

How exceptional are western notions of individualism and the person?

“Preserve the essential inner personality through all difficulties and vicissitudes: I must never sacrifice moral principles or essential work to ‘posing,’ to convivial *Stimmung*, etc. My main task must be work. Ergo: work!” – so reads an extract from Bronislaw Malinowski’s diary during his fieldwork among the Trobrianders¹. This essay examines differences between notions of the person in what are conventionally described as western societies and in non-western societies. A broad-stroke depiction of what constitutes Western individualism is initially defined. This is linked to elaborations drawn from both Marcel Mauss and Louis Dumont on the manner by which a western mode of personhood is said to have developed historically. This notion of the individual is then set against non-western conceptions of the person and differences of emphasis are explored.

To what do we refer when we talk about Western notions of individualism and the person? Radcliffe-Brown distinguished between individual and person thus: “Every human being living in society is two things: he is an individual and he is also a person. As an individual he is a biological organism. ... The human being as a person is a complex of

¹ Cited here from James Clifford, *Reconstructing Individualism: Autonomy, Individuality, and the Self in Western Thought*, ed. Thomas C. Heller, Morton Sosna and David E. Wellbery (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986), p.153.

social relationships”². Marcel Mauss separates the constituent parts of the person into any human being’s self-awareness (universal, psychological and made manifest in language) and the social concept of the person (on which basis are apportioned jural rights and moral responsibilities). For Mauss, a third quality is subsumed within the social concept of personhood – which is served well by his reference to the actor behind the Greek mask. A given social notion of the person can include a varying quotient of differentiation between personage and person – Fortes points to the *fille de cuisine* in Proust’s *Du Côté de chez Swann* as an “abstract personality”³ behind which office J.S. La Fontaine would remark “the unique and transient human being”⁴. This tripartite division, which Frank Johnson characterises as the inner self (consciousness), the social self (non-reciprocal group situations) and the interpersonal self (reciprocal interaction), seems an appropriate schematic to impose onto the analysis of notions of the person.

Marcel Mauss holds to an evolutionist understanding of societal variation in his essay ‘A category of the human mind: the notion of person; the notion of self’⁵. As such, his explanation of western notions of individualism is rooted in how they have come to be.

² A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, ‘On Social Structure’, *Structure and Function in Primitive Society* (London: Cohen and West, 1940), pp.193-4; cited here from J.S. La Fontaine, ‘Person and individual: some anthropological reflections’, *The Category of the Person: Anthropology, Philosophy, History*, ed. Michael Carrithers, Steven Collins, Steven Lukes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p.125.

³ Meyer Fortes, *Religion, Morality and the Person: Essays on Tallensi Religion*, ed. Jack Goody (Cambridge: University of Cambridge, 1987), p.252

⁴ J.S. La Fontaine (1985), p.124

⁵ Marcel Mauss, ‘A category of the human mind: the notion of person; the notion of self’, *The category of the person: Anthropology, Philosophy, History*, ed. Michael Carrithers, Steven Collins, Steven Lukes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp.1-25

In this grand narrative, initially, within a tribe or bounded social entity there exists a linguistic tendency to denote members as “human” and outsiders as non-man and – as N.J. Allen notes – “a fortiori not *personnages*”⁶. Those within a totemic sub-clan are *personnages* since their clan possesses a limited number of ancestral names (*prénoms*) and a fixed stock of souls. The present day bearers are regarded as the incarnation of ancestral souls – a point emphasised through rituals that involve “dancing out the fact”⁷ and in the case of the Kwakiutl, incorporating masks, theatre and ecstatic states⁸. Allen suggests that Mauss had in mind an evolution of grammar which abstracted the speaker from the subject matter of his statement as, legally, a corresponding separation of individual and role occurred⁹. With the Romans, the separation of the world into *personae*, *res* and *actiones* saw a legal enshrinement of the “person” (*personne*) in a concept of citizenship extended to all freemen. The Stoics gave this notional “person” a personal ethics, and Christianity made a metaphysical entity of the “*personne morale*”¹⁰. Mauss here commends to us von Carolsfeld’s exegesis on Galatians 3: 28 – “You are, with respect to the one, neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor freeman, male nor female, for you are

⁶ Mauss mediated by N.J. Allen, ‘The category of the person: a reading of Mauss’ last essay’, *The category of the person: Anthropology, Philosophy, History*, ed. Michael Carrithers, Steven Collins, Steven Lukes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p.32

⁷ *ibidem*, pp.32-33

⁸ Mauss (1985), pp.8-9

⁹ Allen (1985), p.35

¹⁰ Mauss (1985), p.19

all one person, *εἷς*, in Christ Jesus”¹¹ – writing, “Our own notion of the human person is still basically the Christian one”¹².

Louis Dumont’s account of the emergence of modern individualism in the West is also heavily invested in the weight of Judeo-Christian tradition. Yet in the essay ‘Genesis, I’, he starts by observing in India the outworldly individual of the renouncer, the “individual-outside-the-world”, and postulating how a similar step outside holism was achieved in the West at a societal level. He notes what whilst in India the renouncer represents the possibility of full independence, this phenomena has coexisted for more than two millennia within a society which simultaneously “imposes upon every person a tight interdependence which substitutes constraining relationships for the individual as we know him”¹³. Individualism for Dumont developed as the Epicureans, Cynics and Stoics adopted the self-sufficiency which Aristotle and Plato ascribed to the *polis* and attributed or posited it as a quality of the individual. Where Mauss stresses the individuation of incumbent from personage, Dumont describes the emergence of the modern state as a bearer of absolute values such that it should be seen as a collection of individuals within “a transformed church”¹⁴ and not an institutionalisation of functions.

¹¹ *ibid.*

¹² *ib.*

¹³ Louis Dumont, *Essays on Individualism: Modern Ideology in Anthropological Perspective*, (London: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), p.25

¹⁴ Dumont (1992), p.51

Moving from the Western academy to the popular imagination, the resonances of the phrase “Western individualism” are varied. In ‘The Western Concept of Self’, Frank Johnson outlines characteristics of Western individualism manifest in North America based to varying degrees on a survey of social science literature. Manifestations described include the “political accentuation of individual freedom and rights”¹⁵, comparatively high cultural levels of verbal disclosure and physical intimacy¹⁶ and a rhetorical emphasis on the path of “self-actualization”¹⁷ qua personal enhancement and fulfilment. In the West more widely, the concept of the person as an individual and unique existence can, Johnson relates, be an invitation to a defensive narcissism, isolation, alienation, anxiety and (after Ernest Becker) denial of death¹⁸. Johnson describes the US socialisation process as one which trains individualistic behaviour via a push-pull dynamic conceived thus: “Children are socialized simultaneously to be obedient, to submit to rules which protect the rights of others, *and* to develop a progressive independence”¹⁹.

James Clifford recalls that when Malinowski’s diary was published in 1967 the discrepancy between the published ethnography and the private ethnographer was disconcerting. It became apparent that not only had a coherent and sympathetic account

¹⁵ Johnson (1985), p.120

¹⁶ *ibid.*, p.122

¹⁷ *ib.*, p.121

¹⁸ *ib.*, p.120

¹⁹ *ib.*, p.123

of the Trobrianders been wrought with some artifice, but also that Malinowski's writing had effected "the construction of a new public figure, the anthropologist as fieldworker, a persona that would be further elaborated by Margaret Mead and others"²⁰. It is more often the case that this public / private separation of the individual is remarked of non-western cultures. Takeo Doi noted the Japanese separation of a public self and a private self – the *omote* and the *ura*²¹ and wrote also of the manner by which the Japanese notion of the person places less emphasis on individualism than the Western notion adumbrated above, such that within the context of *amae* for example, the fostering of lifelong (infantile) dependency is normatively supported and consistent with a view of the individual as functioning in an interdependent system²². George DeVos affirms that whilst Confucian dogma is not overt in Japan's quotidian life, the Confucian influence persists, structuring the expressive concern with harmony which "underlies instrumental cooperation within any group"²³; and that furthermore, suggests that this has a profound impact upon the expression of individualism:

In seeking to understand Japanese expressive satisfaction one must attend both to continuing nurturance on the one hand and harmony on the other and see how often these take precedence over the actualisation of intimacy in relationships that are to any extent exclusive of social role considerations.²⁴

²⁰ Clifford (1986), p.158

²¹ Johnson (1985), p.123

²² *ib.*, p.124

²³ George DeVos, 'Dimensions of the self in Japanese Culture', *Culture and Self: Asian and Western Perspectives*, ed. Anthony J. Marsella, George DeVos and Francis L.K. Hsu (London: Tavistock Publications, 1985), p.167

²⁴ *ibid.*

Meyer Fortes describes how the Tallensi principle of personhood considers full person status as something which is attained gradually over the course of a lifetime²⁵ and can only ever be ascertained with finality after death in the funeral divination. In order to be eligible to become a person, a human (*nisaal*) must be born of a married mother into his father's house and also live long enough to secure the benevolence of his ancestral grandfather (*segher*)²⁶. In the context of rights, a man may achieve maturity, but it is only upon his father's death that he gains true jural and ritual autonomy. A soul-like essence *sii*²⁷ is believed to emanate and imbue one's possessions – *sii* is what makes each individual who they are and determines how successful relations between individuals will be²⁸. Additionally, *yam* consists of traits such as maturity and responsibility and, located in the abdomen, it grows with age and can enhance its owner's personhood²⁹. Fortes writes that for the Tallensi, "Self awareness means, in the first place, awareness of oneself as a *personne morale* rather than as an idiosyncratic individual. The moral conscience is externally validated, being vested, ultimately in the ancestors on the other side of the ritual curtain"³⁰. Fortes comments that this model of the person as a microcosm of the social order is very different from some other West African societies where the person is

²⁵ Fortes (1987), p.261

²⁶ *ibid.*, p.271

²⁷ *ib.*, p.269

²⁸ La Fontaine (1985), p.127

²⁹ *ib.*p.128

³⁰ Fortes (1987), p.285

seen to embody a mythological genesis of culture and humanity and expected to live out the mythological design³¹.

In examining the Tallensi alongside the Lugbara, the Taita and the Gahuku-Gama, La Fontaine concludes that the Western concept of the person is consonant with none of them. “Social characteristics of individuals are represented by images of the living body, not by concepts of the person”³² she determines, arguing that in each society it is the principles by which authority is legitimised that govern notions of personhood. Among the Lugbara and the Taita, the legitimate exercise of power by particular individuals is recognised. Women in Lugbara society are considered to lack *orindi*, the male spirit of responsibility which grows with age. Whilst all human beings have *adro*, the divine essence of desires and wishes, it is women and children who are unable to exercise control over their erratic whims and are therefore denied jural rights. The Taita regard the head as the “total person” of an individual and the seat of consciousness. Women have weaker heads in this schema. Finally, the Gahuku-Gama have only weakly elaborated communal institutions and as such require no sense of the person. Individuality does exist, but it inheres in body parts which constitute parts of the personality, as well as in skin and in excreta. The Gahuku-Gama were thus reported by K.

³¹ *ib.*, p.286

³² La Fontaine (1985), p.139

Read as not grasping the concept of friendship between two unique individuals unless it was defined in terms of the social relationship between two³³.

To conclude, what can be described as Western notions of individualism and of the person – a universal category of unique individuals who have equal entitlements to rights and are possessed of social obligations – such notions are not found universally in non-western cultures. As J.S. La Fontaine summarises, neither would it be reasonable say that the Western notion of individualism is exceptional in the sense of “surpassing”. To quote, “Its unique character is not simply the result of greater sophistication or elaboration of conceptual thought but, as Mauss has made us aware, it derives from a particular social context”³⁴. Both Mauss and Dumont propound how the Greco-Judeo-Christian historical context has moulded the notion of what constitutes a person in the West, and a similar influence of Confucian faith upon Japanese notions of individualism is remarked. The Tallensi, the Lugbara, the Taita and the Gahuku-Gama exemplify how since the status of “person” confers entitlements and responsibilities, this, a category of the mind, is a significant field for political contention.

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³³ cited here from La Fontaine (1985), p.129

³⁴ *ib.*, p.139

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