EXTENDING RESPECT TO ALL HUMAN BEINGS: A PERSONALIST ACCOUNT

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Abstract. I start from the ancient Greek distinction between "Greek" and "barbarian," which seems to express an inveterate, incorrigible way of thinking about other human beings. People who are cast into the role of "barbarians" are exposed to violence and injustice at the hands of the "Greeks." They are deprived of a certain moral protection; the "Greeks" can with a good conscience commit crimes against humanity as long as humanity is thought of as "barbarian" humanity. I then ask how we as philosophers can overcome the Greek-barbarian way of thinking, and how, at the level of philosophical reflection, we can protect people from being degraded to "barbarians." I argue that we can raise a strong intellectual bulwark against all such degradation if we think of the encounter with others in terms of personalism. I develop the personalist distinction between "environment" and "world" and I show why it is that through our world-openness we destroy the aspect of others as barbarians. I also consider and reject a plausible "cosmopolitan" misunderstanding of my "personalist" way of extending respect to all human beings.

I

IN THE *Republic* of Plato Socrates says, "I affirm that the Hellenic race is friendly to itself and foreign and alien to the barbarian." He continues, "we shall then say that Greeks fight and wage war with barbarians, and barbarians with Greeks, and are enemies by nature, and that war is the fit name for this [natural] enmity and hatred" (470-c). He proceeds to say that when civil war breaks out in Greece, so that Greeks have to fight against each other, the victors will take care to impose moderate punishments on the vanquished, always having an eye on their eventual reconciliation. He sharply contrasts this humane way of waging war with the way Greeks wage war on barbarians, where fierce punishments and inflicted and no thought is entertained about any ultimate reconciliation. From this passage we see that Socrates does not envision a moral realm encompassing all peoples and all human beings. The moral realm is only the Greek world; Greek is naturally at peace with Greek, so that it is an unnatural disorder when they engage in civil war, just as it is unnatural when brothers or sisters do violence to each other. But with Greeks and barbarians it is different; they are naturally hostile to each other; their natural relation is not peace but war. Socrates has no idea of one human family, all the peoples of which owe the same respect to each other.[1]

Though most of us take offense at this Greek provincialism, as we could call it,

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[1]In this paragraph and in the following few paragraphs I use, slightly modified, the opening paragraphs of my 2005.

we should not forget how "natural" it is to the human mind, nor should we forget how difficult it is for human beings to embrace imaginatively the idea that they form one human family. The French anthropologist, Claude Levi-Strauss, is surely right when, writing soon after the second World War, he observes that the concept of an all-inclusive humanity, which makes no distinction between races and cultures, appeared very late in the history of mankind and did not spread very widely across the globe. What is more, as proved by recent events, even in the one region where it seems most developed, it has not escaped periods of regression and ambiguity. For the majority of the human species, and for tens of thousands of years, the idea that humanity includes every human being on the face of the earth does not exist at all. The designation [of humanity] stops at the border of each tribe, or linguistic group, sometimes even at the edge of a village. So common is the practice that many of the peoples we call primitive call themselves by a name that means "men"...thus implying that the other tribes, groups, and villages do not partake in human virtues or even human nature, but are, for the most part, "bad people..." "human monkeys..." (Levi-Strauss 1983, 329)

We human beings even find ways of making distinctions among our own kind that in a way re-introduces the Greek-barbarian distinction among our own. These distinctions, too, have the effect of exposing to violence those who fall on the wrong side of them. Let us return to Plato's *Republic*, to the passage where he develops his famous parallel between the different classes within the city-state and the different levels of the individual soul. With respect to the city-state he distinguishes between the many human beings who are fit to be ruled and the few who are fit to rule, and with respect to the individual soul he distinguishes between the unruly appetites of the soul and the power of reason in the soul. Then he draws out the parallel like this: just as human appetites need to be ordered by reason, since they have no rational principle proper to themselves, so those fit to be ruled, also having no rational principle proper to themselves, need to be ordered by the natural rulers. It is, then, no wonder that for Socrates these natural rulers have a nobler, more divine kind of soul, which he expresses metaphorically by saying that they have gold in their souls, nor is it any wonder that for him the ruled have a more based kind of soul, which he expresses by saying that they have brass and iron in their souls. The consequences that he draws from so fundamental a difference between human beings are also not surprising. In one place (*Republic*, 460-c) he says that when those of base soul procreate, it will often be necessary to dispose of the child by exposing it as soon as it has been born. He shows by contrast much more solicitude for the offspring of those of noble soul. So in addition to the distinction between Greek and barbarian, Plato drew a similar distinction that divides some Greeks from other Greeks, namely the distinction between those possessing reason in their own right and those who have reason imposed on them from without. Both distinctions have the effect of imposing a kind of moral disenfranchisement on the inferior group.

This deficiency is in no way remedied by Aristotle; the distinction between superior and inferior Greeks is simply perpetuated through his concept of the "natural slave," that is, the human being who "participates in reason to the extent of apprehending it in another though destitute of it in himself." Aristotle infers that

those who have this limited share in reason are by nature capable of becoming the property of another, and in fact occupy their proper place in the world only by being owned as slaves. And so, we have *over against* the Greeks the barbarians, and *among* the Greeks the natural slaves: in each case the range of those who count as fully human is further narrowed: in the first case the real humans are limited to the Greeks, and in the second the really real humans are limited to only certain Greeks.

It is well known that Christianity broke with this Greek provincialism. St. Paul famously said: "There are no more distinctions between Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female, but all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28). All human beings, having the same father and the same redeemer, have equal access to the one human family. And yet even where people have long professed, and sincerely professed, the Jewish or the Christian faith, the old Greek provincialism has lingered on. Here is an example.

When the Spanish entered the New World in the early 16th century they inflicted great violence on the native peoples they encountered. Many of the natives were taken by the Spanish and used as slaves. One has only to read the history of the great 16th century Dominican, Bartolome de las Casas, who is known as "the great gatherer of Indian tears," to see the appalling proportions of the wrong done to the native Americans by the Spanish (Sullivan, 1995). But worse even than the wrong done was the justification sometimes offered for it. In 1550 there was a famous debate in Spain on Spanish colonial practice between Bartolome de las Casas and a certain theologian by the name of Gines de Sepulveda, who defended the policy of making war on the native peoples. In the course of his defense he invoked the Aristotelian concept of natural slave, arguing that the native Americans were so primitive and degraded in their way of life as to be just the kind of being that Aristotle had in mind. He said that they were as far below the Spaniards as monkeys are below human beings. It was, then, only right that they should be subjugated by the Spanish, and subjugated by force if they should offer resistance. The Christian faith of this defender of Spanish colonial practice had not yet given birth in his mind and imagination to an understanding of the unity of the human family. He still distinguished between real and quasi human beings. In this way he was able to justify crimes against the native Americans that were condemned by Bartolome de las Casas, whose more vigorous Christian imagination was able to grasp the full belonging of the native Americans to the human family.

It would be superfluous to show how the failure of these Spaniards has repeated itself in our time and on larger scales. The Greek-barbarian dichotomy seems to be almost ineradicably rooted in our thinking about others; and even those who, like Christians, have good reasons for surpassing it, often remain caught in it.

II

Our question is this: how can we, working not at the level of Christian revelation but at the level of philosophical reflection, overcome the inveterate habit of thinking of ourselves as "Greeks" and of people outside our group as "barbarians"? What are the truths about the human being that have to be affirmed and taken to heart if we are

going to extend a fundamental respect not just to our tribal fellows but to all human beings?

I take my cue from a significant fact about the debates at the United Nations in 1948 that led to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Apparently an impasse was reached in those debates when the Western countries who wanted the declaration to focus on the individual could not reach agreement with the Eastern and communist countries who wanted the declaration to focus on the community, or even the state. What broke the impasse was the introduction of the concept of person. "Person" seemed to the one side to be sufficiently expressive of the individual and seemed to the other side to be sufficiently open to the communitarian dimension of man. I want now to see if in the setting of our present discussion the recourse to the concept of person might not once again be of service. In what follows I will propose a personalist account of human beings; I will try on a personalist basis to dismantle the Greek-barbarian contrast.

III

At first glance personalism seems to offer very little of what we need. For some ears personalism sounds like individualism. A person seems to them to be mainly an individualistic subject of rights. The first aspect under which he encounters another is as potential intruder; the first thing he wants from another is to be left alone. Such a person thinks of himself as unconnected with others except to the extent that he enters into agreements with others; his ties to others are contractual; as with all contracts these ties can be dissolved. In terms of the contrast between *Gesellschaft* and *Gemeinschaft* this individualist is a creature of *Gesellschaft*. He knows nothing of the solidarity by which people are bound together in a *Gemeinschaft* by ties that are prior to and more fundamental than all contractual ties. If personalism is just another name for this individualism, then it is, in relation to the problem of setting Greeks against barbarians, part of the problem rather than part of the solution. It would seem to cast others outside of my moral domain, and to let them in to it only by the tenuous tie of contract and agreement. All those outside of my contractual world are in danger of becoming for me "barbarians."

And so it is all-important to understand that personalism as I take it has nothing to do with such individualism. If personalism were individualism, then the recourse to man as person at the UN in 1948 could have never accomplished the work of mediation that it in fact accomplished; it would have just led to the hardening of the conflict between East and West. In his book *Personalism* Emmanuel Mounier, after describing this individualism, says that individualism "is the very antithesis of personalism, and its dearest enemy." He goes on to unpack the radical interpersonal structure of personal existence according to personalism: "if the first condition of individualism is the centralization of the individual in himself, the first condition of personalism is his decentralization, in order to set him in the open perspectives of personal life." And he says: "Other persons do no limit us, they enable us to be and to grow. The person only exists thus towards others, he only knows itself in knowing others, only finds himself in being known by them. The *thou*, which implies the *we*,

is prior to the *I*..." Then Mounier thinks through what results from a deficit of interpersonal life: "When communication fails or is corrupted, I suffer an essential loss of myself: every kind of madness is a severance of my relations with others–*alter* then becomes *alienus*, and I in my turn become a stranger to myself, alienated. One might almost say that I have no existence, save in so far as I exist for others, and that to be is, in the final analysis, to love" (Mounier 2001, 19-20). This reminds us of what Martin Buber says on the first page of *I and Thou:* if I take the other always only as It and never as Thou, then I can never be in the relation to the other *with my whole being* (Buber 1958, 3).

If this personalist account of intersubjectivity is correct, then we are in a position to strike a blow at the Greek-barbarian dichotomy. If each person exists towards other persons, and for them, and through them–if in other words personal existence is signed by this radical *interdependence* and *mutuality* of persons--then it can never be right to cast most other human beings in to the status of "barbarians," to break moral solidarity with them, to put them "beyond the pale," and to feel at liberty to do them violence.

But the question arises how it is possible for us to achieve that decentering of the self that opens up for us the world of intersubjectivity. To attempt an answer to this question let me introduce the personalist distinction between *environment* and *world*, and let me explain what is meant in saying that man as person exists as a *world-open* being. This personalist thesis throws much light on our capacity to extend respect to all other persons.

IV

Personalists such as Scheler (1962) and Buber (1966) have distinguished environment and world as two realms in which human persons dwell.[2] My environment is constituted when I approach my surroundings using my needs as a principle of selection; I notice just those things in my surroundings that promise to fulfill some need or that threaten to block the fulfillment of some need; whatever in my surroundings has no bearing on my needs, is ignored and does not enter into my environment. Thus anything that could serve as food or shelter is prominent in my environment, to start with the most elementary needs; predatory animals are also prominent. My needs, from the most elementary ones to the most refined ones, are the measure and the center of my environment, and are reflected in its makeup. What the things in my surroundings are *in their own right and apart from my needs*, is of no interest to me and thus finds no place in my environment. As environment-bound beings we humans are like the conscious animals, who also occupy an environment.

But we do not live only in an environment, nor do we differ from the conscious animals only be living in a more complex environment than they live in. We also live

[2]Josef Pieper has also discussed the distinction in his 1963, pp. 83-96, and I have discussed it my 1996, pp. 161-173.

in another realm altogether, a realm to which the conscious animals have no access: we are "world-open" beings. Personalist thinkers usually characterize our world-openness in two ways. First, they say that we open to the world when a sense of the whole of reality awakens in us. This opening does not mean that we thematize the whole of reality in the sense of talking explicitly about "God and the world"; our sense of the whole is usually present as a frame of reference. For example, when we form the concept of environment, as we just did, and think of it as one realm in which we live, and then ask whether there are also other realms, we are asking on the background of "all possible realms in which a being can exist," which expresses an unsurpassable whole. An environment-bound being does not wonder about its environment as a realm of its own and ask what might lie beyond it; by asking like this–and asking even before an answer is found–we have already passed from its environment into the "world." The second characteristic of our world-openness is intrinsically bound up with this sense of the whole: we are able to take an interest in things in their own right. Our power of taking an interest is no longer dominated by our needs; it is now de-centered; it can be captivated by the otherness of things. Instead of measuring things by our needs, we let ourselves be measured by them. We release things from our pragmatic grip and let them appear before us as they are. What something *really and ultimately is* can be understood only by inserting the thing in its place in the whole, and so this "objectivity" that we aim at as world-open beings, awakens in us that sense of the whole that also characterizes us as world-open beings. We human persons live in both realms–not only in our environment, but also in the world. The matter-spirit duality of our being is expressed in the fact that we are citizens of both of these realms.

The concept of world-openness is a personalist concept, because the capacity of a person to take things in their own right is rooted in the person's interiority or subjectivity. It is just because a person is gathered into himself and exists out of an inner personal center that he can turn outward to the point of taking an interest in things in their own right. We find here a polarity of subject and object such that the depth of subjectivity makes possible the reach of objectivity. Only beings that possess themselves as persons do can take an interest in what things are in their own right. Only personal subjectivity enables us to take a distance to things such that they present themselves "from themselves" and on their own terms. Beings that are entirely embedded in their environment have a weaker subjectivity; they are not gathered into themselves like persons are. They can only encounter things through the prism of their needs.

This point is so important for our purposes in this paper that I would like to cite Josef Pieper's way of explaining it. He claims that we can discern a certain "inwardness" in every living being; even the most elementary living being lives out of a center. Pieper proceeds to say that the stronger the inwardness of a being, the greater the reach of the acting of the being. Thus a conscious animal has a vaster reach than a simple plant, for the very reason that the inwardness of the conscious animal is stronger than that of the plant. "The more encompassing the power with which to relate oneself to objective being, the more deeply that power needs to be anchored in the inner self of the subject so as to counterbalance the step it takes

outside." Turning to the human person he says:

> And where this step attains a world that is in principle complete (with totality as its aim), the highest possible form of being established in oneself, which is characteristic of spirit, is also reached. The two together constitute spirit: not only the capacity to relate oneself to the whole of reality...but an unlimited capacity of living and being in oneself, of standing in oneself as a being of one's own–the very traits which, in the philosophical tradition of Europe, have always been ascribed to being a person. To have a world, to be related to the totality of existing things, can only be the attribute of a being whose being is within itself–not a "what" but a "who," a self, a person. (Pieper 1963, 90-91)

One we see the personalist structure of world-openness, we see the bearing of environment and world on the question of how we can avoid treating others as "barbarians" and can extend respect to all other persons. "Barbarians" exist for us insofar as we live in the environment. Other people are constituted as barbarians for us when we approach them with the question, who is a threat to us? But as soon as we de-center ourselves, and let others appear before us as beings existing out of their own center, as beings that surprise us with their own originality and their otherness, we exercise our world-openness towards them. And with this we have eliminated the aspect of the barbarian in the others. The reality of the others now makes itself felt too strongly for us to degrade them to the level of barbarians.

Consider the rich description that we find in Romano Guardini. He describes a way of encountering another as "a center of resistance, as material to be used, as a constructive opposite to oneself, or something of the kind. In such an approach to the other I do not take him as the being who stands in himself and forms the center around which everything in his world is ordered; instead I refer the other to myself as to the only center to be taken account of, and I use the other as a tool for achieving my goals." This is an encounter with the other that is typical of the environment. Guardini proceeds to describe the personalist transformation of this encounter. "The first step towards the other as 'Thou' is that movement which means 'hands off' and clears the space in which the person's capacity of serving as his own purpose can be realized...Personal love begins decisively not with a movement toward the other but away from him...*I release the being which at first I regarded only as an object, and consider it as a self meeting me from its own center, permitting it to become my 'Thou'...*"(Guardini, 1965, p. 127). In other words, I de-center myself in the spirit of world-openness; as a result the other emerges before me as having a reality comparable to my own reality. This makes it impossible for me elevate myself above him as Greek above barbarian.[3]

[3]In his book *The View from Nowhere* Thomas Nagel seems to aim at what we are calling the world-openness of the person. But we differ from him in that we do not think, as he thinks, that the exercise of our world-openness always objectifies, as if the most emphatically world-open approach faces a world of objects. The description of Guardini shows how through the power of our world-openness we can awaken to others as personal subjects. More on this important point in the final section of this paper.

There is something in the life of the personalist philosopher, Dietrich von Hildebrand, that makes the point very concretely. In the 1930's he was active in Austria as a leader of the resistance to Hitler. He often expressed his regret that the Church would sometimes wait until the Nazi regime would encroach upon its property, or upon the freedom of its schools, or would commit some crime against a priest, and only then raise its voice against the regime. He said that the crimes committed say against the Jews should weigh on the Christian conscience no less than the crimes committed against Christians. He thought that the Church was not speaking with its full prophetic voice until it condemned all the Nazi crimes against humanity and without any special preference for condemning the Nazi crimes against Christians. He even said that if Hitler were to be extremely respectful of Christians but otherwise remain the criminal that he was, the Church should not relent one iota in bearing witness against him (Wenisch, 1994, pp. 252-253). We might say that von Hildebrand was speaking out of the abundance of his world-openness and was troubled at the Christian voice being muted by the spirit of the environment.[4] This is why he had a greater ability than many of his contemporaries to extend respect to all human persons.

V

But there is a certain "cosmopolitan" misunderstanding of world-openness that should be avoided. Sometimes one says that any and every special preference for one's own family and one's own people gives evidence of the sub-personal spirit of the environment, and that the world-openness of persons has the effect of undermining all such special preferences and of making us experience all others mainly as "fellow human beings." That would be a depersonalizing way of understanding world-openness, and we would thereby be prevented from claiming the mantel of personalism for our attempt at explaining the extension of respect to all human persons.

Why do I speak here of depersonalization? Just consider how it is that I myself appear within the cosmopolitan setting of which I speak. I am just one of 7 billion human beings; I am not the center of the world; I am adrift in a space that has no center. My subjectivity is bracketed out and I appear from the "view from nowhere" as one object among innumerably many objects. The reason why I cannot take any special interest in my family is that I cannot take any special interest in myself. I count as one and only one, as Bentham said, and my child counts as one and only one, neither more nor less than anyone else. It is true that I cannot raise myself above others as if they were barbarians; but for this I pay a price of depersonalization, since I have become interchangeable with others. I have become an infinitesimally small part of the whole of humanity. [5]

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[4]Of course, von Hildebrand did not think that the Christian churches were restoring the Greek-barbarian dichotomy. I mention him here because the same world-openness that underlies his criticism of the churches also strikes at the root of that dichotomy.

[5]These reflections grow out of chapters 1-3 in my book, *The Selfhood of the Human Person*.

This is not the world-openness that reveals other persons in all their otherness. This is not the way in which von Hildebrand extended his respect to the Jews of his time. Those who think of themselves as "one among many" do not have the experience described by Guardini, the experience of another emerging as "someone in his own right." For as I just explained in the previous section, the power of world-openness is rooted in the subjectivity of the person who is open. This openness to others as they are in their own right is born of a strength of subjectivity, not of a bracketing of subjectivity. Only if I am alive at the center of my world can I turn to others in the spirit of world-openness. It is not enough to be counted as an object; I have to live as a subject, that is, to live my being from within myself. Everyone knows that it is wrong to objectivize other persons, but not everyone is equally alert to the fact that it is wrong to objectivize oneself. The deceptive appearance that one is practicing "altruism" by objectivizing oneself can obscure this latter wrong. The "cosmopolitan" mentality which I resist abolishes the barbarian by making everyone into an object, even oneself; the world-openness that I defend abolishes the barbarian by taking account of everyone as personal subject, even the other.

Of course, there are certain settings in which we are right to make ourselves just "one of many" and think of ourselves by means of arithmetic, as when we deal with issues of distributive justice. In distributing benefits and burdens in the political community I really should just count as one and only one, and my child should not count for more than someone else's child.. But this distributive fairness does not reveal the person in the way in which my personalist approach reveals it. It regards persons *in relation to each other*, whereas my approach takes them *absolutely*, that is, it takes each as she lives out of herself.

Perhaps one will say that the assertion of personal subjectivity for which I am pleading returns us to the environment, and that we surpass the environment and dwell in the world only by cancelling out personal subjectivity. But surely this is a false alternative if ever there was one: either environment-bound self-centeredness, or the abolition of the personal self. Every real I-Thou relation makes manifest the falsity of this alternative, for as Buber says I am present "with my whole being" in the relation in which I encounter the other as other. I break out of my environment-bound self-centeredness towards the other, but I do so "with my whole being" and not by annulling my own being.

My way of extending respect to all human persons should not, then, be confused with the "cosmopolitan" way of achieving this result. This personalist approach does not discredit special commitments to certain people, such as to my own children or to my own people. These commitments simply show that I am alive as personal subject, not that I am doing some wrong to those for whom I do not have the same concern. It is true that I show myself here as personal subject by the fact that my children have an importance *for me* that other people's children do not have, but this *for me* does not have to be the self-centeredness of the environment. For consider that every parent needs to discern in his or her children beings who live out of their own center; every parent has to know how to let his or her children go so that they can become themselves. Thus parents have to practice that other-revealing world-openness towards their own children no less than towards their fellow human beings. At the

same time, parents with a world-open spirit are enabled to be sensitive to non-family members as beings in their own right; they can refuse to think of other people's children simply as threats to, or aids to, the flourishing of their own children, but can honor them as persons who live out of their own center. They can refuse to commit any injustice against other children. Thus it is that the world-open spirit of parents affects the way they relate to their children and to their non-children, but it does not affect it in such a way as to make parents relate in exactly the same way to their children and to their non-children. The world-open spirit leaves intact the special claim that children have on their parents.

I conclude, then, that personalism has the resources for explaining that de-centering of myself that opens me to the other in such a way that the other is never a barbarian. "De-centering" is indeed vulnerable to being taken in the depersonalizing sense of me existing as "one of many" in a kind of space-time grid. By explaining "de-centering" in terms of environment and world, we can understand it as the way of entering into a kingdom of persons.

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