Constitution and relationality of individuals

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The view that I would like to advance in this talk is a misleadingly simple one: individuality, as it relates to human beings, is personhood and personhood is constituted by relationality, that is, persons exist insofar as they are persons only in relation to other persons. It follows, therefore, that the concept of a person must fail to refer ontologically in an imagined world where only one entity is predicated to be a person. I propose to begin the discussion with some of the historical aspects of this idea.

At the heart of the concept of individuality is the idea of a particular human being, an individual being, literally a substance that cannot be divided into two or more parts, an atomic being set in opposition to physical things that can be cut and divided in two.

Boethius, a Roman senator and philosopher of the early 6th century, defined a human being in his work "De Persona et Duabus Naturis" ("On the Person and Two Natures"). as an "individual substance of a rational nature".

The term was notably used by Saint Thomas Aquinas, a 13th-century Dominican theologian and philosopher who went on to influence philosophy and theology in the centuries that followed. Aquinas used the Latin term "individuum" to discuss individual substances, including individual human beings, in his theological and philosophical works, such as the "Summa Theologica." In these works, Aquinas examined the nature of individuality in the context of both metaphysics and theology, elaborating on how individual human beings possess both material and immaterial aspects that make them unique.

Much later, Descartes continued this line of thought from a different perspective. To Descartes, the individual exists as a thinking substance (res cogitans), distinct from the material world (res extensa). This division laid the groundwork for modern

substance dualism, positing a separation between mind and body. While the exact relationship between our minds and our brains is yet to be identified, I take it as granted that a simplistic type identity theory of the mind, where quite simply the mind is strictly identical to the brain, is false.

The individual, in this view, is set against the material world, which was believed to be divisible as a matter of basic fact about res extensa, the “extended things” of Descartes.

The modern sense of the individual as a unique human being with a distinct personality developed gradually from the 17th century onward, post-dating by many centuries the development of the terms person and personhood. These were themselves innovations of the Church to formulate the central Christian doctrine of the Trinity, one divine nature in three persons, which had to draw upon the Greco-Roman philosophical concepts of substantia and persona, both unknown in the writings of the Hebrew prophets. Tertullian, an early Christian theologian, was instrumental in developing the vocabulary and conceptual framework for understanding the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. He is believed to be the first author to use the Latin term "persona" to describe the three "Persons" of the Trinity. The ensuing confusion between the Latin persona and the Greek hypostasis took a universal council of the church to be resolved since in the Greek philosophical tradition, "hypostasis" originally referred to a foundation or substance that underlies reality. Over time, in the context of Christian theology, its meaning evolved to denote an individual, concrete instance of a general nature or essence, becoming a synonym of persona.

This was followed by the rise of individualism as a social and philosophical concept centuries later, emphasising the individual's moral worth over the collective. The seeds of this development were sown much earlier in the Judeo-Christian tradition, as just mentioned, which influenced the subsequent philosophical treatment of the notions of personhood and individuality, most notably as discussed in recent times by Larry Siedentop in *Inventing The Individual: The Origins of Western Liberalism*. Siedentop writes, I quote,

I tell a story about how the 'individual' became the organising social role in the West – that is, how the 'civil society' which we take for granted emerged, with its characteristic distinction between public and private spheres and its emphasis on the role of conscience and choice. It is a story about the slow, uneven and difficult steps which have led to individual moral agency being publicly acknowledged and protected, with equality before the law and enforceable 'basic' rights. End quote.

Yet the collective, at the very least, is a set of individuals, which raises many questions about the relationship between the individuals and the collective. I propose that the concept of relationality is central to the idea of individuality (personhood) of human beings, drawing on philosophical and theological reasons and, what might be more surprising, on contemporary physics.

Generally, a "person" refers to a human being with certain attributes like consciousness, self-awareness, and the capability for rational thought and moral judgment, while "individual" emphasises separateness and distinction from others, often focusing on the biological or physical entity. Most notably, "person" usually encompasses relationships and roles in a society or community, defined in part by interactions with others, whereas "individual" may focus more on a set of inherent traits or qualities that make one unique, often irrespective of social context. I suggest that we confuse ourselves by failing to acknowledge that the underlying reality, whatever it is, of a person and of an individual is the same.

The basic proposition here therefore is that our relations with other individuals (persons) constitute our individuality, for ontological and epistemic reasons that the Judeo-Christian tradition has significantly influenced.

The personal properties of a person, such as their kindness, reliability, their being father of so and so or follower of so and so are interpersonal properties, and interpersonal properties obtain only between two or more actual or hypothetical persons. Those properties of persons which are not interpersonal, such as their weight or height, are strictly speaking properties of the embodiment of persons and not persons per se. The distinction we make between persons and their bodies is not just

a convention but a reflection of deep-seated, for good reasons, differences between our persons and our bodies.

It follows, in particular, that one cannot be an individual in the absence of other individuals and that relationships, far from being external or optional to our notions of personhood as atomic (to remind Latin individualis is a synonym of Greek atomikos), are instead constitutive and essential, which is congruent with the original Roman notion of persona as a role or function in a larger drama. To note, I consider the term relationship a subset of the term relation, a more abstract concept.

To try and grasp the role of the individual in this drama, Siedentop suggests, I quote:

We must imagine ourselves into a world where action was governed by norms reflecting exclusively the claims of the family, its memories, rituals and roles, rather than the claims of the individual conscience. We must imagine ourselves into a world of humans or persons who were not 'individuals' as we would understand them now. End of quote.

The individual, as we know him or her today, did not always exist as a matter of historical fact. Particular human beings existed, with their roles, offices, obligations, privileges and so on, but they did not see themselves as individuals until quite recently, in historical terms. Discussing what we mean by personhood does therefore help in our understanding of individuality, which, so to say, blossomed after the concept of personhood did.

Personhood is necessarily characterised by relationality and first-person perspective, even if the analytic tradition of philosophy has had little if anything to say about relationality as an essential feature of human personhood. Richard of St. Victor, a 12th-century philosopher and theologian, defined a person as an 'incommunicable existence' or 'incommunicable from-another-to-another becoming'. Linda Zagzebski, a contemporary philosopher, proposes that to be a person is to be an incommunicable subject in relation. Social psychologists suggest that the capacity to have first-person perspective is socially emergent, requiring social interaction, a linguistic community, and human intersubjectivity for its emergence. This view rejects reductive physicalism,

where human beings are fully reducible to their physical parts without ontological remainder since *a priori* there is no space for personhood in its ontology.

In other words, we have philosophical reasons to believe that the first-person perspective is an ontological given and the world that we persons inhabit is irreducibly personal and relational – which in no way negates its physicality but neither does it reduce all ontology to the physical.

But what is the physical? Carlo Rovelli, a prominent physicist with a distinctly philosophical outlook, suggests that one of the most fundamental physical - I'd like to stress the word, *physical* - aspects of reality shown by contemporary quantum physics, is its relationality. He insists that deep down, at the sub-atomic level, past the GCSE-level physics which sadly misinforms so much of our imagined knowledge of physics, the properties of particles only make sense in relation to other particles and that objective reality as traditionally understood does not exist but rather is shaped by interactions.

In classical, Newtonian, physics, observers are not part of the equation. When you kick a ball, it does not matter, as far as classical physics is concerned, whether someone else is looking at you or measuring the speed or the spin of the ball – the trajectory of the ball can be completely and deterministically described in the framework of Newtonian physics, using concepts such as mass, speed, density of the air, kinetic energy of your kick and so on. However, in quantum physics, observers (which are other particles or systems and not just the scientists in the lab) play a pivotal role. They are not just passive onlookers but actually shape the reality they participate in creating, interacting with or standing in relation to, and so does everything else.

Traditional quantum mechanics describes particles in terms of wave functions, which give probabilities of finding a particle in a particular state. Quantum relationalists insist that these properties are not intrinsic but are instead relational. That is, a particle's properties only have meaning in relation to other particles or systems. when an observer measures a quantum system, the system is indeed in a definite state relative to that observer. However, for another observer who has not interacted with the system or the first observer, the system can still be in a superposition. In essence, the wave

function collapse occurs in the "relational space" between the measured system and the observer, without affecting the absolute, "global" state of the system. This perspective avoids the need for a "global" wave function collapse and accommodates the possibility of multiple observers each attributing different states to the same system based on their own interactions.

I cannot go into more details of this interpretation of quantum physics, not least because I am not a quantum physicist, but the parallels are striking and unavoidable: the fundamental nature of physical reality, as demonstrated counterintuitively but reliably by quantum physics, seems to be relational. It is not just persons that are constituted by a web of relations, the fundamental physical reality seems to be a web of relations.

The properties of substances do not inhere in substances themselves but are the products of interactions with other substances and forces. If this reminds you of Berkeleyan idealism, then it should. Unlike Berkeley, Rovelli does not negate the concept of substances and ultimate physical reality, but like Berkeley he suggests that properties arise in a physical process akin to Berkeley's famous dictum, Esse est Percipi, To be is to be perceived. Properties are in the eye of the beholder.

While science has long acknowledged the distinction between primary observer-independent properties such as shape, motion, and mass, and secondary observer-dependent properties such as colour, taste and smell, relational interpretation of quantum physics advanced by Rovelli and others insists that all properties, at the most fundamental quantum level, are secondary properties, that is they are dependent on interaction with other physical systems (which includes other subatomic particles and forces as well as the more run of the mill scientists in white coats). To summarise, relational quantum mechanics posits that the properties of quantum systems are not intrinsic but only have meaning in relation to other systems or observers, in a striking and surprising parallel to our ideas of personhood and individuality.

Personhood is not just intrinsic or self-contained, but is significantly shaped and constituted by interpersonal relationships and social contexts. This view contrasts with the more individualistic perspectives that often dominate Western thought, where

personhood is commonly understood as a set of inherent attributes or capabilities, such as rationality or autonomy.

In this relational view, personhood is a dynamic, evolving construct that emerges from interactions with others and the broader social environment. This has several implications:

Humans are inherently social and interdependent beings. Our identities are co-constructed through relationships with family, friends, communities, and so on.

Our behaviours, thoughts, and even moral standing can vary depending on the social context and relationships we are a part of.

The notion of a fixed, unchanging "self" is questioned. Instead, identity is seen as fluid, continually constructed and reconstructed through social interactions, particularly in childhood.

Historical cases of children growing up with no human interaction, such as the Genie girl from California or Victor of Aveyron in France, suggest that while unquestionably belonging to the species of Homo sapiens, these children do not grow up into what we would normally recognise as fully personal individuals, notably lacking the ability to acquire language and limited cognition of other persons. It appears that belonging to our species does not necessarily mean being an individual.

When found in the woods at the approximate age of 12 near Aveyron, Victor was in a relatively healthy physical state but was unable to speak and exhibited various animal-like behaviours, such as biting and scratching. He displayed a lack of understanding of social cues and norms, and his cognitive abilities were severely limited, suggesting the crucial role of social interaction in personal development. Despite efforts, Victor never fully acquired the ability to speak, reinforcing the theory of a "critical period" for language acquisition.

In "Feral Children and Clever Animals: Reflections on Human Nature," (OUP, 1993) Douglas Candland concludes that the extraordinary cases of so-called feral children

and intelligent animals challenge our conventional understanding of human nature, cognition, and socialisation. He emphasises that these cases show the profound impact of social and environmental factors on development, thereby questioning rigid nature-versus-nurture dichotomies. He proposes a more complex, relational understanding of human nature that takes into account both biological predispositions and social-environmental influences.

Last but not least, I'd like to conclude with a brief overview of the personalist philosophy of Roger Scruton, who was the supervisor of my postgraduate research, which has influenced my thinking on this subject.

Scruton argued for the unique moral value of the individual and believed that personhood is deeply interconnected with responsibility, agency, and moral understanding. For Scruton, personhood is tied to the capacity for moral agency. He believed that to be a person is to be a subject of experience and a responsible agent, capable of making moral judgments and being accountable for them.

Scruton emphasised the difference between two realities, between treating individuals as objects, subject to natural laws, and treating them as persons, subject to moral laws. He stressed the importance of interpersonal relationships in constituting personhood and argued that our understanding of ourselves is deeply influenced by our relations with others, especially in communities.

To conclude:

Individuals are persons.
Persons are constituted by their multifaceted, dynamic interpersonal relations.
It makes no sense to speak of a fully isolated, in a metaphysical sense, person, since an entity lacking any interpersonal relations would not be a person.

Thank you.