

KNOWLEDGE OF PERSONS

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Abstract. What is knowledge of persons, and what is knowing persons like? My answer combines (a bit of) Wittgenstein's epistemology with (a bit of) Levinas's phenomenology. It says that our knowledge of persons is a hinge proposition for us (as in: 'I am not of the opinion that he has a soul', PI ii, iv). And it says that what this knowledge consists in is the experience that Levinas calls 'the face to face': direct and unmediated encounter between persons. As Levinas says, for there to be persons at all there has, first, to be a relationship, language, and this same encounter: 'the face to face' comes first, the existence of individual persons only second. I explore some consequences of this conception for how we think about personhood, and also for how we read Descartes and Augustine.

... all mankind is of one author, and is one volume; when one man dies, one chapter is not torn out of the book, but translated into a better language; and every chapter must be so translated; God employs several translators; some pieces are translated by age, some by sickness, some by war, some by justice; but God's hand is in every translation, and his hand shall bind up all our scattered leaves again for that library where every book shall lie open to one another ... No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friend's or of thine own were: any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind, and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee. (John Donne, *Meditations* XVII)

I.

Donne says 'No man is an island'; I'll argue that no human *starts out* an island. Each of us at least begins as a piece of the continent, a part of the main. Insofar as we ever come to be anything like 'entire of ourselves',

this is a learned and socialised achievement; an achievement, moreover, which is necessarily built upon our prior status as parts of the main. In a slogan, *individuality presupposes relationality*.

A venerable and remarkably persistent tradition in philosophical anthropology, dating back at least to the seventeenth century and still going strong today, has things the other way round. It says that each human *is* an island, at least to start with, and that it is only later (if at all) that we learn to build bridges to other islands. This tradition's slogan is *relationality presupposes individuality*. It takes individuals to be prior both in the order of analysis and in the order of genesis, whereas relations are subsequent engagements entered into, or not, by these already-existing individuals. This is the view I oppose. We can call it *individualism about persons*. The view with which I want to replace it, I have just described in the first paragraph: we can call *relationalism about persons*.

What kind of theses are individualism and relationalism about persons? What kind of arguments will I be offering for the latter, and against the former? One way to go is suggested by Alva Noë: it is to treat them as psychological theses, with immediate consequences for philosophical problems like solipsism.

No sane person can take seriously the suggestion that our knowledge of other minds is merely hypothetical. However weak our evidence that others have minds may be, it is plainly outrageous to suggest that we might, for this reason, give up our commitment to the minds of others ... Our commitment to other minds is, I would like to propose, not really a theoretical commitment at all. We don't come to learn that others think and feel as we do, in the way that we come to learn, say, that you can't trust advertising. Our commitment to the minds of others is, rather, a presupposition of our life together.

In this respect the young child, in her relation to the caretaker, is really the paradigm ... the child has no theoretical distance from her closest caretaker. The child does not wonder whether Mummy is animate. Mummy's living consciousness is simply present, for the child, like her warmth or the air; it is, in part, what animates their relationship. Mummy's mind and Baby's mind come to be in the coo-choo directness that each sustains towards the other. If one wants to speak of a commitment to the alive consciousness of others here, one should speak not of a cognitive commitment but, rather, of a practical commitment. (Noë 2009: 32-3)

As we might say: not so much ‘I think, therefore I am’ as ‘We talk, therefore we are’.

One classic text in this area is Kenneth Kaye’s in *The Mental and Social Life of Babies: How Parents Create Persons*. Kaye writes, for example,

It surely is a miracle that the kind of creature a man and a woman can bring into the world by purely biological processes becomes (eventually) the kind of creature that possesses a mind and a sense of self, an unsurpassed intelligence and a sense of identity in relation to society ... The evolution of the human brain alone could not have brought about mind. Symbolic representation, language, and thought could not emerge in any species, and would not develop in any individual, without a special kind of fit between adult behaviour and infant behaviour ... the argument places social processes at the very root of mental development. (Kaye 1982: 3)

And again, later,

The human infant is born social in the sense that his development will depend from the beginning upon patterns of interaction with elders. He does not enter into that interaction as an individual partner, as both the views just mentioned hold ... infants only become individual partners gradually, as a result of those interactions. (Kaye 1982: 29)

The way of developmental psychology is a perfectly good way of arguing for relationalism about persons. Many contemporary philosophers of mind are likely to think (wrongly in my view) that the way of developmental psychology is the *only* way; or at any rate that it is the *best* way. Even if it is, developmental psychology is not what I will do here. Though perhaps what I will do can be seen as corroboration of Kaye’s views from another source.

As well as being theses in psychology, it is also obvious that individualism and relationalism about persons are theses in the philosophy of mind, where, roughly speaking, individualism is the view that follows naturally if you believe that the brain is identical with or constitutive of the mind, while relationalism about persons has a lot more appeal if you deny the mind-brain identity thesis. Suppose that like me you endorse the plainly relationalist thesis that mindedness broadly depends, at least typically, on intentional or quasi-intentional interactions among groups of individual creatures, whereas brainedness depends on some one individual creature’s combining the right genetic heritage with the right nutrients, the right environment, and the right stimuli. Then you should conclude that the conditions for having a mind

and for having a brain are different. (As the slogan has it, the mental is the environmental; but the *cerebral* is not the environmental.) Moreover, brains and minds are *very* different; which grounds a presumption that there can't be a constitution-relation between brain and mind either.

In another sense individualism and relationalism about persons appear to be theses in metaphysics, and that appearance is not completely misleading: individualism and relationalism are certainly views about what persons are. However, the case I want to make for relationalism and against individualism does not deploy the kinds of argument most commonly found today in what we might call 'pure' metaphysics – *a priori* deduction, inference to the best explanation and/or the simplest/most systematic overall theory, indispensability-to-causal-explanation arguments, figuring-in-laws-of-nature arguments, and the like. Rather my argument is, broadly speaking, phenomenological (hence, *a posteriori*).¹ It is about *how we experience* persons, *what it is like* to be a person or related to persons, the place in our life-world of the notion of a person. As usual in phenomenology, a description of experience will be offered, and also as usual, the key test of this description of experience will not be whether it faces logical objections – though it had better not, of course – but whether the description rings *true to experience*: true to our own actual experience, or true to experiences we can see as possible for us and aspire perhaps to actually have some day, or true to experiences that many of the greatest explorers of these dark domains have reported, or all three.

Moreover, if there turns out to be some sense in which this experiential or 'applied' metaphysics is at odds with 'pure metaphysics',

¹ A highly controversial 'hence': as Adrian Moore has reminded me, Husserl and other phenomenologists thought it crucial to insist that theirs was an *a priori* project. But I think the 'hence' is justifiable, given a now-standard distinction between what is essential and what is *a priori* (a distinction that Husserl and his contemporaries did not usually make). Investigating what is essential to our experience should be the phenomenologist's concern, since what is *not* essential to our experience would have no interest: it could not bring out any *general* or *important* or *explanatorily important* truths about our minds. However, investigating our experience's strictly *a priori* features sounds like an incoherent project, at least if we gloss *a priori* as 'knowable independently of all experience': for then it will mean 'investigating experience's non-experiential features'. It is not that experience logically cannot have such features: of course it can, it has e.g. logical features. The point is rather that investigating these features cannot be *phenomenology*, a philosophical investigation of experience (itself, and not its merely formal properties).

that doesn't bother me much.² I'm not interested, here, in what persons are 'in themselves'; I'm interested in what persons are in our common life. If there turns out to be some account of 'what persons are in themselves', e.g. a reductionist one, that conflicts with 'what persons are in our common life', for my purposes that doesn't matter. My concern is how the *experiential* metaphysics goes. If the pure metaphysics goes a different way, so be it.

Admittedly, I probably wouldn't say that unless I was also pretty confident that there is no such pure metaphysics of the person. To some extent this confidence rests upon my wider tendency towards Wittgensteinian scepticism quite generally about the kind of *an-sich* claims that pure metaphysics tends to go in for. I know what is to be a chess-piece in a chess-game, and I know what it is to be a carved piece of wood in carpentry, and I know what it is to be a carbon-based organic compound in chemistry. I'm not entirely sure I know what it is for anything to be anything *in itself and aside from all contexts*, which, all too often, seems to be what pure metaphysics is after. Whether or not this scepticism stands up elsewhere, it looks convincing in the case of persons. It seems that, apart from 'what persons are in our common life', there *isn't* anything that 'persons are in themselves'. Philosophers are too quick to assume that in every debate alike, whether chemical or botanical or psychological, they are looking for the same kind of kinds – usually, something like Kripke-style *natural* kinds. But there is no good reason to think that the kind *persons* is that kind of kind. And so, aside from the social (dare I say 'forensick'?) role of the notion of a person, the quest for the essence of personhood *in the abstract* seems to be an empty quest built around a meaningless question. In a sense, that is exactly my point here.

Here we come to a third important aspect of individualism and relationalism about persons, the sense in which both are, crucially, *ethical* theses: theses about how we make sense of ourselves and should make sense of ourselves, about how we relate to each other and should relate to each other. More about that later.

² Nor will I be much bothered if there are arguments against my or any view of personhood that depend, in the way that Derek Parfit's work has made familiar, on personality fusions or fissions, brain bisections, etc. As has often been objected to Parfit, not knowing how to apply the concept of personhood *in weird puzzle cases* is not the same thing as not knowing how to apply the concept of personhood *at all*: here as with many other sceptical scenarios, something like a disjunctivist strategy seems right.

II.

First, here's a bit from *The Hitch-Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy*.

Many many millions of years ago a race of hyperintelligent pan-dimensional beings (whose physical manifestation in their own pan-dimensional universe is not dissimilar to our own) got so fed up with the constant bickering about the meaning of life which used to interrupt their favourite [pastimes] that they decided to sit down and solve their problems once and for all. And to this end they built themselves a stupendous super-computer ['Deep Thought'] which was so amazingly intelligent that even before the data banks had been connected up it had started from 'I think therefore I am' and got as far as the existence of rice pudding and income tax before anyone managed to turn it off ... (Douglas Adams, *The Hitch-Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy* (London: Pan, 1979), pp. 125-6)

Deep Thought represents a power-fantasy of individualism about persons (and also of rationalism). The fantasy is that one mind all on its own, if it is clever enough, can build an understanding of the world out of nothing but its own contents, by sheer deductive horsepower – *a priori*, and in advance of access to any data. The cleverer you are, according to this fantasy, the better you will be at this kind of deductive work: the further you will get beyond your own head and out into the world around you. On this picture, this is what cleverness *is*. What the tale of Deep Thought expresses – or more likely satirises – is what I call individualism about persons, taken to the *n*th degree.

Satire or not, it is no accident that Douglas Adams has Deep Thought start his intellectual odyssey by performing the *cogito*. For the picture just sketched is, in an obvious way, Cartesian. According to one standard summary, Descartes' view is a paradigm of individualism about persons. On that summary his view is that if we leave aside groundless and unreliable prejudice – as he proposes to – then what reason teaches us is that each of us starts, like Deep Thought, in the solipsistic predicament. Emerging from that predicament into a (rationally-vindicated) shared world is, on this Cartesian view, an achievement of reason. Each of us is an individual, and a reasoner, before she ever reaches that shared world; and she only does reach it *because* she is an individual and a reasoner. Getting beyond our own heads is a feat of inference, deduction, interpretation: in short, it is detective work. Of course we get better at this detective work the more we practise it. But unless we had a basic capability for such detection

wired into us from the beginning – a capacity which as I say we can just call *intelligence* – we could not get started at all.

This then is the Cartesian view – which, as we shall see, need not mean quite the same thing as ‘Descartes’ view’. Hence it causes some surprise that, when Wittgenstein wants to attack the individualist picture of the mind in the *Philosophical Investigations*, and specifically – at least at first – the part of that picture that has to do with language, the author whom he quotes is not Descartes but *Augustine*. Here is what Wittgenstein says about the quotation that he uses (*Philosophical Investigations* I, 1):

These words, it seems to me, give us a particular picture of the essence of language. It is this: the individual words in language name objects – sentences are combinations of such names. – In this picture of language we find the roots of the following idea: every word has a meaning. This meaning is correlated with the word. It is the object for which the word stands. Augustine does not speak of there being any difference between kinds of word. If you describe the learning of language in [his] way you are, I believe, thinking primarily of nouns like ‘table’, ‘chair’, ‘loaf’, and of people’s names, and only secondarily of the names of certain actions and properties; and of the remaining kinds of word as something that will take care of itself.

The picture that Wittgenstein is drawing out of Augustine is simply the application to the case of language of individualism about the mind. On this picture, a baby learns its own first language by, in effect, *playing charades with its carers*: the adults say a word, the baby has to guess what the word means from the context. No doubt the cleverer the baby, the better it will be at making such guesses; presumably a baby with the intelligence of Deep Thought would be phenomenally good at this game, whereas other, more ordinary babies will be rather slower. The words in question are, as Wittgenstein stresses, primarily *nouns*, and within the class of nouns, they are primarily the names of concrete particulars, such as people and the other physical objects salient to the baby. It is, as he says, an obvious flaw of this picture that it offers no account of how other words than nouns might be learned by the baby in the guessing-game.

This then is the individualist picture of language-learning, and hence of mind more broadly, that Wittgenstein is attacking. Is it the picture that Augustine is defending? The quotation from which Wittgenstein draws the picture he wants to attack is from *Confessions* I, 8:

When they named anything, and when at that name they moved their bodies toward that thing, I observed it and gathered thereby, that that word which they then pronounced, was the very name of the thing that they showed me. And that they meant this or that thing, was discovered to me by the motion of their bodies, even by that natural language, as it were, of all nations; which expressed by the countenance and cast of the eye, by the action of other parts, and the sound of the voice, discovers the affections of the mind, either to desire, enjoy, refuse, or to avoid anything. And thus words in diverse sentences, set in their due places, and heard often over, I by little and little collected, of what things they were the signs, and having broken my mouth to the pronunciation of them, I by them expressed mine own purposes. (*Conf* 1.8, tr. William Watts)

Certainly the first sentence of this passage says that the infant Augustine learned to correlate nouns with things by observing how adults correlated nouns with things. Does that mean that Augustine is committed here to the ‘particular picture of the essence of language’ that Wittgenstein wants to attack, on which meaning just is thing/noun correlation, and language-learning is the detection of such correlations; that picture being, as I’ve said, the one which emerges naturally from a wider and more general individualism about mind and persons?

It does not, and Wittgenstein does not say that it does. To see that, just read the rest of Wittgenstein’s Augustine quotation, after its first sentence. The second sentence is about how we come to understand others’ meanings (and their intentions – the same Latin word, *velle*, covers both) by seeing and understanding, not just the thing/noun correlations that they go in for, but the whole set of their bodies, the whole bodily demeanour behind these correlations which constitutes what Augustine calls a kind of ‘natural language of all nations’. Or as Wittgenstein might have expressed it, ‘the human body is the best picture of the human soul’ (*Philosophical Investigations* II, iv). And the third sentence is about how habituation into any language, or indeed into any large-scale form of human life, is not granularly bit-by-bit or stepwise, but a holistically cumulative process. Or as Wittgenstein might have said, ‘the light dawns gradually over the whole landscape’ (*On Certainty*, 141). Overall, this Augustine quotation is strikingly *Wittgensteinian*. If Wittgenstein’s purpose is an all-out attack on Cartesian individualism, this quotation does not serve.

Perhaps what Wittgenstein is doing here is not so much setting up Augustine in order to knock him down, as displaying Augustine’s

account as one which is generally interesting and plausible *even though* it includes, or suggests, the commitments that Wittgenstein thinks most need questioning – the threads in Augustine’s thought that he wants to tease apart from other and more promising lines. This surmise is perhaps confirmed by the witness of Norman Malcolm (1984: 59):

He revered the writings of Augustine. He told me he decided to begin his *Investigations* with a quotation from the latter’s *Confessions*, not because he could not find the conception expressed in that quotation stated as well by other philosophers, but because the conception *must* be important if so great a mind held it.

Evidently Wittgenstein’s attitude to Augustine was not that of the patient and somewhat patronising correction of gross and benighted error. The more we look beyond Wittgenstein’s Augustine quotation to its context in Book One of the *Confessions*, the more it is bound to strike us that on balance Augustine is far more of an ally to Wittgenstein than a target.

Fergus Kerr (1997: 41) draws our attention, for instance, to the sentence immediately before the passage that Wittgenstein quotes, where Augustine says that his elders did *not* teach him words ‘in a particular order of teaching, as a little later they did with the letters’. These words show that Augustine recognises that we are drawn into the linguistic practices of our species in various ways, not just one. We may learn our letters by being drilled in the correlation of given sounds with written shapes. It doesn’t follow that we learn anything *else* that way. (Perhaps we learn the numerals rather similarly: though the differences are as interesting as the commonalities.) In particular, and *pace* the lesson that Wittgenstein says he wants to draw from his quotation, Augustine expressly denies that we learn the names of things *just* by being drilled in thing/ noun correlations. Rather, Augustine’s story about how we learn the names of things gives a crucial role – a role which is not apparent from Wittgenstein’s quotation – to *desire*. Here is the rest of the *Confessions* I, 8 sentence immediately before Wittgenstein’s quotation:

My elders did not teach me words in a particular order of teaching, as a little later they did with the letters; rather I myself, by the mind that you gave me, my God, with cries and various noises and various motions of my limbs tried to express the feelings of my heart, so that my will might be complied with; but I was not able to express everything I wanted to, nor to express it to everyone I wanted to. So I considered in my memory ...

What most of this passage suggests – all of it except the last two words, *pensabam memoria*, which belong with the next sentence – is that for Augustine the key precondition of language-learning is not so much cognitive as conative. Unless the baby has the kinds of desires and impulses that human babies typically do have, one crucial prerequisite of its induction into typical human sociality will be missing; it just won't be the right kind of creature to cotton on to those sorts of sociality. Augustine's point is that it is because he *did* have these desires and impulses, because in this sense his relation to other humans was what Wittgenstein would call 'agreement in form of life' (PI I, 241), that it was possible for him to become a member of the linguistic community.

It is only against the backdrop of that agreement in form of life that the next step becomes possible – the step introduced by the two words *pensabam memoria* at the end of this passage. These words lead us straight on to the guessing-game described in the opening words of Wittgenstein's quotation from Augustine, as displayed above. (For some reason Wittgenstein quotes the rest of the sentence, but leaves out its first two words, *pensabam memoria*.) Wittgenstein famously remarks how easy it is to forget that 'a great deal of stage-setting in the language is already presupposed if the mere act of naming is to make sense' (PI I, 257). Augustine would agree. That is why he does not present the guessing-game part of language-learning without first putting it in the context of the kind of stage-setting that is provided by human bodies moving in characteristically human ways under the impulsion of typically human desires. Such a guessing-game cannot be the *starting-point* of language-learning; it is itself only possible against a background in which language-learning is *already* happening. This insistence on contextualisation is not a view which Augustine *rejects*. On the contrary, Augustine shows that he accepts such a view in this very passage.

If Wittgenstein were simply taking Augustine as his Aunt Sally for the failure to contextualise that would result if we took the thing/noun guessing-game all on its own to be the starting-point for language learning, he would be being obtuse. It seems particularly unlikely for him to have been guilty of obtuseness in the opening lines of his own *magnum opus*. The natural conclusion is that Wittgenstein's relation to Augustine is not so simple, and not so crassly oppositional. The guessing-game picture to which Augustine is committed is one that Wittgenstein thinks is misleading *if it is wrenched from its context*, from its place as *just one part*

of what it takes to become a language-using human. It doesn't follow that Wittgenstein thinks Augustine himself guilty of this decontextualisation.

It is a question, anyway, whether even thing/noun correlation is really, in real life, as un-Wittgensteinian a starting-point for meaning and understanding as philosophers (perhaps including Wittgenstein) often suppose. Obviously real-life guessing games of thing/noun correlation do exist. But what is striking about real cases of such games is usually their social and contextual embeddedness, not their surgical abstraction from all other contexts. Even thing/noun correlation games are evidence for the Wittgensteinian thesis that such games, while perfectly possible, could never be the starting-point for understanding.

Consider, for example, this, from Patrick Leigh Fermor's beautiful book *Roumeli*. During his travels in the remoter parts of northern Greece, Fermor, though fluent even in thoroughly demotic Greek, is gleefully challenged by a circle of friendly villagers to guess the meanings of words of a particularly obscure dialect that they all speak and he doesn't:

... the alien and the un-Greek ring of these wild syllables filled me with wonder: it was as though each villager, as a word was uttered and corroborated by the rest, was throwing a strange object on the table in a mysterious and insoluble Kim's game. A few were immensely familiar, the linguistic equivalent of rusty penknives, bus tickets from vanished lines, flints from a blunderbuss, glove-stretchers, a broken churchwarden, the cat's whiskers from a crystal set, a deflated million-mark note, the beer label of a brewery long bankrupt, a watchman's rattle. Others were familiar objects misapplied ... (Patrick Leigh Fermor, *Roumeli* (London: Murray, 1966), p.193)

Fermor and his villagers are dealing almost exclusively in nouns. (There's no deep ideological reason for that, any more, I suspect, than there is with Augustine; it's just that the meanings of nouns are particularly easy to use as examples when we're talking about ostension.) So their guessing game is, precisely, a game of thing/noun correlations. But the point of my quotation is that *a whole way of living* comes with these correlations, one that Fermor does not know and the villagers do. Even to understand even this supposedly most basic and simple part of their dialect we need also to understand an entire world, the world of the dialect-speakers. A language presupposes a form of life at every point, even in its most straightforwardly referential parts; even in its thing/noun correlations.

Broadly speaking, Wittgenstein and Augustine are not opponents on our issue of relationalism vs. individualism about persons, but allies. A wider and more general reading of Book One, and indeed of the whole, of the *Confessions* reinforces this conclusion. Especially in the earlier parts of his story, Augustine goes out of his way to illustrate from his own case how all human understanding and individuality are dependent – in a variety of ways, some of which Fermor’s villagers exemplify – on a pre-existing *tradition*: a context which is essentially structured by second-personal relations, and is, as they say, ‘always already’ there whenever any individual begins to understand. The relationalist thesis that each of us, for the shaping of his or her very nature, is not just incidentally dependent on others, but constitutively so, is not an afterthought or a sideline in the *Confessions*. It is the heart of the book.

The point in Bk. I Ch. 8 is that this constitutive dependence holds in the case where those others are other human beings; Augustine spells the point out by focusing particularly upon language. More often elsewhere in the *Confessions*, the point is that it also holds – and holds pre-eminently – in the case where the other in question is God. So in one of the most famous passages of all in the *Confessions* (X. 8):

Late have I loved you, you beauty so ancient and so novel – late have I loved you! And yet behold you were within me – and I was outside of myself; and I sought for you outside myself, and hurled myself, all misshapen, upon the shapely things that you have made. You were with me, and I was not with you; and the things that held me far away from you were things that would not exist at all, unless they existed in you.

In what sense has Augustine loved God ‘late’? In comparison with when God has loved him – which is, all along: from before the beginning of his being. God in loving Augustine has been *present* in him, and to him, even when Augustine was not present in or to himself. As he puts it elsewhere in the *Confessions*, God has been ‘closer to him than the closest part of himself, and further above him than the highest he can know’ (*Conf* 3.6).

Augustine’s claim is phenomenological: that when he reflects clearly, what he sees in his own consciousness is the categorical and unquestionable presence of God, and at the same time and in contrast to that, the conditional and questionable presence of himself (*Conf* 10.33): ‘But you, O lord my God, hear me and look down on me and see and pity and heal me, you in whose eyes I have become a question to myself’. There is something riddling and uncertain about his own being which is

brought to light by God's presence, perhaps by the contrast between the categoricity of God's being and the non-categoricity of Augustine's.

There is something in a man which even the man's own spirit which is in him does not know. But you, O Lord, who made him, you know everything of him. Therefore I will confess to you what I know of myself; I will confess to you to what I do not know of myself, since even what I do know of myself, I know because you shine your light on me ... (*Conf* 10.5)

Speaking of riddles, the opening two chapters of *Confessions* Book I set two riddles in turn. The riddle in Chapter 1 is: How can Augustine call on God, unless he already knows him? Or as we might also express it: How can Augustine start out in the individualist way from his own being, and deduce from that the existence of God? Yet unless he can do this, it is pointless for him to call on a God who for all he knows may not be there at all. The answer to this riddle is that Augustine does not start out in the individualist way from his own being; he starts out in the relationalist way, from the fact that God is always already present there in and to him, and from God's gift to him of faith.

And the riddle in Chapter 2 is: If God is to 'come into' Augustine, what place is there within Augustine for God to come into: *quis locus est in me quo veniat in me deus meus, quo deus veniat in me, deus qui fecit caelum et terram?* Or as we might also express it: How can Augustine start out in the individualist way from his own being, and welcome God into that being? If Augustine's personhood is really what individualism says – a sealed and self-subsistent system of self-awareness – then how can God break into this system from the outside? The answer is that God does not need to start from the inside. He is there within Augustine's personhood already, and has been all along, as a constitutive condition of that personhood: *non ergo essem, deus meus, non omnino essem, nisi esses in me*. Indeed Augustine could not avoid having God within him, unless Augustine was outside the whole of the created order: *quo enim recedam extra caelum et terram, ut inde in me veniat deus meus, qui dixit, 'caelum et terram ego impleo'?* On Augustine's conception, God is not 'out there' in the way that individualism about persons supposes, as a reality that we can encounter, if at all, only by working our way, like Deep Thought, from within our own consciousness to the outside. He is already present in the foundations of that consciousness. For Augustine to be an *I* to himself already presupposes that God is a *you* to him, and indeed that Augustine is a *you* to God. In short, Augustine's status as an individual

person, once he emerges as such by way of the processes described in the opening chapters of the *Confessions*, is preconditioned by his prior and more basic status as a person-in-relation; in relation to God.

I started this section by saying, in qualification of what is often read as Wittgenstein's outright assault on *Confessions* I, 8 at the beginning of Part One of the *Philosophical Investigations*, that we need to see his Augustine quotation in its context. Well, this is its context.

III.

Maybe a false individualist picture of language-learning can be extrapolated from *Confessions* Bk. I, or at least from some selections – perhaps selective selections – therefrom. But the picture that we get when we look at Augustine's narrative as a whole is that he is a relationalist about persons and language, like Wittgenstein; not an individualist about persons and language, like the Cartesians. What is primitive, for Augustine, is never my awareness of myself. What is primitive is the relationship of awareness between me and others, and above all, between me and God. I start off as a piece of the continent, a part of the main; it is only by *first* being a part of that main that I *later* learn to be 'an island entire of myself', a separate individual, as well.

This is a striking enough result in itself. It is all the more striking when we reflect on one of the few beliefs that almost everyone in philosophy shares about Augustine: that it was he, not Descartes, who invented the *cogito*. But the *cogito* is the stock in trade par excellence of the individualist: think of Deep Thought again. So isn't this strong evidence that Augustine was an individualist after all?

No. Augustine presents his form of the *cogito*, the *si fallor sum* argument, in at least three places: *de Libero Arbitrio* (*dLA*) 2.3, *Enchiridion* 7.20, *de Civitate Dei* (*dCD*) 11.26.³ In each of these discussions the argument is explicitly presented as a refutation of academic scepticism. The *dCD* exposition is the fullest; and it sets the argument in the context in which, I believe, Augustine really always wants to propose his version of the *cogito*. That context is set by one of Augustine's key ideas, the idea that the human mind is structurally parallel to the divine mind.

³ In the 'Fourth Set of Objections' to Descartes' *Meditations* it is the *de Libero Arbitrio* passage that Fr. Antoine Arnauld quotes as evidence that Descartes is not as original as he makes out.

And indeed we recognise within ourselves the image of God – even if it is not at an equal level, indeed very far from being equal, since it is not coeternal or of the very same substance as God. Still, nothing in all God's creation is closer to that image than this nature of ours. The image of God I mean is an image of the highest Trinity, which till this time needs to be made perfect by reshaping, so that it may be as close as possible in likeness to Him. It is an image of the Trinity because we *exist*, and we *know* that we exist, and we *love* this existence and this knowledge ... (My own translation)

What Augustine is offering here is a doctrine which makes mentality *essentially social*. For Augustine, there *is* no lonely, solitary mind; to be a mind is already to have relations of some sort within, whether those relations are relations of knowledge or of love or of both. For Augustine, indeed, the more internal-relatedness there is within a mind, the truer a unity it is, precisely by *being* in this way internally related to itself. (Here it is obvious how well Augustine's philosophy of mind equips him for defending the Christian doctrine of the Trinity.)

Crucially, it is not until he has established this point that Augustine moves the argument against the sceptics. Here is how he continues:

Then in these three things that I have mentioned – existence, knowledge, love – there is no falsehood resembling the truth to disturb us. For these things are not like external realities; we do not grasp them by any of the bodily senses ... without any image-making within the mind, it is most certain to me that I exist, that I know that I exist, and that I love my existence and my knowledge. For these truths there is no threat from the Academic arguments that ask us 'But what if you are mistaken?' For if I *am* mistaken, I *exist*.

Here it is obvious that for Augustine, the *si fallor, sum* argument arises against a background which is precisely not the Cartesian background of a 'solitary' thinker, deducing his way out of his solitude like the computer Deep Thought. This is so for at least two reasons. First because, as just said, mentality is for Augustine essentially social. For him, to be a unitary individual thinker is to be a thing the essence of which is self-consciousness: something that can think and be aware of (and indeed love) itself, that can for example talk to itself. Thus even an isolated single mind is already, in a sense, a kind of community of thought if it exists at all.

Secondly, as before, this essential sociality of mind is for Augustine something that arises in each of us only because she starts off in relation with others. Each of us becomes a mind, and a person, only by being 'always already' in relation with other persons, both human and divine, as a precondition of her own mindedness. Personhood, in short, is not something I achieve on my own; it is a gift, the gift to me of others. To enact the *si fallor sum* is not to announce my own solitariness. On the contrary, it is to express what only that gift could have made me capable of expressing.

IV.

This being the case for Augustine's *cogito*, the natural next question is whether it is also the case for Descartes'. Some readers must be wondering if I am cueing myself up to argue that Descartes isn't an individualist either, that the standard account of his views is all a mistake, and that he too is a relationalist about persons just like Augustine.

That isn't *quite* what I think we should say about Descartes; but some of it is right. For all the utter familiarity of the *Meditations*, it is still possible to be surprised by a rereading. Thanks to a host of culture-shaping readers and teachers, we expect to find the *Meditations* narrating the individualistic Deep-Thought-like odyssey that I have already described: the heroic journey of a single lonely mind, equipped with nothing except its own brilliantly ingenious powers of reasoning, out of its locked-in isolation into inferred and deduced relations with God, other people, and a world. And this certainly *can* be what we find in the *Meditations* – especially if it is what we are expecting to find.

But what did Descartes expect his readers to expect to find? His own culture – especially the Jansenist, counter-reformation-pietist part of it that he himself was one of the most famous sons of, alongside Blaise Pascal and Pierre Corneille – was far more aware of Augustine as a cultural presence than we are today. It was not just Antoine Arnauld who could see the influence of Augustine all over Descartes' text: that influence on Descartes is patent, for example, when we consider Augustine's distinction in the last-quoted passage between what is known by reason and what is known by sense, and his remarks about the place of *phantasiae* and *phantasmata* in this story. Before ever they reached the *cogito*, with its obvious reminiscence of Augustine's *si fallor, sum*

argument, Descartes' intended readership would have found it entirely obvious to see the *Meditations* as (among other things) an extended essay on knowledge quite studiously written in the Augustinian manner – to be sure, with updates to bring Augustinianism into line with the best renaissance science. The fact that, today, we cannot even see Descartes' Augustinian framework of allusion is no evidence that it isn't there. His contemporaries saw and understood at once how Descartes' frame of reference deliberately and studiously subverts his text's ironical pretension to be presuppositionless.

I don't mean these comments to add up to a *rejection* of one standard modern reading of the *Meditations*. I do mean them to suggest that that reading needs to be kept in balance with other possible readings, if we are to see this paradigm of philosophy in anything like the way that Descartes meant us to see it. In our philosophical culture, the usual way to read the *Meditations* is as asking simply 'What can I know?' I am not suggesting that this reading is entirely wrong; but I am suggesting that it is not uniquely right. Another and equally good way is to read the *Meditations* as an inquiry, as it were, into the epistemic 'problem of evil'. God is good, and a good God cannot be a deceiver. Yet there it is: there is deception in the world. How does that happen? And how can we avoid being deceived? We are naturally inclined to trust God; given that there is deception in the world, how trusting should we be, and about what?

If we do read the *Meditations* this second way, does that turn Descartes from an individualist into a relationalist, in my senses of these terms? In historical context, and for his contemporaries, I suspect the answer to that is Yes. They would, to put it briefly, have known what he was talking about; from what he explicitly said they would have inferred the Augustinian and relationalist context for his thoughts that he was implicitly evoking. First and foremost, they would have understood the *Meditations* in the way I suggest above, as an inquiry into the epistemic problem of evil. And they would have seen as absolutely central to Descartes' inquiry, the relatedness of Descartes' inquirer to God – who is after all, as modern students often complain, an active and indeed a busy presence in Descartes' epistemology.

For even the most proficient modern readers, by contrast, the answer is likely to be No. They are likely to miss the entire background of Augustinian allusion that frames Descartes' inquiry in the *Meditations* as inescapably as a modern composer's decision to write in the style of Bach would frame his whole enterprise: inescapably, even if that

composer never actually *said* that this was his chosen framework. Hence they are likely to take Descartes to be doing – give or take a few quaint theological curlicues – almost exactly the same as modern inquirers into ‘our knowledge of the external world’. The point is not that this is an *impossible* reading of the text. The point is that, all on its own, it is a historically blind reading of the text; and that by focusing on only one part of what Descartes is doing in the *Meditations*, it seriously falsifies our overall picture of that text.

In typical contemporary practice, things do not even go this well. It is not merely that most readings of the *Meditations* now focus on what Descartes himself would have thought of as just one way of reading his text. It is not merely that most readings fail to make sense of Augustine’s implicit presence in the background of the *Meditations*, and thus miss an important possible understanding of the text. It is, rather, that most readings fail to make sense of God’s explicit presence in the foreground of the *Meditations*, and thus end up with a completely impossible understanding of the text. To most philosophical readers of the *Meditations* now, all ‘Descartes’ God stuff’ (as students often put it) is no more than an embarrassment. People do not know what to make of it. They abstract away from it. They try – with real heroism – to make sense of Descartes’ argument *entirely without God*, or with some substitute, e.g. ‘the functional provisions of natural selection’, holding God’s place in Descartes’ structure. And this *is* an impossible way to read Descartes.

Augustine is well understood as a relationalist because, for him, it is only within the framework of a pre-existing relatedness to God that any truths at all can be discovered by the individual person. At first sight Descartes does not seem to share this outlook: certainly, his inquiries start with the individual mind. But to borrow a distinction from Aristotle, I suggest this is more a difference in order of discovery than in order of existence. Descartes’ thesis is that, beginning from the individual mind and what ‘clearly and distinctly’ appears to it, we can think our way not only to God as one of the objects that so appear to the mind, but also to God as (the source of) the clarity and distinctness with which any genuine object so appears. Hence Descartes’ *lumen naturale* really is no more and no less than Augustine’s *illuminatio*: as its name suggests, it is the same thing approached differently, as it were by ascent from below rather than by inspiration from above. Augustine stresses the primordially of God in our consciousness, Descartes stresses the idea that God is reached by exploring the structure of our consciousness.

For both, God is the precondition of our knowing any truth at all; the main difference between them is that Augustine insists on this at once, whereas Descartes insists on it only eventually.

In sum, Augustine and Descartes are very alike in their approaches to truth and understanding. Certainly they are more like each other than either is like modern ‘Cartesians’, for whom all Descartes’ talk about the place of God in truth, understanding, and consciousness is no more than dispensable traditional ornamentation. We might sum the contrasts up by saying that for Augustine, the presence of God to me is a luminous precondition of my finding any knowledge; for Descartes, the presence of God to me is something that emerges in the course of my discovering what it is to find any knowledge – and turns out to be a precondition, albeit an implicit rather than a luminous one; whereas for modern ‘Cartesians’, there is just me all on my own in the world, trying like Deep Thought to find some knowledge; Descartes’ God is treated either as an insubstantial stylistic ornament (by those who want to appropriate his views), or as a substantive embarrassment (by those who want to reject them). The extent to which this modern Cartesian picture is in any sense *genuinely* or *historically* Cartesian is surely overestimated. Perhaps it is more to the point to call it genuinely Hobbesian.

But is God actually a presence *to* Descartes, in the way that he clearly is to Augustine, or again to Descartes’ much younger contemporary Blaise Pascal? I have said a lot about the similarities between Descartes and Augustine, but here, surely, is a big difference between them. Augustine’s work, especially the *Confessions*, is full of direct address to God; there is nothing like that in Descartes. In the *Meditations* Descartes does not talk *to* God, as a person; he talks *of* God, as a notion. He talks *to* other humans; never directly to God.

This contrast is real. Perhaps it arises because Descartes’ project in the *Meditations* is to objectify, for other humans, an essentially subjective process of ‘meditation’ – of phenomenology – that he believes any human can go through, whereas Augustine’s project in the *Confessions* is simply to engage in, and speak expressively straight out of, that subjectivity. In which case the contrast will be this, that Augustine’s primary addressee is God, and other humans are implicitly invited by the *Confessions* to address him too; whereas Descartes’ primary addressee is other humans, for whom Descartes describes in objective and third-personal terms a process that, implicitly, has the very same subjectivity and second-personality as Augustine is describing.

Some critics of Descartes – notably Bernard Williams – have wondered whether the *Meditations*' project of being objective about subjectivity is even coherent, and perhaps Augustine would have made something like the same point against Descartes. Perhaps he would have said that there can be no third-personal, detached describing of what is either lived as engaged second-personal experience or not known at all. A more recent philosopher who seems to have something like the same thought is Roger Scruton (2012: 166):

Explanation by cause and effect involves the discovery of lawlike connections between events. Subjects have no place in those laws, not because they are mysterious or supernatural, but because they only exist *for* each other, through the web of interpersonal accountability. Look for them in the world of objects and you will not find them. This is true of you and me; it is true too of God. Physics gives a *complete* explanation of the world of objects, for that is what 'physics' means. God is not a hypothesis to be set beside the fundamental constants and the laws of quantum dynamics. Look for him in the world of objects and you will not find him.

V.

My next point is that, contrary to many readings including Williams', the subjectivity that concerns Descartes can be understood as not solely first-personal, but as second-personal too. This point is central to the reading of the *Meditations* that has been offered in the twentieth century by another great French philosopher – one who is also perhaps the greatest philosopher of second-personality since Augustine: Emmanuel Levinas.

Levinas is a pretty well perfect example of what I mean in this paper by a 'relationalist'. 'It is by this living in the Other – and not logically, by opposition to the Other – that the soul comes by its identity.' (*Totalité et Infini* French edition, p. 219; my translation)

One motto we might apply to him – if such a Christian phrase may be allowed for a self-consciously Jewish philosopher – is *in the beginning was the word*. Like the later Wittgenstein, Levinas takes language to be primordial, and for a similar reason: because he takes *sociality* to be primordial, and language to be the primary expression of sociality. (Also as with the later Wittgenstein, this equation should be read right to left: Levinas has a generous conception of what language is, not a parsimonious conception of sociality.) As Levinas characteristically

puts it, 'meaning is the face of the Other' (*Totalité et infini*, p. 206/227 (in Lingis translation)); 'the face to face founds language' (pp. 207/228). This does not just mean that previously isolated individuals are sparked into life, and into communication, when they come into contact; it means that it is the possibility of communication that underwrites the possibility of there being individual minds, reasoners, or persons at all.

Language institutes a relation irreducible to the subject-object relation: the *revelation* of the other. In this revelation only can language as a system of signs be constituted. The other called upon is not something represented, is not a given, is not a particular, through one side already open to generalisation. Language, far from presupposing universality and generality, first makes them possible. Language presupposes interlocutors, a plurality. (Lingis, p. 73)

This may begin to clarify why the subtitle of *Totalité et infini* is *Essai sur l'extériorité*. It is because Levinas believes that real understanding necessarily comes to us only from outside, from our encounters with the real world beyond us, and in particular with the other people in that world: 'the absolutely foreign alone can instruct us' (Lingis, p.73; *enseignement*, teaching or instruction, literally in-sign-ment, as it were the writing of semantic meanings *into* someone, is emphatically one of Levinas's words). Not that everything *ipso facto* comes right, simply because one is in contact with some exteriority. On the contrary, we are always free to relate to exteriority either by trying to subjugate it to ourselves as part of our own system (what Levinas calls our 'ontology'), or by entering into the endless task of actually trying to understand what always outruns our complete understanding (Levinas's name for this task is 'metaphysics'). We are free to choose whether to see philosophy as a war of conquest, or as an unending pilgrimage: we can aim at totality, or we can accept infinity.

Early on in *Totalité et infini* one passage of extraordinary bitter lucidity presses the charge that Heidegger's philosophy is a paradigm of what Levinas means by ontology (French edition, pp. 36-7, my translation; Lingis, pp. 45-46):

The relation with Being that is enacted as ontology consists in neutralising the existent in order to comprehend or grasp it. It is hence not a relation with the other as such but the reduction of the other to the same. Such is the definition of freedom: to maintain oneself against the other, despite every relation with the other ... to ensure the autarky of an I ... 'I think'

comes down to 'I can' – to an appropriation of what is, to an exploitation of reality. Ontology as first philosophy is a philosophy of power. It issues in the State and in the non-violence of the totality, without securing itself against the violence from which this totality lives, and which appears in the tyranny of the State. Truth, which should reconcile persons, here exists anonymously. Universality presents itself as impersonal; and this is another inhumanity.

It is not hard to hear these as the words of a Jewish philosopher who suffered as a prisoner of war in Nazi Germany, about another philosopher who flourished as a bulwark of the regime in Nazi Germany. (Consider, for a start, the characteristically Nazi word 'autarky'.)

If Heidegger comes under attack from Levinas because he's a systematiser, why doesn't Descartes? The answer is: because Levinas does not think that Descartes is a systematiser. For Levinas, Descartes is on the side of *infini* and not of *totalité* – an adherent of the view of knowledge as pilgrimage, not as conquest. For Levinas the key to the *Meditations* is a relatively rarely-discussed passage from the end of *Meditation 3*:

... the Cartesian *cogito* is discovered, at the end of the Third Meditation, to be supported on the certitude of the divine existence qua infinite, by relation to which the finitude of the *cogito*, or the doubt, is posited and conceivable. This finitude could not be determined without recourse to the infinite, as is the case with the moderns ... The Cartesian subject is given a point of view exterior to itself from which it can apprehend itself. If in a first movement Descartes takes consciousness to be indubitable of itself by itself, in a second movement – the reflection on reflection – he recognises conditions for this certitude. This certitude is due to the clarity and distinctness of the *cogito*, but certitude itself is sought because of the presence of infinity in this finite thought, which without this presence would be ignorant of its own finitude ... (TI, Lingis, p. 210)

As we might paraphrase this for analytic philosophers: it is only because we have the capacity for thought that we can think the *cogito*; but the capacity for thought is an instance of the capacity for language and meaning, and there can be no language or meaning without others (p. 206: 'meaning is the face of the Other'); hence, the existence in me of a capacity for thought itself already presupposes the existence of others. Moreover, conceiving myself involves conceiving myself as finite; but the thought of my finitude as possible brings with it the thought of the

other's infinity as possible. And the paradigm case of the other as infinite is the case of God. On Levinas' reading, it is just as true in the case of Descartes as it is in the case of Augustine that reflection on the structure of our own consciousness will reveal the presence of God in the depths of that consciousness.

As I myself noted above, Descartes is more usually understood as talking *about* God than *to* God. I suspect Levinas would concede that that is what is *normally* going on. But one reason why the ending of *Meditation 3* is so important to his reading is because it is here, in particular, that he sees Descartes' God as actually 'face to face' with Descartes:

The last paragraph of the Third Meditation brings us to a relation with infinity in thought which overflows thought and becomes a personal relation. Contemplation turns into adoration, admiration, and joy. It is a question no longer of an 'infinite object' still known and thematised, but of a majesty ... To us this paragraph appears to be not a stylistic ornament or a prudent homage to religion, but the expression of this transformation of the idea of infinity conveyed by knowledge into a Majesty approached as a face. (TI, Lingis, pp. 211-12)

VI.

The point is not to argue that Levinas's reading of Descartes is uniquely, unchallengeably correct; even the best readings of texts of any interest and complexity are most unlikely to be *uniquely* correct even if correct. Rather, the point of my discussion is threefold. First, it is meant to suggest the conclusion that even Descartes, paradigm individualist about persons as he is generally taken to be, can be read as a relationalist insofar as he can be read as an Augustinian (or indeed a Levinasian). On this reading it turns out that Descartes' theism is no side-issue in the *Meditations*. We cannot take Descartes to be the kind of modern Cartesian for whom all the God-stuff in the *Meditations* is at best picturesque. We have to understand him, as Levinas suggests and as an Augustinian reading of the *Meditations* also suggests, as having a concern with God that is absolutely central to the whole of his thought.

Secondly, I hope my exposition of Levinas on Descartes has brought it to light what rich resources Levinas has to offer anyone who, like me, wants to defend relationalism about persons. Central to Levinas' thought is the idea of the 'face to face': the idea that it is through personal

encounter that personhood begins. And the relation, the encounter, so to speak antedates the relata: it is because we are in relationship with others that it becomes possible for us to come to be persons, not vice versa. ‘This relation with the Other ... precedes all ontology; it is the ultimate relation in Being’ (French edition, p. 48, my translation).

Thirdly, I hope my discussion makes it clear by this point how these reflections connect with an argument about personhood in applied ethics that I have made elsewhere. If persons depend for their very being upon a pre-existing relationship, then there is something deeply wrong with the usual approach to persons in applied ethics. This begins from the claim that personhood is a status which we attain by satisfying criteria of various sorts: rationality, the ability to speak, emotionality, and so on. Such an approach to personhood makes sense if individualism about persons is true: on an individualist approach, there can’t be anything wrong with just subjecting individuals to a tick-list of properties they might have, and seeing whether in fact they do have them. But if relationalism about persons is true, how *can* it make sense? If persons – and so *a fortiori* personal qualities like rationality and emotionality – are only constituted in the first place by the antecedent relationships in which persons are to be found, then to approach the question whether someone ‘counts as a person’ by seeing whether they pass this or that test is to step away from the relationship that we already have with them. On an individualist approach to persons, criterialism – as I have elsewhere suggested we call it (Chappell 2011) – looks like straightforward ‘scientific objectivity’. On a relationalist approach, it looks like a denial of our commitments to others; it looks, in fact, like a kind of moral offence. Acceptance of others, for the relationalist, cannot be a conclusion that we infer from a test procedure; acceptance of others means precisely refusing to submit them to such tests. Here – to engage in a little ring-composition – is Noë again:

I cannot both trust and love you and also wonder whether, in fact, you are alive with thought and feeling, just as I cannot dance well if I am counting steps and trying to remember what comes next. A certain theoretical detachment is incompatible with our joint mutual commitment ... the point is not that our commitment to each other’s consciousness is beyond rational criticism ... The point ... is that for a person’s mind to be thrown into doubt for us does not mean that we have lost the evidence we once possessed that assured us from a standpoint of theoretical detachment that the other was mentally present ... that is a standpoint that we never

occupy in relation to other minds (or that we occupy only rarely, in special circumstances) ... what is thrown into question ... is what our relationship to the other *should* be ... the question of whether a person is in fact a conscious person is always a moral question before it is a question about our justification to believe ... even to raise the question of whether a person or a thing has a mind is to call one's relation to that person into question. And this is the point. For most of us, most of the time, our relations to others simply rule out the possibility of asking the question. For the question can only be asked from a detached perspective that is incompatible with the more intimate, engaged perspective that we actually take up to each other. (Noë 2009: 33-4)

'Acceptance of others,' I said: what others? The others with whom we typically find ourselves in relationship with the human form of life. That typically means other human beings, because it is typically other humans who confront us in the kind of way that Levinas describes, with the ethical authority of the other. (Other) animals can do it too, sometimes, and that fact suggests that there is something important for us to make moral sense of in the case of the (other) animals. But it also suggests that the individualist approach to these issues, i.e. the criterialist approach, is wrong-headed from the start. The question to ask is not 'What properties do these creatures have, and to what degree, so that we can assess their moral status?'; for that is not how we do in fact 'assess moral status' (insofar as we do this at all, as opposed to acting on the basis of an understanding that we already have). We 'assess the moral status' of any individual creature on the basis of the place in our form of life of *creatures like that*: what kind of good treatment do we direct at this kind of animal, and why, and what is there to be said for or against such treatment? (As this last clause shows, the test is not merely a conservative one.) It follows that to conclude that some human, perhaps disabled or very young, 'is not a person' on the basis that s/he *individually* lacks emotionality or rationality or the ability to speak or whatever, is to make a serious moral mistake. These properties are not properties that we *determine* personhood by. They are properties that we look for, hope to see, and seek to nurture in those to whom we have already granted the status of persons, on quite other grounds such as – and this is the usual ground – their membership of the human species.

If relationalism about persons is true, then criterialism about persons looks not just false but incoherent: it takes as a criterion of personhood

what it only makes sense to treat as an ideal for personhood. By contrast, relationalism has on its side an emerging consensus: it is what fits the realistically world-centred and embedded thinking of which Levinas is a prime example in the phenomenological tradition, and Wittgenstein a prime example in the anglophone tradition; it is also what fits an increasingly large body of data from developmental psychology, and from the philosophy of mind and action. Meanwhile mainstream applied ethics continues to be firmly wedded to individualism about persons – and a strikingly shallow and implausible form of individualism about persons. If this emerging consensus is right, mainstream applied ethics has a lot of catching up to do.⁴

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