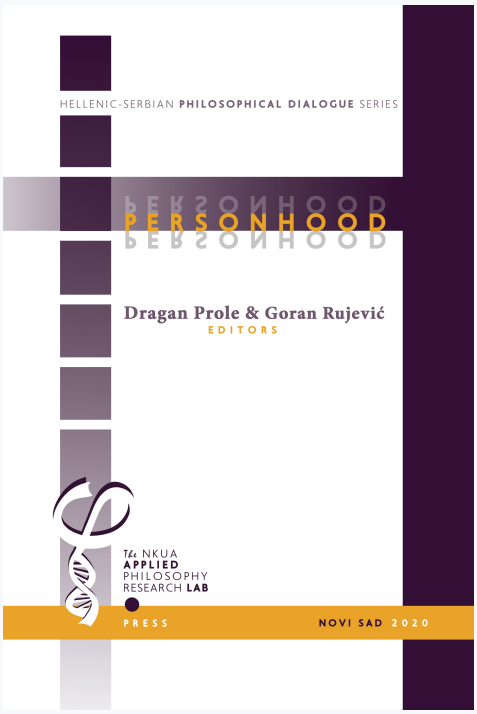
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Chapter

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Personhood

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Personification: A Category Mistake or a Categorial Novum?

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Abstract: In this paper the author considers the problem of whether personification, the process of treating something without personal characteristics as if it were a human person, is based on the misuse of the category of personhood. A very serious historical form of this kind of categorial gerrymandering is so-called anthropomorphism. In order to shed light on the mentioned problem the author thematizes personification in three ways: personification as a categorial mistake, as a categorial transfer and as a hidden vivification. For this purpose, the following philosophical theories will be helpful: Ryle's logical analysis, Hartmann's new ontology and Klages' metaphysics of life. At the end of the paper the author pleads for an integrative approach in the philosophical theory of personhood.
Keywords: personification; anthropomorphism; categorial mistake; categorial transfer; vivification; Gilbert Ryle; Nicolai Hartmann; Ludwig Klages.

I. Introduction

Both within and without the philosophical context, the word 'person' is surrounded by a nimbus of sanctity which was a guarantee for its frequent usage in metaphysical and ethical theories (especially in deontological ones). Furthermore, it can be designated as a guiding concept of philosophical anthropology. This is nothing extraordinary because the human being defines themself[1] as a being which possesses a Self, which means that it is able to

[1] In order to avoid the difference between male and female individuals I will use the pronoun 'themself' when it is necessary to refer to self-reflective activities of a human being.

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attribute the capability of self-consciousness to themself. The human being (the person) knows that they are the subject of their thoughts, wishes and feelings but also the subject of their actions and the initiator of interactions with other human beings, i. e. persons. This state of affairs has a theoretical and a practical consequence. Both are relevant for a philosophical investigation of the phenomenon of *personhood*. But there is also an aspect of this phenomenon that could be of systematic importance for the philosophical investigation – the so-called *personification*, the semantic (maybe also pragmatic) process of treating something that does not possess a Self as personal or quasi-personal, literally *making it personal*.

II. On anthropomorphism

From a historical point of view, the procedure of personification can be seen in a similar kind of projection of human characteristics onto something non-human or super-human – the so-called *anthropomorphism*. In ancient myths and legends gods are presented in a humanlike form: they look like humans, have similar thoughts, they intend and realize their actions in the same way as humans do, show feelings and passions, enjoy pleasures, deal with disappointments and express their emotions in different types of situations. This problematic attribution of human characteristics to divine beings induced some thinkers to scathing criticism. Xenophanes noted that if horses and lions had hands they also would create pictures and statues of gods in the likeness of the form they themselves possess. This critique of anthropomorphism anticipates the very ideas of the later formulated criticism of religion represented in the works of such thinkers as Ludwig Feuerbach and Karl Marx.

In the Christian tradition the ancient and pagan polytheism is refuted primarily because of the anthropomorphic personification of divine beings. Although the Christian believer tries to keep their faith aloof from anthropomorphism, they take the risk of regression to this alienated form of consciousness by using nouns and verbs that describe human

mental states and ways of planning and realizing actions when they want to render God's ideas and intentions. In the age of *Enlightenment* the situation has been turned upside down – God is now disempowered, and (enlightened) man is deified. This is a different way of understanding "the dialectics of Enlightenment."

But this is not the end of the story – by which I mean the history of anthropomorphism and its critical evaluation. These days, anthropomorphism is unmasked as anthropocentrism, a sort of *speciesism*. In present bioethical debates the application of human standards of value for the purpose of specifying the moral status of non-human beings is criticized as tendentious and injudicious so that it must be refused or corrected. It seems that man no longer wants to show themself godlike and – instead of this – declares solidarity with animals by making them humanlike. Not only (the imagined) gods have personal traits – now the animals also have the right to be treated as persons.

III. Personification as a categorial problem

After these preliminary considerations of anthropomorphism we must immerse ourselves in the problematic matter. For this purpose, we can choose the standpoint of *categorial analysis* conceived as a method of classifying phenomena under concepts not only in ontological theories but also in theories which find their point of departure in the linguistic turn. First, we must emphasize that it does not make sense to describe the person themself as a category. It is more correct to designate *personhood* as a category. A man or woman can be subordinated under the category of personhood, and then we state that he or she is a person.

The main characteristic of a person is their *self-consciousness*. In a discipline such as bioethics this way of determining personhood is refuted by the argument that there are some humans like babies, people who suffer from Alzheimer's disease or vegetate in a state of coma – people who are still to be treated

as persons not only because of the social environment in which they are embedded but also due to other characteristics which are further intrinsic components of personhood (attributes like sensibility to pain or responsiveness to stimuli from their environment). Even if the characterization of a person as a self-conscious subject may be grasped as one-sided, it has the advantage of pointing out a seeming difference between humans and other beings. (We now leave aside the crucial problem whether it is an essential account of distinguishing beings or just a speciesistically motivated projection of arbitrary traits of human beings.)

Returning to the problem of anthropomorphism, i. e. the way non-human beings are described by means of human characteristics, we can notice that these beings are outfitted with some abilities which imply self-consciousness (for example: thinking, planning and realizing actions, communication with other beings etc.). When Zeus, the mightiest god in ancient Greece, is enraged by sacrilegious or reckless practices of the mortals, he *considers* which kind of punishment could be necessary to rebuke the contumacious race; finally, he *chooses* the adequate punishing procedure and *instructs* other gods or human executioners to put his will into practice. The mentioned (mental) activities (consideration, deliberation, issuing commands and so on) are undertaken on the fundament of self-consciousness of a personal or, at least, person-like being. It is the privilege of persons to be aware of their thoughts, intentions, wishes and projects of action. If the ancient immortals are persons too then they possess the same capabilities – and, vice versa, the possession of these abilities qualifies them for being deemed as persons.

Self-consciousness is a categorial moment within the human condition – one of its most important. It is a constitutive personality trait. The traditional philosophy has stylized it to the *conditio sine qua non* of human personhood: from the ancient definition of man as *animal rationale* and the Christian doctrines of man as the image of God to the theories of action and communication in contemporary thought, philosophers hang

on to the figure of person as the owner of self-consciousness. It is the guarantee for attributing dignity to human persons. So far, so good! But what happens in the case where these characteristics of human persons are transferred to other beings? In other words, what are the theoretical implications of the categorial transfer of personhood outside the sphere of humanity? Is personification a correct way of categorial transfer?

There are at least two possibilities to answer this question. One answer is skeptical, the other rather affirmative. One can come to these answers from different points of view: either from a logical perspective or from an ontological one. The first answer is based on the philosophical critique of language, the second results from a realistic approach in ontology based on the idea of levels of reality. It is time to raise the question of whether personification represents rather a *categorial novum* than a case of *category mistake*. This is the crucial problem I want to discuss in my paper.

a. Personification as a categorial mistake (Ryle)

In the tradition of nominalism we can find breadcrumbs of language criticism regarding the usage of general concepts. This trend is continued with John Locke's description of the abuse of words and later with the neopositivistic refutation of metaphysical language. Finally, this kind of philosophizing has found its adequate manifestation in critical analysis of language represented in *analytic philosophy* which dominates today, not only in the Anglo-Saxon context. In his work *The Concept of Mind* (1949), one of the most renowned proponents of analytic philosophy, Gilbert Ryle, introduced *category mistake* as a specific topic. This kind of fundamental mistake "represents the facts of mental life as if they belonged to one logical type or category (or range of types or categories), when they actually belong to another."[2] Having in mind the procedure of Cartesian

[2] Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1966), 16. Cf. also Gilbert Ryle, "Categories," in Gilbert Ryle, *Collected Papers*.

metaphysics to hypostatize two different sorts of substance – *res extensa* and *res cogitans* – Ryle wants to show that this dualism is based on a category mistake by treating mind as an autonomous substance instead of reconstructing it just as a collective name for a set of activities which can be registered by the help of our senses and which, considered in aggregate, constitute a behavior of a certain person (including the dispositions which cannot be perceived by our senses). The so-called "Dogma of the Ghost in the Machine" is one of the most prominent examples in philosophy for making a category mistake. According to the "grey eminence" of philosophy in Oxford the key for clarifying this conceptual confusion can be found in the means of logical analysis of language: "The exhibition of these absurdities will have the constructive effect of bringing out part of the correct logic of mental-conduct concepts."[3]

What does it mean when someone is making a category mistake when talking about persons? Obviously, we can recognize this case when someone uses concepts from one categorial sphere to describe beings, events and processes which belong to a different categorial sphere. For example, if one says that their dog *decided* to take one path in a situation where many paths are passable, they actually misinterpret the behavior of this animal by using categories which are applicable only to human behavior, which means that they lose sight of the fact that the dog's behavior is in particular directed by its olfactory sense and presumably not by even a rudimental rational way of decision-making. The problems compound when we try to use categories of human behavior for the purpose of describing mental states and activities of superhuman beings. It could also be identified as a case of category mistake when it is said that the ancient god Zeus, irritated by the impudence of Prometheus who stole the fire and gave it to the humans, *made the decision* to punish

Volume 2. Collected Essays 1929-1968 (London, New York: Routledge, 2009), 178–193 (reprinted from *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, vol. XXXVIII, 1938).

[3] Ibid., p. 23.

the enchained titan by sending an eagle to feed on his liver. Why would this description of state of affairs be interpreted as a category mistake? Because it is disputable whether terms which describe human characteristics could be used without a hitch to reconstruct the behavior of superhuman beings like gods, demons or fairies, i. e. creatures about whose nature and potential sphere of action we do not have any empirically verifiable knowledge. Things get even more complicated when we give consideration to the problematic ontological status of these beings – after all, we do not know if they even exist. In other words, it is the typical case of a so-called "*fallacy of misplaced concreteness*"[4] when we deal with fictive subjects or objects as if they were real and accessible to our experience, in other words, when something extremely abstract is taken into consideration as something very concrete. From the logical point of view, it is very arguable to treat nonhumans and superhumans like autonomous persons. This kind of personification inevitably must fail.

b. Personification as a categorial transfer (Hartmann)

How could personification be scrutinized from an ontological standpoint? In this context I want to refer to Nicolai Hartmann's project of "New Ontology" primarily because I think this theory could be useful when the problem of personification is considered in a categorial manner. Hartmann took the view of *critical realism* and presented a *pluralistic* approach in ontology. The idea of being is not unitary here – it is composed of several *layers* or *strata*: the inorganic (inanimate), the organic (biological), the psychical and the spiritual stratum.[5] The fundamental strata

[4] This is a term introduced in the philosophical discussion by Whitehead. Cf. Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1929), 49-70 (Chapter III: The Century of Genius). Cf. also Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality. An Essay in Cosmology* (New York: The Free Press, 1978), 7-8.

[5] Cf. Nicolai Hartmann, *New Ways of Ontology*, translated by Reinhard C. Kuhn (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1975), 43-53 (Chapter V: *The Stratified Structure of the World*).

of the world are determined by specific laws and regularities.[6] One of them is the law of *categorial novelty* which postulates that there is a specific novelty in the higher stratum which cannot be reconstructed simply as a sum of the categorial moments which belong to the lower ones. It is something new and not reducible to already given components; because of this it is called a 'categorial novum."[7] For example, the self-organized metabolism is the novum which appears in the organic stratum and cannot be found in the inorganic one. The crucial question is whether this ontological *ansatz* could be fruitful for the categorial analysis of the phenomenon of personification.

What kind of criteria must be regarded if a being should be denoted as a person? According to Hartmann's theory of strata (*Schichtenlehre*) it must be enfolded by categories of the highest stratum – the *spiritual* stratum. It is the region of three forms of spirit: the *personal*, the *objective* and the *objectivated* spirit. The most important categorial moments of personal spirit are consciousness, will, foresight, teleological activity and liberty. A person is aware of their thoughts, wishes and feelings, they can plan their activities and realize intended purposes, finally – what is especially important from an ethical viewpoint – they are disposed to the idea of liberty. The human being[8] is participating in the spiritual stratum: as an individual they are implied as having a personal spirit, as a member of a community they are among other individuals in the medium of objective

[6] Cf. op. cit., 73-83 (Chapter VIII: *The Strata Laws of the Real World*).

[7] "The recurrence of lower categories never determines the character of the higher stratum. This character always rests on the emergence of a categorial novelty which is independent of the recurrent categories and consists in the appearance of new categories. The modification of the recurring elements is contingent upon the emergence of novelty." Ibid., 76.

[8] It must be mentioned that Hartmann advocates an *integrative* view of the human nature: "The nature of man can be adequately understood only as the integrated whole of combining strata and, furthermore, as placed within the totality of the same order of strata which, outside of man, determines the structure of the real world." Ibid., 121-122.

spirit and they produce artefacts such as books, paintings, sculptures etc. which are manifestations of the objectivated spirit (mind). When we want to describe a human person, we can use extensively most of these categories without making a categorial mistake. Problems begin to arise if we make a step underneath (or even above) the spiritual stratum and use the categories of personal spirit to grasp quasi-personal abilities and activities of non-human beings.

How could personification be reconstructed from the perspective of Hartmann's new ontology? I think that this could be done in two different ways. The first way is similar to Ryle's linguistic criticism – personification can be refused as a form of illegitimate category transfer. For example, if one says that their dog decided to choose one path and not the other, they use the category of decision-making which is an activity of human will and thereby transfer a category from the spiritual layer to the lower one where psychic phenomena are considered. Even more problematic is the transfer of a category from a lower to a higher stratum although Hartmann assumes different possibilities of transformation of "lower" categories at a higher level (for this purpose he is distinguishing between *superinformation* [*Überformung*] and *superimposition* [*Überbauung*][9]). In a fictional (mythological) context the proposition 'Zeus wants to punish Prometheus' can be understood without problems. But does this proposition have a sense in our real world? Does a godlike Zeus really exist? The spiritual stratum is the highest one in Hartmann's stratified view of the real world. There is no layer above the spiritual one. Even though ancient and other divine beings are part of the so-called objectivated spirit because of their appearance as characters in myths, from Hartmann's neo-ontological point of view nothing can be said about the ontological status of these beings. A major problem considered within this philosophical approach is the difficulty of representing ontic forms without grounding them in the lower layers of reality. In other words, Hartmann

[9] Cf. Nicolai Hartmann, *New Ways of Ontology*, 78-79.

excludes the possibility of 'levitated' layers which would be lacking any categorial contact to other levels. It is notable that Nicolai Hartmann has never written a book about philosophy of religion.

It seems that personification must be unmasked as a form of category mistake also from the perspective of Hartmann's critical realism.[10] But there is a second possibility to understand this phenomenon without refusing it as senseless. This interpretation is dealing with the very concept of person. Namely, if we understand this concept as a stratified structure, we can then recognize some of its categorial moments in the lower layers of reality as well. Maybe it is problematic to ascribe personal characteristics inherent to humans also to animals, but if we recognize some abilities like sensibility or pain susceptibility as belonging to the scope of personhood then we can treat all beings which, for example, feel pain as persons. Pain sensitivity is something that humans share with animals due to the fact that it is a category which connects the organic and the psychical stratum. It is no wonder that this insight is often used in contemporary bioethical debates to argue the case for *animal rights*. The main argument is that animals should be treated like persons because they can feel pain and someone who tries to harm or even to kill them transgresses their right to be treated with respect. Anyway, for someone who is defending the concept of animal rights on the basis of *pathocentrism*, it could be possible to take advantage of some of Hartmann's ontological ideas in order to strengthen their position.

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[10] Hartmann listed many categorial errors in his article "How Is Critical Ontology Possible? Toward the Foundation of the General Theory of the Categories, Part One," translated by Keith R. Peterson, *Axiomathes* 22 (2012): 315-354. An extended version of his critique of ontological "prejudices" can be found in Nicolai Hartmann, *Der Aufbau der realen Welt*. Grundriß der allgemeinen Kategorienlehre (Ontologie Band 3), 3. Auflage (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1964), 61-156.

c. Personification and vivification (Klages)

Finally, I want to sketch a further sense of personification that might provoke a degree of odium among certain people who are subscribing to a strong realistic view of the world. This could be understood as a wider sense of the term 'personification.' In a stricter sense, personification refers to all kinds of living beings, no matter whether they are mortal (humans or animals) or immortal (gods, angels, demons and the like). But having in mind our emotional responsiveness triggered by external impact we tend to phrase that sunshine *pleases* us, rain is *boring* us by its monotonous sound, boredom is *killing* us, some painted figures seem like they're amicably *smiling* at us etc. It seems that in this case some personal qualities, i. e. qualities like pleasantness, boringness, deadliness, happiness etc. have been ascribed to non-living entities such as weather conditions, emotional states or drawings. If the first case of personifying fictive beings like demons or fairies is already confusing, what should be said about the mentioned case? Hence the confusion reaches its climax.

Personification of non-living beings or events by ascribing humanlike qualities to them can rightly be refused from a logical point of view and considered as a notable category mistake. But there is a way to recognize one positive effect of such personification. It can namely be treated as a vehicle for renewing our linguistic means in order to describe the impressions that similar beings or events induce in minds of humans. This is not simply the case of the so-called "transfer of meaning." Maybe it is rather the opposite case that this kind of personifying things and processes makes the forming of metaphors or other "transferred" terms possible at all.

An impassionate proponent of this interpretation of personification was the German philosopher Ludwig Klages, best known for the radical criticism of occidental rationalism presented in his opus magnum *The Spirit as Adversary of the Soul* (1929□ 1932). As the title of his work suggests, he transvalued the role of soul in contrast to the overvaluation of the spirit.

The reality of the world is given in images[11] and because of the ability of humans to perceive very lively impressions on account of the influence of these images on their soul, the world view is permeated with interpretable expressions. Therefore, every movement or change within perceived things, events or situations has its individual signature which triggers a specific reaction in the observer who is interpreting it as a quasi-personal trait. For example, if one says: "The wind gently tousled Mary's hair," then gentleness (tenderness) is a quality which is being ascribed to human persons but it seems that the wind (a natural process) also can generate similar effects as a hand movement. But in our everyday opinion, characteristics of human activities (i. e. activities of human persons) can also be paraphrased as symptoms of non-human agents. Taking into consideration that there is a subthreshold nexus between occidental rationalism and personification, Klages prefers the retreat – in terms of Hartmann's ontology: he tries to step back from the higher stratum to the lower one.[12] These two tendencies – personification and vivification[13] – both could be dismissed as a sort of metaphysics or mysticism.[14] But they stand for the potential of our language to "depict" reality as

[11] According to Klages the reality is *ipso facto* reality of images. Cf. Ludwig Klages, *Der Geist als Widersacher der Seele*, 6., ungekürzte Auflage (Bonn: Bouvier Verlag Herbert Grundmann, 1981), 801-1248 [*Die Wirklichkeit der Bilder*].

[12] Cf. the comparison with *botanic* symbols and metaphors in Ludwig Klages*, Der Geist als Widersacher der Seele*, 1308. Klages emphasizes the reverse perspective, namely "that here rather the human person is taken back into the more elemental sphere of the vegetative than the tree [this is his foil for comparison, D. S.] personified" (cf. op. cit., 1310 [translated by the author, D. S.]).

[13] Klages describes the essence of personhood as *dichotomous*: the person hovers between the poles of *spirit* and *life*, the two conflicting forces in his metaphysical system. Cf. op. cit., 61-76 ("Die Zwiespältigkeit der Person").

[14] They also could be related to the magical worldview which dominates in elemental communities (this relation is the research object of the social and cultural anthropology).

something that is affecting us and not as something separated from our personal experience. The world is touching us – and we respond to its effects by reflecting this in our allusive language. Personification and vivification have more in common than it might seem at first sight.

IV. Conclusion

In the end, I want to summarize the results of my consideration of personification in a few statements. (1) Personification is based on a category mistake if some higher-order categories are transferred to a lower layer of reality and then used to characterize abilities and activities of non-human beings. (2) Personification is also a sort of category mistake if it consists in the use of categories whose purpose is to specify the behavior of entities the being of which is transcending the well-known layers of reality (at least the four above-mentioned strata presented in Hartmann's ontology). This kind of personification is more a projection of human attributes onto something unreal than a description of entities in the real world. (3) Personification can furthermore be understood as a manifestation of categorial novum if the categories, which serve to picture the character and behavior of human persons, can be explained as a kind of "superformation" – or at least "superposition" – of categories already existing in the lower strata. It also needs to be pointed out that categories of the lower stratum *per se* can be sufficient for qualifying a non-human being as a person. (4) It is also possible to personify entities and processes in the non-living (physical) world if it is shown that the quality of impressions elicited in other subjects by these entities is nearly the same as the quality of impressions which other (human) persons evoke in ourselves. In like manner there is the possibility to recognize qualities of "lower" forms of life in human characteristics, actions and behavior patterns on condition that the impressions of former and latter mentioned processes resp. beings are look-alikes. The category descent or ascent could be justified

by means of the theory of *modifying predicates*.[15] (5) Finally, the essence of personhood should not be explicated by means of just one distinction, no matter how important it is (for instance self-consciousness). The very state of personhood is *stratified* so that an additional effort is needed to describe it adequately. Like in other cases, an *integrative* approach is more fruitful than a narrow-minded reductionism.

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[15] This kind of logical theory is presented in Josef König's work *Being and Thinking* (1937). Modifying predicates articulate the so-called *certain impressions* which are equivalent to *impressions of something certain*. Cf. Josef König, *Sein und Denken*. Studien im Grenzgebiet von Logik, Ontologie und Sprachphilosophie, zweite, unveränderte Auflage (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1969) (1st Edition: 1937), especially 1-80.

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