

**PHILOSOPHICAL ANTHROPOLOGY:
WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE HUMAN? CAN A ROBOT BE A PERSON?**

**Roberto Dell'Oro
Loyola Marymount University***

THE QUESTION

We begin with provocations, instigations to think, in this case, as in previous occasions (think of developments in medicine), impelled by technological advances. Those advances are not neutral, and their practical success does not yet suffice to measure the spectrum of questions they raise. That certain things, like machines, can help us do things faster, communicate more easily, even perform better than we in many spheres of life, cannot be considered “the whole story.” What is left out of a purely pragmatic consideration? I would say two things: prospectively, the question of where all this is going (teleological consideration); retrospectively, the question of what has driven the trajectory of development that led us to the production of such machines (archeological consideration).

The teleological question is essentially ethical in nature. To ask “where all this is going” is to ask about criteria for action. The archeological question, on the other hand, is ontological; it pertains to the nature of the reality envisioned by the productive effort. This last consideration requires a deeper interrogation of the pre-comprehension underlying our technological efforts. The matter, in this case, can only be addressed fully through a historical reconstruction. We

* Disclaimer: this paper is only a collation of notes for the lectures delivered at Harvard university for the workshop on “Robotics and Artificial Intelligence: A Chance to Rediscover our Humanity?” (October 11-12, 2019). Thus, the allusive nature of many statements and the rather raw character of the writing style. A proper paper would have to further flesh out the arguments presented here, and support them with proper scholarly apparatus, a work I intend to do eventually. Also the scope of the writing in question should be kept in mind, i.e., to provide a general background with which to address the question, “can a robot be a person?” The pedagogical intent of my notes is “deconstructive” in scope, for the one at stake is only a pseudo-question. The constructive task, however, requires further articulation.

need to revisit the past in order to better understand the present. In so doing we come to make sense of the meaning of the questions we ask; we might even unmask such questions as meaningless. And so, how is it that we have come to ask, can a robot be a person?

The question points to a doubt, a puzzlement about the nature of personhood with respect to its attributions (can dolphins, chimpanzees, and now robots be persons?) To be able to adequately address the question entails reconstructing the entire trajectory of modernity, so as to make sense of the intellectual paradigm that brought about the tremendous advances of science and technology. The issues raised by robotics and artificial intelligence find their cultural location within the space defined by such trajectory.

Science *and* technology: the “and” is central for at stake is not only the theoretical study of reality, but our capacity to effect changes upon it. Technology no longer points to a set of tools at our disposal (as in the old version of *techne*), but to the very nature of the world within which we now live. Our world has become the abode of *homo technologicus* (confront Heidegger on the essence of technology as *Gestell*, as framework through which we look at reality. *Our outlook has become a doing*). This realization is at the heart of the development of bioethics as a field: the issue is not only what science can study, but what it can do.

A HISTORICAL RECONSTRUCTION

The story of modernity begins with a skeptical puzzlement about the nature of reality, the place of God in it, and the destination of the self. The modern *Denkform* is new with respect to its historical predecessor. I would frame the difference in terms of a contrast between two radically different existential attitudes: wonder and doubt, and do so while reviewing the central insights of important philosophers. Thomas Aquinas will be one, but then also Descartes, Hume, Kant (and Nietzsche).

Facing the World in Wonder: Thomas Aquinas and the Person as Spirit Incarnate

For Aquinas, who comments on Aristotle's metaphysics, philosophy begins in wonder (so Plato in the *Theaetetus*). Wonder is the attitude that throws us back onto ourselves, in stunned astonishment at the sheer being there of things. Later on, such astonishment will engender perplexity about the meaning of things. Yet, prior to the activity of questioning perplexity, or doubt, wonder entails a kind of trust, a confidence (*fides*) in the natural goodness of reality, almost like a love: being is promising and good (Genesis says, "God saw that it was very good"). Being is the miracle of gratuitous generosity, a being there without explanation, out of a source that gives: the gift of "coming into being" remains inaccessible to explanations concerning the "becoming" of a being that already is (consult the third proof "on contingency"). But what does it mean "to be" for Thomas?

He refers to two aspects of being: the "in-itself aspect" of being (*substance*), and its "towards-others aspect" (*relationality*). "To be" is "to exist," and to exist is to be *an-integrity-in-relation*. Existence is the actualization of the energy of being, the gift from a source that offers itself, and whose communicative aspect is being participated to each existent. Of course, all this cannot be fully grasped without reference to its theological underpinning. Thomas talks about being, but ultimately thinks about God, the Christian God of creation.

Now, in this conception, also the person finds its place. Unlike other beings, the person is not just being-in-itself, but being-coming-to-itself in self-presence (Thomas speaks of *reditio*, of return unto itself). The *person is a mindfulness of being in its totality*, a complete openness to its fullness, and thus, most fully being. Indeed, person is the most perfect of substances. The personal being is the most perfect being because of its ecstatic *openness to the totality of being*, an openness actualized *in knowledge and will*.

Such openness is not just a function of one particular aspect of the person, say the mind. It is the function of the entire being that is the person in the unity of its principle, i.e., its soul (Thomas, like Aristotle: *anima est quodammodo omnia*). And this is so because the *soul is the form of the body (anima forma corporis)*.

This is an important point: when thinking about the person, Thomas always thinks about the unity of body and soul. In encountering the body, one encounters the person in its totality, in its spiritual presence. The person is in this sense “spirit incarnate” (Rahner). It is an integrity of being (a substantial unity). And in this integrity of being, the person is also infinite openness, infinite intentionality (*homo capax Dei*).

To summarize: the person for Thomas Aquinas entails three dimensions (can we say that we are dealing with a “definition?”):

1. to be a person is to be an existent, that is, an integrity of being unto itself (incommunicable substance);
2. who is actively open to other being (substance-in-relation);
3. and is passively receptive to the totality of being (receptivity).

Incommunicability, relationality, and receptivity point to a balance between *passio* and *conatus* in the person.

Here is where I would locate the question of potentiality in the person. To be a person as substance-in-relation means that the person (like being itself) is always in a process of becoming: its openness and receptivity are the conditions of its growth and dynamic passing from potency to act. *To be a person is always to be in-potency*, that is, in a process of progressive actualization toward a more perfect fulfillment. To be a person is to be an energy of transcendence.

So far Thomas. But before we get to the paradigm shift of modernity, we need to mention important changes in the philosophical and theological disposition of the late Middle Ages (nominalism). First with respect to the concept of God: the stress is now on God's transcendence, on his distance from the world. Also, the stress is on his will, which is inscrutable and absolute (unlike Thomas, who sees the eternal law as the height of rationality). Both the distance of God and the inscrutability of his will leave the world devoid of the signs of his presence, "de-sacralized," or *secularized*, as we like to say today, but because of this, also available for the exploration of man, for his engagement with things, and for the general project of natural discovery. Nature can no longer hide – contra Heraklytus, for whom "nature loves to hide".

There are also changes in the concept of nature: God is beyond nature, infinitely powerful and inaccessible. Now stripped of all the signs of divine communication, being is no longer conceived as communicative (*actus essendi*, act of existence), as the energy of relationality (God→man), but as a being-unto-itself, distant and cold (Norris Clarke on this). A progressive impoverishment in the understanding of being sets in. Consider as an example, the loss of an analogical perspective on things ("being is said in many senses," *to on legetai pollakos* – Aristotle, and Thomas, *ens multipliciter dicitur*) and the univocal reduction to particularity, taking place especially with Duns Scotus.

One aspect of the change is paramount: the *emphasis on essence rather existence*, and the subsequent loss of the notion of being as energy of communication. Being is no longer seen in the fullness of its over-determinacy, in its plenitude (Jacques Maritain speaks of the "generosity of being"), but as a thing-like presence, retracted unto itself, an object facing a subject. Also, the "essentialization" in question signals the end of a teleological understanding of nature. There is

no intrinsic finality to nature, no intrinsic destination: nature is not a dynamism that gives itself (the etymology of *physis!*), but a static object to be grasped by a subject.

The Person as Subject and the Dualism of Renee Descartes

Descartes inaugurates a definitive shift of paradigms with respect to the previous mindset, with changes in ontology and in anthropology. His philosophical discovery, *cogito ergo sum*, emerges in the wake of doubt, and functions as the condition of possibility for the reconstruction of an image of the world now certain, finally resting on secure foundations beyond any skeptical assault. There are losses and acquisitions following such shift of paradigms.

The losses: no longer is being understood in its character of act, of energy, of power, communicative to mind. Furthermore, no longer is being endowed with intrinsic value. As such, i.e., as valuable and good, it was able to speak to the mind. Now we have like a reversal of directionality (Copernican Revolution!) in the relation between mind and being: the mind dictates to being the conditions of its meaningfulness (“I think,” that is, the epistemological certainty, precedes and grounds “I am,” that is, the ontological constitution).

I said there are also important theoretical acquisitions in this shift. The most important is the “turn to subjectivity,” also named the “anthropological turning point,” which, later on, Kant will compare to a Copernican revolution. To be a person is to be a subject. The language of *substance* gives way to the language of *subjectivity*, of self-reflexivity and interiority (Descartes is the father of *philosophie réflexive*, says Ricoeur). The person is not just a substance, even if the most perfect one, in ontological continuity with the others. It is an entirely different being, discontinuous with the rest of creation, because of its ability to think (Pascal will say: “Man is only a reed, the most feeble thing in nature, but a thinking reed”).

To the subjectification of substance there follows the objectification of being: being becomes an object for a mind that is a subject. In its neutrality, being is simply a raw reserve of resources available for human exploitation. This is so because without a *telos*, an end (final cause), nature cannot account for meaningful origin either (*arche*). Nature becomes the neutral thereness, stripped of value, without formal or final cause. It is the realm of effective causality, a network of forces linked together by mechanic interaction. So Descartes on nature, including the nature of human body (!).

There is no denying that the main conquests of science do rest upon such an understanding of reality. The synthesis of this can be offered by Edmund Husserl in the *The Crisis of European Sciences* (1936):

The exclusiveness with which the total world-view of modern man lets itself be determined by the positive sciences and be blinded by the “prosperity” they produced, meant an indifferent turning away from the questions which are decisive for genuine humanity. Fact-minded science excludes in principle precisely the questions which man finds the most burning: questions of the meaning or meaninglessness of the whole of human existence.

What is being left out of this picture are questions of meaning. What is the subject to do, when facing such mechanized reality? It sees itself as other to the mechanical world, or at least as irreducible to it. The world is purposeless, but the subject is purposeful. Thus, it will be *active* with respect to being, not passive. It will provide being with the value being does not possess intrinsically. With Kant, the subject becomes “a self-assertive subjectivity.” The person turns into the source of value, a noumenal being endowed with infinity value, with dignity.

The separation at the ontological level, between mind and being, effects important changes in the understanding of the person. For the person too will be defined by an intrinsic split, a separation between body and soul, no longer grasped in the unity of a single substance, but as two separate substances. From the idea of the human being as a substantial unity of body

and soul, as incarnate being, a separation sets in between soul (mind) and body. The soul and the body become increasingly separated from one another, with the soul losing its original meaning of principle of life's unity. The soul progressively becomes intellectualized as "mind," and this in opposition to the body (dualism).

The separation of mind and body, now thought of as separate substances, opens up a dualism and a reduction in the understanding of the person. *The person is his mind*, independent of his body. The separation also comes with a new attribution of value: the mind is higher than the body. Here Descartes inherits the dualistic theological logic of "modern devotionalism" (*devotio moderna*) of 14th and 15th century, with its emphasis on askesis and the denial of the body (consult on this Karl Löwith).

What emerges is a kind of *deracinated person*, a personhood without body, a *personhood reduced to its cognitive faculties*. To be a person no longer means to grow into the biological space defined by a specific life-principle (rational soul), but to be able to actualize the faculties that are proper to the traits of a "thinking substance." The person will be such only because *cogitans*, a capacity to think; and this independently of the body, whose connection with the mind is now viewed as entirely accidental. The human body, now separated from the spiritual principle, becomes the machine (*res extensa*). What this means is the *loss of the incarnate self*, and the intellectualization of the spirit. As the "other" substance in the human composite, the body is left open to the manipulative intervention of the superior principle. Think of the emergence of anatomy in medicine, the study of the body as inert entity (*Körper*), rather than lived-reality (*Leib*).

We need to understand the profound implications of the dualism in question. We are inheritors of such dualism, and I will say that to ask about the personhood of a robot is to fall de facto into the trap set by such pre-comprehension.

One can look at the consequences of the dualism in question from two angles: either the angle of a *bodiless mind*, or the angle of a *mindless body*. We have here the two developments that follow Cartesian dualism: *rationalism and empiricism*. Let me begin with the latter.

The Deconstructed Self of David Hume

The empirical line is pursued by Hume and the British empirical tradition, all the way down to 19th century utilitarianism. The body receives sensations, sensible impressions from experience, and progressively, the mind builds a sense of identity, out of the congeries of such impressions.

What is the person? It is the product, the net result, of external stimuli registered by the mind. But one can see that, because such impressions are seen in their *transitional* capacity to impress the mind, the identity of the person will only be the result of the *psychological*, rather substantial, ability of the mind to retain impressions through memory. For Hume, the person is *not an integral center of being* (substance), but the flow of impressions that come and go, insofar as they are retained by memory. Thus the paradox: there is “person” only insofar as there is *actual consciousness of sensations and impressions*, or, as we say today, of empirical stimuli.

Consider the thought experiments of contemporary bioethicists: when a person loses her consciousness, does she become a different person? Can we have two persons, when a patient loses the ability to reason or to retain memories, etc.? (Think of Alzheimer patients).

One of the great problems of Hume was the problem of sleep: when I am asleep, do I cease to be the person I was? As such, am I waking up every time as a different person? Hume looked into the mind in order to find a unity to the flow of impressions, and found nothing. Thus, he concluded that *there is no person* as a substantial principle of integrity-in-communication.

If there is a person only insofar as there is *actual* consciousness of sense impressions, then the body is no longer central in providing the condition for mind’s continuity, nor is the

embodied-self understood as dynamically growing into its full potential. Consciousness of sense impressions means that both, the preconditions of bodily development, or the fading of mental functions in a still operative body will not affect the presence of personhood. The person does not “come to mindfulness” out of its bodily conditions, nor does she persist in its no longer conscious bodily presence. Prenatal life will not be personal. Nor will the life of the senile demented be the life of a person.

Contemporary bioethics is mostly defined by such an understanding of personhood. Personhood is transitional: it passes from being to being like a “thing,” as long as certain dimensions of actual empirical consciousness are present. Thus, a dolphin, a chimpanzee, a higher mammal, a robot can be a person. Not so a fetus, a child, a gravely intellectually disabled, or a senile human being. There is, for the Humean philosopher, a difference between “human being” and “person.”

Let me make two final points. The first has to do with freedom of the will. For Hume there is no freedom of the will because the person, in the way he understands it, is entirely determined. Freedom of the will is a mask, a deception, at best the epiphenomenon of something else to which it can be reduced (contemporary philosophies of mind in a determinist vein). The de-personalization of the human being is thus complete!

Second point: the deconstruction of personhood and the denial of freedom rest upon a conception of morality based on emotions, rather than reason. The feeling of sympathy towards other human beings will become the basis of morality. But how fleeting is such feeling! The Humean retrieval of emotions, feelings, and in general, of the affective dimensions of the person, a retrieval that has been praised by contemporary feminist ethics, is *de facto* equivocal: it stands

in the wake of Cartesian dualism and cannot provide a secure basis for moral judgment. Hume will become the father of non-cognitivism.

The Person as Universal Ego and Autonomous Subjectivity: Immanuel Kant

Let me come to the rationalist line of development, following Cartesian dualism. Kant saw that the empirical ego is parasitical on a more original, *apriori* notion of the self, i.e., the transcendental ego, which is the condition of all ordered experience as the experience of the unitary I. Kant's philosophical anthropology represents a reaction to the fragmented self of Hume: the universal/transcendental ego is the formal capacity to gather the multiplicity, the manifold into an ordered unity. Furthermore, with Kant, we have a more rigorous understanding of the meaning of personhood, which, however, builds still within the legacy of Cartesian dualism. Such dualism will be rendered by Kant in terms of a gulf between the *phenomenal and the noumenal* sphere of reality. To be a person is to belong to this noumenal realm, a realm of rationality and capacity for absoluteness, a realm of freedom, rather than natural necessity (Kant is thinking here of Newtonian physics). The noumenal realm is also a realm of value in a world stripped of value. It is as if the value sucked out of the objective world is now being channeled back into the subject, who becomes a being of infinite value.

Question: where does the value of the subject come from, if the world is valueless? How can from such a world emerge something like a being endowed with value?

With Kant, personhood is recognized in its moral significance. To be a person is to be a moral being, to be able to exercise moral agency. This is where the dignity of the person, its infinite value, resides. This also means for Kant that to be a person is to be *autonomous*, i.e., to grant meaning, not to receive meaning from reality (from God, church, nature, etc...). we may ask: is there a freedom *beyond* autonomy?

The story of autonomy is, after Kant, the story of its progressive radicalization. There is a logical trajectory that runs from Kant to Nietzsche, from the person as power of autonomous decision making, to the person as will to power (see DeLubac and Guardini on this).

In a world devoid of value, of intrinsic value, and with a notion of the person become assertive (autonomous) with respect to the other (heteronomy), also man becomes an object. The objectification of the world turns into the objectification of man. Think of this in relation to technology: is it an expression of nihilism?

Having mechanized the world, we cannot do anything other than mechanizing ourselves, or looking at ourselves as mechanical systems, as machines. The machine is the perfect expression of the modern outlook on reality. It is entirely constructed. It is available, that is, entirely disposable. It is the perfect “object”. We become like constructed mechanisms. We cry freedom of choice and autonomy, but we are victim of all sorts of “constructionisms”: social (Marxism), psychological (Freud), neurological.

Think of the attempt of cognitive science to reduce the human mind to the physiological circuitry of the brain, and to explain away consciousness in terms of deterministic happening, entirely reducible to neurological functionality.

The essence of the machine: to be entirely passive to our own construction. Even in the case of the robot, its apparent activity, whether cognitive or practical, is entirely determined by us. Even when robots think for themselves, they do not think really. They only carry out preordained programs based on algorithmic laws of our own devise.

TO BE A PERSON: A PHILOSOPHICAL ACCOUNT

I will begin with a definition (but can we really de-fine a person?), keeping into account the fact that the reality of a person escapes definition, at least in the sense in which we are able to circumscribe objects. And this is so because no objective definition of the person is possible

without passing through the lived subjectivity of the person. Thus, the real question is not “what is a person,” but “who is a person”?

When I say “who,” I am pointing to a being who is conscious of himself/herself. I am referring to a subjectivity, or better to a self. I want to retrieve some important insights of a Thomistic understanding, without forfeiting the achievements of a modern turn to the cogito (see Karol Wojtyła’s uneasiness with the pre-modern notion of substance on this).

Let me put forth the following definition: *person is an incarnate singularity, coming to itself, in openness to the world.* Let me parse through the three elements in this definition: incarnate singularity, selfhood, openness to the world.

The Person as an Incarnate Singularity

To be a person is to be individuated, to be an individual, to be one with itself (already Boethius and Thomas Aquinas speak of *individual substantia*). Such individuality is expressive of a certain incommunicability (Roman law defines the person as *sui iuris et alteri incommunicabilis*). We are singular beings, even if similar to others (monozygotic twins, or brothers, or even clones!). The singularity in question is not the result of a *statement of singularity*, it is not a vindication of singularity (think of the adolescent who wants to be unique). It is not constructed, but *given in the flesh*, that is, in the body that we have, in fact, the “body that we are” (Marcel). This singularity is incarnate. Yes, only a human being can be a person, i.e., someone that belongs to the human species, because the singularity in question is embodied in the singularity of a human flesh.

This is relevant in addressing the question of double personality raised in the wake of the empiricist understanding. It is also relevant in the sense that to say “I” (as we will see later, when talking about the self) is to actualize an energy of being that might still be dormant in the

body (the fetus), but that in its elementality reminds us of our being given to be *in the body that we are*.

Here is where the issue of potentiality should be located: *to be a person is to be in-potency*, in a constant state of growth. The person is always the promise of something more. We could say that such elementality cannot yet be objectified. It is pre-objective, in the sense of *being felt, rather than determined* in itself, *as an object*. We feel ourselves, first of all, in bodily immediacy. If the dimension of self-insistence is prevalent at this point, it is a self-insistence that is also already a community with others. Think of the face (Levinas): in my face I say, “I am.” But this is always also a “here I am,” that is, “I am with.” One must stress the flow-like, rather than fixed, character of this incarnate singularity. (Here is where a metaphysics of substance falters.) The singularity in question is also a site of flow and passage. It undergoes the world. One could say that the incarnate singularity is a passion of being.

Note the difference between this elemental, suffering being (passio) and the self-positing ego of transcendental philosophy (conatus). Leibniz had a premonition of the meaning of this suffering being, when he distinguishes between “perception” and “apperception”: the self as flesh is perception that is not yet conscious in the distinct sense of apperception.

The Selfhood of the Human Person

The person is a being that comes to itself in consciousness of itself, in self-awareness and reflectivity. It also comes to itself in action, and the development of moral agency. The self is not only given to itself. It becomes a self, it becomes a subject, indeed, a thinking self (Descartes). Of course, coming to itself can only be possible in the intermediation with what is other (Hegel). Thus, the third dimension in the definition provided above, that of “openness to the world,” is the last only in a temporal, rather than logical sense: it already subtends the other two components. I said before that the incarnate singularity already undergoes the world. The

body is always a medium of exchange, it is never only “mine” (so Italian philosopher Umberto Galimberti, in his book *Il corpo*).

We come to ourselves in knowledge and action. The first component speaks to the exercise of knowledge as an intentional act, a communion with what is other to us, an “object” toward which we move (or “to which we attend,” *ad-tendere*), and yet could not do so, if not because of a mysterious participation already given to us in the ontological intimacy of mind and being.

This is why intelligence can never be “artificial”: artificial intelligence is a preordained function wired to carry out certain operations. If we speak of intelligence, and can do so only analogically, we should always distinguish it from the intelligence of a person, a human being. Whereas a machine possesses, at best, “syntactical” capacity, the person is capable of “semantic” appropriation, i.e., is able to understand what it is doing (see John Searle on this).

Intelligence can only be an embodied act (think of the notion of “emotional intelligence!”), the actualization of knowledge and thinking through which we complete the world (Herman Krings has beautiful insights on this in his *Meditation des Denkens*), we make the world come to itself, while receiving from the world the gift of a deeper sense of ourselves. How far from the artificial intelligence of a robot this phenomenon is!

The distance of human from artificial intelligence becomes even more clear, when we analyze basic dimensions of intentionality. Consider *desire, imagination, and memory*.

In the eruption of desire, something possible only to an incarnate singularity, there emerges for the self the possibility to be other to itself. Desire reveals the energy of transcendence at work within the self, and it testifies to the power of self-differentiation in the self. There is more to the self than the identity of the same (Ricoeur: to be a self is not to be the

same, *idem* has to become an *ipse*!) When the latter feels itself as lacking, it not only expresses something negative, but rather, more positively, it brings forth the energy of being in all its richness, exploding in the self in the form of desire.

In this process, desire and imagination are allied. Imagination brings to further clarity the process of othering in the self, for desire acquires specific contours only in imagination. In all this, one has to remember that the process of othering takes place in the intermediation with the other. The self is not fixed, it is a metaphor, a carrying across, which differentiates itself in the images of itself it images for itself. *The self is the metaphor of a carnal mindfulness.*

Careful vigilance is required, though, since the process of imagining itself as other to itself is equivocal. It can be seen as an end in itself, a process in which the self goes from one self-formation to the next, never encountering the other, and in so doing, never coming to itself. In this, the self is in flight from itself, and not toward the other.

We end up dissipating the original energy of being, given to us in who we are, when we cannot face the selves that we are in promise. Thus *we need to remember* who we are in our self-transcendence. Memory is needed to balance desire and imagination, and to ballast the quest for self-transcendence. Memory is the perduring of the elemental self-awareness in the passage of transcending or becoming. It is the return of the self to itself in the passage of becoming. I am talking here about memory in a non-objective way: not so much in terms of the process of remembering things, but as a kind of non-objective function, grounding our sense of interiority (remember Augustine here). Self-transcendence is not only externally directed. It is also internally directed: memory opens up the self in its inner otherness (think of the discovery of the unconscious, or the “underground man” of Dostoevsky in *Notes from the Underground*: the ground of autonomy turns out to be a groundless abyss!

How is one to speak of artificial intelligence in terms of desire, imagination, and memory?

In action we come to ourselves as moral agents. This is first of all an openness, in fact, a response (*Wertantwort*) to the world of values and the call of values (von Hildebrand), which is being revealed to us in the face of the other (Levinas), its vulnerability and indigence. To act morally is to transcend oneself. This in two ways: we transcend ourselves in what we become, when acting morally. This is why the “doing” involved in acting (*praxis, agere*) is different from the doing of production (*poiesis, facere*). In the latter we do something that brings forth an external being, an external object. In the former, the effect is not outside the agent, but on the agent itself. The effect of moral action is the achieved integrity of agency.

The robot produces effects, but does not act in the sense above, thus it cannot be a moral agent

The transcendence in question, however, is ultimately toward the other as other. For this reason, there can be an ambiguity at play here. The process of moral performance can turn into a journey of self-achievement, whereby the other is sought only as a function of one’s fulfillment: we desire the other out of a lack, which is not seen as impelled by the energy of the source that originated us, by rather, driven by the sense of lack that, negatively, determines the other for-self.

We might call this kind of transcendence “self-oriented.” Hegel understands the subject in the process of its becoming thus, as self-determining negativity: the other is for-self, like in the master-slave dialectic of the *Phenomenology*, a story that repeats itself in Sartre’s dialectic of masochism and sadism. Yes, deformation takes place with the smothering of the plenitude of excess, which is the origin prior to the lack of the self-oriented self. Nietzsche: the will to power willing itself for the purposes of its own self-glorification. Is there another way?

The Person as Openness to the World

We need to understand the fulfillment of the self differently. Yes, the self is *penia*, poverty, for sure; but it is also excess, because *porous* (Desmond) to the sourcing power. (Think of the story of love in Plato's *Symposium*.) The openness of transcendence can be *agapeic*, i.e., other, rather than self-oriented: it can be an openness for the sake of other-being, rather than self-being. The "agapeic self" breaks the circle of mediation, and returns to the origin (God?) as a source of infinite energy. Impelled by the generosity of the origin, the self opens itself up to the other, to what is other to itself, breaching the circle of self-mediation (Levinas on the "exteriority" of the other). In self-oriented transcending, the self is more than the transcendence. In other-oriented transcending, transcendence is more than the self.

In all this there is a dialectical mediation at play, but one that becomes an inter-mediation, rather than a sublation of the other to the self (*à la* Hegel). The space between self and other rests intact as the middle space between infinitudes: to the inward infinitude of the self there corresponds the infinitude of the other. The mediation between such a plurality of infinitudes cannot be a self-mediation, in which one subordinates the other to itself. As the singularization of communicative being, the self *as self* cannot be reduced to will to power (Nietzsche), but will have to be understood as the *willingness to give itself* up for the other. But here is the paradox: loss of self is finding oneself. The "agapeic self" is dis-interested, in the sense of transcending self-interest into the middle (*inter-esse*). It is also *hetero-archic*: *subject to the other, but because of this, a subject*. In free obedience to the other, the self finally finds itself.

The openness to the world, chiefly the world of the other, is an act of love, a fulfillment of reciprocity. To be a person is to love, because this is what "the incarnate singularity of a self,

open to the world,” ultimately does: it actualizes itself beyond itself, in the responsibility for the other that is both a response (responsibility comes from *respondere*) and a release.

A responsibility: I become myself, I become a moral agent, because I see myself commissioned by a call. I can be many things, and yet fail myself, when failing to heed the particular call to which life calls me (this the nucleus of truth in situation ethics). Such call is singular: it is not a general call for “the humanity in me,” as Kant would have it; nor is it a response reducible to the production of a good, not even “the greatest good for the greatest number” of utilitarianism. But whence the call? And why should I heed it? Why to be moral, in the end? Kant put the question in terms of a difference between a “hypothetical” and a “categorical” imperative. He had a premonition of the issue at stake here, but was ambivalent about recognizing an alterity that summons the autonomy of the self, lest falling into heteronomy again. A communion of autonomous beings will be possible, for Kant, only in the “kingdom of ends.” But this is only a postulate, an exigence of our thinking, not a reality we can know.

The question here is the question of God as the ground of morality. An important question, and not only for Kant (recall Ivan’s statement in Dostoevsky’s *Brothers Karamazov*: “without God everything is possible”!). And yet, at stake is not only the question of God as the law giver who grants the moral imperative its absoluteness. This is why I say, it is rather a question of release: the release of our own freedom into the reciprocity of love, out of the love that generates us into being. We love because we are being loved. Generated into love, in the space of goodness predisposed for our enjoyment, we are capable of a freedom-for-the-other beyond autonomy, in the generosity of service. This is to be a moral being. This is, ultimately, what it means to be fully human, to be a person (Jean Vanier, *Being Human*).

