"Re-inventing" the person. A non-Kantian approach to the self.

by

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Abstract
This paper seeks to address the idea of the person present in what can be called the “studies of personae”. These studies understand the social sphere to be an independent domain concerned with the formation and maintenance of forms of life-conduct and ‘provide a suitably descriptive sociological account of the ways in which individuals have acquired definite capacities and attributes for distinctive forms of existence as certain sorts of person’ (Du Gay, 2007: 14). Rather than espousing yet another theoretical framework, the studies of personae for the most part ‘open the door to a fundamentally non-Kantian approach to the self, treating this not in terms of a subjectivity transcendentally presupposed by experience, but in terms of one historically cultivated to meet the purposes of a particular way of life’ (Hunter, 2001: 23).

The ‘person’ is not a given entity; concepts of ‘person’ differ between cultures and between periods in our own Graeco-Christian civilization. And not only concepts, the practices, institutions, and forms of reference which constitute ‘personalities’ also differ, and with them speech, gesture, and conduct (Hirst and Woolley, 1982: 118).
Man was a persona long before being a person (Fournier, 2006: 325 citing Mauss).

Persons also differ from *individuals* (as biological and psychological human beings) in depending for their delineation and distribution on definite forms of cultural technique and social organisation (Saunders and Hunter, 1991: 482, emphasis in original).

As the preceding quotations indicate, this paper seeks to address the idea of the person present in what can be called the “studies of personae” or what Du Gay recently called the “sociology of persons” (2007: 13). These studies understand the social sphere to be an independent domain concerned with the formation and maintenance of forms of life-conduct and ‘provide a suitably descriptive sociological account of the ways in which individuals have acquired definite capacities and attributes for distinctive forms of existence as certain sorts of person (Du Gay, 2007: 14). This approach is a shift away from ‘general and cultural theoretical accounts concerning the formation of “subjectivity” and “identity” towards an understanding of the specific forms of “personhood” that individuals acquire as a result of their immersion in, or subjection to, particular normative and technical regimes of conduct’ (Du Gay, 2007: 11). Finally, this is a way of seeing persons, stripped of the neo-Kantian clothing bestowed on them by various critical studies, as taking up moral positions not given to them by their supposed higher nature,
their reason, or by some other higher source, such as God. Instead, the morality involved here is a this-worldly morality.

Examples of these studies are Weber’s sociological work on forms of life conduct (1983; 1992; 1994) and histories of ethics such as Elias’s historical sociology, in particular his trilogy on forms of life-conduct (1996; 2000) and the second and third volumes of Foucault’s *History of Sexuality* (1990; 1992), to name just a few. One thing all these works share is the idea that no piece of political, social or philosophical thought is without its own historical context. Evidence is gathered to be used in pursuit of one or any number of such contexts against any attempt to grant to some piece of thought or other the status of a timeless universal truth: that is, to grant it immunity from its own particular circumstances (Wickham, 2006). Oversimplifying, they argue against the adherence of Kantian philosophy to the transcendental conditions of subjectivity, that holds that

the ground of obligation must not be sought in the nature of the human being or in the circumstances of the world in which he is placed, but solely a priori in concepts of pure reason (Hunter, 2002: 911, citing Kant).

Rather than espousing yet another theoretical framework, the studies of personae for the most part ‘open the door to a fundamentally non-Kantian approach to the self, treating this not in terms of a subjectivity transcendentally presupposed by experience, but in
terms of one historically cultivated to meet the purposes of a particular way of life’ (Hunter, 2001: 23).

Although the anthropologist Marcel Mauss is not the central character of this paper, his lecture on “the category of the person” and the “notion of the self” has served as an important source for many of the studies of personae featuring here. The significance lies in Mauss’s proposition that the “person” is not a given entity and changes throughout history. According to Mauss, role-playing is an integral component of the Western conception of selfhood. He regarded the early form of the self, found in indigenous Australian and north-west American tribes, to be the persona, role or mask – a concept referring to its possessor’s social function. An important development of this form occurred in the early Roman social order, which made extensive ritual use of ancestral masks. An additional meaning became attached to the word persona, which designated the mask: ‘it became a technical legal term assigning someone to whom the provisions of the law applied, the bearer of rights and obligations’ (Goldstein, 2005: 3-5). Formed as such, persona for the Romans became ‘synonymous with the true nature of the individual’; additionally, ‘the right to the persona had been established’ (Mauss, 1985: 17). This did not apply to everybody; slaves for example were excluded: ‘Servus non habet personam. He has no “personality” (personnalité)’ (Mauss, 1985: 17). In other words, slaves did not own their bodies, or for that matter any personal belongings.
Mauss observes that the modern Western concept of the person emerged from antiquity, when the concept of persona was developed ‘from that of a particular status or role, to which attach certain obligations, into that of a person as an independent moral entity, a being whose conduct is self-governed’, through Christian times, when this moral entity was endowed with additional metaphysical attributes (Hirst and Woolley, 1982: 119ff). Specifically, Mauss acknowledges two key factors: the development of Roman law, which ‘first dissolved the distribution of personhood on the basis of clan genealogies and reconstituted it on the basis of the citizen’s role in the republic’ (Hunter and Saunders, 1995: 72); and the developments within the institutions of religion and morality. The latter development is responsible for the emergence ‘of a system in which the status and attributes of Christian personhood are attached to an inner principle of monitoring and control: conscience and consciousness’ (Hunter and Saunders, 1995: 73). It is this notion of the person as the possessor of a moral consciousness, as the source of autonomous motivation and something capable of self-development, that is the foundation of our own self-understanding. Rose adds that ‘it remained for Kant and Fichte to give this its precise modern form, Kant making the individual consciousness the sacred basis of Practical Reason, Fichte making the self the condition of consciousness, science, and Pure Reason’ (1989: 3).

An example of applying Mauss’s notion of the person, is the special issue of Science in Context on ‘Scientific Personae’. Editors Daston and Sibum write that although they adopt Mauss’s historicisation of personhood, the application of the term persona is new
to the history of science; moreover, the history of science was not part of Mauss’s work (2003: 1). The notion of persona is defined by Daston and Sibum as follows: ‘personae are creatures of historical circumstance; they emerge and disappear within specific contexts. A nascent persona indicates the creation of a new kind of individual, whose distinctive traits mark a recognized social species’ (Daston and Sibum, 2003: 3) – in this case “the scientific persona”. For the authors personae are not individuals, stereotypes or social roles. Roles are easily stepped into and out of, equally ‘masks are easily donned and doffed’ and ‘in modern parlance’ masks are ‘a topos of insincerity: to wear a mask is to disguise one’s authentic self, to succumb to social constraint and convention’ (Daston and Sibum, 2003: 3, italics mine). Through Mauss’s writings, it becomes clear that masks could signify the opposite: rather than suppressing selfhood, one could attain it. Daston and Sibum argue that ‘to understand personae in this sense is to reject a social ontology that treats only flesh-and-blood individuals as real, and dismisses all collective entities as mere aggregates, parasitic upon individuals’, and continue by stating that ‘personae are as real or more real than biological individuals, in that they create the possibilities of being in the human world, schooling the mind, body and soul in distinctive and indelible ways’ (2003: 4).

Ian Hunter, in Rival Enlightenments: Civil and Metaphysical Philosophy in Early Modern Germany (2001), approaches philosophical doctrines as ways of fashioning personae for envisaged historical circumstances and as such uses the notion of person in a historical sense to relate these histories, and as a way to argue against metaphysical conceptions of
the person. Hunter argues that histories of the practices of the self occupy themselves with histories ‘of the means by which individuals have come to form themselves as the subjects of various kinds of experience and action and to endow their lives with particular kinds of significance and shape’ (1992: 359). This presupposes a certain kind of (historical) person with a particular historical trajectory and is counter to the universal notion of person. Hunter applauds Mauss’s endeavour to relativise the ‘conception of the “person as self”’… by treating it as ‘a special case, peculiar to the modern West, of the cultural forms in which personhood is elaborated and borne by individuals’ (1990: 402). As such, ‘personae are inventions for living’ (Hunter, 1993: 179). In other words, personae are historically formed: they are not “natural” or universal, they are achieved.

In another paper, Hunter and Saunders elaborate on this achievement: the historically formed person, by saying ‘that individuals came to conceive of themselves as the objects of their own ethical attention, that they came to problematize and modify their own conduct on the basis of the ethical being they aspired to was the result of a particular dissemination of ethical techniques’ (techniques that, after Foucault, we can call “techniques of the self”) (1995: 73). This historical notion of the person is also counter to the longing for a unified concept of the person put forward in neo-Kantian thinking. Hunter and Saunders ask have we ‘learned the historical and anthropological lessons that Mauss taught’ or has ‘our intellectual milieu… obeyed the siren call of neo-Kantianism?’ (1995: 65).
To find a possible answer to this question Hunter and Saunders discuss Lévi-Strauss’s introduction to *Sociologie et Anthropologie*, a collection of Mauss’s work. The question alludes to their concern that the writings of numerous sociologists, philosophers and anthropologists have undergone a “neo-Kantian process” resulting in a move away from in this case Mauss’s descriptive project, and towards a task that is ‘of a higher order’. Instead of Mauss’ ‘endless interplay between subject and other, self and object’, which would challenge ‘the finality of any knowledge claim’ that is, that we can come to a final answer ‘Lévi-Strauss’s solution is to import the unconscious… to be “the mediating term between the self and other”’ (Hunter and Saunders, 1995: 66). According to Hunter and Saunders, ‘in this way anthropology and psychoanalysis join in a dialectic that moves us back and forth between the given and the unconscious said to furnish the conditions of that given’, whereas ‘Mauss’s whole endeavour… was to remain at the level of the techniques themselves’ (1995: 66-68). Thus, ‘the subject is a manner in which individuals possess the attributes of particular kinds of personhood’ (Saunders and Hunter, 1991: 503). Cultivation and formation of human attributes, shaping the intellect and bodily capacity involves training. Hunter further explains that 'the figure of the universal subject, understood as the reflexively self-aware vehicle of transcendental conditions of experience and transcendent moral identity’ at the centre of philosophy and sociology is a misleading notion (2006b: 3-4). Different from the universal person present in Kant and Hegel’s ideas,

Mauss’ person as self is neither an emancipation of the timeless metaphysical categories of subjectivity nor an anticipation of the final moment of historical self-
consciousness, in which the subject recollects and transcends all its determinations. Instead, this remarkable mode of human being was brought into existence as a result of the historical development of particular legal and moral institutions. And it is in this light that we should view the deep differences that exist between alternative forms of ethical comportment, or ways in which individuals cultivate their persons.’ (Hunter, 1990: 403)

It is the unified concept of person, that is, the concept that there must be a fundamental form of personhood, that David Saunders argues we need to break with. In, what he describes as his fight against ‘the unrelenting attempt to rejoin existing institutions (such as the law) to morality’ or metaphysics he cites the philosopher Amélie Rorty who raises a similar question ‘Why, … is there such a metaphysical longing for one concept [of “the” person]? Or is it a longing for one metaphysical concept?’ (1997: 108, citing Rorty). Saunders lets Rorty answer her own question:

Perhaps the explanation is that the various functions the concept plays are unifying functions: ‘the’ locus of liability; ‘the’ subject of experience; ‘the’ autonomous critical reflector or creator. Since these various functions are unifying functions, there might be a strong temptation to look for their unified source. But this is an elementary error… A desire for unity cannot by itself perform the conjuring trick of pulling one rabbit out of several hats: a transcendental unity of the concept of person, unifying the variety of distinct, independently unifying functions that each regional concept plays (Saunders, citing Rorty, 1997: 109).
Clearly, Rorty argues that there is no such thing as “the” concept of a person. She asserts that this is evidently so ‘for the obvious historical reason that there have been dramatically discontinuous changes in the characterization of persons’ as well as ‘equally obvious anthropological-cultural reason[s] that the moral and legal practices heuristically treated as analogous across cultures differ so dramatically that they capture “the concept” of personhood only vaguely and incompletely’ (Rorty, 1988: 31). Equally, Saunders points out the blatant error of a unified concept of person: ‘its failure to recognise that the concept has quite different functions in different cultural contexts or social “regions”’ and further underlines that given this regional nature, personae and their ‘definite but limited settings’ must be taken into account (1997: 109). If we do not, we overlook ‘that each has its own history and distribution, has fashioned its own ethos, and is directed by its own techniques and to its own ends’. By not considering these elements, ‘normative generalisations about “the person” – whether the self-directing individual or the moral community’ will arise (Saunders, 1997: 109).

How then might we undertake studies of personhood/personae? Rorty favours a strongly contextualised approach and argues that ‘concerns about how such a strongly contextualised approach identifies entities across contexts are deflected by refusing to provide a general answer’ (Rorty, 1988: 8). To Rorty, ‘questions and contexts are particular all the way up and all the way down, such questions are given their sense and direction by the particular context in which they arise’ and concludes that ‘the question,
How are contexts identified and individuated? is answered by the counter-question, Which contexts?’ (Rorty, 1988: 8). To understand a particular concept of “the” person then is to understand its history.

**Conclusion**

Ultimately, the formation of the person comes down to the paramount ethical question: ‘What must individuals do – what ethical practices must they master, in what department of existence, to what ethical ends – in order to constitute themselves as subjects of a particular range of personal attributes?’ (Saunders and Hunter, 1991: 503). Again, the subject, the person, ‘is something brought into being and maintained as a definite mode of conduct by certain ethical institutions peculiar to the history of the West.’ Thus, ‘the subject is a manner in which individuals possess the attributes of particular kinds of personhood’ (1991: 503). In conclusion, it seems unwise ‘to divorce forms of personhood from the empirical settings within which they are formed. If we do so we are left only with a highly abstract, even transcendental, concept of “the person” that literally has no location’ (Du Gay, 2007: 26) – and no history.

**References**


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1 A thorough discussion of Ian Hunter’s texts on various developments within critical studies referred to in ‘The History of Theory’ is beyond the scope of this paper. See: Hunter 1990; 2006a; 2008.