The Human Person: Vulnerability and Responsiveness. Reflections on Human Dignity, *Religio,* and the Other’s Voice

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**Abstract**

The guiding thread of this essay on the human person is the experience of pain and violation inflicted on others (1). It takes the notion of the person and her or his dignity as a normative consequence drawn from the will to establish, on an ethical basis, an unconditional limit to such violence (2). This raises the question whether (and in what sense) this consequence is to be regarded as a recognition of or bestowal with a dignity that is nowhere simply “given” (3). The essay steers a third course between these alternatives, arguing that human dignity can only be testified (4). This idea seems not to be restricted to a religious inspiration in the traditional sense of the word and may even be severed from any particular religion (5).

What does it mean to be a person today? If we believe Paul Tillich, the answer to this question has once and for all been definitively given and requires no further thorough examination.1 The straightforward answer assures us that there is an essential nature of man thanks to the “fact” that he is a created being. And this essence can never get lost—whatever direction a radically contingent cosmos in the future may take in order to leave the human species behind as it did prehistoric animals. This answer may satisfy those readers who on the one hand are willing to subscribe to whatever modern cosmology has to teach us today or in the future, but who on the other hand call for a comprehensive interpretation of man’s nature as a being placed in a vast universe that seems to ignore the human species completely. Such an answer downplays, however, the reference to our *historical present* which is obviously at stake when it is asked what it means to be a person today.2

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2 I am referring here to the title of the conference on “The Human Person and the God of Nature” organized by the Ian Ramsey Center & Sophia Europe in Oxford, 3–6/9/2007 where I have presented this paper.

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In the following considerations, I am going to advocate a new approach to this more specific question. The guiding thread shall be (1) the experience of pain and violation (a) as an unavoidable dimension of our destiny as incarnated beings and (b) as violence inflicted on others. I shall then (2) take the notion of the person and her or his dignity not as resting on an objective character of the human species or on an ontology of the person but, rather, as a normative consequence drawn—in a specific historical context—from the will to establish, on an ethical basis, an unconditional limit to such violence. This raises the question (3) whether (and in what sense) this consequence is to be regarded as a recognition of or bestowal with a dignity that is nowhere simply “given.” I try to steer a third course between these alternatives, arguing (4) that human dignity can only be testified. The recognition of the dignity of the other as a person responds at any rate to a pre-normative appeal to our responsibility for the other. This is at least what the phenomenology of responsivity describes as a religio\textsuperscript{3}, which is bound to the other without being subjected to him like a hostage. I conclude my considerations (5) with the question how this idea of a religio to the other may improve our understanding of what it means to be a person today—insofar as our understanding is not restricted to a religious inspiration in the traditional sense of the word and may even be severed from any particular religion.

1 Human Vulnerability

We enjoy a healthy life when our entrails keep silent, said the French surgeon René Leriche.\textsuperscript{4} In fact, when our normal experience is undisturbed by pain it is directed towards what is experienced as such, and mostly to the outer world. In this case the process of intentional experience tends to forget itself in order to realize only its objects. The process of saying falls into oblivion once it has resulted in what was said. Similarly, the process of hearing becomes consumed in what is heard. Vision, when it does its work as seeing something without disturbance is forgotten in our concentration on the visible.

Phenomenologists who have analysed these distinctions between saying and the said, between hearing and the heard and between seeing and the seen, coined the terms noesis and noema as common denominators of the processes of experience on the one hand and the experienced as such on the other

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