The Classical Notion of Person and Its Criticism by Modern Philosophy

Enrico Berti

Abstract The paper illustrates the classical notion of person, i. e. the definition of person given by Boethius (fifth to sixth century A.D.) as "an individual substance of a rational nature", showing the derivation of its elements from the philosophy of Aristotle. Afterwards the paper exposes the criticism to this notion formulated by modern and contemporary philosophers (David Hume, Joseph Butler, Alfred Ayer, Derek Parfit). Finally the text shows the reaction to this criticism and the rediscovery of the classical notion of person, or of its Aristotelian elements, by Saul Kripke, David Wiggins, Paul Ricoeur and Martha C. Nussbaum.

1 The Classical Notion of Person

By classical notion we mean the definition of "person" formulated by Boethius (fifth to sixth century A.D.), that is, "an individual substance of a rational nature" [*rationalis naturae individua substantia*, cf. *Contra Eutychen* III 1–6]. This definition possesses the unique characteristic of being theological in origin and of using at the same time purely philosophical categories. The origin of the definition is theological because Boethius introduces it polemically in opposition to the monophysitic heresy of Eutyches, which attributed to Jesus Christ a single nature, the divine one, and against the dualistic heresy of Nestorius, which attributed to him, as well as two natures, also two persons, one divine and one human. Against these positions Boethius defends the Christological dogma of the Council of Chalcedon (451 A.D.), which affirms the "hypostatic union," in a single person [the Greek term *hypostasis* is rendered in Latin as *person*], of two natures, one

E. Berti (✉)
c/o Dipartimento di Filosofia, University of Padova,
piazza Capitaniato 3, I-35139 Padova, Italy
e-mail: enrico.berti@unipd.it

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divine and one human. However, in order to formulate his definition of person, Boethius uses two concepts derived from Aristotle's *Categories*, of which he was the first Latin translator and commentator (together with all of Aristotle's writings on logic, i.e. the collection called *Organon*, which Boethius made known to the Medieval Latin world).

Indeed, the concept of "individual substance" corresponds to what Aristotle in the *Categories* calls "primary substance" [*ousia prôtê*], that is, "what is neither the predicate of a substrate nor inherent in a substrate," because it is itself a substrate. "Substrate" translates the Greek *hypokeimenon*, which literally means "that which lies underneath," which underlies becoming, change, inasmuch as it is its subject, that is, the thing that becomes, the thing that changes and which, in changing, persists during the entire process of change. It might also be translated as "subject" (*subjectum* in Latin is equivalent to the Greek *hypokeimenon*), but modern philosophy has agreed to use this term only for the human subject, while the substrate as intended by Aristotle indicates any subject of becoming, both living and non living. For Aristotle, substrate is that of which universal concepts are predicates, such as species, e.g. "man," and genus, e.g. "animal," and which accidental properties inhere in, e.g. "white" or "grammatical" (i.e., capable of reading and writing). Therefore, as the substrate is not predicated of anything else and is not inherent in anything else, it is "in itself". Since, in order to exist, both the universal and the accidental properties suppose the existence of a substrate on which they may be predicated or in which to inhere, this is termed not only *ousia* (literally "being" in a strong sense, that is, permanent, lasting), which in Latin is translated as *substantia* (literally "what is underneath," like the Greek *hypostasis*), but also "primary" *ousia*, that is, preceding all others. On the contrary, species and genus, which do not exist "in themselves," but only in the substrate, and nevertheless constitute its essence (that is, tell "what it is"), are termed "secondary" *ousia*.

As an example of "primary substance" Aristotle indicates "a certain man," that is Socrates, or Callias, and, more in general "a certain 'this'" [*tode ti*], that is, a determinate individual. Therefore Boethius rightly interprets the Aristotelian concept of "primary substance" as "individual substance." In this case, "individual" does not mean "indivisible" [*atomos* in Greek] but "particular," not universal, because species and genus, that is "secondary substances", are universal. Thus it is not indivisibility which is essential to the Aristotelian concept of primary substance, but individuality, i.e. particularity, the non universality, because the universal, that is the species and genus, is always "in something other," while the primary substance is always "in itself." Individuality, however, is not sufficient to build a primary substance, because there can also be particular or individual properties, for example Socrates' particular whiteness. Thus a primary substance must first and foremost be a substrate, or subject, and must also be individual. This is why Boethius, wanting to say that the person is first of all a primary substance, says that it is an "individual substance."

Even the concept of "nature," used by Boethius to characterise the type of primary substance which the person consists in, derives from Aristotle, where it is expressed by the term *physis*, which alludes to "birth" [the Greek verb *phuô*, in its intransitive meaning, corresponds to the Latin *nascor*, whose participle is *natum*],

that is, what a thing is "by birth": e.g. a man is a man because he is born of human parents. In Aristotle "nature," in this sense, is synonymous with "essence," a concept also expressed by the term *ousia*, but with the meaning of "what something is by its own nature," which corresponds to the question "what is it by its own nature?". E.g., if I ask, "what is Socrates?," meaning what is he by nature, that is, by birth, the answer is: "man".

Finally, the term "rational," which Boethius uses to clarify the nature of the person, translates the Greek *logon ekhon*, that is "possessing *logos*." The term *logos*, as is well-known, in Greek certainly means "reason" (Latin *ratio*), but it first and foremost means "word" (Latin *verbum*) and "discourse" (Latin *sermo*, *oratio*). Therefore, Boethius' expression "of a rational nature," contained in the definition of "person," indicates an individual substance that, by its nature, that is, by its essence, possesses *logos*, i.e. speech, language. According to Aristotle, this is what distinguishes man from other animals, what constitutes the specific difference of the species "man" within the genus "animal." Since Boethius' definition applies first of all to divine persons, or to the person of Jesus Christ, the determination of "rational" cannot simply allude to the capability to reason, but must allude more in general to the capability to communicate, to enter into a mutual relationship. Indeed, according to the Trinitarian dogma, formulated by the Council of Nicaea (325 A.D.), the three persons of the Holy Trinity possess the same nature, that is, divine nature, and are distinguished only by the relationship they entertain mutually, that is, because the Son "is generated" by the Father and the Holy Spirit "proceeds" from the Father and from the Son. Already in the *Gospel* of John, the Son is called *Logos*, that is "word" [*verbum*].

Returning once again to speak of the human person, to whom Boethius' definition is applied by analogy with the divine one, we must remark that "substance possessing *logos* by its nature" does not necessarily mean "substance which currently exercises *logos*," but rather also substance that, by nature, possesses the capability of exercising *logos* even when it does not exercise it. Indeed, nature is what Aristotle would call a "primary act," that is the current possession of a body of capabilities, the exercise of which should be called "secondary act" or "activity." Therefore, on the basis of Boethius' definition, a new-born is also a person, even thought he is as yet unable to speak, and so is a human individual affected by aphasia, since he is born of human parents and therefore possesses a rational nature (leaving aside the problem of the human embryo, which would lead to a whole other series of problems, although, in my opinion, what has been said about the newborn can be applied).

2 Criticism of Modern and Contemporary Philosophy

Boethius' definition of person can be considered "classical" because it has remained at the basis of global culture, not only Christian but also Jewish and Muslim, both ancient, medieval and modern, that is of the entire culture which Aristotelian tradition has influenced: indeed, we find it with irrelevant variations in Augustine, John

Damascene, Richard of St Victor, Thomas Aquinas, G. W. Leibniz, Antonio Rosmini, Jacques Maritain and several other thinkers I do not need to mention.[1] However, starting from the seventeenth century the classical notion of person has been jeopardised, not so much because it has been criticised directly, but because the notions on which it is founded, i.e. "substance," "nature" and, more recently, "individual," have been criticised. First of all, the notion of "substance" has been, so to say, over-determined by Descartes and Spinoza, who defined it as "what does not need anything else to exist" or "that which exists by itself," which strictly can only be applied to a divine substance. As a reaction, the notion of substance was criticised by John Locke (1632/1704), who considered it "a complex idea," that is, borne not of direct experience (sensation and reflection), like "simple ideas," but of a combination of several simple ideas, that is, as a construction of the intellect, which does not correspond to any experience. The object of such an idea, that is, the substance strictly speaking, remains for Locke a *substratum obscurum*, that is, something that, so to say, is "underneath" or "behind" the primary or secondary qualities, that can be seen and therefore cannot be seen, cannot be touched, cannot be perceived in any way. With this doctrine we are very far from the Aristotelian notion for which substance is the single individual of whom one has a direct experience, e.g. Socrates. The notion of substance then underwent a further transformation on behalf of George Berkeley (1685/1753), for whom material substances do not exist, inasmuch as existence consists in being perceived (*esse est percipi*), thus the same qualities are nothing but perceptions and the only really existing substance is the percipient subject, that is, the human spirit (besides the divine Spirit).

These transformations led to the explicit criticism of the concept of substance on behalf of David Hume (1711/1776), according to which we do not have a direct experience either of material substances or of spiritual substances (that is, of ourselves as substance), therefore the idea of substance (as indeed also that of cause, which is the object of another memorable criticism by Hume) is only a belief of ours generated by habit, to which we cannot say any independent reality corresponds. For Hume we do not even have experience of ourselves, thus we are not a substance that persists, equipped with its own identity, but only a bundle of impressions that follow one another over time. Personal identity itself, which for Locke was guaranteed at least by memory, that is by conscience, for Hume is not guaranteed by any experience, although this is a problem for him, because in the Appendix to his *Treatise of Human Nature* he declares himself unsatisfied with the doctrine he himself had expounded and admits he has not been able to find a solution.

The Anglican bishop Joseph Butler (1692/1752) and the Scottish philosopher Thomas Reid (1710/1796) reacted to the criticism respectively of Locke and Hume. They referred to the classical notion of substance as the only thing capable of guaranteeing individual identity. But the somewhat narrow notion of experience as formed by individual sensations, or impressions, proper of empiricism, prevented the Aristotelian doctrine from being fully recovered, according to which the true object of experience is the primary substance itself, that is, the

[1] Cf. Berti (1992, 1995).

individual substance perceived in its entirety, with all its properties, including identity and persistence in change.

Even the attempt, made by Immanuel Kant (1724/1804), to give back objective value to the idea of substance (and to that of cause, on which the entire Newtonian mechanics is founded), considering it as an a priori concept, that is, a category of reason, universal and necessary, has not led to an actual recovery of the classical notion, because even Kant continued to admit that we do not have any experience of substance and the perception that we have of ourselves—the "transcendental apperception," or "I think"—is not the experience of a substance but is only the condition of each of our experiences. The idea of "soul" for Kant is an idea of reason, that is, the rational need to unify the psychic phenomena that we know of, which in any case is destined not to be able to be translated into authentic knowledge, for the very lack of an authentic experience of the soul. However, from the practical point of view, Kant has recovered the concept of person as a subject bearing the moral law and thus possessing his own "dignity," i.e., not exchangeability, which distinguishes him from things that are exchangeable and thus only have a "price," and makes him worthy of "respect," worthy of being considered always, in the person proper and in the others, not only as a medium but also as an end.

The concept of "nature," on the contrary, which is still present in Hume, who writes a *Treatise of Human Nature* trying to build a science of this analogous to the one build by Newton for non human nature, is also undermined in the nineteenth century, first by idealist and historicist philosophy and then by evolutionistic anthropology. Fichte, Schelling and Hegel's idealistic philosophy denies the existence of unchangeable essences and, resolving reality in thought, which is a continuous process, dissolves substances, essences and the bodies themselves in moments of a single major process, which is the becoming of the Spirit. However, it is worth noting that Hegel's most important critics, that is, Feuerbach, Marx and Kierkegaard, objected that it is not possible to have a process without a substrate, and conceived this substrate as the individual human subject, just as Aristotle did, explicitly recalling the latter (Marx even went as far as using the Aristotelic term of *hypokeimenon*).[2]

Evolutionistic anthropology, as is well-known, denies the fixed nature of the species and thus the interpretation that has been given of it by positivistic philosophy has gone as far as denying the existence of an unchangeable human nature, which is the same at all stages of evolution and in all the earth's peoples. The concept of "human nature" is thus replaced by the concept of "culture," intended as a differentiated, dynamic reality. However, also for this very reason, we must report a misunderstanding that took place at the beginning of the modern age, when "nature," in particular "human nature," was intended as an unchangeable essence, belonging to a hypothetical "state of nature," that is, to a primitive, pre-political condition of man. This notion, belonging to the so-called "jus-naturalism" (Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau), led to the opposition between "nature" and "culture" or between "nature" and "history," exposing the concept of nature to the criticism of evolutionism and historicism, which have shown that such a "nature" never existed and that the true

[2] Cf. Berti (2004).

nature of man is culture itself, that is, what man makes of himself. But, if we apply such criticisms to the Aristotelian and then to the classical concept of nature, they completely miss the mark, because for Aristotle, as we have seen, the true nature of man is *logos*, that is, speech, therefore political life, "culture." Indeed, man is for Aristotle "an animal who is political by his nature," precisely because of language, and the pre-political condition can belong only to beasts or gods. Besides, Aristotle explicitly states that the true nature of man is the end (*telos*), the achievement, the total fulfilment of human capabilities. Even from the point of view of the modern evolutionistic anthropology I do not think it can be denied that there is a marked difference between the human species and the other animal species, thanks to evolution, and this difference consists precisely in language and culture.

Finally, even the concept of individual, and the connected notion of "personal identity," has been the object of criticism on behalf of contemporary philosophy of empiricist and neopositivist inspiration. Alfred J. Ayer, the greatest representative of neo-positivism in Great Britain, has gone as far as denying the experience that we have of our very thought, declaring that one can never affirm "I think," but can only say "it is thought" or "there is a thought."[3] Derek Parfit, echoing Hume, maintained that the person is nothing but a series of subsequent "selfs" equipped with a collective identity, comparable to what is proper, for example, of a nation, in which individuals change continuously and what persists is only their common quality, that is, the fact of all belonging to the same nation.[4]

3 Reaction to Criticism and the Rediscovery of the Classical Concept of Person

In the Anglo-American philosophy of the second half of the twentieth century, characterised by analytic-linguistic inspiration, that is, by the notion of philosophy as language analysis—not only of scientific language, as was the case in neo-positivism (Russell, the early Wittgenstein, Carnap), but also of ordinary language—we see a progressive rediscovery of the classical notion of person, as an answer to the criticisms of modern and contemporary philosophy of Humean inspiration to the concept of substance and personal identity. To this end we must recall first of all the position of Peter F. Strawson, the continuer of the Oxford and Cambridge School inspired by the late Wittgenstein (Austin, Ryle), who, in the work *Individuals* (1959), tried to describe how the world must be able to explain the way in which we speak of it in ordinary language. By means of this description, which he called "descriptive metaphysics," Strawson showed that the ultimate reference of our language is always made up of particular objects, which are identifiable by means of space-time coordinates and reidentifiable through "sortal" designators (a term

[3] Ayer (1963).

[4] Parfit (1984). For the reaction to criticism and the rediscovery of the classical concept of person, see my article Berti (2006).

derived from Locke to indicate "what sort of" an object it is), that is, of a universal type. Among these particular objects, Strawson remarked, there are some that serve as a reference for the identification of others, which are called by him "basic particulars" or "individuals": they correspond exactly to what Aristotle called "primary substances" and which he indicated as the logical subjects of propositions. Among individuals, Strawson continued, there are some that play an even more basic identificatory role and correspond to original and not further analysable units of physical and psychic facts, which are persons. Persons are thus basic particulars, or individuals, that is "primary substances," with indissolubly united physical and psychic properties.[5] The affinity between this notion and the classical one is evident.

Simultaneously, in the United States he who today is perhaps considered the greatest American philosopher of the twentieth century, that is Willard v. O. Quine, in his work *Word and Object* (1960), maintained that the possibility of referring language to objects, that is, to give meaning to language, requires as a necessary condition the fact of being able to identify objects: indeed, there is no entity without identity.[6] This way, he reproposed the problem of personal identity, denied by Hume and by his most recent continuers. This has given rise to a debate the first document of which was constituted by the seminar on *Identity and Individuation*, which took place at the Institute of Philosophy of New York University during the academic year 1969–70, the proceedings of which were published in a book by the same title edited by Milton K. Munitz.[7] The problem is how it is possible to identify an individual, that is, to distinguish him from others coexisting in space and recognising he has a certain persistence, or identity, over time.

This problem in turn contains various issues, for example what authorises us to affirm the identity of a thing or a person when these change over time? Then there is the issue raised by Leibniz with the so-called "principle of the identity of the indiscernibles": is it true that two individuals who have exactly the same properties, that is, that are indiscernible, are also identical, i.e., are the same individual? Finally, there is a third issue, called forth by the famous essay by G. Frege, *Über Sinn und Bedeutung*, of 1892: how is identity possible between realities that are the object of different descriptions, for instance "morning star" and "evening star?"

A famous solution to this problem was suggested by Saul Kripke in *Naming and Necessity* (1980), according to whom there is identity when two "rigid designators," that is, two signs, that indicate essential properties, have the same referent in all possible worlds. But this supposes, exactly, that there are essences, the object of necessary truths, that is, of necessarily true although not analytic judgements (distinction introduced by Quine), which are first and foremost natural species but can also be classes of artificial objects.[8] The reference to essences naturally calls to mind Aristotle, but this is not essential to Kripke's thesis, which, although criticised and contested,

[5] Strawson (1959).

[6] Quine (1960).

[7] Munitz (ed.) (1971).

[8] Kripke (1980).

is certainly considered an important reference point within the framework of analytic philosophy and thus makes enough sense to be able to be discussed.

David Wiggins is also moving in the same direction as Kripke, but with more explicit references to Aristotle, and in *Sameness and Substance* (1980) he explicitly advocates that, to establish an absolute identity, as is the case in a single individual, it is necessary to resort to the Aristotelian concept of substance. Also for Wiggins natural species are substances and are each characterised by an "activity," that is, life, therefore they are not plain nominal essences in Locke's sense. The same character is possessed, although to a lesser degree, by artificial objects, for which functioning is analogous to activity. Thus, to identify something, it is necessary to say what it is, that is, to subsume it under a predicate that offers for it a principle of continuity or of individuation: this is what predicates indicating a principle of activity or functioning—i.e. the concepts of natural or artificial substances—do.[9]

The debate on identity was finally summarised in the treatise by D. W. Hamlyn on *Metaphysics* (1984), where the author showed that, in order to identity any object, first of all the reference to its space-time coordinates is necessary, then to its "space-time history" and, finally, to the species it belongs to.[10] This can lead to a form of essentialism, which, however—as Putnam noted in *The Meaning of Meaning* (1975)—is indispensable, especially for natural substances, such as water, which has as its essence the fact of being H_2O, whether we know it or not, in all possible worlds.[11]

Within the framework of the problem of the identity of substances, the problem of personal identity was recently taken up again, always in the framework of Anglo-American analytic philosophy. Wiggins suggested an original solution to this problem, indicating as the condition of personal identity not conscience, like Locke, but the continuity of life. Parfit objected to this that the important continuity for the person is not the biological one but the psychological one, which may fail during character mutations,[12] and Williams observed that this notion makes of the human person a simple natural species (it is the accusation of "biologism").[13] These objections of a spiritualistic nature do not take into account the fact that the higher functions of man are strongly conditioned by the biological ones, and that thought itself is a form of life, as proved today by the fact that the *Mind-Body Problem* is no longer addressed by the cognitive sciences by means of information technology or computer science, but especially by recourse to the neurosciences. This emerges clearly from the most recent formulation of "functionalism" by H. Putnam in the book *Words and Life*, where the author goes as far as speaking of a "return to Aristotle after Wittgenstein."[14]

[9] Wiggins (1980).
[10] Hamlyn (1984).
[11] Putnam (1975).
[12] Parfit (1973).
[13] Williams (1986).
[14] Putnam (1994).

However, together with the notion of person, analytic philosophy has also recovered the Aristotelian notion of substance. For example, in the *Blackwell Companion to Metaphysics*, the author of the entry "Substance," Peter Simons, illustrated a whole range of possible meanings of this term, affirming the need for a metaphysical perspective in which a single notion of substance can play its role consistently. Indeed, substance can mean: A) being independent, as for Husserl; B) ultimate subject, as for the nominalists Quinton, Price, Quine, Bambrough and Stout, or for the realists Armstrong, Ryle and van Cleve; C) individuating element, as for Strawson and Wiggins; D) what underlies change, as for Mellor, Q. Smith, McMullin, White, Furth and Anscombe; E) fundamental underlying object of reference, as for Campbell, Kim, Loux and Rosenkrantz (I omit further mention of names, although they are present in the text).[15]

Another eloquent example of the topicality of the debate on the substance of analytic philosophy is the article *Substance* by the aforementioned D. Wiggins in the volume *Philosophy. A Guide through the Subject*, edited by A. C. Grayling (1995), of which it constitutes, together with *Causation, Time, Universals* the *Metaphysics* section. Wiggins rightly refers to Aristotle as to the first who focalised the concept of substance and first of all takes into examination the criticisms that Hume addressed to the concept of substance, demonstrating that they start from a prejudicially hostile definition, which oscillates between the "something unknown and invisible" (*Treatise*, I, IV, 4) of Lockian origin, and "that which can exist by itself" (*Treatise*, I, IV, 5) of Cartesian origin.[16] In any case, it has nothing to do with the famous definition of "primary substance" given by Aristotle in the *Categories*, that is, "that which is neither in a subject nor is the predicate of a subject," a definition that can be applied to all those particular concrete realities which can be qualified by other things but do not in themselves qualify other things. Primary substances, which are the basic constituents of the world, are also what survives certain types of change, that is—as Wiggins says with an expression taken from his aforementioned book *Sameness and Substance* (Oxford 1980)—the continuants, characterised by a certain function or activity. In *Metaphysics*—as is well-known—Aristotle further develops the issue, identifying the cause of substantiality in form, intended as principle of activity, of which the latter in living beings fundamentally is life.

The Lockian idea of substance as "a certain je ne sais quoi," that is, something hidden, invisible and thus absurd—observes Wiggins—is the product of the separation of the subject from all of its properties, which has nothing to do with the subject (*hypokeimeon*) which Aristotle speaks of, a perfectly visible reality, which is palpable and possesses quality. The same can be said—I may add—of the Cartesian and Spinozian idea of substance as something that exists in itself, which has nothing to do with the sensible substance that Aristotle speaks of. But Wiggins also criticises some recent misunderstandings of the concept of substance, for example the one that is proper of the constructionalism of David Lewis, while he

[15] Simons (1995).

[16] Wiggins (1995).

observes that the Aristotelian idea of substance has been recovered by Strawson and Quine. On the basis of this notion, concludes Wiggins, concrete realities such as animals, human beings and other similar *continuants* are substances, about which one can rather pose the problem of how we can identify them or how they conserve their own identity.

Finally, the thesis inspired by Hume and supported by Parfit, who—echoing Hume—interprets the life of the person as a series of subsequent experiences, comparable to the history of nations, where there is an evident lack of a substantial subject that remains identical at different times, has also been subject to criticism. In particular, Bernard Williams, another exponent of the Oxford School who recently passed away, observed that there must be some kind of link between subsequent "selfs," which should be engendered by change, as proved by the fact that they all fail in the case of the physical death of their "progenitor".[17]

A return to the classical notion of person is not only present in Anglo-American philosophy of analytic inspiration, but also in "continental" philosophy of hermeneutic inspiration. Paul Ricoeur's position is exemplary in this regard. In the article "Meurt le personnalisme, revient la personne," which came out for the first time in the journal that had been the instrument of "personalism," that is, *Esprit*, in 1983, the French philosopher, who had been close to Emmanuel Mounier, founder of this current in the years 1947–1950, and had collaborated with his journal, declares that personalism as a philosophical current is dead because "it was not competitive enough to win the battle of concept," while person returns because "it had been the best candidate to sustain legal, political, economic and social battles" in defence of human rights.[18] I believe that both parts of this diagnosis must be shared, and that for this reason a philosophical foundation of person, more robust than the one previously offered by personalism, must be sought. Besides, Mounier did not consider himself a philosopher and was seeking a philosopher of personalism, after Nazi persecution had parted him from Paul Landsberg, who was the most appropriate to play this role in the *Esprit* group.

The "battle of concept" lost by personalism, although Ricoeur does not say it explicitly, is in my opinion the criticism of the notion of person made by Anglo-American analytic philosophy, which Ricoeur too found himself up against and was able to deal with in his most recent writings. Indeed, we must recognise that not only French personalism but the entire philosophy of Christian inspiration developed in the European continent in the second half of the twentieth century almost completely neglected the comparison with the analytic philosophy tradition, in the conviction that it was too logical, too abstract to say something interesting on the person and on the person's life. Thus not only were the extremist criticisms of a neo-positivist such as Alfred Ayer ignored, so were the much more traditional ones of Derek Parfit.

Ricoeur himself, in his most recent writings, precisely in order to reply to Parfit's objections, tried to solve the problem of personal identity distinguishing identity as

[17] Williams (1981).

[18] Ricoeur (1992).

"sameness" (*mêmeté*), on the basis of which each is simply "the same" (*idem, same, gleich*), from identity as "selfhood" (*ipséité*), on the basis of which on the contrary someone is "himself" (*ipse, self, selbst*). The former, in his opinion, supposes the existence of a substance, but it is not important, because it belongs to the sphere, in Heideggerian language, of *Vor-handen* and of *Zu-handen*. The latter is the important one, belonging to the sphere of *Dasein*, that is, of authentic existence. But the latter identity, that is, selfhood, according to Ricoeur is only a "narrative identity," resulting from the effective unity of an entire life, and is ensured by "character," intended as a certain constancy in dispositions, but above all by that loyalty to oneself that one gives proof of by keeping promises. This "loyalty to oneself" (*le maintien de soi*) is, for Ricoeur, the authentic personal identity.[19]

The latter solution may seem insufficient, because it offers a purely ethical, not ontological foundation of the person, which is applicable only to those who are responsible for their own actions, that is, who possess a moral "character," the capability of remaining loyal to themselves, a reliability from the point of view of the others. How could a similar concept of personal identity be valid for someone who is irresponsible, for instance a child, or for someone who is seriously ill, or for a dissociated person? Yet even in these cases there exist rights, such as for example the right to inherit, or the right to property, which suppose a personal identity. If it is true, as Ricoeur himself affirmed, that the person remains the best candidate to sustain the battles in defence of human rights, it is necessary to recur to a concept of person capable of playing this role. Besides, Ricoeur, in the above-mentioned article, had mentioned a similar concept, defining the person as "the support of an attitude," which means the substrate, the substantial subject of the various activities, irreducible to the latter ones. And in his most recent book he points out that the Aristotelian doctrine of potency and of the act does not apply only to human praxis, but indicates "a ground of being, at once potentiality and actuality," which seems to allude to the presence of a substrate as the foundation of acting, equipped with those capabilities that Aristotle indicated with the expression "primary act".[20]

The fact that the person remains, as Ricoeur maintains, the best candidate to sustain the battles in defence of human rights is demonstrated, in my opinion, by the philosophical implications that the formulation of the latter entails. For instance, the right to equality, that is, the right of each to be treated by law in the same way as everyone else, presupposes something that makes all human beings the same, independently of their differences in origin, nationality, social class and culture. Well, this is what the classical notion of person expresses by means of the concept of "nature." Let us then take the right to freedom, freedom of thought, of speech, of press, of religion, of association: it supposes that man, although strongly conditioned by a series of material factors (physical constitution, economic condition, subconscious, education received, etc.) conserves a margin of freedom, that is, of self-determination, of capability of escaping material conditionings, that corresponds to what Boethius called "rational nature." Finally, the right to property, on

[19] Ricoeur (1990).

[20] *Ibidem*, p. 357.

the basis of which the owner of a good conserves its property despite any changes in his life, that is, irregardless of whether he changes civil status, citizenship, religion, etc., presupposes that the owner of said right always remains the same person, that is, is a subject that persists in becoming, which is the same as admitting that he is an individual substance in the sense meant by Boethius.

It is true that not all philosophers recognise human rights as founded, or foundable, on incontrovertible reasons, in fact some believe that they cannot even have an ultimate foundation. However, there is no doubt that they correspond to the way of thinking of the majority of people, i.e. they express "public opinion," as proved by the fact that they have been solemnly proclaimed in universal declarations undersigned by most States, that they are present in many constitutions of democratic States and that even those governments that in actual fact do not respect them are not willing to admit it officially, because they know this would make them unpopular.

Besides, the notion of person that underlies the declarations of human rights has been adopted by some of the philosophers most committed, for instance, to the defence of the rights of women or of people belonging to different cultures than the Western one. I am thinking especially of the case of Martha C. Nussbaum, who, referring to the theory of economist Amartya K. Sen, according to which the most equitable distribution of wealth is the one based on the people's capability of using it, has drawn up an actual list of human capabilities, which outlines an anthropology that is not very distant from the classical notion of person. Besides, M. Nussbaum explicitly echoes the Aristotelian notion of happiness as the full realization of all human capabilities, although she criticises Aristotle for his discrimination of women, slaves and barbarians.[21] All in all, we can say that today, despite the criticisms it has been subjected to by a part of modern philosophy, the classical notion of person proves to be still topical both in the contemporary philosophical debate and in the people's way of thinking.

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[21] M. C. Nussbaum (2000).

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