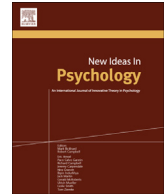




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## Unitas multiplex: The person as agent



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Before we can begin to assess the significance of Eric Johnson's proposal for a psychology of 'form' and to try to adjudicate between the several proposals he tables for the conceptual basis for a whole person approach we need to reflect on two preliminary questions:

What is a substance in the relevant context that it should be a fit recipient of a 'form', which fulfills Johnson's desideratum of 'something' which can be used to characterize the human being as a whole, and yet bears some resemblance to the people we know and the person each of us knows him or herself to be? How far must it be in terms of prior organization from organic prime matter – 'protoplasm' – to be the recipient of the form of a person? Johnson so sets up his project that the substance(s) in question are persons. But which of the many concepts of 'person' is to play the leading role in the discussion? And from which discourse practice is it to be drawn? I will explore aspects of his concept of choice – 'person as agent' – that may help to strengthen his claim to the desirability of shaping psychology within the framework of concepts that this choice brings with it.

Johnson's project is to explore various answers to the question as to what are the forms to be that they should be relevant to the traditional concerns of psychologists as students of certain aspects of human life: thinking, feeling, acting and perceiving? What are the whole person attributes that will be the content of the Johnsonian form?

'Form' is now often used to mean structure or shape. It is in virtue of its form(s) as a molecular structure that an individual substance has its causal powers. Chemistry still depends on this way of looking at things – the properties of material stuffs are presumed to be the consequence not only of the proportion of the chemical elements but of their stable arrangement of the constituent atoms in space with respect to each other.

The same constituents differently arranged are distinct substances – there are many ways of arranging carbon atoms into stable structures, graphite, diamond, Bucky Balls and so on. This use of 'form' does not seem to be

appropriate to the Johnsonian concept. Persons have a great many diverse attributes but it would surely be a mistake to devise a neo-Cartesianism in which diverse attributes are assigned to diverse parts. As [Bennett and Hacker \(2003\)](#) have made very clear any steps along this route lead directly to mereological fallacies.

### 1. A convergence of substances

Among Johnson's proposals the concept of 'person' as agent is consonant with many lines of development in recent psychology, and several of Johnson's subsidiary concepts such as 'character' seem to me to be features of the person as agent. This claim would be greatly strengthened if there were arguments to show that '*person*' is necessarily the ultimate being in the domain of psychology. Borrowing Stern's phrase the person is conceptually revealed to be *unitas multiplex*. Johnson's catalog of proposals for that which characterizes the whole human being is one or other of the items in the *multiplex* of which a person is the *unitas*. As Strawson, Wittgenstein, Stern and many others have shown in different ways and by different techniques of analysis some version of this concept is the ground for the best account of human beings in all their diversity and complexity; rather than say 'organism', 'body and soul' and so on.

#### 1.1. Strawson

In his famous book *Individuals* P. F. [Strawson \(1959\)](#) developed the thesis that our lives as human beings are built around the concept of a person as 'a type of entity such that *both* predicates ascribing states of consciousness and predicates ascribing corporeal characteristics, physical situation etc. are equally applicable to a single individual of that single type' (p. 64) In other words persons are basic particulars, that is entities we can talk about without invoking other entities. Persons have no parts. In this way persons differ from trees, cats, cars and solar systems which do have parts. A person has a great many attributes, which, since they are occasionally and some rarely displayed, we ascribe in the form of dispositions.

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How does Strawson arrive at this very significant thesis? He argues that it is an inherent foundation for coherent talk about the goings on in the world of human beings. Just as the concept of 'atom' is an inherent foundation for talk in the world of chemistry from the Periodic Table to the simplest test tube reaction, so 'person' plays that role in discourses centered on and referring to human beings, including those in which a person refers to him or herself – that is the grammar of first person expressions.

The logic of self-ascription and the logic of other ascription of the whole gamut of person ascribable predicates are tightly linked and it is this link that Strawson's analysis depends on.

The key to the argument is that the attributes and dispositions that are ascribed to others, that is used descriptively of them, have just the same meaning when they used by the first person to express how he or she feels, what this person is thinking, remembering and so on.

There are two stages in the analysis. In the first Strawson shows that a person can ascribe mental predicates to him or herself only if that person can also ascribe such predicates to others. This is a version of a famous argument of Ludwig Wittgenstein's – it is impossible to learn a word for a subjective feeling or for any other conscious state one might be experiencing, say remembering something, if one tries to learn the word by reference to that subjective state as the exemplar from which its meaning is derived. This is the Private Language Argument (Wittgenstein, 1953: §241) that purports to show that there could be no private language, that is a language the words of which have been given meaning by reference to the supposed speaker's private experiences. It is only because there are common natural expressions of such states that one can learn the relevant vocabulary. One's Mom expresses her joy in your school achievements by saying 'Well done'. Since these words are in the public domain you have learned what they mean as expressions of feeling that could have been kept to herself, because you know that such words are the last step in the long transition from natural expressions like smiling to verbal substitutes having the same expression function. Now, as words, they are endowed with the possibility of being used descriptively to *ascribe* states such as those originally *expressed*. Once established the use of a word for how one feels, what one thinks and so on can be enriched in all sorts of dimensions by metaphor, simile and other tropes. Thus, in Strawson's terms, I can master words for conscious states only if I can understand the expression of such state by others, and that must be through the means discussed by Wittgenstein (and verified, as if it needed it) by developmental psychologists. My Mom expresses what I ascribe to her, and now to others whose smiling faces are around me. Of course the same story extends to pains and how I can understand the suffering of those found groaning at the foot of the stairs.

In the second stage, Strawson argues that mental and corporeal attributions 'are connected in this way: that a necessary condition of states of consciousness being ascribed at all is that they should be ascribed to the *very same things* as certain corporeal characteristics' (p. 98). And this core substance is a person.

And why is that? Because any kind of referential act depends on locating its target within a spatio-temporal framework, the very framework which is anchored in the materiality of the human body and its surroundings. This requirement itself stems from a deeper condition that there could be no coherent discourses at all unless one were able to re-identify the beings that are described in that discourse. Re-identification can be achieved only by reference to a standing spatio-temporal framework, a thesis derived from an examination of the logic of personal predicates.

Once again we return to Wittgenstein's Private Language Argument. If a person had established an apparent link between a word and an object, be it private or public, how would that person know that the next time he or she used the word it would still mean what it had meant yesterday? The exemplar, like everything else in yesterday's world, is gone for good. Perhaps this person claims to remember the meaning by attending to a vivid image of yesterday's happenings – but how would that be checked? As Wittgenstein quips it would be like buying several copies of the morning paper to see if what the first one said was true.

## 1.2. Wittgenstein

Descartes' famous picture of the human being as a pairing of two substances, a material body and an immaterial mind has often been ridiculed. Yet it appears that there are still philosophers who are willing to puzzle over the paradox of how two substances which have no characteristics in common can interact with one another. According to my reading of Wittgenstein, the abandoning of the Cartesian mind as the locus of thinking and feeling does not leave us with the Cartesian body to build our psychology on. Both arms of the distinction must go since each component is part explicative of the other.

Wittgenstein comes at the question obliquely. 'Only what behaves like a human being can one say that it has pains. For one has to say it of a body or if you like of a soul which some body has. And how can a body have a soul?' (Wittgenstein, 1953, §283). Human beings qua persons have feelings, make decisions, play games, are awake or sleeping, careful or careless, dead or alive.

To answer that rhetorical question let us try to ascribe feelings and so on to something which is nothing but a body – the left over bit when the Cartesian mind is removed – say a stone. It makes no sense to ascribe pain to a stone. Now look at a wriggling fly and 'pain seems to be able to get a foothold here, where before everything was, so to speak, too smooth for it' (PI §284). The point is deep – it is not that we know of the fly's pain by inference from its behavior – the vocabulary with which we manage our lives and in relation to others is possible only if there are natural expressions of feelings, intentions, and so on.

The dichotomy 'mind (soul) and body' has led us astray. If we cannot make sense of the Cartesian mind (soul) we should ditch the dichotomy, and no longer struggle on with trying to make sense of the ascription of 'mentalist' attributes to a Cartesian body – more or less a stone. If we set out the predicates that are appropriate to people we find

non-lethal dichotomies like living-dead, skillful – butter fingered, comatose – active, nice – nasty, rude – polite, clever – stupid and so on for as large a catalog of attributes as you like. None of these dichotomies requires us to take a stand between subjective experiences and body states as the ontological ground work of the scientific study of human action.

But to what are these attributes ascribed? It can only be to persons. Neither minds nor bodies are suitable recipients of the whole gamut of material and mental, let alone action and moral attributes we may wish to ascribe to people. What are we to say of someone carefully coiling a rope?

### 1.3. Stern

But it is to psychology that we look for the third figure of authority. The recently revived work of William Stern<sup>1</sup> – with his personalism – presented the human being as *unitas multiplex* as the most penetrating version of the principle that persons are the ultimate, unanalyzable beings at the core of psychology. Here are three passages from Stern's writings to illustrate the point.<sup>2</sup>

The first step is to resist the temptation to think of persons as beings with parts. We tend to think that 'this work of dissection, which seems to culminate at that point where the ultimate and not-further-analyzable elements have been reached – implying in turn a synthesis whereby it is assumed that complex entities are brought into existence through the combination of those very elements – all of this ignores the priority of that very unity, which as *person* is at once the precondition for all more focused investigations and the ultimate point of convergence of the findings of those investigations. [A person cannot be composed of memories, because for an experience to be a memory it must be entertained by a person]. In other words: a science of the person cannot be obviated by any more specialized investigations or empirical discoveries. Nor can such a science be allowed to fall victim to the danger – and it is a very real one – of being rendered superfluous by rhetorical proclamations of the scientific status of claims concerning the wholeness and essence of the person. All research into the isolated details of specific aspects of the functioning of persons must be organized from the standpoint of their relationship to the whole; every particular must be located with reference to the whole. That is, its determination by the whole and its significance for the whole, must be made clear. The principle of "whole-relatedness" (*Ganzheitsbezogenheit*) must be regarded as the central theme of personalistic research, and we will encounter it often in its concrete manifestation.' (Stern, 1939, p. 3)

'What is needed is a primary, or, better, a super-ordinate science the subject of which is the person prior to any

decomposition into person fragments. It is simply not true that any statement about a person must be a statement about his/her body or consciousness or culture – or about some connection between these components. There are statements about persons which are neutral *vis-à-vis* those components, i.e., statements which cannot be categorized as psychological, physiological, or cultural, but which are instead immediately personal. Such statements relate first and foremost to the undivided unity of the person; only secondarily can they then be applied to the particular manifestations of the person bodily, psychological, or cultural. [Think of a football player evading the tackles, taking the throw and scoring].' (Stern, 1939, pp 5–6)

'The existential independence of persons is not destroyed by the aforementioned interconnectedness of all things in nature. Indeed, one can even regard it as the ultimate determinant of the nature of personal being that the person is a unitary whole as well as a part of other unitary wholes, and therefore one's self is not only not lost but indeed is realized in the interplay of one's relationships to humanity and the world. Even the strongest ties emanating from without, even the closest membership in human communities of all kinds, do not reduce the person to a thing, a mere piece of the world, a number, a passive deposit (*Geschiebe*). A person retains his/her most fundamental personal characteristic, "self-determination," precisely in the tensions arising from forces of outer determination that surround him/her.' (Stern, 1939, p. 8)

And if we read him in depth we find much the same insights in the writings of Lev Vygotsky, particularly in *Thought and Language* (Vygotsky, 2012).

We now have identified and argued for something like the being to which Johnson's forms could be ascribed.

Before we 'check out' Eric Johnson's catalog of whole person characteristics against the background that all generic psychological approaches must be coherent with, we must try characterize the constituents of 'person as agent' the generic form for generating 'person' by realizing it in the mute substance, 'human being'.

## 2. Of what is the relevant form of the person to consist?

I propose to explore the idea that the metaphysical scheme that best fits Johnson's notion of the person as agent and the subsidiary features of that notion such as 'character', is a *hierarchy of dispositions*. Most of what we know about anyone is what he or she can, could or might do – what they are capable of or not capable of. Of course we gather evidence for such judgments from what the person has done, but that is much outrun by our ascriptions of dispositions. At any one time and in any discrete situation human beings display only a tiny fraction of what they are capable of displaying. The recently established research program of positioning theory looks into the way ascriptions of rights and duties to social actors affects what any person is ready to do, in a certain situation as interpreted

<sup>1</sup> We owe this revelation to the studies by James T. Lamiell (2010).

<sup>2</sup> I am grateful to my colleague James T Lamiell both for drawing my attention to these passages and for allowing me to use his translations of them.

by the actors. What someone can do is often limited by a right or a duty that is involved, and the actual action can be seen as an environmental or historical contingency. Mostly ascriptions of dispositions, capacities, liabilities and propensities are tacit, so it might seem as if there are none relevant – but studies have shown that this is almost never true. So in following Johnson's lead in thinking about what persons are that they might be the topic of a possible psychology (we surely do not have anything like that yet despite the miles of shelving filled with 'empirical' studies – indeed getting farther and farther from it) whatever characterizes a person is largely a cluster of dispositions as Gilbert Ryle (1949) so elegantly displayed. The psychological concepts with which persons are studied,<sup>3</sup> analyzed, and their behavior explained, will, in consequence largely be dispositional in form. But what is a person that he or she can be so characterized? However, to be a something that characterizes a whole person the multiplicity of dispositions a person might have need to be organized in some way. Let us test Johnson's proposals against the idea that at its simplest, the structure of a psychologically relevant 'form' should a hierarchy of dispositions to acquire dispositions, the double dispositions account as Moghaddam and I have called it (Harré & Moghaddam, 2012).

This picture of the structure of a whole person 'form' for psychological attributions can be found in the writings of Mencius the psychologist disciple of Confucius with his double disposition account of human beings. For Confucius and his disciples, the virtues were the most important psychological attributes, and together they characterized the whole person. The educational schedule recommended by Mencius could be interpreted as the way a living being that is not a person becomes one – that is enters into a world where moral considerations are consequential and where there are good grounds for ascribing both states of consciousness and material attributes to oneself and others.

### 2.1. The double dispositional account

Part of what Mencius argued for was a certain view of the fundamental moral distinctions that shape or should shape our lives. The nobility of Heaven is a matter of character: one must be benevolent, just, high-principled, and faithful, and taking an unwearying joy in being good. The double disposition account of human psychology emerges from the concept of *Hsing*, as referring to something which every human being has in common. *Hsing* distinguishes human beings from animals in so far as the distinction is mental. It includes not only intellectual skills and capacities, but also impulses towards action. These can be manifested in good and right acts or bad and incorrect ones. Whether *hsing* gives rise to virtuous or vicious behavior depends on external circumstances, especially the economic situation and the edicts and practices of government. The person is duty bound to act virtuously, as he or she conceives it.

These impulses are manifested in native and universal tendencies to 'pity, shame, reverence, and the sense of right and wrong' (Richards, 1932: 67). As yet these are not virtues. They are the necessary psychological preconditions for the development of virtues, morally qualified dispositions of mature human beings. These primitive tendencies, according to Mencius, are universal. So proper education in the right social circumstances should lead to universal development of the associated virtues, since they are derived from universal features of human psychology. These derivations run along the following lines:

From the native tendency to pity, with training, we can develop the virtue of *Jen*, which is not so much an emotion, as a moral tendency to favor certain kinds of action sympathetic to other people, particularly in regard to how they might feel. According to Richards it covers 'the source of honour ..., with effort to strive for mutuality'. It is clearly supportive of the Confucian injunction to serve one's parents, and to use that duty as model for duties in general.

From the native tendency to shame we can develop the virtue of *Y*. It has to do with the moral uneasiness one would feel at having failed in one's duties, especially one's social duties.

The native tendency to reverence develops into the virtue of *Li*, good manners and competence in ritual observances. It also comprehends knowing one's proper place in the social world, and the correct behavior for one in such a place.

The native sense of right and wrong develops into *Chih*. This virtue is shown in judgement and discrimination, especially in social and moral matters.

This is a whole person story – the dispositions to act well in different circumstance and with respect to different issues are a composite that applies to the whole person. Given their derivation the virtues could not be acquired piecemeal. Since it is the development of the social virtues that is in question it is not self-development in the Western sense of 'self-actualisation'. To grow in virtue in this dispositional sense is a natural activity, though it needs a guide. It is not the result of a calculation of advantage based on knowledge. We do not acquire the social virtues for any utilitarian reason.

The totality of a person's dispositions and capacities are comprehended under *hsing*. But dispositions must be grounded in something non-dispositional, something enduring in the person. This is *ch'i*. To take a modern instance the skill to play a musical instrument must be grounded in a permanent state of the body, acquired during practice.

Diagrammatically presented, the mind/character of the mature person has some such structure as the following:

<i>Ch'i</i> (Substance)			
<i>Hsing</i> (Grounding)			
(Dispositions and Skills)			
<i>Jen</i>	<i>Y</i>	<i>Li</i>	<i>Chih</i>
(Virtues)			
Love	Shame	Good manners	Right/Wrong

<sup>3</sup> One must not forget the choice of commensurate research methods.

Here we have a moral psychology that is presented as the ground of a social and political point of view, rooted in a psychology which is itself rooted in a metaphysical or general prescription of the nature of human beings. *Ch'i* grounds *Hsing* which grounds the virtues.

Persons are the seat of dispositions. How dispositions are grounded – in neural states and processes, social environments, relations to another person – is irrelevant to their role in psychology. As John Gardner once remarked ‘The clowns would be just as funny if their heads were filled with sawdust!’.

## 2.2. *The trait theories and their shortcomings*

This eminently sensible frame work for research and understanding of people has been horribly muddled by the arrival of ‘personality’ theories – the offspring of misuses of the ‘factor’ method in analyzing what people do, or tell about themselves in questionnaires! Correlations of correlations are explained as the expression of mysterious ‘factors’, hidden features of people that come to light in this kind of research. While it makes sense to explain the correlation between expression of loyalty to a certain political party and an aversion to the death penalty as having a common origin in the cognitive economy of a person, let us call this their ‘liberalism’, does it make sense to invent another, higher order factor that accounts for the correlation between liberalism and religiosity? The correlating of correlations with correlations continues until we arrive at a few factors that are independent of one another, say the Five Factors of McCrae and Costa (2005). Why should we take these as anything more than artifacts of the mathematics, like the ‘imaginary’ roots, of certain quadratic equations?

The problem with any form of ‘trait’ account of what it is that endows a human organism with being a person is that within the assembled cluster of traits the human actor, the person, evaporates. We start with a conceptual scheme that makes sense only if real persons are actively engaged in carrying on their lives in accordance with local cultural conventions, and we finish up with a picture in which there are no persons at all. This defect is not so gross as it was in the Skinnerian scheme, but still the person is a kind of platform or locus at which traits are activated. What we want is a person actively engaging in projects making use of meaningful moves in accordance with local conventions. Being a person means that one is capable of managing one’s dispositions, and even working on one’s tendencies in the manner of a student of the Confucian way.

The several candidates for the form of the whole human being must meet the double dispositional criteria of Mencius without slipping into the mystery mongering initiated by Hans Eysenck (1998).

## 3. Johnson’s catalog

### 3.1. *Person signature*

Characteristic displays of traits that are idiosyncratic to just that person. But displays of traits are situationally relative so what is the personality signature of any one

human being right across their life contexts? I see myself as at times ‘introvert’ and at times ‘extravert’, at times high on neuroticism and at times low – it all depends on when Eysenck asks me to complete one of his questionnaires.

### 3.2. *The self as that which characterizes the whole person*

But a comprehensive analysis of how that word is used and the conceptual complexities it is used to convey shows that the concept covers at least a threefold variety.

- a. The self as core agent, acting at a location in space and time. We see this version of ‘the self’ expressed in and reflective of the use of the indexical grammar of the Indo-European first person, displaying the ontological status of persons as core agents and the loci in space and time from whence perception is structured and action initiated.
- b. The self as a loose and ever changing cluster of reflexive beliefs including the various autobiographies a person consults from time to time and situation to situation.
- c. The self as how someone appears to be in the course of public presentations. This was the self the appearances of which Erving Goffman (1959) explored in his classic ‘The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life’ – the sort of person I think you think I ought to be, or some yet more complicated pattern of mutual beliefs.

### 3.3. *Personal agent –situated agency*

The person as agent manages his or her actions within the framework of their individual pattern of dispositions, and in the light of the meanings of the situations in which they are called upon, or believe themselves to be called upon to act.

- a. There is one’s bundle of instrumental skills, sawing wood, playing the flute, speaking one’s mother tongue and any others one may have picked up, acting wisely (foolishly) and so on – structured à la Mencius as a hierarchy of dispositions to acquire dispositions, and dispositions we have individually acquired.
- b. Johnson proposes ‘character’ as a whole person form for someone to be a person considered as an ethical being. This is the domain of ‘positioning theory’, a prolific research domain, not mentioned by Johnson, the study of how rights and duties to live and act in certain ways are assigned, adopted, resisted and so on, situation by situation. But from the point of the double disposition account of what it is to be a person, character is one aspect of personal agency. For example in qualifying the power of a certain person as agent we say ‘He has a weak character but she is strong-minded’.
- c. Talk of *communion* as a feature of the *unitas multiplex* raises the question as to how one acquires that hierarchy of dispositions crucial to being a person. Here we should pick up echoes of Vygotsky. His work as a developmental psychologist was aimed at displaying how individuals emerged out of community. How the transition of a skill from the zone of proximal development (where it is always communal in some degree)

to the zone of actual development where it is something exercised by individuals came to be.

- d. *Narrative* – the whole person as at once an unfolding story and story teller. What are the conditions that have to be satisfied before a being can be a story-teller? There must be plots to unfold, characters to introduce, denouements to engineer.

Imago Dei – the same god in whose image we are made is the very god whose characteristics are derived from the human beings who invented him. How wise of St John of the Cross to declare that the only knowledge he had of God was that he had no knowledge of Him.

#### 4. Which shall we go with?

An agent is a being which has the power to act and a patient is a being which has the liability to acted upon. The same being can be both an agent and a patient, even in the same interaction. The Sun acts on the Earth and the Earth acts on the Sun. In the case of people as human agents asymmetries are very common, though close analysis using the methods of qualitative analysts (Hermans, 2012) may disclose more ‘counter-transference’ than we might expect. The most powerful, comprehensive and recognizably plausible choice from this catalog is the person as agent and the relevant form the totality of declarative and practical knowledge that our active being makes use of carrying out his or her projects in the actual world of social relations and material stuff. What would a hierarchy of dispositions need to encompass to serve as the form of a person?

Under the family of ‘dispositions to act’ would be the genera of ‘powers’ and ‘capacities’ (Cartwright, 1989). Under the family of ‘dispositions to be acted upon’ we would find such genera as ‘liabilities’, ‘vulnerabilities’. Under each genus there would be species having as differentia such instrumental categories as ‘effective’, ‘feeble’, and such moral categories as ‘right’, ‘duty’, and so on, including the morally indifferent. This is not the place to set about the Herculean task of illustrating the role of this way of understanding the ‘form of a person’ in a possible

comprehensive psychology. There is an extensive literature on many constituents of this hierarchical scheme for a taxonomy of dispositions and related concept.<sup>4</sup> The conclusion of our examination of Johnson’s proposal is simple: the philosophical work has already been done. The status of the person as the fundamental ‘substance’ of any plausible psychology has been established while the status of powers and liabilities as the constituents of any plausible ‘form’ on which to build that psychology has also been achieved. What remains is the working out of the Johnsonian scheme in actual psychological research – and even there much has already been achieved.

However, there is an institutional risk of sabotaging our deepest insights by continuing to use methods of research that make sense only if human beings are not persons in the sense of personal agents, exercising their powers and suffering from their liabilities.

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<sup>4</sup> The recent collection of studies edited by Max Kistler and Bruno Gnassanou (2007).