

IS DESIRE DESIRABLE?
THE QUESTION THAT DISCLOSES THE PERSON

David Walsh

The invitation, to reflect on the theme of desire, provides an opportunity to sketch the horizon of the person who is capable of asking about desire. Is desire desirable? It cannot be asked without invoking the perspective of the person who has thereby gone beyond desire. It is to the reality of the person, disclosed in such self-disclosure, that I would like to devote my reflections. We begin with the admission that the notion of the person is sufficiently underdetermined to require such a re-examination. Despite our familiarity with the term person and its continuous usage from its Greek and Roman beginnings in *prosopon* and *persona*, we have still to get philosophically to grips with the notion. In many respects, the horizon of the person is what is missing within the classical discovery of mind. The later definition of the person as “an individual substance of a rational nature,” derived from Boethius, is precisely what must be challenged if we are to reach the dynamic of self-transcendence that we know as the defining reality of the person.

Our first step will be to show that this conception of the person is not entirely absent in the Platonic account. His treatment of the parts of the soul continually points toward a whole that cannot be included within them. Instead he invokes particular persons, Socrates and the philosopher king, as the means of expressing what cannot be conveyed in term of parts and wholes. Next we follow the similar strategy that Aristotle employs in his account of the

formation of character, where continuous reference to types of persons enables him to sidestep a consideration of the person who can ask about the question of his or her character. Our third step will be to ask about the opening of interiority as an event that goes beyond its mere presupposition in the Greek thinkers. Only then will we arrive at the person who, in taking responsibility for a whole life, is present in the mode of self-transcendence. To reach that realization, however, we must be prepared to go beyond the limits bequeathed by the classical thinkers, to acknowledge revelation as the constitutive horizon of the person. Once that suggestion has been broached we may find we are not too far from the region of modern philosophy in which it is precisely presence in the mode of absence that marks its account of metaphysics. But that is a topic we will have to save for another occasion. (Russell)

For now, we begin with the theme we are asked to consider in this series of lectures. At the outset we sense that “Desire” cannot be presented as a topic of discourse, apart from the whole within which it finds its place. We must not overlook the person who takes responsibility for desire within a whole life. Yet initially our attention is directed to a part in just the way that Plato divides the soul into its parts in the *Republic*. There we find desire most closely associated with appetites, the part of the soul driven by the material needs that specify them but which, in themselves, lack the transparency of rationality. Like the artisans and producers of the polis, appetites pursue fulfillment that falls short of full human fulfillment. In order to reach their proper human good, appetites must be subsumed within the directing guidance of reason, assisted by the auxiliary force of the spirited part. Justice as the ordering virtue is invoked as the source of the harmony that allows all of the parts of the soul to perform their proper function and, thus, the good of the whole to be attained. It is notable that neither in the city nor in the soul is justice fully exemplified. No part possesses it as its distinctive virtue, for all must participate

in it in varying degrees, if justice is to be achieved. So ends the founding play of the Republic that is ostensibly intended to let us behold the emergence of justice in both the city and the soul. It would seem that the Socratic project of defining justice has missed its mark even if, ironically, many readers still take the definition of the ordering harmony of the whole as his definition.

Anticipation of that failure is surely the most profound insight of the text, for Plato goes on, through the waves of objections, to sketch the only perspective in which the ordering harmony of the whole can be comprehended. That is, within the soul of a person who so orders himself. Socrates surmounts objections to the equality of men and women, the community of property, wives, and children among the guardians, to reach the only viewpoint within which they can be comprehended. Significantly, that is the interior perspective of a person, the philosopher king. The anthropological principle, the search for justice on the larger scale of the polis, is discarded by the admission that it really only exists within the inwardness of the philosopher. Even when he returns to the declining forms the path of explanation follows the interior changes within individuals that work their way out in the political realm. The accent has shifted so decisively to the interior that one is left to wonder whether the external city could ever understand the condition of its possibility, one beheld nowhere but within the innermost vision of the philosopher. Even the philosopher him- or herself may not be able to articulate what it is, since it ultimately derives from the good that is beyond being. Concerning the transcendent ground of order nothing can be said. That is surely the summit of Platonic wisdom and the crown of philosophy. But it is less than satisfactory when something of its truth must be conveyed to the producers and consumers and the mythically educated guardians who are remote from such eschatological glimpses. It is small wonder that Plato seems not to have attempted such a raid on the inarticulate again, given the unpromising limitations of potential listeners or

readers. Rather than embracing the philosophical challenge, of intimating what cannot be said, there is something of a retreat into the indirection that myth and conceptual elaborations make possible.

The Platonic withdrawal from writing anything serious, or even attempting it, may derive not only from the unsatisfactory condition of the life of philosophy, but just as much from an inability to grasp the full measure of his own accomplishment. Having reached the philosopher-king he does not seem to have realized at what he has arrived. Even for Plato, the philosopher remains too much present in the city. The notion that the city may be contained in the philosopher is only haltingly approached in the closing reference, to the city in speech that exists within the dialog itself. Missing is the realization that the city distended in history, unfolding through its declining and restorative forms, exists nowhere but within the minds of those who are capable of conceiving it. The idea of the city is its truth. Surely that is the burden of the *Republic*. Yet the dialogue stops short of the realization that the idea is the condition of possibility of the polis that is constituted by those who bear the city within.

Tantalizing echoes of the transcendent perspective of the philosopher and, by extension, of all persons who contain the city inwardly are there. The portrait of the statesman who can exist outside of the polis, and Aristotle's astonishing reflection on the man of preeminent virtue who outweighs the whole, are powerfully evocative. They remain, however, only passing glances at the full realization of the person actually on display in the account of the philosopher, as the one who has turned his soul toward the brightest part of being. By becoming a person, he has revealed the constitutive genesis of that reality. The person stands in relation to the Good that is transcendent, and thereby partakes of what surpasses being in dignity and power. The soul that can order its desires and tame its pre-rational spirit gains this rationality through

submission to the ordering pull beyond it. Yes, this was a signal breakthrough to the ground of order in mind and cosmos, but not so definitive that it could forestall the multiple misunderstandings that would afflict its interpretation up to the present. Few are the readers that are prepared to admit that reason is neither an instrument nor a faculty, but a theophanic event.

The veil of self-awareness has not yet been parted to disclose the full magnitude of what has been reached. Revelation has occurred without recognizing the mutuality of persons that make it possible. The Platonic theophany is a distinctly impersonal one and the impossibility of such an impersonal encounter has been largely overlooked. Of course it is always possible, as Eric Voegelin has suggested, that Plato deliberately situated his account within a ring of hesitations as to its full ramifications. He spoke of opening toward a beyond without conceding that such an event is only possible if the soul is already constituted by such openness, and the beyond itself bends toward that which is otherwise incapable of receiving it. The mutuality of revelation is a mutuality only available to persons. Only a person can reveal and only a person can receive the revealer. All of this is abundantly evident in the textual account of the ascent toward the Good, for the visible analogy of the sun serves merely to underline the strictly invisible nature of the unfolding. The movement is interior and can only be accessed by those who are open to the same interior prompting. Yet the revelation is not private, as Plato makes clear, for the philosopher has followed the path available to every soul. At its apex it turns, not on the impartment of information, but merely on a participation in that which is. All that is absent is the admission that what is encountered is also soul. Plato's reluctance to identify Nous as God probably derives from his unwillingness to link it to the intra-cosmic gods of the Homeric myth. As a consequence, the breakthrough to transcendence must be recounted without the self-

revelation of the transcendent. We know neither how it is possible for the immanent to grasp that which transcends it, nor how the transcendent can reach that which is immanent.

The language of the soul and its parts is not capable of accounting for their order as a whole, nor can it reach the relationship to the whole, the good, from which the order of the soul is derived. The soul is opaque to itself for it cannot account for its capacity to give itself completely to that which is goodness itself. Equally elusive is the self-abasement of the good as it descends from its dwelling in inaccessible remoteness. How do we know about what lies beyond knowledge, unless we are somehow capable of knowing more than we can know? The more one dwells with the constraints of the Platonic movement toward the Beyond, the more it becomes clear that they can only be resolved within the horizon of the person. Only a person can give more than has been given and only a person can receive more than has been received. The relationship to that which is transcendent calls forth a complete self-giving, just as it is the reception of the One who has already exceeded the limits of self-giving. It is a relationship of mutual self-opening, whether from the human or divine side. And it takes place nowhere but within the mutuality by which alone the inwardness of the other can be glimpsed. Only a person is capable of stepping aside to yield to the other. The one who carries the mask is always more than the mask and always says more than what is said. In every instant the instant is transcended. Some sense of this is intuitively present in the *Republic*, for the whole dialogue is framed by the imperative of souls, whether in the Piraeus or Hades, of choosing the character to which the respective destiny is attached. The question of how we can be forever bound by the decision of a moment is not broached. Yet it is taken on board as the unspoken foundation of the whole work. Each person holds their destiny, in all the decisive aspects, in their own hands.

That is what it means to be a person, always more than one is and therefore always capable of hearkening to the One who is more than what is, the One who is also a person.

Without a notion of the person, the formation of character, the main topic of Aristotle's *Ethics*, similarly remains a mystery. To his credit Aristotle does admit his puzzlement as to how those who lack a sense of the noble and good might be induced to acquire it, since it is precisely that disposition that is needed. To refer to it as a gift of nature is no more satisfactory than to explain the weak-willed man as one whose desires overcome his rationality. Admission of the question-begging nature of his own analysis is a strong indication of his awareness of the situation, even if Aristotle did not possess the theoretical means of addressing it. But being Aristotle he did not lack resources and, often, highly suggestive ones that point in the direction of the person. In a manner that parallels the central role that one particular person, Socrates, plays in the dialogues, Aristotle has recourse to types of persons throughout the *Ethics*. There are of course the types that exemplify particular virtues, the courageous man, the magnanimous man, the munificent man, or the incontinent man. But these are by way of illustration. They do not reach the man who makes the ethical life his overarching concern. These are the individuals who exemplify the unnamed excellence of the text, what might be called the existential virtues that make possible the ordering of a life as a whole. It is the life of virtue as a whole that is aimed at in the notion of character, but it can only be specified by particular persons or types. The mature man, *spoudaios*, and the man of practical wisdom, *phronimos*, are the most well-known instances. In each case Aristotle invokes them as a way of naming what cannot be named. That is, the capacity for ordering one's existence as a whole that remains a possibility for persons who in every instance are not simply present in their existence. They can hold themselves at a distance and ask if desire is desirable. In other cases, Aristotle introduces such types only to pass

over them or leave them unabsorbed in his overall account. One thinks of the man who follows justice in the comprehensive sense who is shunted aside, while Aristotle explores justice in its partial or legal sense without reference to the former. But the outstanding case is surely the friend or friends that frame the horizon of Aristotelian ethics without being fully integrated into it. The uncertainty is announced in the opening discussion of *philia* as either a virtue or the whole of virtue. No need to decide. Except that by not deciding, Aristotle has lost the one opportunity to anchor philosophy within the relational setting from which its genesis can be understood.

The account of friendship that follows is one that preserves the intellectual distance we have come to associate with the Aristotelian approach. A classification of the types of friendship, as the useful, the pleasant, and the good, remains aloof to the differences between them. Initially, one would be inclined to overlook the author's special affinity with the life of friendship, or that the analysis offered to his readers constituted a singular act of friendship. The thinker remains outside of his thought. Mastery of the subject conceals the extent to which the subject masters him. Yet the latter is precisely the case, as Aristotle's own deepening exploration reveals. Eventually it becomes apparent that friendship is not a virtue or a part of the good life but its whole. Even the good man, it turns out, has need of friends. He does not need them for utility or for pleasure, although they are both, but for the sake of friendship itself. A life without friends, Aristotle finally concedes, is hardly a life. The good life is inconceivable without friends for it is friends that enable us to think. The most characteristic activity, the highest of which human beings are capable, the life of contemplation, is impossible alone. Thinking together, *sunaitesis*, intensifies what we do separately, but in such a way that it makes it more real and more self-sustaining. We are not meant to be alone, not even in our

minds. But this is not a mere lapsing into fellow-feeling, for we can only be united if we are united in truth, not merely in aspiration or appearance. It is only in truth that we can share the same consciousness, including our own existence and the existence of the friend, in the same intention.

Friendship, it turns out, is not only the whole of virtue but the whole of philosophy as well. Philosophy is impossible without friendship, without the friendship of philosophers. Even the analysis of friendship that encompasses the continuum of individual and social and political relations, is embedded within the commitment to truth and goodness (and beauty by implication) within which the possibility of friendship is grounded. We cannot even think about friendship without offering it as an act of friendship. The analysis of friendship, as the overarching model of relationships in Books VIII and IX of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, is so stunning in its range and depth, overflowing the boundaries of associational structures into the reality of consciousness itself, that one is inclined to regard it as the summative text of the Aristotelian corpus. Yet the failure to grasp the account of friendship as the key to his thought seems almost to have begun with Aristotle himself, for he rarely seems to exploit the full potential of the astonishing reflections he has laid before us. Only occasionally are there tantalizing suggestions as to where the extensions may lead. Surely one of the most fascinating is his reflection in Book X when, after dealing again with pleasure and its dynamic within desire, he transitions to the concluding discussion of the life of contemplation as the highest, and therefore that which provides the highest pleasure. In describing contemplation as the life that is most continuously active he exhorts us to follow the life that is beyond the human, even if it launches us on a process of immortalization. Not only is this suggestion evocative of the idea of the person as always more than he or she is, but his visualization extends into the only instances of persons that exemplify

that dynamic. That is, the life of the gods that now includes the philosophers who, through their own divine activity, reach up to that level. Confirmation that this extension is not a mere overreaching can only be received in the affirmation that it is offered to us from the divine side. The highest contemplation, reached through the co-contemplation with others, is a participation in the friendship of the gods.

No sooner is that limiting encounter broached than its evocative potential slips away. In the absence of the self-understanding of the person it is impossible even to account for how the elusive glimpse was reached. The interior experience of straining beyond a boundary cannot be retained because there is scarcely an interiority without the person. Only the one who can step aside even from his or her own experience, who can behold the interior movement of the soul, can grasp the condition of possibility for that experience. The *prosopon* was a term available to the classic philosophers but they did not employ it, for they scarcely apprehended the need to hold onto the experience of their own philosophic illumination. It was enough that they had broken with the externality of the Homeric myths and retained the dramatic enactment of truth in tragedy. As a consequence, they launched philosophy as a symbolic form that remained incapable of explicating the source of its own inspiration. Truth could be exemplified but it could not be grasped, for it was not yet the truth of a person. The priority of the person to truth had scarcely been intimated and thus truth could not yet be seen as a mode of existence. Inwardness was certainly there in the classical founding, but it had not yet acquired the language by which it might be retained inwardly. The focus on concepts and results, and the death struggle the polis itself was undergoing, meant that it was enough to preserve what had been gained. The self-deepening of inwardness would have to await a new impetus, one that would impinge on philosophy from beyond it and yet transform it forever. For now, the topics and

categories into which Aristotle was already pouring the liquid of philosophy was the best that could be expected. That would still be a considerable achievement. It might not make it possible to raise the question as to whether desire is desirable and thereby open the perspective of the person who is beyond all desire. But within the philosophical subtlety of an Aristotle it would always be possible to follow his suggestion that desire unfolds as intelligent desire or as a desiring intelligence that already transcends the finitude of desire. To ask how such transcendence is possible would require a fuller opening of the horizon of the person. It would have to await the advent of the One who poured himself out on behalf of all. Only the event of unconditional love reveals the amplitude of the person. The actor has not only put himself aside to bear the mask, but has so completely surrendered himself that he now bears the imprint of all others.

It is the One who gives himself completely who calls forth the response of complete self-giving. The words of the Gospel capture the astonishing simplicity of the event. They left their nets and followed him. Hardly knowing what it entails they leave everything to follow the One who calls them. Explanation is neither needed nor given, for the response is everything. The person who calls outweighs all that might be said about it. In that moment of self-abandonment the meaning of what it is to be a person is discovered. No longer is the person the bearer of a mask, the enactor of a role, but one who offers himself. Holding nothing back, the person is present in his or her nakedness as the one whose whole life has become visible and who yet remains, as the invisible beholder. The episode of the woman at the well is just such a turning point. It is because he calls for a complete change of heart that Christ can open the perspective on the whole life of the woman. The metanoia he offers is parallel to the periagoge of the Republic, but it arises more directly and immediately in life. Intellectual distance has been

removed as the interlocutors enter into a strictly second person perspective. Who do you say that I am? The call for a complete surrender of self has abolished the leisure for reflection, for there must be nothing held back. Having turned our hands to the plough we dare not look back, if we are to be worthy of the Kingdom of God. The transcendence of all that one has been, brings into view the self-transcendence of the person as such. Yet within that glimpse of total loss there arises the astonishing realization of the fullness thereby attained. By giving we do not lose but gain, immeasurably. He who loses his life will save it, not in the future but in the now from which the self-giving of the person is always possible. Contrary to the idea of substance so often applied to the idea of the person, it becomes apparent that the person exists only through the outpouring of substance. By giving we receive, not just in the sense of reciprocation, but in the deepest interior of the person. Rather than discoursing about the flash of transcendence, we are living it out. It is a long way from the Greek understanding of the mask, yet it is its ultimate fulfillment. The possibility of the mask derives from the one who places himself behind it. Now it has become possible to see the one who cannot be seen and yet is always seen as the bearer of the mask. Only a person can give or receive a person.

What is remarkable about the *New Testament* is how far this understanding of the person as transcendence is developed without naming it. The notion of the person is operationally pervasive even if its metaphysics is never made explicit. Yet there is a distinct advance on the Greek intuition. Where the man of practical wisdom is the one who can weigh action in light of the good life as a whole, the follower of Christ has already offered his life without reservations or conditions. It is the encompassing character of the Christian vocation that brings to light the condition of its own possibility. That is, that each is a person and therefore capable of giving him- or herself as a whole. It is a depth of self-giving that surpasses the material limits of what

is given. The widow's mite is greater than all that had been dropped into the temple treasury. Even a cup of water given in Jesus's name is a gift that overflows the boundaries of the finite. This is the meaning of the incarnation, that flesh and blood have become the disclosure of what they cannot, and yet do, contain. The mode of containment, however, is no longer material for the latter has been subsumed within the transparency of the person. Spirit is too gross a metaphor for what continually denies itself. Breath intimates the lightness and the movement, but not the evanescence that is the heart of what it means to be a person. We are open to one another only because we continually yield place to one another. From the weakest to the strongest, the richest to the poorest, self-giving remains the deepest possibility. The ladder of transcendence is available to all, slave or free. A spiritual hierarchy is a contradiction in terms, for it operates in a realm where the last shall be first.

Even within the *New Testament*, however, there are degrees of self-acuteness. All may possess the self that can be freely offered, but not all penetrate its interior dynamics to the same degree. This is what makes the self-reflection of Paul of such signal importance. He is capable of putting into words what all believers intuit, without fully explicating. That is, that there is scarcely a self until it has learned to deny itself in obedience to the good. In the famous wrestling of Romans 7, St. Paul acknowledges that the good he *wants* to do is not what he does, while the evil he does *not* want to do is what he does. A self, divided against itself, resonates with universal human experience and yet it had not been so piercingly grasped before this text. The abyss that opens within the human heart is achingly on display. The impossibility of reaching resolution, a resolution that can be counted upon, looms as the fate of free being. It is a harrowing penetration of the emptiness of the heart that far exceeds the Aristotelian grappling with the weak willed individual. Problems of the latter seem comparatively slight in contrast

with the drama that overwhelms us in the self-consciousness of sin. Rather than failure, or the loss of self-approval, we seem to face annihilation as the mounting threat. Only the self-distance remaining within the Pauline reflection provides a slender thread of redemption. How was it possible for Paul to glimpse the innermost dynamic of his soul if he was completely engulfed by it? Even in the descent, the person remains as one who is capable of recognizing and therefore of reversing it. At the extreme, this would mean that the person could even be brought to confess his or her incapacity to bring about the change of heart so direly needed. The person who can grasp the irresolvable conflicts of the soul, it turns out, depends on a viewpoint that cannot be summoned at will. Self-distance, the mark of the person, is itself a graced moment.

It is the viewpoint of God on each of us. Augustine would go on to make this the basis of the *Confessions*, the accusation of oneself before God. But as such, it is a perspective that goes beyond what we can attain. Yet miraculously there it is, an opening that oversteps all limits, especially the limit of the self-contained self. To see ourselves, as we really are, is to go beyond who we are. Without fully formulating it, this is perhaps the great Christian contribution to the differentiation of the person, a differentiation still unfolding within the arc that stretches from Augustine to Kierkegaard. The possibility of asking if desire is desirable, the question that opens the perspective of the person who stands outside of desire, is made possible by the grace embedded in the question itself. It could not be raised if it did not contain the possibility of going beyond desire. We are not prisoners of desire precisely because we can ask the question of its desirability. Desire is itself overturned in the moment, as we know when reflection deflects and deflates the urge of the moment. But this is more than an intellectual tripwire that snaps the motive force. The grace of self-distance is the crucial opening that is both the transcendence and the fulfillment of desire. To the extent that desire aims at what it cannot attain it is doomed to

unfold in a progression without terminus, the satisfaction of one desire becoming only the beginning of the pursuit of the next. Without a summum bonum, as Hobbes diagnosed, we are locked into a joyless pursuit of joy. By contrast, the grace of self-beholding is already a glimpse of the fulfillment that is the opening of unending joy. It could scarcely even be glimpsed if we did not already touch it, however tenuously, and from there intuit the possibility of submitting ever more completely to its ever more powerful attraction. The grace that is the apex of the person is, thus, not an external imposition but the indelible mark of love that lingers at the edges of our consciousness. The person, who exceeds all that has been said and done, is already in the heart of a Love exceeding all limits.

It is the vantage point of overflowing love that is the summit of the self-transparency of the person. The person who stands under judgment, who is called to attain the distance of truth on him or herself, is at the same time sustained by the intimation of love emanating from the call itself. Ultimately the perspective of truth surpasses our capacity and can therefore only be attained when we have been able to see beyond what we are. Self-transcendence is a gift. What had seemed to be an innate capacity of the person turns out to be a gifted possibility, for it is a sharing in the transcendence of Being itself. How else could we even know about such a reality, a reality that surpasses all else that is, if we were not privileged with access to its inner consciousness. To be a person is thus to be constituted by the consciousness of God. This philosophical-theological high point has been scaled numerous times within the tradition, but it has just as often remained an ineffable aspiration consigned to incommunicability. It is only within the perspective of the person that its structure can be articulated, because it is only the dynamic of mutuality that yields up the secret of interiority. The self, that can scarcely know

itself through its own resources, can enlarge its self-transparence only when it has reached the horizon of transparence as such. We love because He first loved us.

The School of Philosophy

October 8, 2017