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*Idea of themselves as persons? According to the anthropologist
Gert H. Coorens, the answer to this question should be negative.*

*People everywhere have developed symbolic structures in terms of which
persons are perceived not really as such, as mere individual members of the
human race, but as representatives of certain limited categories of persons,
specific sorts of individuals (Coorens 1974, 305).*

Though this implies that the concept of person is a cultural universal, it
clears that conceptions of the person as they are, or were, actually
in various cultures may differ greatly. But how, and in what
ways? Assuming with Coorens that the concept of person is a universal,
what forms and symbols does it become manifest? How and where do
we look for it in a particular culture?

In 1938 the French sociologist Marcel Mauss (1892-1980) published
a pioneering essay on what he considered to be a fundamental category of
human mind: the concept of person (Mauss 1985). Mauss made use of
his own notion 'personne', that has had a history of its own. Its original
meaning is 'mask' (ancestral mask, mask used in the theatre), but it also
referred to the role an individual played in the public life of Roman
society (Fehrmann 1979). The idea of role slowly became decomplicated,
though it can still be detected in the well known theological formula of
Christian 'una substantia, tres personae'. The Latin meaning of 'personae'
personas Mauss's made concern that all definitions and conceptions
of the human self are part of a cultural and historical context.
Evolution of person in the various modern European languages had its
own judicial meaning only gradually. From the 12th century onwards a
new meaning came into use, expressing the specific individuality of a
being: the notion 'personality', 'Persönlichkeit', 'personage'. Next
it is hardly possible to deal exhaustively with this subject here, so
we confine ourselves to referring to the relevant literature mentioned in the
bibliography at the end of this volume.

On the basis of the psychological and linguistic insights of his days,

EXTRATERRESTRIAL PERSONS

Wim B. Drees

1. *Introduction*

The question I want to discuss in this paper is: on what condition would we apply our concepts of person to extraterrestrials? This question is concerned with an investigation into the way we employ our concepts rather than with an investigation of extraterrestrials.

The applicability of the criteria presented by H.G. Hubbeling in this volume will be discussed, together with a few other philosophical contributions concerned with the concept of person, both in general (J.J. Oosten in this volume) and in relation to extraterrestrials (M. Tooley, R. Puccetti).

I agree with R. Planck (1968) and L.W. Beck (1971) that claims about *contacts* between humans and extraterrestrials are at present matter for psychological research. However, the mere possibility of the existence of life and intelligence elsewhere in the universe should be taken seriously. And it is taken seriously by the International Astronomical Union, which in 1982 established a Committee on the Search for Extraterrestrial Life. Evidence of the actual existence of such life has not yet been found, but the absence of evidence in this field is not evidence of absence.

2. *Would ETIs be persons?*

The philosophical question within the context of this volume is whether a concept of person can be applied to ETIs (Extraterrestrial Intelligences). The answer depends on the concept of person used.

2.1 Individuality, self-consciousness and will as criteria.

If one uses the classical definition of Boethius, discussed by Hubbeling in this volume, 'personae est naturae rationalis individua substantia', one has to concern oneself with two components: rationality and individuality.

Rationality might be ascribed to extraterrestrial beings on the basis

of the signals received. Signals should neither be too regular nor too chaotic because such signals would be ascribed to ordinary physical processes. For some kind of radio signal to be able to serve as evidence for the presence of extraterrestrial intelligence, it would be best if it could be interpreted meaningfully, say, as an expression of the prime numbers or chemical elements. Such a message need not be evidence of a living being, since there are many messages which can be produced by machines (chess computers, etc.). In any case, messages come from ETIs, or from machines produced by ETIs, or from machines which could themselves be considered intelligent.

Whereas the ascription of rationality, understood as intelligence, might be defended on the basis of conceivable evidence in the form of radio signals containing information of a certain structure, individuality is more problematic. On Earth, projects like interstellar communication require organizations composed of many individuals. In bilateral communication the time between question and answer would exceed many earthly generations. But elsewhere there might, of course, be a different life span, and biological individuality need not be the same as it is on Earth. Life might be more symbiotic, as it is in the case of termites. As long as the information content of the messages has not been deciphered, nothing meaningful can be said about the structure of individuality of the transmitting being(s).

Hubbeling characterizes 'person' as possessing *self-consciousness* and *will*, bearing moral and aesthetic values, as well as having an 'I-Thou' relation to other individuals, to the collective 'thou' of the group, and to God.

As far as self-consciousness and will are concerned I can be brief. Sending messages into outer space implies that the transmitting civilization considers it possible that somewhere in the universe there might be other civilizations. This implies a certain degree of reflection upon their own civilization, and hence something like self-consciousness. Since communication does not come about by chance, one being, or more, must have decided to send messages, signals with contents. Consequently, if 'will' is taken as the criterion of personhood, the existence of messages points to the existence of persons.

The existence of messages does not give any information about the question whether ETIs have *aesthetic* values. The contents of the messages, however, could have aesthetic value, e.g., a representation of

the music of J.S. Bach.

2.2 ETIs and morality

Moral criteria for personhood can much less clearly be applied to ETIs. However, there have been some discussions on this issue.

M. Tooley has discussed the question 'Would ETIs Be Persons?' in relation to the question of 'how we *ought* to interact with extraterrestrial, nonhuman intelligences' (Tooley: 1976, 129). Tooley has based himself on the distinction between three classes, namely inanimate objects, animals and adult human beings (persons). To which class would ETIs belong? According to Tooley,

to be a person an extraterrestrial being would have to be a conscious entity with the capacity for self-consciousness plus the capacity for envisaging a future for itself and for having desires about its continued existence (Tooley: 1976, 141).

The epistemological question arises as to how one could know whether an ETI possesses these properties.

The answer depends, according to Tooley, on one's philosophy of mind. Behaviourists (mind is a matter of there being a certain type of complex behaviour) would not have any difficulty with this question, nor would it pose serious problems to identity theorists (mental states are states of the nervous system). The issue would in fact only be problematic for dualists (mind is something non-physical and private). However, dualists give different accounts of the conviction that other human minds exist (analogy, explanatory power, use of terms referring to mental states), and these accounts can also be applied to ETIs. Tooley concludes that there are conditions which would justify anybody in believing that certain ETIs possess self-consciousness, and are capable of envisaging a future and having desires about their own continued existence, and 'this means that such extraterrestrial beings would have to be regarded as persons' (Tooley: 1976, 145).

Tooley's argument in support of the idea that ETIs may be regarded as persons rests on precisely the same grounds as his justification of our calling another human being a person. Its upshot, however, is rather trivial: if some ETIs were very similar to humans - and if they were not

deceptions - those ETIs would have to count as persons. The intriguing question is under what conditions ETIs are properly considered to be persons when we do not know the extent to which they are similar to us. It seems to me that Tooley underestimates the practical difficulties. The identity theorist is not able to look for corresponding states of the 'brains' of the ETIs. The explanatory power of a mind (according to Tooley, reason for a dualist to consider ETIs as persons) is not clear if we know almost nothing about the physiology of an ETI. Of Tooley's three philosophies of mind only the behaviourists' approach seems feasible.

Tooley discusses the problem of whether ETIs are persons, because he wishes to answer the moral question of how we ought to treat them. However, as will be explained in section 3, one does not need to know whether they are persons to have reasons to treat ETIs as persons.

According to R. Puccetti, in his *Persons. A study of Possible Moral Agents in the Universe*, moral relations 'are possible only between persons, and ... any entity with which one can conceive having moral relations would be a person' (Puccetti: 1968, 26). Puccetti applies the concept to artifacts, ETIs, and God. According to him, belief in the existence of ETIs conflicts with belief in God. This theological claim will be discussed below. First I want to focus on morality.

For evolutionary reasons 'the differences [between ETIs and humans] will be relatively negligible' (Puccetti: 1968, 89). Puccetti bases this on examples of convergent evolution on Earth. He points out that some scientists refer to ETIs as 'humanoids'. He sees this as an example of parochialism. A concept at a higher level, i.e., 'person', is already available, for

although human beings are persons, not all persons need to be human. To qualify as a person an entity must, as I said, be capable of both these things: the assimilation of a conceptual scheme and the experience of sensations, emotional states, etc. Which is to say that persons are always potential 'moral agents' (Puccetti: 1968, 99).

Convergent evolution assures him that

despite secondary biological differences they would certainly qualify for person-

status, since they would be both capable of assimilating a conceptual scheme and the sort of entity to which one can quite reasonably ascribe feelings (Puccetti: 1968, 106).

Puccetti then goes on to discuss moral relations within a postulated community of ETIs and possible moral relations between ourselves and ETIs. The truisms of H.L.A. Hart (1961) (vulnerability, equality in strength etc.) are

applicable to extraterrestrial communities as well. For we have seen how the principle of convergent evolution assures a considerable uniformity between ourselves and extraterrestrials ... For this reason I think that if we ever establish communications with extraterrestrial societies we shall find their moral concepts and legal structures recognizably familiar, at least in these more fundamental respects (Hart: 1961, 109f).

The question of moral relations between ourselves and ETIs is a more complex one. If we were to come into direct physical contact with ETI's, which Puccetti justly considers extremely unlikely, this might lead to colonization and either destruction (no established moral relation) or living together, especially if the planet of one of the societies has become uninhabitable. In the latter case there would be moral relations. It would be different if contact were made by radio. Even then there are some moral aspects to the relation. It is already a moral decision to send valuable information, for it is an example of supererogatory moral behaviour to promote the well-being of the receiving civilization. And both communities may arouse certain feelings in each other, for example feelings of comfort. (If one reports the occurrence of a catastrophe the reaction of the other can make a difference.)

So far R.Puccetti. I agree with most of the issues mentioned above. But I am less confident that convergence in the evolution of different species on Earth can be extrapolated to convergence between species on different planets. Though there is room for analogical reasoning here, I maintain that we should be more careful in our consideration of things that may reasonably be supposed to be quite different.

2.3 ETIs as social persons?

Hubbeling mentions relations with other individuals, with a collectivity and with God as the fourth group of criteria constituting personhood. If signals were sent out by a group of cooperating individuals, there should be at least some practical forms of cooperation; but this neither implies personal ('I-Thou') relations within that group, nor a wish on its part to enter into an I-thou relation with another culture. There could be other reasons for sending messages, like cosmic expansion or curiosity. Columbus did not embark on his journey in order to establish personal relationships with people of other cultures. Ascription of personhood in the social sense, then, is not defensible on the basis of the mere fact that messages have been received.

J.J. Oosten's contribution to this volume adopts a different approach to the concept of person by placing it squarely within a social context. He maintains that in a discussion on the meaning of the concept of person, one should not neglect the ideological function of the concept in our society. He criticizes Hubbeling's position as representing the latter's own Western philosophical tradition and thus as not being helpful in acquiring an understanding of other cultures.

Oosten's critical remarks apply to this paper as well, because it has been written within the Western, scientific tradition. I am not concerned with the question whether ETIs have a concept like 'person', but rather with the question whether our concept can be applied to ETI's, as well as with the difficulties that might arise in this connection. In Oosten's approach the only point of discussion seems to be the social function of the concept of person within a particular culture. Obviously in that sense it cannot be applied to ETIs, given the (lack of) knowledge we have of them now, as well as the (lack of) knowledge we will have of them in the near future.

2.4 ETIs and religion

In my opinion there is no way of knowing whether ETIs have relations with God. We simply cannot tell whether they are persons in the sense of the last of Hubbeling's characteristics as long as we do not have messages that are intelligible to us. In a few publications attention has been paid to the theological implications of the existence of ETIs and

extraterrestrial persons in particular. These publications mainly deal with the place and worth of man in the universe, the relation between God and mankind and the uniqueness of Jesus Christ. Since it is directly related to the concept of person, I shall discuss the position taken by R. Puccetti who claims that: 'a correct analysis of the person-concept combined with the not unreasonable belief in extraterrestrial natural persons actually undermines the belief in God'. (Puccetti: 1968, 143).

As a factual statement this is not true. There are some believers who do think that the uniqueness of mankind is essential, but there are others who are delighted by the idea that the universe is full of images of God, expressing His fullness and love. Puccetti, however, is referring to the fact that it undermines the belief in God if one reasons correctly. His main argument (besides the fact that ETIs are not mentioned in the Bible and the 'scandal of particularity') is related to the person of Christ. The unity of the person of Christ is incompatible with an incarnation on every inhabited planet. Puccetti (1969, 139) estimates that 'there would be in the order of 680,000,000 to 3,400,000,000 incarnations occurring simultaneously from now to the extinction of life on all such stars'.

This contradicts the oneness of the Son of God, 'for two corporeal persons are not one' (ibid, 140).

Puccetti asks a serious question concerning Christology and the doctrine of the Trinity. However, I think he claims too much in presuming that this is a question that cannot be answered within the framework of Christianity. Some forms of Christianity cannot incorporate it, but as a whole Christianity is quite flexible. Apart from changing the dogma of the Trinity or reducing Christ to the expression of God's love for us, one could perform the same kind of arithmetical tricks as Puccetti does. Two is not the same as one. But the second person of the Trinity is traditionally conceived of as an infinite being. And 'infinite+1' equals 'infinite+2'! If the incarnation is the expression of God in a finite being, that finite being does not exhaust the Christ. This may seem somewhat scholastic, but it shows that Puccetti's argument is not conclusive.

Puccetti's argument seems to imply that his concept of person is not applicable to God and Christ. He suggests the conclusion that they do not exist. However, it is an old idea in theology that our concepts apply only analogically to God. So if a certain concept of person does not work, why not abandon or reformulate it? E. McMullin (1980,88) perceived 'an

odd, ungenerous fundamentalism at work here, a refusal to allow for the expansion of doctrine, that is after all characteristic of both science and theology'. I think that Puccetti's argument does not by implication undermine the belief in God. However, it has a psychological aspect: the belief in ETIs compensates for a belief which Puccetti has already discarded:

But at least it could lay to rest the provincial humanist dogma that if we abandon belief in the Divine we have nothing to fall back on but Man's values. What we have to fall back on are the values, one may reasonably hold, of a potentially universal community of persons from which we are detached by the accidental dispersion of matter in the cosmos. That is a pallid comfort, yet a comfort of a kind (Puccetti: 1968, 118).

3. *When should we call them persons?*

By way of conclusion I would like to defend the thesis that in different contexts there are different reasons for ascribing personhood to ETIs.

If extraterrestrials are considered in a *moral* or *legal* discourse, I think that it is reasonable to talk about persons. In the rare cases of moral discourse related to extraterrestrials it is morally better to treat them, at least *prima facie*, the way we would like to be treated ourselves. *Reciprocity* seems in this case to be the only argument, and not whether they 'are' persons. If, as in some science-fiction, we were to find a spaceship with frozen ETIs, we would be obliged to treat them the way we are expected to treat humans.

In *religious* discourse concerning the uniqueness of humanity, God's relation to us and to other creatures, the same reciprocity holds. We should treat them as persons and we should modify our opinions, if necessary, about the relation between God and mankind so that they can incorporate these ETIs as well. One could of course deny this equality in relation to God, and classify them as animals, but I consider that to be the sin of hubris. One could also rank ETIs among the angels, but that might prove to be false if we were to become better acquainted with them.

In *scientific* or *general philosophical* discourse, which is what the main part of this paper consists of, there is no reason to take a firm

stand. I expect that ETIs, if we were to learn something about them in the next millennium, would in some respects fit our concepts of person, but there is no need to go ahead of it. The question whether they are 'real persons' presumes a fixed, platonic, concept of person. Let us wait and see.

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