Political Unity and Religious Diversity: Hermann Conring’s Confessional Writings and the Preface to Aristotle’s Politics of 1637

Thomas Hobbes defined a person as someone whose words or actions are considered, either as his own, or as representing the words or actions of an other man, or of any other thing to whom they are attributed, whether Truly or by Fiction.1

His definition distinguishes sharply between the person and the person’s words or actions. Of course the words or actions can be regarded as the person’s own. That would reflect our natural understanding of what a person is: a human being saying and doing certain things. But Hobbes stretches the natural understanding beyond its ordinary limits. The way he sees the matter, words and actions need not at all belong to the person saying and doing them. They can represent the words and actions of someone else. Indeed, they need not come from any human being; they can be attributed to things. Even if the attribution is grounded in a fiction, the person does not lose its reality. From Hobbes’s point of view, a person is like an actor appearing on a stage in one of infinitely many forms of play.2 The person is one thing, the role is quite another.


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1 Thomas Hobbes, Leviathan 1.16, ed. Macpherson, 217.

2 “The word Person is latine: instead whereof the Greeks have πρόσωπον, which signifies the Face, as Persona in latine signifies the disguise, or outward appearance of a man, counterfeited on the Stage; and sometimes more particularly that part of it, which disguiseth the face, as a Mask or Visard: And from the Stage, hath been translated to any Representor of speech and action, as well in Tribunalls, as Theaters. So that a Person, is the same that an Actor is, both on the Stage and in common Conversation.” Hobbes, Leviathan 1.16, ed. Macpherson, 217.
The actor wears a mask. What lies behind the mask, however, may never be revealed without undoing the very nature of the person.

Hobbes justified his definition by drawing on the meaning of πρόσωπον in ancient Greek and persona in ancient Latin. But there was something more at stake than just classical etymology. Hobbes was reacting to the strain that two opposing forces placed on early modern Europeans: on the one hand, deep uncertainty about the nature of religious truth, and on the other, the need to identify with some form of it. The writings of men like Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin, and documents like the Augsburg Confession or the canons and decrees of the Council of Trent had never settled the question of religious truth. Each was lucid in its way, but they did not agree with one another and their interpretation was a matter of intense debate. Yet theologians, politicians, and ordinary folk all had to play their part in society. Emigration or the establishment of new communities in isolated places was taken up by some. But it was not for all, and minding your own business without disturbing others worked only so long as war did not come knocking on your door. War did come knocking, and soldiers came to ask if you were able to pronounce the shibboleth. What was your faith? Under those circumstances it made sense to heighten a distinction between the person and the person’s role that is basic to the human condition, but only on occasion raised to consciousness.

In just this fashion Hermann Conring (1606–81), professor of medicine at the University of Helmstedt and soon to become professor of politics as well, stepped self-consciously on to the stage of European confessional debate early in 1648 in order to impersonate a Catholic theologian. At the time negotiations for bringing the Thirty Years War to a conclusion had long been underway. But late in 1646 confessional hackles had once again been raised by the publication of a Catholic memorandum maintaining that it was impossible to make real peace with Protestants. Even among Catholics that position was regarded as extreme. Conring decided to respond with a book entitled Pro pace perpetua Protestantibus danda consultatio Catholica or A Catholic Recommendation to Conclude Perpetual Peace with Protestants. He had it published under the fictitious imprint of “a long-suffering German” (Apud Germanum Patientem) in the fictitious town of Frideburg (actually Helmstedt), and he wrote it under the pseudonym Irenaeus Eubulus, which may perhaps be translated as “Peacelover Goodwill” without concealing the inelegance of a

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3 For information about Hermann Conring’s life and works, see Fasolt, Limits of History, and Stolleis, ed., Hermann Conring (1983).
4 This was the Iudicium Theologicum written by Heinrich Wangnereck for the bishop of Augsburg in 1640, but not published until the end of 1646; see Dickmann, Der Westfälische Frieden, 413–14.