REVIEW ARTICLE

MAUSS AND THE TORTOISE'S PREDICAMENT

MICHAEL CARRITHERS, STEVEN COLLINS and STEVEN LUKES (eds.), *The Category of the Person: Anthropology, Philosophy, History*, Cambridge etc.: Cambridge University Press 1985. ix, 301pp., Index. £27.50 / £9.95.

ANTHONY J. MARSELLA, GEORGE DEVOS and FRANCIS L.K. HSU (eds.), *Culture and Self: Asian and Western Perspectives*, New York and London: Tavistock Publications 1985. xi, 307pp., Index, Figures. £8.95.

The focal text of the volume edited by Carrithers, Collins and Lukes is a new translation of Marcel Mauss's Huxley Memorial Lecture of 1938, which has become known as his 'essay on the person' ('A Category of the Human Mind: the Notion of Person; the Notion of Self'). Informal discussion of the essay led to the planning of a series of seminars in 1980 at Wolfson College, Oxford, exploring its relevance in a range of different academic fields. The series provoked wide interest, and the present volume, whose main title *The Category of the Person* deliberately echoes Mauss, was subsequently planned upon the basis of the papers given. The new (and very fine) translation of Mauss's essay is by W.D. Halls, and a careful contextual exegesis and appreciation is contributed by N.J. Allen. The rest of the papers follow (ten in all), and endeavour, if unevenly, to place themselves in relation to Mauss's argument; which is, in a few words, that the idea of the person/self as it is taken for granted by 'us' today is a uniquely modern European phenomenon within the long social history of law and morality.

To clarify what follows let me immediately anticipate my

conclusion. I believe that Mauss has insufficiently distinguished between the domain of law on the one hand, and that of morality on the other: in seeking to specify a *category* of selfhood, and in distinguishing this quest from a consideration of such fields as language, psychology, and experience, Mauss has bracketed together 'law and morality' as the conjoined framework within which that category has developed. But I would suggest that a clearer focus on the essential question is gained if we distinguish the field of jural definition from that of morality; this distinction may well be starker in the 'modern' context than in pre-modern circumstances, but it is not unique to the modern era, nor to 'the West'. If it is accepted that the jural and the moral domains may very generally be separable, then we can certainly agree that the *category of the person/self* is absent from pre-modern forms of 'the law'. At the same time we may recognize as generally present a range of inter-translatable notions of the person which do not derive from law in any sense, but which may testify on another level to the presence of concepts of moral agency and thus to a socially relevant 'category of selfhood'. Many systems of law, and their formal comparison, get on very well without 'our' notion of the person; but the comparative study of morality disappears, as a project, if personal agency in non-modern societies is supposed to be subsumed entirely within their systems of jural definition.

While Mauss's view on the evolution of the notion of person dominates discussion in the 'Oxford' volume, his essay is nowhere mentioned in the American collection with the main title *Culture and Self* edited by Marsella, DeVos and Hsu - neither by editors, nor by contributors. It could be argued, as many of the contributors to this collection might well do, that Mauss's approach to the topic is irrelevant, mistaken or outdated. But equally, the lack of reference to Mauss's essay (or the position it represents) could be taken as indirect evidence confirming the essence of his thesis: that the very enterprise of comparing cross-culturally the subjective understanding of 'self' can only spring from peculiarly modern, and thus in themselves culturally specific, assumptions about 'the person'. I shall return to this point.

There are some very interesting papers in *Culture and Self*, which clearly speak to an eager audience. The editors write in their Preface:

> The self has returned! After almost seven decades, there has been a resurgence of interest in the concept of self.... Today, social scientists, philosophers, and even theoretical physicists are increasingly invoking the self as an explanatory concept for understanding complex human behavior. The present volume is a contribution to the renaissance of interest in the self.

The topic itself is not presented as problematic by these editors, who take a straightforward, common-sense approach to 'selves' elsewhere. Among the nine chapters are a few on general themes, one of the most interesting being by M. Brewster Smith on 'The

Metaphorical Basis of Selfhood', as well as case studies from India, Japan, and China, some by Asian authors. Psychology, rather than social anthropology or philosophy (let alone the law), is the touchstone throughout. While this book could be said to be speaking to questions of morality in important ways, it does not claim to be dealing with the legal or historical domain and could not be represented as exploring the 'category' of personhood in Mauss's essentially jural sense.

It is obviously, if ironically, true that our renewed interest in Mauss's essay is a sign of movement in the British academic world parallel to the American enthusiasm evident in *Culture and Self*, a movement towards subjective awareness in the humane disciplines, and perhaps particularly within the fieldwork-oriented practice of social anthropology. But given its conservative orientation towards jural definitions, how far does the essay speak to the current concerns of a modern student interested in intersubjectivity, reflexivity, the rights of persons in distant places and the cross-cultural experience of self? And how far should it?

I would suggest that in many respects Mauss's essay is dated, his interpretations one-sided, and the importance of his formal argument mainly of historical interest. In representing the social history of the concept of the person as a gradual evolution, traceable in the documentary and ethnographic record, Mauss is offering an optimistic and rationalist view of fundamental progress in human affairs. In its tracing of a continuous line of growth in intellectual sophistication and liberal institutions, the essay belongs very firmly to the pre-war world. There is no recognition of the rougher side of history, politics or the law in Mauss's account. Thus, for example, he mentions the Declaration of the Rights of Man, as a part of the unfolding of the modern idea of the person as a self, alongside the growth in philosophical claims for linking the category 'person' with self-consciousness as a principle. But he fails to note that the Declaration was born out of extreme political struggle. And whereas he mentions sectarian movements of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in contributing to modern notions of individual liberty and conscience, the historical circumstances of their 'contribution' remain in the background. Mauss nowhere mentions the French Revolution, and nor do any of the contributors to the 'Oxford' volume, which is strange, since 'history' is one of the fields supposedly covered by this book.

The contributors to the volume do not sufficiently criticize that implied theory of historical development, as the evolution of ideas in themselves, which lies behind Mauss's account. In the words of the new translation:

> From a simple masquerade to the mask, from a 'role' (*personnage*) to a 'person' (*personne*), to a name, to an individual; from the latter to a being possessing metaphysical and moral value; from a moral consciousness to a sacred being; from the latter to a fundamental form of thought and action - the course is accomplished.

And even though the future is unclear, and without vigilance (it is implied) the idea of the person might disappear (its moral strength already questioned):

> Let us say that social anthropology, sociology, history - all teach us to perceive how human thought 'moves on' (Meyerson). Slowly does it succeed in expressing itself, through time, through societies, their contacts and metamorphoses, along pathways that seem most perilous. Let us labour to demonstrate how we must become aware of ourselves, in order to perfect our thought and to express it better. (pp. 22-3)

Mauss thus enjoins the citizen of the present, beneficiary of the modern regard paid to the active, conscious self, to take part in the historical process towards perfection; to safeguard, indeed, that very idea of the person which the modern liberal age has produced. Here perhaps is something for the modern student to grasp, the student who has set aside intellectual history and gone into the field to grapple with the problems of personhood at first hand. Out there, the novice ethnographer encounters those flesh-and-blood informants who not only provide notes for the field diary but personal dilemmas for their observer. In this kind of encounter the ethnographer may find his or her notion of person and self extended, and in this recognition lies a peculiarly modern challenge. But at the same time the pragmatics of human interaction have always included encounters which fell outside the expectations of role or *personnage*; and there has always been, in one form or another in every society, the potential extension of moral relationship to strangers, non-kin and non-citizens. These aspects of a common human predicament (to adapt Steven Collins's use of this term in his essay here) are not merely the product of modern liberalism. Nowhere, I suggest, could a formal account of roles and *personnages* be a complete account of personhood; what Victor Turner characterized as *communitas* must also be explored.

Perhaps one of the harshest indictments of a social history, or a social anthropology, which bases itself on the orthodoxies of jural definition in the study of personhood is the figure of the slave who finds a voice. Alex Haley's *Roots* is not alone in evoking the muffled voices of past non-*personae*; there are many variants of the book title chosen by one Salim Wilson (alias 'Hatashil Masha Kathish'), *I Was a Slave* (n.d., c. 1939), in which the author describes his childhood in Dinkaland, his subsequent capture, and then release from slavery into the service of the Anglican church. The genre of autobiography here offers a means of redressing a denial of selfhood even when the circumstances of the world prevented the author from ever returning to his original home, to the society which had given him his sense of personhood in the first place. A slave may generally be categorized as a non-person, but of course only within what is sometimes benignly known as his or her 'host society'; that authoritative definition is imposed by circumstances of such dominant power that it can only rarely be contested on its own ground. And yet where such challenges have occurred, they have given rise to the formulation

of new freedoms (as has followed every slave revolt or even every rising of oppressed peoples), and to the extension of 'personhood' to include new perceptions of self. But Mauss pays little attention to the tension between flesh-and-blood human beings and the conservative character of political-jural boundaries and definitions: even though such tensions have often contributed to the 'evolution' of the ideas which he explores.

The *Année Sociologique* was engaged in a quest for the forms of primeval society, and though conscious that history had everywhere eroded those forms (perhaps particularly in Africa, for which reason their use of African ethnography is very slight), they did not have in focus the periods and processes of upheaval and rapid change out of which so many 'modern' ideas (such as the integrity and autonomy of the individual) have sprung. Change was seen as a gradual unfolding, a long-term development, of 'society as a whole', not of the antithetical clash of system with system, or of systems with forces external to themselves. Allen writes of the Durkheimian vision of primeval society as a dance, a masquerade of forms; he does, however, worry slightly about those who do not have a part in this dance, who do not, presumably, have a mask to wear, and thus do not occupy clearly defined roles:

> Members of a clan are not necessarily *personnages*. This may be because they have had to retire owing to old age or because they are female or too young. It would seem that some clan members otherwise qualified could not be *personnages* because there would not be enough names to go round.... Nor is it clear whether people who are not *personnages* are 'non-persons' in the same sense as the outsiders to the society or as Roman slaves. I suppose not, and this implies the possibility of gradations of personhood. (p. 33)

This all sounds familiar to a modern ear; perhaps there were recognizable predicaments for individual human beings in archaic society as there are in modern times for the contemporary liberal conscience. But their voices are usually silent. Those liable to be left out of the masked dance do not often figure in the ethnographic record; indeed what ethnography, except that of our own day, would attempt to elicit their views?

There are three areas of discussion missing from Mauss's essay which today's student might expect to find. First, there are no people as such, no named individuals (apart from classic ethnographers and philosophers); second, no regard is paid to the power structures within which and through which 'categories' have existence; and third, the field of *experience* of the self in relation to others is not treated comparatively. These areas of concern, however, and quite properly, pervade many of the papers in the 'Oxford' volume; and the field of comparative personal experience is the dominating theme of the American collection. Having specified, rather crudely, these 'omissions' from Mauss, let me consider them in turn, drawing upon contributions to the two volumes under review (though I cannot here cover all the

essays, nor treat them fully).

First, Mauss's essay lacks reference to individuals, as case studies, as witnesses, as subjects or objects of study: it is uninhabited. Iris Murdoch has suggested that a moral philosophy should be inhabited; and we might say the same for a comparative anthropology. 'Notions' or 'categories' can be communicated to the ethnographer only through the medium of human encounter, through the specific words, actions, and full-length accounts by and about real people. This point is made boldly in different ways by contributors to the 'Oxford' volume - for example by Mark Elvin for China:

> To imply that the Chinese in classical and medieval times did not make the human actor (*personne*) 'a complete entity independent of any other except God' does not do justice either to the radical individualism of Yang Ju, or to the sense of personal isolation expressed by the poet Chiu Yuan. ... For thinkers like Luh Shianqshan (thirteenth century) and Wang Yangming (sixteenth century), the mind of the individual was not unlike Mauss's conception of the self in the Western Enlightenment. (p. 156)

Alexis Sanderson makes analogous points for Hindu India, and Godfrey Lienhardt for Africa. Like other contributors seeking selfhood in textual expression outside modern Europe, A. Momigliano is most forthright in his use of Greek biography and autobiography. With that rich tradition of heroes, and of lesser but still warm-blooded people, the recognizable person/self cannot be declared absent from the ancient Greek world; and yet Mauss, as Momigliano points out, fails to mention the Greeks in his essay. Nor does he refer to material of this kind in his discussion of any other people or civilization.

The second element missing from Mauss's study is a consideration of authority and power, especially in the making of effective definitions of persons as political or legal entities. To label some foreign, female or immature human being as a non-person, a clan as a person, or twins as a single person, is itself an exercise in the extension of power over others through the use of jural categories. Not only is the field of power in this and other senses omitted from the description of masked Kwakiutl dances and so on, but even from much of the discussion of modern European history. Here one would point, however, to the reintroduction of this theme in various of the 'Oxford' contributions, in particular in Louis Dumont's historical essay on the Christian beginnings of modern individualism. The modern in-worldly individual is presented as developing quite specifically within political transformations of the relations between Church and secular society.

Michael Carrithers in his 'An Alternative Social History of the Self' draws a very helpful distinction between the *personne* oriented to a given collectivity, and the *moi* oriented to a field of like selves:

> That the *personne* has a social and legal history is no surprise, for social and legal history are precisely what make any particular example of the *personne* itself and nothing else.... An individual human being may be subjected to an alien notion of the *personne*, as are black South Africans.... The political community to which one belongs may not be one's moral or religious community. (p. 236)

Carrithers attempts to disentangle a narrative history of the *moi* from that of the *personne*; and clearly finds this distinction present wherever it is seriously looked for. Questions of the comparative dimension of the experiencing self then naturally follow; questions of the kind Mauss does not treat.

This field of inner experience, the 'psychological' aspect of the person, is deliberately left aside at the start of the essay. Several contributors to the 'Oxford' volume note this with reservation; and note also (most explicitly in the case of Michael Carrithers) that Mauss reintroduces as definitive the inner psychological aspect of persons exclusively in the context of modern Europe. Given that Mauss's essay would have been prepared before the publication of any of Evans-Pritchard's monographs, which set new standards in field observation, it might be claimed that the ethnographic evidence then did not allow the kind of comparative treatment that a modern reader might expect of the representation of the human being as an experiencing and evaluating subject. But this field, now known as 'ethno-psychology', was not entirely neglected even at that time. The evidence available to us today is, however, much more sophisticated than that of half a century ago, and in this field it is much less easy to perceive an evolutionary story-line.

The volume *Culture and Self* provides us with rich material in this sphere, including several 'indigenous anthropologists' from Asia writing both an academics and informants on the non-Western self. Particularly valuable, at least to the non-specialist, are the essays by Agehananda Bharati on 'The Self in Hindu Thought and Action', and Godwin C. Chu on 'The Changing Concept of Self in Contemporary China'. While esoteric and difficult in many ways, these presentations are of a kind a Western reader need not find impenetrable. Frank Johnson's analysis of 'The Western Concept of Self' reminds us of how many dimensions the Western self itself may be found to have; by contrast, Mauss's view is very simple.

The American volume nevertheless fails to grasp the central difficulty of the relation between inner or experiential, and outer or jural, formulations of personhood. But the most helpful of the essays in the 'Oxford' collection do seize upon this problem. Steven Collins's lucid and illuminating essay moves towards a formulation of the general, and even universal *predicaments* in which we find ourselves; one of them being the experience of self as more than a biological given, a sense of self being completed only within a social context. Hence, he suggests, we find everywhere theories of self as 'body-plus ...' and a potential distinction between public character and private consciousness,

while the latter is itself formed within a social milieu (p. 74).

Godfrey Lienhardt's *leitmotif* is also that of the imcompleteness of any public definition of the person/self. With reference mainly to Africa (a continent which scarcely makes an appearance in Mauss's essay, or indeed in his wider writings) Lienhardt sketches the complexities of cultural representations of the inner person and subjective experience. He quotes the West African tale of the king who offered a prize for the best dancer at a gathering of the animals. To the surprise and displeasure of the crowd, the king gave the prize not to the graceful giraffe, nor to the agile leopard or the leaping gazelle, but to the awkward tortoise. The king claimed an exclusive right to judge the dancing, for he was providing the feast and the prize: '"And so it is that I award the prize to the tortoise ... for it is only I who can see the dance of the tortoise: his dance is entirely inside him"'. Lienhardt comments:

> For those who tell this tale, the success of the slow, ungainly tortoise is an extreme example of the deceptiveness of outward appearances, though the moral is not that hidden intellectual agility is preferred, as such, to physical dispaly: both are parts of the dance. The tortoise too, now public and exposed, now withdrawn and hidden, is a fitting and subtle image for the self. (p. 143)

The most penetrating of the essays in *The Category of the Person* go well beyond what that phrase might be taken to mean in its simpler sense, and acknowledge the predicament of inner and outer which Lienhardt's tortoise embodies. They all encompass in discussion that notion of experienced selfhood in which 'I' am linked to others by the discriminations I make between myself and others like me: that is, I distinguish myself as one in a field of other moral points of reference. In this field, 'I' exist in relation to some 'Thou', or a number of 'They', thought of as being like me in some essential way. At this level there may be present, as a social fact, a conception of personhood distinct from categories at the jural level. To discuss the morality of human encounter need not reduce one to the discussion of pan-human biological givens. But Mauss does not touch this problem at all. Throughout his essay there runs a sharp, characteristically Durkheimian, distinction: that is, a distinction between the self thought of as a unit, and the wider society thought of also as a unit, albeit an encompassing one. The person/self is thus defined by discrimination, not from others of a like order, but from a structured, ordering whole which alone gives it what jural-cum-moral existence it may have: a species of citizenship.

Perhaps our more modern - even post-modern? - view of real persons potentially everywhere is itself a product of Mauss's profounder sociological insight; perhaps in asking the sort of questions that Carrithers does in his '*moi* theories' and Collins in his 'body plus ...', we are projecting our modern notions

unjustifiably into the conditions of archaic and non-Western social life. Here, the straightforward approach of many contributors to *Culture and Self* would be culpable naïvety; and while I am not suggesting that they should stand accused in this way, it is necessary to accept that a book of this kind could not have been produced except as a result of the social history of the modern West. The modern Western 'I' is a new and local creation: but it changes more rapidly than we can easily make allowances for. It was a late nineteenth-century view of relations between peoples of the world which ultimately underlay Mauss's view of persons, and this has now been largely displaced. The events of the last half century, revealing Europe as a less secure home of liberal individualism, and former imperial territories as politically capable in ways which would not have been thought possible even in the 1930s, have surely made Mauss's views a matter of history in themselves. Meanwhile a humbler comparison of self with self becomes possible across the world.

One tiny slip in the 'Oxford' volume I will mention as it touches on a sensitive point: in the newly translated text of Mauss, reference is made to 'the Ashanti Ntoro' as though this were the name of some tribal collectivity (p. 12). But *ntoro* is an Ashanti term for an individually received spirit passed on through the father, thus differentiating the inner nature of persons who are otherwise members of a common matrilineage with shared bodily substance. The tendency to erase individuality, and the spiritual distinctiveness of persons, in the writing of ethnography about 'other peoples', is still with us.

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