

Introduction

In invoking “politics of the person” we begin at the point of maximum danger. The person is in jeopardy. Exposed to shifting assessments of who is to count as a person, each is placed in perpetual jeopardy. Political power is the power of life and death. It can unleash all of the neglect, destruction, and malice to which frail flesh may be subject. Politics is the realm from which deadly force erupts because it is the point at which decisions are made or unmade. Left to themselves swords would rest as peacefully as plowshares. Mind, especially as collectively activated in politics, is the deadliest thing of all. When the political mind has changed, the character of its threat may be profoundly altered. We no longer have the same fear of the nuclear warheads of the Russian Federation, for it does not possess the mentality of the Soviet Union. At the same time we look to the political as the guarantor of life, fending off the lethality that would render it “nasty, brutish, and short.” This is why the political normally assumes the far more benign aspect from which it draws its support. The monopoly of force attained by the state is usually exercised on our behalf. We do not need to arm ourselves as if we are perpetually engaged in a war of all against all. Instead, we can view the political as the guardian under whose protection

the bonds of mutual trust may flourish. But we know of its Janus character. The political is capable of great good or great evil. For this reason we have sought to contain it within the boundaries that mark the rights of persons. We are determined to make the state strong enough to suppress the threats, internal and external, that might reach us, yet not so strong that its own supremacy could be turned against the persons it is pledged to protect. The miracle of politics is the attainment of that impossible balance.

Like every balance it is perpetually in danger of collapse. It is never achieved but must be constantly re-achieved. The person is at stake in every moment, for there is nothing in the past that ensures that rights hitherto protected will continue to be guaranteed. None are immune to the process of erosion by which their humanity is imperceptibly devalued. Only the assertion of the rights of persons can halt that silent disappearance, for in the defense of what it means to be a person we behold the full stature of what is at stake. It is for this reason that the great historical struggles for liberty are so frequently recalled. We look to these pivotal episodes as the moments in which our humanity is most fully realized. Liberty, we are told, is a tree whose roots must be refreshed with the blood of tyrants. Why tyrants must thus recur is a topic that is less often broached, or why liberty must depend on their regular execration. Who, after all, are the tyrants but the power in whose misuse we have become complicit? And who are those in whose name we must undertake such an anarchic act of resistance? The political community seems to exist nowhere more than in the effort to bring it into existence, an effort that never reaches its end but seems to demand its perpetual repetition. In the rights of the person we glimpse something of this ceaseless political dynamic in which we live. The state can only *be* through the voluntary transfer of power from the individuals within it and they, in turn, can only be induced to make such an offering through the knowledge that it will be expended on their behalf.¹ How the contract gets enacted may be elusive but once it does the momentum evinces impressive durability. The most powerful states are those most dedicated to the preservation of the rights of their citizens. When every one is weighed as if he or she was the whole, then it creates a whole that is well nigh invincible. Something of that mutual exchange is constitutive of every functioning polity, but its transparency is only evident in the language of individual rights. There must be a state for rights to be guaranteed but there must be a guarantee of rights for there to be a state.

It is through this struggle to preserve the rights of persons that we discover that it is the person who is at stake. Nothing more or less than what the person *is* is at issue in the effort to determine the kind of political association in which we are going to live. How are we going to treat the lowliest member of the social whole? That is the measure by which we are to judge ourselves and, most importantly, the political community in its most visible sense. In saying how we regard the most vulnerable we announce the character of the whole. We are implicated in the defense of the person. Our politics is inescapably politics of the person. Responsibility for the person is thrust upon us before we have sorted through the rationale that is to guide us. Not only are we individually called by the imperative of conscience before we have a moral philosophy but, politically, we are also impelled by the same priority to defend the person without whom the polity would not be. The language of rights by which that precedence has been expressed is a language of abbreviations that has emerged before we have grasped what is being abbreviated. Practice takes precedence over theory because life is there before reflection on it takes place. In responding thus to the imperative that draws us, in recognizing politics as politics of the person, we can never fully grasp that by which we are grasped. We are rather led by intuitions that can be deepened but never fully articulated. Their truth can be enlarged but never surpassed. It is for this reason that theory never fully provides the grounds for politics, for politics is already a realm of truth before theory arrives on the scene. The political must confront its inescapable responsibilities. It is the latter that illumine what politics is about. In living up to what is demanded of it, the political discloses that by which it is constituted. It shows that it answers to that which is more than the political, that which comes before it as that which it must serve. The political is led forth by what is before it exists. That is its intimation. Politics of the person is the politics of being.

Viewed as such a voyage of discovery it is not too surprising to find that it is marked by many ups and downs along the way. Even when the language of rights has clarified the centrality of the person within politics, there remains the possibility of distortion as one of its unintended results. Nowhere is this more evident than in the use to which the heightened awareness of the person is put in the discourse of rights itself. Defense of the rights of persons leads to the easy assumption we know what persons are, or at least to a working definition as the capacity to assert an interest in

rights. When persons are the putative possessors of rights attention shifts to the lines by which we define who is a person. It may be a curious consequence of the centrality of the person that it now becomes easier to exclude the marginal cases in which the status of personhood is less than clear. But it should not strike us as so unexpected. An advance in one area of self-understanding always suggests a mastery we might readily extrapolate beyond the limits available to us. As always, however, it is the rise of moral hesitations that is the leading indicator of the errors into which we are about to fall. It is in the moral life that we are closest to life as such. A troubling intuition alerts us to the misconception that refuses to see any difference between a newborn infant and a baby kitten, on the grounds that they each lack an established self-identity. Infanticide and felineicide are equally permissible. What is disturbing is not the lack of sensitivity exhibited, but its justification by the heightened attention to the person that was presumed to avoid it. The greater respect owed to persons has turned the definition of the person into the most contested question. It is perhaps no wonder that many have despaired of rendering the notion of personal rights in coherent form. When a focus on the person supports depersonalization we are given pause.

Yet a sweeping dismissal of the turn toward the person would also be a mistake. What is decisive is that this truncated view of the person as defined by conscious self-identity has not been allowed to stand unopposed. Indeed, it has provoked vigorous and unremitting resistance. The integrity of the person must be defended even against the claim of persons to be entitled to regard themselves in any way they wish. Human rights must not be invoked to override human dignity. We are not simply minds possessing ownership of bodies to be disposed of as we choose; nor are our bodies devoid of value without a proprietor entitled to register such a claim. The self, that innermost core of the person, cannot be so easily separated from all that enables him or her to be what he or she is. Self-expression occurs only through the medium of that which is not the self.² Our bodies are our own but not in the way we own anything else. The unity is far more intimate than the language of self-determination would seem to suggest, for in injuring my body you injure me. This is why it is possible for me to injure myself while it is not possible for me to rob myself. The intimacy of the person with his or her bodily presence is not the only continuum that

extends the reach of the self. A wider zone of continuity makes us part of the community of persons without whom we could scarcely be. The focus on individual rights may have suggested an atomistic existence, but the web of interdependence making our lives possible constantly refutes that impression. Just as we are body-persons we are also persons-in-community. Indeed, we are scarcely capable of becoming persons, acquiring the awareness of our distinct selves, except in relation to the field of others. I am a person because I am recognized as such by others. It is through the nurturing support of others that I become the kind of self whose independence makes it possible for me to return the same indefatigable care for others. There is, in other words, no such thing as the self pure and simple, without the hyphenated relation to the body and the world of others. The imperative of a more “personalist” account is one of the fruits of the heightened centrality of the person within liberal rights. The turn toward the person has generated a personalist response as one of the most prominent alternatives to the regnant individualism of our discourse.³

As such, personalism has enlarged the truncated account of the person that revolves around the autonomous self. Yet it has not really succeeded in responding to the core challenge of the inversion made possible by autonomy itself. What is there to prevent me from using my autonomy to destroy myself? Can it even be destructive or degrading if it is freely chosen? How can we even presume to set our judgment against that of another equally entitled to exercise his or her judgment? The personalists are guided by a profound intuition that there is something appalling about the self-destruction of self, but how is it to be expressed when autonomy has become the highest value? Some notion of human dignity is indispensable if we are to hold the line against self-degradation and the degradation of others, but noting the desideratum is not the same as satisfying it. Kant is in many ways the fount of this preoccupation, and we may regard personalist philosophy as arising from dissatisfaction with the Kantian attempt to ground human dignity in reason.⁴ The problem is that personalism has done little more than keep the issue alive, a not inconsiderable achievement, but far less than the revision in the dominant discourse at which it aims. The language of human dignity, with its emphasis on integrity and sociality, will be opaque so long as the source of its inspiration remains inaccessible. It must be within the exercise of autonomy that the enhancement

of self and others is discovered. Too often personalists have been content to limit their theoretical reach, falling back on traditional formulations of nature, rationality, and the *imago Dei*.⁵ However laudable the deepening of reverence and respect at which they aim, they cannot hope to reach it without articulating the source of the convictions by which they are drawn. Human dignity must be located through the perspective of autonomy if it is to function authoritatively within that realm.

Dignity must be found as the source of autonomy rather than as a possible goal of it. The difficulty is that autonomy is usually so preoccupied with its immediate setting that reflection on the condition of its possibility is somewhat remote. We are propelled by the urges and urgencies of life before we even begin to question it. Yet none of this occurs unconsciously. Behind our decisions lies an awareness of what can never be suppressed, that which will not allow us to freely degrade ourselves. It refuses to countenance the descent into self-deception and self-delusion. The greatest offense, Kant thought, is lying to oneself.⁶ But why? What is it that restrains our autonomous freedom before we have even begun to exercise it? Conscience, natural law, right by nature, duty are all possible answers that ultimately beg the question of how we know them. The tradition of moral reflection has always erred in not conceding the difficulty entailed in the starting point it invokes. How can we know what we do not know and yet must know if we are to make a beginning? The conviction that human dignity must at all costs be preserved when the abyss of subjective freedom jeopardizes it is itself testament to an undertow that is all the more powerful for its imperceptibility. It is at this point that the opaqueness of the traditional formulations obstructs us. We cannot penetrate to the source of a movement we sense but cannot discern. The call for a deeper philosophy of the person remains no more than that, a call without an answering response.⁷ Overlooked is the extent to which this challenge has preoccupied the history of philosophy in the modern era. It reaches a turning point in the work of Kant when the nature of the challenge comes into view. We cannot answer the question of what makes it possible for us to know or for us to respond to the pull of obligation because we cannot step outside of the perspective of those enactments. The condition of the possibility of knowledge cannot be grounded in knowledge because to do so would presuppose it. No grounding of moral judgment can escape the inexorable imperative of

grounding it morally, for the good can be justified only in terms of itself. Even for Kant, however, the perspective of the transcendental, the perspective outside of which we cannot go, assumed a mysterious aspect. To call it a priori hardly cleared matters up since we really need to know the meaning of that priority. Obviously this is not the place to seek such a clarification since the whole book is an attempt to provide just that. It is sufficient to note that the character of the difficulty has at least become explicit and that dismissal of Kant as a formalist merely overlooks his crucial significance in grasping the nature of the challenge.

That was not an error committed by his immediate successors among the German Idealists. They understood that Kant had initiated a new philosophical phase in grasping the ungraspability of what makes it possible for us to know and to act. We know it and yet we do not comprehend it because we are so fully immersed within it. But where Kant was even hesitant to name that about which he spoke, they were more daring in identifying it as the distinct reality of spirit, *Geist*. This had the advantage of making more real what had proved elusive within the Kantian formulations. Antinomies, the ultimate limiting points of his thought, could now be resolved in a certain sense. All that was needed was to note that Kant himself, by grasping the antinomies, had somehow managed to go beyond them. The reality of *Geist* defied univocal and fixed determination for it was apprehended in the movement whereby it included even itself. Philosophy in the Hegelian variant would assume a newly dynamic form that would lead it back to the vitality of life from which it had always arisen, only now with the capacity to include itself in that fluid medium. As the speculation became progressively more elaborate, however, it was evident that the pall of a new fixity had settled over the account. The system threatened to abolish the question from which it had arisen. It too would have to be overturned in the name of an existence that could never be contained within its parameters. That determination has framed the outlook of philosophy up to the present. The existential turn, initiated by Kant and inadequately realized by Hegel, Fichte, and Schelling, forms the permanent condition out of which reflection unfolds. As with the great pioneers Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, philosophy thus becomes radically fragmentary, incomplete, and inarticulate. Correlative to the paradoxical style of thought that knows it can never think itself, there is increasing attention to the inability of language

to say what it seeks to say. Falling short has become the mode of saying. Nowhere is this more on display than in the bewildering pyrotechnics of Heidegger and his successors.⁸

Yet in a strange way they are closer than ever to the horizon of the person. We might characterize all of Heidegger's lifelong preoccupation with the question of being as an attempt to identify what it means to be a person without ever using the word "person." He had already turned away from the language of persons, even as invoked by Scheler and Jaspers, as too close to the subject for whom reality must be composed of objects. The whole that contains both of them would be missed, even though it is that capacity to contain them by not being either a subject or an object that defines what it means to be a person. It is perhaps the most striking feature of Heidegger's vast meditation on being as the possibility of apprehending being, that is, of being as self-revelation, that he nowhere seems to notice that this is what it means to be a person. Being is personal through and through because it is that which discloses by never fully disclosing; it is disclosure that ever remains beyond disclosure as its own movement. The tragedy of Heidegger is that, despite it all, being looms as an apocalyptic event that overshadows its recipients. This explains why for Heidegger persons could remain invisible to him, even to the point of countenancing their mass annihilation. Their cry could not be heard because he had not grasped it as continuous with the self-sacrifice of being, even though it was the very same movement of transcendence by which he had glimpsed being. Ontology is prior to ethics for, as he insisted in what is almost a throwback to his scholastic formation, every ethics entails an ontology.⁹ Absent is any consideration of the Levinasian corrective that every ontology presupposes an ethics, that we already bear a responsibility before being as the condition for raising the question of being. All of this comes into focus when persons have become the center of philosophical vision. Then we see with Levinas and Derrida that the person, the face of the other, is before all else, including the self.

It is a great mistake to conclude, as a number of personalist commentators have, that this formulation is the imposition of an impossible demand for perfection in human relationships. That impression occurs only if we assume that Levinas is, for example, offering a description of interpersonal dynamics rather than of what is the condition of their possibility. We can relate to one another as persons only because mutuality is the very

meaning of what it is to be a person. I am responsible for the other before I even know him or her because that is what makes it possible for me to practice the limited responsibility of which I am capable when we meet. The priority of the other may be the divine command, especially as it is given to us by Jesus, but it is so only because we are already marked by its possibility. God can command only what can be, even if our natural limits usually obstruct the way. We are at least capable of embarking on the way. Eschatology is not some vague destination at which we will arrive in the future. It is the ineliminable horizon of possibility in every moment. Persons, we will see, are not beings within being.¹⁰ No matter how frequently we think of persons as beings, strictly speaking they are incapable of such a status. Otherwise they would be incapable of glimpsing being. To apprehend that within which they are they must somehow never simply be within it. Their genesis is from before being. All of this is amply confirmed by our ordinary knowledge of persons, each of whom we know as unique irreplaceable wholes that exceed in meaning and value all that is in the universe. With each birth being begins anew. This is something that is known to every parent, and it is verified in every encounter with the infinity of the other. The problem is that our language, even in the hands of those attuned to the centrality of the person, has been incapable of voicing that pleromatic epiphany. It is the turn toward inwardness in modern philosophy that has opened up the paradox of the person as what can be contained without ever being contained in what we say about him or her.

The problem of the pre-modern philosophical account is that it never found language consonant with its own apprehension of the person.¹¹ As a consequence, it always ran the danger of losing what it had grasped. Inwardness is a permanent feature of human existence; it *is* human existence, but its articulation is neither final nor definitive. What has been discovered can also be lost, even if it remains available for recollection. We might even think of the whole history of philosophy as one long effort to regain what had been glimpsed in its very opening. The discovery of being, as well as the revelation of the I AM, is simultaneously the discovery of the interiority within which such events are possible. The beyond and the within are correlative. But they are quickly covered over by the more reliably solid language of beings and nature, as well as the historical destiny that such traces of the ineffable must endure as they wander through space and time. The opaqueness of symbols set adrift from their originating experiences

becomes the overarching problem. We do not know what being is when it can only be encountered in the mode of beings, nor do we know what persons are when they too must be assimilated to the finite. The dislocation seems pervasive when we can think about everything except what it is that makes thought possible. There is perhaps no more poignant reflection of the confusion than the preoccupation with what it means to live in a secular age.¹² God is absent, not because he has absconded, but because we can no longer conceive of how he might make himself known. The way of the transcendent seems irrevocably blocked when the inward has shrunk to the subjective. Even while yielding to the abundance of experience we have become incapable of perceiving its reality. God continues to be heard in a secular age; the difficulty is that he can no longer be recognized. The great atheists of the nineteenth century were in revolt against God, which meant that, in their own way, they affirmed him more deeply. Today we have only the unease of the question of God that can no longer be voiced. It drives our new atheists to reject the God that science can never find. Utterly overlooked is the realization that God is nowhere, that he does not exist, because he is that from which everything has come into existence.¹³

To think of God as the first cause is to already draw him into the chain of existence and therefore into the logic of what stands in need of a cause itself. St. Thomas's famous five ways are deeply informed by the awareness of this problematic. Each of them concludes with the formula *quod Deus dicitur*, which makes it clear that we have not proved the existence of God. How could we prove a God whom we already know about in advance of our demonstration? The arguments are really ways by which we arrive at that which we know, the God who is called God and who is vastly more than has been glimpsed. The God who overflows all ways is the ground of possibility of the ways. What is neglected in St. Thomas's meditation is the question of how we know the God whom we recognize as the end of each way. He does show, however, that we ask about how we arrive at the God whom we already know. The question of God comes from God himself. We would be incapable of asking it if we did not already know who it is for whom we search. Our only problem is to account for this revelation itself. The standard response is that God, the transcendent, has chosen to reveal himself to us. But that too begs the question. How can God reveal himself to us unless we already know who he is? How can we hear the voice of God

if we cannot recognize it? To know God is thus to know that which is already known and which could neither be sought nor found if that were not the case. But this means that we have no need for a proof of the existence of God because we already know him as that which is beyond existence. We do not even experience God for it is our knowledge of him that makes such experiences possible. We know that which is *not* before we know that which *is* because we are ourselves persons who are not what we are. The inwardness by which we glimpse the transcendence of God, *quod Deus dicitur*, is not the subjective perspective within us. It is the shattering of all subjectivity within transcendence itself. Inwardness is not a private realm but the point from which all that is merely private can be beheld. We do not know God but are rather known by him within the inwardness that is God. Transcendence is not only the way to God but also the very being of God who is known as inwardness. He cannot be other than personal.

The unfamiliarity of such reflections is almost enough to demonstrate the constraints that longstanding conventions have imposed on the spiritual irruptions at the beginning of philosophy and revelation. Each, as Eric Voegelin has suggested, has been content to preserve the results of its illumination, without being excessively concerned about the event of illumination itself.¹⁴ The effect has been the widely lamented opaqueness of what is thus preserved, a still life without the vitality from which it has arisen. To remedy the situation something more than complaint is needed. Voegelin understood this and sought, through the return to experiences of transcendence, to find again the wellsprings of thought. In this he made it clear that there were no such things as ideas of order unless there were first the particular experiences of order that were undergone. That is an indispensable realization. Yet it remains to be carried further, for the invocation of experiences is still tied to the subjectivity of persons who undergo them. Strongly suggested, in Voegelin's account, is that the experiences are not simply subjective. They are experiences of truth, of that which transcends the self. But how can that be said if it is not said in the mode of subjective experience? One can talk about the echo of truth recognized by other selves, but that too is merely to talk about experiences. What has not yet occurred is a discourse out of such events themselves. Even to describe them as experiences is already to have set up a distance by which we stand apart from them. If they are, on the other hand, what makes experience possible, then we can

scarcely experience them. We simply glimpse that within which we stand. Of course, this too is an experience, but not of the kind that is simply my subjective grasp. Instead, it is the point at which the subjective stands within the reality of which it is a part. Voegelin struggled mightily to suggest this in distinguishing between the intentionality of consciousness toward objects and the luminosity of consciousness's own participation in reality. Yet he did not quite follow the logic of his own distinction to recognize consciousness as an event of being itself. He saw that consciousness grasps being but not that consciousness is the grasp of being. We experience the transcendent because we are already constituted by it. We know that God is more than he reveals because we are persons who are always more than we say. It is out of the non-saying that all saying arises. This does not have to be established by experience or confirmed by others for it is prior to all demonstration. The order of being is that which we live within. As such we glimpse it without really experiencing it. There is no way of avoiding the recognition that it is only persons who can have such an apprehension of what passes all apprehension. In conceding this we are also acknowledging that what they apprehend is that being is personal.

It is not just that the person is a being. The person is the apex at which the being of being is disclosed. St. Thomas's metaphysics is based on the understanding that every being seeks to disclose itself, to communicate what it is.¹⁵ But he does not ask about how he knows this and, as a consequence, it never becomes clear that being is personal. The person provides the model of being without really showing why. To do that would require the enlargement of perspective to include what it means to be a person. Then it would be seen that the person is not an event within being but the event of being. As that which comes from what is not, the person exemplifies the emergence of being. We can ask about the source of being because we are ourselves engaged in the advent of being. We know that it comes from that which is not. That which can set itself aside, so that being might be, is what it means to be a person. Within inwardness the whole of being is contained in the mode of what is beyond being. To say that the movement of self-unfolding in all things is teleological, as St. Thomas suggests, is itself a perspective that depends on the assignment of purpose of which persons alone are capable. In doing that, however, they are already contemplating it from outside. Freely they assign purpose because they are

not subsumed within a regime of purpose. When we ask about what it is that can assign purpose, we know that it cannot be explained in terms of purpose. The only explanation of being remains what is outside of it. Only the person occupies that role. But this means that explanation falls short for we cannot penetrate to what it means to be a person. We apprehend being from within the highest perspective available to us, that is, from the vantage point of the person. The culminating moment is the self-disclosure of the One whose self-disclosure has been dimly intuited all along. We encounter the God whom we have always known.

To be a person is to know what it means to be a person. It is to live within that openness that is there before all communication. Signifying is the capacity to relate to others what can be said but it cannot say what cannot be said, signifying itself. We can point everything out but we cannot point out pointing. It cannot be taught, for all teaching begins with it. We are there before there is a there. Consciousness is very often taken as the starting point for all discussion about the person, and has notoriously been invoked as the *sine qua non* of being a person. This in turn has led to the question of whence consciousness has arisen. The expectation is that consciousness must derive from some more solid reality outside of it. What is less frequently noticed is that such an explanation would provide us with no insight at all since it would only reduce consciousness to what it is not.¹⁶ We might know what consciousness uses, even what makes it possible, but not what it means to be conscious. Just as we cannot understand money in terms of the physical analysis of paper, so we cannot understand consciousness in terms of anything but itself. The real question is how we understand what it is to be conscious. Given that we are conscious of such an endless stream of things, how is it possible to become conscious of the stream itself? Of course, we say that self-consciousness is the indispensable accompaniment of being conscious of something. But is this not one more of the many things we “say” when we know we cannot, especially since being really conscious of something is usually said to consist in forgetting our selves? To say that the self is merely unconscious or forgotten in that moment is simply to beg the question of how it can then be retrieved. We are hesitant to conclude that consciousness is a form of un-self-consciousness, even though that is exactly what we know. Loath to dislodge the supremacy of consciousness, we know that the knowledge on which the possibility of

consciousness turns would also come tumbling down. Like Descartes we would rather build reality from the isolated I than concede that even such an effort is underwritten by what is before the I.

We could not even be conscious without the relationship to what is other that makes it possible. I become conscious of what makes itself known to me, including what disclosure as such means. The world is knowable before I know it. The relationship prevails before the instant when it is actualized in my knowledge. Nothing is so utterly alien that we are incapable of comprehending it. All can be assimilated to what is known because we are borne by an abiding trust in the order underpinning all things. To say that this is faith, that faith makes knowledge possible, still connotes too much of the subjective. We are unused to marking faith with the seal of certainty. Yet what could be more certain than what makes all certainty possible? We may not be certain of what we know but we are certain of certainty. Even to ask the question is to stand within certainty. It is to say, before I know there is certainty. That is what makes it possible for me to know. Descartes's mistake was to think he could ground certainty in something more than itself; it was to confuse faith with knowledge. We cannot know what makes knowing possible. But how then do we characterize what we know of that relationship that makes knowledge possible? It is a relationship we cannot know because we live within it. No one needs to instruct us and no one can receive instruction in it, for all instruction takes place within its boundary. The transcendence of the person can be glimpsed by consciousness because it is prior to consciousness. Metaphysics is not what we establish but what establishes us. This is why it is a great error to identify the person with consciousness or even with the notion of self-identity. Neither would be possible unless the person was more than either of them. Outside of all that marks the person is the person himself or herself.¹⁷ That is what is disclosed in the reverence that is owed to the person from before birth to the moment of death.

We know what it is to be a person before any encounter has taken place. Nothing in what is disclosed can disclose what lies beyond all disclosure, and we know this only because we are persons who encounter other persons. All that matters lies outside of what can be discerned. The person is before being. This is why the question of being, of the ground of that which is, is not just a question incidental to the person. It is the question of the person, for the person occupies precisely that question. The only re-

maining question is how we know this since as persons we are not strictly speaking in being. We are ever coming into being, but this is a possibility that requires that we are definitively incapable of containment within being. This is the aspect that brings into focus the highest dignity of the person as limitless transparency. The person lives in the luminosity of the person. The beyond being is glimpsed in its transcendence. Language is defeated in its capacity to say only what is, yet that defeat does not have to be final. The very fact that we have adverted to it already initiates a reversal. Through the paradox of non-saying the more-than-sayable can be said. Indeed, it turns out that all language carries that overflowing within it. Containing the uncontainable is what gives the whole vitality and un-stoppability to what we say. The problem is that without the constancy of warning signs against it we are prone to lapse into amnesia. We forget the person as the condition of possibility of all saying and doing. Being massively intrudes into the space that previously had been occupied or, rather, non-occupied, by what makes it possible for it to be discerned as being. Otherwise than being, to borrow Levinas's ascription of the project, requires more than the responsibility evoked by the face of the other.¹⁸ It demands an understanding of what it means to be a person who is and is not present within a face.

Being must be discovered, not as the alternative, but as the possibility of the person. It is within the horizon of the person that the whole movement of existence can be contained. There is no other model available. Immanence and transcendence are fragmentary aspects of what the person alone makes whole. There is no ontology of the person because the person is the encompassing ontology. The only reason that our philosophical discourse has not descended into sheer chaos is that we have integrated in person what we could not integrate in thought. In this sense what will be attempted in the present work is nothing new. It is what we have known all along yet never found the way to admit. Persons stand outside of being. Is that not the presupposition of the Parmenidean pronouncement of the Is? Could Parmenides have declared being if he was not apart from it? Even to suggest, as he does, that thinking and being are one, has remained an enigmatic pointer to this realization.¹⁹ We know thinking is possible because it is not subsumed within the being it thinks about. Yet there is the point at which thinking and being are one since thinking is itself in being. But how is this Parmenidean thought itself possible? That is what has proved so

elusive for millennia. Only the realization that Parmenides is himself a person furnishes the answer, for then the thought of being is separable and inseparable from thinking it. The person is the pivot of thinking and being, and that thought is inseparable from the being of the person.²⁰ We cannot step outside of the horizon of the person for it is the person that provides the horizon for everything else.

Our purpose here is to sketch that re-centering of reality within the person. Instead of seeing the person within reality, now we must attempt to find reality within the person. This is not to suggest that we embrace a radically subjective perspective, for subjectivity is only a possibility for persons who are not reducible to it. They can be subjective only because that is not what they are. Persons can behold their own subjectivity, demonstrating that they are objective about themselves. The categories simply do not apply. We know this unquestionably in the persons we know and love. They are neither locked within their inwardness nor exhausted in all they have said or done. Outweighing both the subjective and objective dimensions they are each the unique pivot of the whole of reality. This is how we relate to them. While occupying their particular finite terrain, they become to us the whole world. All human relationships turn on this unsurpassably personalist metaphysics. The person exceeds all other reality. The problem is that our language, with all of its presumptive metaphysical capacity, has utterly failed to capture this. We know what we cannot say for all of our saying consigns the person as a part of reality. It is only within the political realm that an opening begins to resist the dominance of the quantifiable. There we have been compelled to admit that persons are not entities in the same way as everything else. They cannot be commodified, instrumentalized, or reified, for they are inexhaustible sources of meaning and value to whom we owe limitless reverence and respect. None is replaceable and none can be discarded. Whatever benefits might accrue to the whole society, they are not worth gaining if it means the sacrifice of its humblest member. In this sense each is a whole outweighing the whole. The language of dignity and rights, with all its attendant implications of indivisibility and inexhaustibility, is the point at which the transcendence of the person comes into view. Yet even that most deeply affirmed conviction has not found the philosophical means for its articulation. We simply know that we do not wish to belong to any society that would live at the expense of its most vulnerable members.²¹ To say why this is profoundly

wrong we are thrown back on the vaguest formulas about fairness or reciprocity that only beg the question of the source of their imperative.

What we do not possess is an account of the person as transcending the political community as such. This is not the notion that the person is destined for union with God in eternity but the far more concrete exemplification of the way in which the person includes the association of which he or she is a member. Politics that guards the infinite dignity and worth of the person is correlative to the person who guards the political with an infinite care and dedication. The existence of any polity is secured only by members who are prepared to sacrifice themselves for it. To conceptualize this as a contract is to fall wide of the mark, for what can be given to those who have given all? They have made unmistakably clear that the polity exists, not for the sake of benefits or even for survival, but for the sake of the community of those who have fully transcended themselves. Its only adequate form is one that acknowledges its character as a community of persons, each of whom is a whole for whom the whole must be continually ready to set itself aside. A community of persons is reciprocal, not just in the ordinary sense of mutual courtesy, but also in the sense of that perfect reciprocity of which alone persons are capable. All of this becomes evident in the political realm where action takes place before its meaning has become clear. In this sense the evolution of the language of rights is only a way station on the journey toward the transience of the person as the founder of the whole that, in turn, embraces the person as greater than itself. For the moment, however, that transience is elusive. All that will be attempted here is a sketch of how it might be conceived. To do anything more would be to request a far-reaching shift in the prevailing manner of thought and discourse, a request that is likely to go unheard. Perhaps what is offered is less a beginning on that larger task than the issuance of a challenge to begin it.

At stake is the person through whom the political community is possible and for whom the political community must devote itself. Demarcation of the boundary of rights is not enough when we do not know what it is they are intended to preserve. To respond that rights are attached to persons presupposes we know what persons are. It is that easy familiarity that must first be questioned, for anyone who accepts it has not contemplated the nature of the challenge entailed in the task of understanding persons while functioning as persons ourselves. The confusion of persons and things has entangled our reflection ever since the term *homoousious*

was introduced to distinguish the *hypostases* of the Trinity (Council of Nicea, 325). Since the two terms mean almost the same thing it was evident that doctrinal affirmation had outweighed philosophic precision, by favoring the language of substance over the language of persons in relation to one another.²² The later introduction of the notion of subjectivity as what characterizes persons served only to bifurcate reality into two different kinds of things, subjects and objects. As a result we treat subjects as if they were a different category of object. It is for this reason that thought itself has proved to be one of the most incomprehensible of all thoughts. Thinking, we assume, must be intelligible in terms of its neurological accompaniments, even though no neurologist reads his own brain scan as the source of his analysis. Science, it seems, is capable of explaining everything except science itself. What can be more invisible than the observer himself or herself? This is also why autonomy cannot simply be selected as the defining purpose of the person, for autonomy cannot include what makes its exercise possible. Not only must there be something choiceworthy for choosing to be possible, but its emergence cannot be determined in advance of the choice. Autonomy discloses the moral horizon of the person, just as science discloses the intellectual horizon. The openness to others and to reality is a possibility only for persons who are not things at all. They do not even exist within history for history is a possibility for them only because they are always apart from it. Persons may leave their mark but they are not reducible to what they have left. Only art, religion, and philosophy, as Hegel suggested, are the exceptions to this rule.²³ In those instances we deliberately intend to put more of ourselves into what we say than the saying will bear. Art is that enterprise in its most preeminent way. The trail of theological symbols differs as the attempt to convey what is deepest of all and what cannot be conveyed, our participation in the divinity that reveals itself as beyond revelation. How that is possible is the question on which philosophy turns, for it is only philosophy that declares what all the other modes of personal existence know. That is, that the person is transcendence, not only as an aspiration, but also as his or her very reality. Nothing is higher. That is what this book strives to acknowledge. Our task is to do what we can to glimpse what cannot be known because it can only be glimpsed. How else can transcendence be known but as what has already departed? Nothing is left of what was there. That is why only a person can know what it is to be a person.