Joseph Pothier (1699-1772), in his ***Treatise on persons and things***, distinguishes six categories of persons, assigning to each determined prerogatives on the basis of the definition of their status, ranging from the slave to the noble.

But from this point of view, the course of the liberal tradition that had just deconstructed the medieval brand of substantialist personalism, characterizing the person solely by its functional

attributes, is perhaps even more surprising. In reality it is just this emancipation from the corporeal substrate that indisputably makes the body the property of the person who inhabits it and in no way coincides with it. For both Locke and for Mill (1806-1873), the person, not by being, but rather by having, a body, is its sole proprietor, and is authorized, therefore, to use it as it pleases. Our starting point, the paradox of a subject that can only express its personhood [*qualità personale*] by objectifying itself returns, breaks down into a fully human, because rational, moral and spiritual nucleus, and an animal, or even objectal [*oggettuale*], stratum, exposed to the absolute discretion of the former. The culmination of this parabola is singularly close, in its extreme results, to the negative biopolitics that it, too, starts by rejecting, and is recognizable in the bioethics, liberal according to its own self-definition, that finds its greatest representatives in Peter Singer and Hugo Engelhardt. For both of them, not only are all human beings not persons – since no small portion of them are situated in a descending ladder that goes from the quasi-person or infant, to the semi-person or old man, to the non-person or patient in a vegetative state, to the anti-person, represented by the mad man, but what matters even more is that all of them are exposed to their custodians' right of life and death over them, on the basis of social, and even economic, considerations. Nor is it a coincidence that Engelhardt, in particular, deduces such conclusions from an explicit comparison with the *ius personarum* of Gaius. Like a captured wild animal is the hunter's prey, so too the defective child or the almost incurable old man is 'under the hand' of their custodian, legitimately free to keep him alive or to abandon him to death. Once again, the apparatus of personhood reveals itself as a terrible thing that, separating life from itself, can always push it into a zone of indistinction with its opposite.

For a philosophy of the impersonal

1.

If there are the results of the personalist paradigm, the least that one can say of it is that this did not succeed in welding spirit and flesh, reason and body, right and life, into a single block of meaning. Despite the constructive intention and the meritorious commitment of its many interpreters, at the very moment it predicates the equal dignity of every human being, this paradigm is unable to erase the thresholds with which it divides them. It can only move them, or redefine them, on the basis of historical, political, or social circumstances. And this is because the very category of the person is constituted around a diaphragm that, ever since its original theatrical meaning, separates it from even the face that wears it. The same principled contrast with the biopolitical perspective needs to be reread in light of this antinomy, not to dissolve it, but to transpose its terms to a different logic. That Nazi thanatopolitics brought the primacy of the ethnic body to an apocalyptic point of no return, as opposed to what a long and glorious tradition had defined as person, does not entail that we should, or even that we could, return to this tradition as though nothing had happened. After the two world wars the modern conceptual lexicon, so strongly imbued with theologico-political categories, can no longer untie the knots tightening around us on all sides. This implies neither refusing it *en masse*, nor in its single segments, such as the person, but inscribing them in a horizon from which their most glaring contradictions may finally come to light, rendering possible, and necessary, the opening of new spaces for thought.

Nietzsche (1844-1900), from a position that today is certainly impossible to assume in its entirety, had already understood the irreversible decline of this lexicon, refusing its traditional dichotomies, starting with the metaphysical separation of soul and body. Maintaining that the mind, or soul, is an integral part of an organism that has the body as its only expression, he breaks decisively with the apparatus of personhood. After two millennia of Christian and Roman tradition it is impossible for him to continue to separate the unity of the living being in two juxtaposed, and superimposed, strata, one spiritual and the other animal. The animal side,

understood as both the pre-individual and post-individual element of human nature, is not our ancestral past, but rather our richest future. That Nietzsche would subsequently confer a highly problematic declension to such intuitions, pushed by his self-appointed inheritors in a racist direction where he had never intended to head, does not revoke the explosive force in question. Affirming, as in fact he did, his desire to reread all of European history with “the guiding thread of the body” meant inscribing his discourse in an expressly biopolitical frame with an awareness that until then no one else had demonstrated. Against every spiritualism, old and new, and with a categorical apparatus system profoundly marked by the Darwinian turning-point (more than he himself was willing to recognize), what he grasped was the essential link between politics and biological life. When, using the ambiguous formula of the will to power, he recognized that politics, like knowledge, too, always has something to do with the body, Nietzsche foresaw something that only today is obvious to everyone. Namely, that at the center of present and future conflicts there would not only be a different distribution of power, and not even the choice of the best regime or the best political party, but rather, and foremost, the definition of what human life is today and what it may become tomorrow. Whatever the meaning that he gave to the expression ‘great politics’ was, clearly this implied a total deconstruction of the paradigm of the person, which was fully involved in the crisis of the double tradition, theological and juridical, whence it derived. If, as opposed to the vital powers that traverse and constitute it, a preformed individual subject doesn’t exist; if the system of law, with its promise of equitable distribution, does nothing but express and sanction, and thus legitimize, the result, at times provisory, of relationships of force arising from past clashes; if even the institution of the State, as is thought by theorists of sovereignty, is nothing but a prophylactic envelope destined, not so much to protect, as to subject [*assoggettare*] its own subjects [*sudditi*] to an order that sometimes contrasts with their own interests. If all this is true, then the relationship between humans must be submitted to a process of radical revision that the modern political dictionary is completely incapable of putting into focus.

2.

The second powerful deconstruction of the paradigm of the person is owed to the work of Freud (1856-1939). If this is recognized in the presupposed primacy of the rational and voluntary choice of the subject agent, it is all too evident that the importance assigned by the father of psychoanalysis to what he would define as the unconscious constitutes a radical rebuttal. But what must be underlined is the precocity of his critical intention, already operating in his 1901 essay, *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*. The writing revolves entirely around the dialectic between person and impersonal in a form that makes one simultaneously the content and the negation of the other. It is no accident that the book opens with the phenomenon of forgetting personal names and substituting them with others that have the function of covering something that disturbs the subject in question to the extent of finally causing him to lose the memory of all proper nouns. Here the loss clearly concerns, even before the noun or the nouns, the ‘proper’ as such: the self-presence of he who, in order to escape the pressure of the disturbing thing, is struck by an amnesia that dispossesses him of his own mnemonic capability, entrusting it to an alien power. The conclusion that Freud draws from this identifies the impersonal ground of what we usually define as personality in a vertiginous exchange between identity and alterity, the proper and the extraneous: “It is as if I were obliged to compare everything I hear about other people with myself; as if my personal complexes were put on the alert whenever another person is brought into my notice” (Freud 1966: 24). The element that characterizes daily experience lies in the enigmatic overlap between the person and impersonal determined in everyday life. In this sense, the book’s title, *The Psychopathology of the Everyday Life*, need to be taken literally. That everyday life is the subject, not simply the frame or the background, of the psyche’s pathology implies that every preceding or ulterior subjective figure gives way to the event that it lives, or

rather, by which it is lived, and which it can never appropriate. The episodes that Freud's text recounts in such detail are not the acts, realized or failed, of a personal subject, but anonymous pieces of life that always fall short of, or lies beyond, the person. In fact, what's missing is not the act, but the one, that is, the conscious intention of the one that brings it into being, which is always traversed, and disfigured, by its own negative. Everyday life is the non-person present and operating in the person, the impersonal flux that distorts its shape and tears away its mask. Not fully depositing it, but taking possession of its own forces and turning them against it. Freud does not hide the disquieting element of this dialectic, which pushes the person towards his impersonal exterior or projects this latter around the former. The hidden forces that undermine the autonomy of the person arise within it: in a sort of incessant battle, they are at once its product and its gainsayer, its outcome and its invalidation. It is true that the psychotic symptom is not the primary disturbance, but the reaction that what we define as the subject uses to respond to a foreign entity growing in its interior. But this response, rather than reestablishing control, assumes the form of yet another failure, and thus winds up doubling the original loss. In effect, for Freud, the difference between full-blown neurosis and the slight, temporary alterations, which, to some extent, affect all humans, is not qualitative, but only quantitative. In each case the person, sick or healthy, is invested with a psychic current that is heterogeneous to it and disturbs its behavior. The even more meaningful element of the analysis is that this heterogeneity, far from being external, emerges from the same unconscious ground that give rise to consciousness. As Freud himself would explain elsewhere, what is disturbing is not what opposes us, but the folding onto itself of that with which we have always been most familiar. Of course, not all of Freud's work follows this deconstructive line: other texts, and the very 'therapeutic' intention of his theory, imply the possibility, if not also the necessity, of control over impersonal forces. Even the Oedipal symbology, in its definition of familiar relationships, does not extract itself from a semantics of the person. And yet, the theoretical passage into the enclosure of what modern philosophy sequestered within the apparently impassible borders of the personal subject, was almost open.

3.

Simone Weil (1909-1943) is the one who decisively penetrated its interior. One is struck by the clarity of her position during the last years of the war, the Nazi defeat already foretold, at the very moment when Maritain and Mounier rally the European intelligentsia around the banner of a new personalism. When she, in the most absolute solitude, finds the courage to write: "the notion of rights [*droit*], by its own mediocrity, leads on naturally to that of the person, for rights [*droit*] are related to personal things." (Weil 2000: 64), she grasps the issue's central point: person and right [*diritto*], in the seductive formula of the right of the person, are welded together in a doubled distancing from the community of humans and from each of their bodies. As for the first, this is attainable only by a justice capable of putting the commitment of obligation towards others, the law of the *munus*, ahead of the claiming of determined prerogatives. It certainly cannot be achieved by a juridical apparatus that functions by excluding those who remain outside of its categories, beginning with the category of the person, which is only apparently universal. The critical reference to Roman history, compared to Nazism with obvious hermeneutic forcing, needs to be situated in this line of thought. It is precisely in Roman civilization that the law is indissolubly linked to the possession of people reduced to things. The original distinction between free men and slaves, specified from the beginning by the *ius personarum*, is the architrave where Roman power rests, a figure of exclusion that, despite profound discontinuities, seems to return, always in different modalities, to characterize the history of the West. It is clear that the line traced by Weil from the Roman Empire to the plans for global domination of Louis XIV, of Napoleon, up to those of Hitler should be interpreted in a paradigmatic or genealogical, rather than historical, sense, like the phantasmic, spectral resurfacing of a terrible archaism in the

secularized heart of modernity. But it should not be forgotten that the institution of slavery, anything but a primitive phenomenon remote in time and space, lasted until the mid-nineteenth century. It reappears, as is noted, in different forms, such as forced prostitution or child labor, even in our cities.

But Weil's challenge to the category of person does not end here. To maintain, as the author does, that: "So far from being his person, what is sacred in a human being, is the impersonal in him." (Weil 2000: 54), seems to inaugurate a radically new discourse, and for the moment we cannot help but sense its urgency, even if we are still unable to define its contours. Part of it is, in any case, already recognizable in Weil's analysis. In particular, in a passage that concerns the two faces of the relationship between body and person, the sovereign dominion of the latter over the former, and the indifference that the ideology of the person reserves for the sufferings of the body and of bodies unprotected by this qualification, she argues: "I see a passerby on the street. He has long arms, blue eyes, and a mind whose thoughts I do not know, but perhaps they are commonplace. [...] If it were the human personality in him that was sacred for me, I could easily put out his eyes. As a blind man he would be exactly as much a human personality as he was before. I should not have touched the person in him at all. I should have destroyed nothing but his eyes" (Weil 2000: 50-51). What these sentences delineate, and what their inverse or affirmative side assumes, is the possible and necessary detachment of right and person. What should be thought is a right thus oriented towards justice, not of the person, but of the body, of all bodies and of every body taken individually. Only if rights, as pompously as uselessly called 'human,' were to adhere to the bodies, drawing from them their own norms, no longer the transcendental type, fallen from on high, but immanent to the infinitely multiple movement of life, only in this case would they speak with the intransigent voice of justice. Then even a body, artificially fed or kept alive without hope, that can no longer bear to suffer uselessly, could claim the last of its rights, escaping from the irrevocable decrees of the person.

4.

If in reflections on justice the reference to the impersonal is still confined to being the inverse of the person, for some time it has constituted the semantic horizon of great literature, as it does for all contemporary art, from non-figurative painting to dodecaphonic music, to cinema. When Maurice Blanchot asserts: "to write is to pass from 'I' to 'he/it [i/l]'" (Blanchot 1993: 380), invoking the figure of the 'neutral' that subtends, like an elusive margin, his entire oeuvre, he is referring to precisely that underground movement which displaces the nineteenth century literary experience toward the harborless land of the impersonal. There, in its most extreme trials, what is at stake is something of a "relation of the third kind" as the author puts it, situated well beyond the dialogical relationship and even beyond any form of verbal interaction between characters endowed with a stable consistency. From a certain moment on, between the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the next, none of these, and even what is termed narrative voice, would retain the capacity, or the intention, to say, 'I,' to speak in the first person, addressing a second, ultimately specular, person. What characterizes all of them, emptying them of their traditional subjective characteristics, is that passage to the third person to which Emile Benveniste (1902-1976) had assigned the peculiar role of the 'non-person,' or precisely, the impersonal, in the pronominal system of the Indo-European language.

Already the first, and most famous, character 'without qualities,' that is to say Robert Musil's Ulrich (1880-1942), had claimed: "What with laws being the most impersonal thing in the world, the personality becomes no more than the imaginary meeting point of all that's impersonal" (Musil 1995: 516). What he meant to say is well known: since the subjective unity of persons failed, exploded into a thousand fragments, so much so that, with a few years' distance, we are at times more similar to another than we are to ourselves, the world in which we move escapes from our control and from our ability to intervene in order to position ourselves on

trajectories the origin and results of which are unknowable. Naturally this dislocation has precise consequences, not only on the ethical, but also on the juridical plane: once what a valorous tradition defined as the person, equipped as such with moral reason and with freedom of choice, was called into question, the delicate problem of the imputability of action was opened, and thus, the problem of the agent's responsibility. But precisely because it is not imputable to anyone, and situated at the point of convergence between pure contingency and pure necessity, action offered Musil the possibility of experiencing absolute perfection.

Later, for Kafka (1883-1924) the impersonal is no longer an option to be adopted, but the general form within which every choice is inevitably subtracted and expropriated from us. In this case, the neutral is not understood as something that occupies the place of the person, not even as its exterior inverse. It is that which, while severing every relation between author and text, giving the story the impenetrable character of absolute objectivity, puts every character, by now no longer definable as such since they are deprived of any fragment of subjectivity, in a relationship of non-identification with themselves. From this point of view, not only have the preemptively disfigured figures that move without direction or goal in Kafka's texts lost the power to determine what happens to them, but what happens is nothing other than the inexorable repetition of that which has been happening all along. The source of the problem's impression of insurmountability is that they believe it lies before them, when it is actually always behind them. People cannot realize this, because they do not have memory, necessarily linked to a certain principle of personal identity, and they perceive only indirectly what they are or are not. But they grasp, opaquely, that in such an absence of transparency, in the destitution of their own subjective consciousness, it's best to gamble their only possible destination, the possibility, if not of redemption, at least of having, or better, being, a destiny. In any case, Kafka's texts certify that it is no longer permitted, nor would it make sense, to pass back through the mirror--to reenter that same world of rational subjects and of shared values that started the machination that grips us now.

5.

Even if one cannot say that the collective vision of twentieth century philosophy was as profound as that of its literature, at least one of its most innovative veins found itself productively contaminated. I refer to the frayed line from Bergson (1859-1941) to Deleuze (1925-1995), through Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961), Simondon (1924-1989), Canguilhem (1904-1995) and Foucault himself, which thought human experience, not in the transcendental prism of the individual consciousness, but in the indivisible density of life. For all of them, despite profound differences in approach and vocabulary, what we call the subject, or person, is nothing but the result, always provisory, of a process of individuation or subjectification, quite irreducible to the individual and his masks. Nevertheless, to identify this process with the first or second of these terms, individuation or subjection, is not a matter of indifference for the direction that the discourse intends to assume. In both cases what's at stake is a radical criticism of the category of person and of the separating effect it inscribes in the configuration of the human being. And in both cases this criticism is conducted with the paradigm of life understood in its specifically biological dimension as its point of departure. But if in Deleuze, in accordance with his Bergsonian genealogy, life relates only to itself, on its own plane of immanence, in Foucault it is grasped in the dialectic of subjection and resistance in relation to power. While in the first case the result is a sort of philosophical affirmation of life, much more radical than the philosophies of life that marked the first decades of the twentieth century variously from historicist, phenomenological or existentialist viewpoints, the latter delineates the sharpest profile of what has been given the demanding name of biopolitics. What remains to be considered is the possible conjunction of these two trajectories in something that could become an affirmative biopolitics,

no longer defined by power over life, such as the last century knew in all its tonalities, but of a power of life.

At its center, but also at its extremes, there can be nothing but a clear distancing from the hierarchical and exclusionary apparatus of the category of the person, in any of its declensions, theological, juridical, or philosophical. Both the Deleuzian notion of immanence and the Foucauldian notion of resistance move in this direction: a life that coincides to the very last with its simple mode of being, with its being such as it is, a life that is precisely, 'a life,' singular and impersonal, and cannot but resist whatever power, or knowledge, is arranged to divide it into two reciprocally subordinated zones. This does not mean that such a life would not be analyzable by knowledge, without which, after all, it would remain muted or indistinct, or irreducible to power, but life in a modality capable of modifying both, transforming them on the basis of its own requirements, producing, in turn, new knowledge and new power as a function of its own quantitative and qualitative expansion. This possibility, but we could certainly just as well say, this necessity, is rendered clear in the double relationship that connects life to right [*diritto*] on one side and to technology [*tecnica*] on the other. In no case is a loosening of the millennial knot that history has tied between these terms imaginable. What a biopolitics that is finally affirmative can and must signal is, rather, the reversal of their relations of force. It cannot be law [*diritto*], the ancient *ius personarum*, that imposes its laws from without and on high on a life separated from itself; but both the corporal and immaterial grain of life must make its own norms the law's constant reference, always increasing its consistency with the needs of all and of each. The same applies to technology, which has become in this third millennium the most direct interlocutor of our bodies: of their birth, their health, and their death. Against a nineteenth century tradition that saw in technology an extreme risk from which the specificity of the human being needed to be saved--by covering it with the enigmatic mask of the person--we need to make it functional for a new alliance between the life of the individual and the life of the species.

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