

How exceptional are western notions of the person and the body?

In everyday life the conception of the self, of our personality and identity is something that we consider as a given, an entity that is self-explanatory and the cause of our uniqueness – which is why we feel it to be our original and natural state. Anthropology has on the other hand endeavored to demonstrate that the notion of the self is not a natural category and that ways in which human beings conceive themselves vary just as the conception of the self and personhood varies throughout history and within different cultures comprising differing value systems. This essay will explore whether this is the case, and if so, to evaluate the distinctiveness of the ‘Western’ notions of the person and the body that are said to be based in individualism in relation to notions developed in holistic societies of traditional character. To do so we will primarily trace Mauss’s evolutionist understanding of how western notions of the self came to be, together with that of Louis Dumont while drawing on examples described in the works of Meyer Fortes and Jean La Fontaine.

Marcel Mauss thought of man as a total human being, a complex that is the product of the unity of biological, psychological and social elements on one side, and society as a total phenomenon, composed of bio-psychological historical and social factors, on the other. By calling for this ‘triple viewpoint’ of physiology, psychology and sociology, Mauss succeeded in surpassing both the reductionist definition of man’s psychological life as a set of relatively autonomous elements, as well as the demotion of social phenomena to exclusively one category of factors (Mauss, 1979). Such a view is complemented by the distinction Mauss makes between a human being’s awareness of body and mind – a self-awareness that is universal and manifested through language, and the social concept of the person as a fact of law and moral (Fontaine, 1996; Mauss, 1996). Thus when Mauss speaks of persons he is referring to the Western representations of the self that can be labeled as individualism, with the goal of comparing variable social forms that illustrate the universal human being.

Beginning with the analysis of the place of *personnage* and *personne* in tribal societies, Mauss tells that within clans there existed a fixed set of names that corresponded to belief in a fixed set of souls, signifying that the living are an incarnation of the original founders, the ancestors. These facts of life are lived out in everyday life, through the employment of names that denote rank, function and role both in real life as well as in rituals, so that those using them are 'writing their statuses and laws in all their daily relationships and utterances' (Mauss, 1996). Therefore, each member of the clan has a role to play both in sacred dramas and family life that is defined by his place in the tribe and its rites, a place that is in the last instance defined by the name that this individual bears representing the soul that he carries within his body. According to Durkheim, the soul is the model according to which all spiritual and physical beings take shape because everybody hides in itself one inner being, the soul as the principle of life that keeps the body in motion (Durkheim, 1995). Just like the body, the soul has physical needs and shape, and being independent, it is subject to change. After death of the body the soul is usually conceived as going to the afterworld where the primary ancestors reside, only to return in the shape of a newborn – in Durkheim's theory of totemism the soul represents the totemic principle embodied in each individual, just as in Christianity a part of the sacred is embodied in all men who 'are all one person in Christ Jesus' (Mauss, 1996).

During the time of Romans the notion of the person evolved into something significantly greater than the previous organizational fact and right to a role and mask in a ritual – it became a fact of law whereby all free men of Rome were considered Roman citizens with a right to a civil persona. With it the persona came to denote both the true nature of an individual, as well as that which is strange to the self – an 'artificial character' (Mauss, 1996: 17), and while the Stoic philosophy created the moral person, it was Christianity that provided it with a metaphysical foundation and in doing so marked the birth of the 'human person'.

The question of unity during early Christian times was a sensitive one, for it was a question of both unity of the Church and the person in relation to the unity of God. After much discussion and numerous disputes that lasted throughout a number of centuries, it was decided that in his omnipresence God exists as three persons that share one single divine nature, a belief that is projected and likewise discovered in human beings. The whole of humanity shares one nature, as

if it was all one man, the first man – Adam – from whom all others originated. However, unlike the Trinity, men do not sense their natural unity with the rest of humanity – instead each man experiences his individual nature as separate and independent from all others, a sensation that is the result of the original sin. The role of the Church then is of the utmost importance for the reason that the reuniting of men on the basis of their universal nature occurs in the Church where men can again become One in the body of Christ, the new Adam.

An elaboration of why this is important for understanding the category of the person is given by Dumont who believes modern individualism to be of Judeo-Christian heritage, but places a great accent on the slow transformation of this set of values over time. In fact, Dumont states that the question of the origin of individualism is tightly connected to the process of transformation from holistic to individualistic societies – from those in which society as a whole is the supreme value to societies where it is the individual who is most highly valued, a transition that is difficult to conceive. For this reason Dumont takes us to India, a society which at the same time ‘imposes upon every person a tight interdependence which substitutes constraining relationships for the individual as we know him’ (Dumont, 1996), while on the other hand allowing independence to the man who chooses to renounce the world and so become an ‘individual-outside-the-world’. This ‘out-worldly individual’ was possible in a holistic society that is India only in opposition to it, and by method of comparison, Dumont deems it possible to see that a similar out-worldly individual was present in the West, in Christianity

The surge of individualism that took place during the transition of philosophical thought from Classical to Hellenistic and continued with the establishment of the modern state was in many ways influenced by the attribution of the autarchy of the polis to the individual by the Epicureans, Cynics and Stoics. The Christian concept of man sees him to be an individual in relation to God, while simultaneously expecting of him to accommodate to society, taking on all duties that come with it and surrendering to the earthly powers of the world. Thus, according to Dumont, man in early Christian thought was viewed as apart from the social and political organization - he was an out-worldly individual.

Another analytical approach to uncovering and comparing concepts of the self is through study of the body – the first image of society in the individual. In his famous essay on body techniques (Mauss, 1979), Mauss comes to the conclusion that there exists nothing that could be considered natural behavior, thus calling for the establishment of a theory of the techniques of the human body that are a product of learning, and not of human nature. However, what is important here is not so much the story of how humans learn to use their own bodies through the acceptance of techniques provided and prescribed by society, but more the question of the relation that exists between the body and the person because there exists no person without the body.

For example, in order to attain status of a person and the rights that come with it in the Tallensi tribe, being born was not sufficient – instead, it was necessary to fulfill a whole array of criteria over the course of a lifetime that was complete only after death (Fortes, 1987). For the Tallensi being self-aware meant being conscious of yourself as a moral person, as each man was considered a miniature model of the social order. Similarly, to be approved as a personality, a person must be embodied and the body itself needs to be shaped in accordance with social norms. Thus, when Taiga women are seen as having weaker heads than men, heads that are considered the seat of the total individual being, it demonstrates that ‘social characteristics of individuals are represented by images of the living body’ (Fontaine, 1996: 139).

The body is treated as an illustration of society, which consequentially does not allow for contemplation of the natural body without referring to its social dimension. The concept of the self is determined by one’s perception of one’s unique body – this body, as well as its various parts, their characteristic movements and positions are strictly ruled by norms, indicating that the self is in turn also molded by these norms through mediation of the body. Clearly then, the out-worldly tendencies in both Christianity and Hinduism are the products of such a bond between society and self – in order to renounce the imposed self, one must reject one’s body, its parts that are organized by means of body techniques and with it, society. The collective consciousness provides a fundamental significance that is manifested in individual action which is most obvious, as Mauss states, in body techniques because each society possesses a specific technique which is engraved into the body of the individual.

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