

The Role of the Concept 'Person' in Gadamer's Philosophical Hermeneutics

David Vessey

DRAFT

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Abstract: Hans-Georg Gadamer joins Martin Heidegger in thinking we need to jettison “subject” and related terms from our philosophical vocabulary. Gadamer thinks the term is problematic for different reasons than Heidegger, though, and thus has a different solution than Heidegger: a recovery of the term “Person.” Here I look at Gadamer’s reasons for rejecting the term “subject”, how Gadamer understands the historical development of the term “person” from the Ancient Greek *prosopon* through Cardinal Ratzinger’s understanding of the Third Person of the Trinity as *commnio*, and finally how Gadamer’s understanding of personhood as being-in-dialogue avoids the problems with the term “subject.”

Hans-Georg Gadamer follows Martin Heidegger in concluding that the term “subject,” as well as the related terms “subjectivity” and “intersubjectivity,” ought to be retired from our philosophical vocabulary. They contain such misleading conceptual baggage that any attempt to redefine them or to use them with extensive caveats would be a dead end. Rather than arguing that the subject is decentered, marginalized, alienated, impossible, or best spoken of as a verb (i.e, subjectivation), and rather than embracing an aporetic, paradoxical, or essentially ambiguous subject, we should adopt a new vocabulary. No other path can free us from the conceptual confusions surrounding the terms. Choosing such a vocabulary however requires us to rethink what role a theory of the subject played and whether that role itself should be preserved. It also requires us to be clear about the conceptual confusions persisting in the old vocabulary. In the

case of replacing the term phlogiston, for example, scientists still sought an explanation of the why some things are flammable in open air and why things will only burn for so long in a closed chamber. However they no longer sought a single element to add to the four classical elements air, fire, water and earth. The old mistake was trying to continue to seek a qualitative rather than a quantitative approach to chemical reactions. We need to understand the analogous mistake in the concept of subject in order to be certain any new vocabulary amounts to progress.

Both Gadamer and Heidegger make clear the inescapable conceptual errors lurking in the concepts ‘subject,’ ‘subjectivity,’ and ‘intersubjectivity,’ though they disagree about what this error is. For Heidegger it is the connection between subject and substance. “*Ontologically*, every idea of a ‘subject’—unless refined by a previous ontological determination of its basic character—still posits the *subjectum* (*hypokeimenon*) along with it, no matter how vigorous one’s ontical protestations against the ‘soul substance’ or the ‘reification of consciousness.’”¹ To speak of a subject is inescapably to speak of a kind of object, a kind of subsisting being that serves as an enduring locus of predication. Such substantive presuppositions need to be avoided if we are to arrive at a proper fundamental ontology. As is well known, Heidegger adopts the antiquated and generic term *Dasein* to derive phenomenologically the ontological character of *Dasein* as being-in-the-world. From there, and only after that, can we understand why ‘subject’ is such a mistaken starting point—it confuses *Dasein*’s ex-sistence with its present-to-handedness.²

¹ *Being and Time* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 72.

² Here is how Gadamer sums up Heidegger’s insight: “[Heidegger] showed that ‘subjectivity’ retained a Greek conceptual schema that only an ontology of the present at hand could satisfy. He made it evident what it means that both *subiectum* and *substantia* point back to the *hypokeimenon*: the ‘enduring’ substance that remains despite the mutability of accidents and

Gadamer's version of the error made in speaking about subjects is somewhat different, though clearly related. It occurs in his preliminary reflections about the nature of intersubjectivity.

I have long followed the methodological rule that one should undertake nothing without giving an account of the history of a concept. One must bear in mind the way that our language can presage our philosophizing, insofar as one seeks to make clear the implication of the words used by philosophy. Now, of course, behind the concept of intersubjectivity stands the concept of subjectivity. One might even say that the concept of intersubjectivity is only comprehensible once we have expressed the concept of subjectivity and of the subject, and its role in phenomenological philosophy. The impression given by the word *subiectum* and the concept of subjectivity has been that "subject" means something like self-reference, reflexivity, "I-ness." This has seemed self-evident to us, but one gets no such impression from the Greek word *hypokeimenon*. This word means "that which underlies."³

that refers to the *ti* of *essentia*. The understanding of being defined in the Greek way did not square with the self-understanding of humanity formed by Christianity. And it did not measure up to the problem of historical relativism at all. Thus Heidegger's own beginning point, the discovery of the temporal character of 'existence,' was truly epoch-making" ("Friendship and Self-knowledge" in *Hermeneutics, Religion and Ethics* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999], 128).

³ "Subjectivity and intersubjectivity: Subject and Person" (*Continental Philosophy Review*, 33:3 [July 2000]), 276.

Gadamer explains that the connection between being a subject and being self-reflective arose with Descartes's *cogito* and was popularized in Locke's account of the self. Indeed Locke's definition clearly connects the modern idea of the subject as self-consciousness with the ancient idea of "that which underlies." A subject is

a thinking, intelligent being, that has reason and reflection, and can consider itself as itself, the same thinking thing, in different times and different places; which it does only by that consciousness which is inseparable from thinking, and, as it seems to me, essential to it: it being impossible for any one to perceive without perceiving that he does perceive.⁴

For Locke it is the combination of our ability to be self-reflective and the constancy of our self-awareness across all perceptions that establishes us as subjects, which is to say as a persisting being that "supports" our properties. For Gadamer it is the self-reflectiveness that is the problem. Among many other places, we see this in *Truth and Method* where Gadamer willingly overstates his own view for the sake of emphasis: "The self-awareness of the individual is only a flickering in the closed circuits of historical life."⁵

Gadamer's difference from Heidegger on the problem of the terminology of the subject connects to a larger disagreement between them and enables Gadamer to find a solution to the question of a replacement vocabulary that is unavailable to Heidegger. First, where Heidegger sees the post-Socratic history of philosophy as irredeemably guilty of the forgetfulness of Being,

⁴ *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Book II, Essay 27, Section 9.

⁵ *Truth and Method* (New York: Continuum, 1989), 267. Gadamer often characterizes the project in *Truth and Method* in terms of a critique of the philosophy of self-consciousness.

Gadamer is more willing to seek solutions to philosophical problems within the history of Western philosophy. Second, Gadamer thinks it is a mistake to try to invent a new vocabulary. Language should both connect to experience and, as much as possible, to the common usage. Otherwise it loses its power to communicate. Gadamer writes that

I did not attempt what the later Heidegger was after: to forcibly recast language, so to speak. This is not language any more, I said to myself. True, one always searches in language for the right word. Yet it is not the word which is decisive, but the whole process of communication. I am not at all obliged to say things once and for all in a single word. It is sufficient that the other person has understood. This was *my* way—I told Heidegger that language is not the powerful word; rather language is reply.⁶

Gadamer's project is to find overlooked alternatives within the tradition of Western thought rather than to try to creatively blaze new paths in an attempt to transcend that tradition.

Instead of Heidegger's early attempt to recast the subject in terms of *Dasein*, and Heidegger's later attempt to focus on the *Ereignis*, on the event of Being, Gadamer looks to the conceptual tradition of the person as a corrective to the conceptual tradition of the subject. At the end of "Subjectivity and Intersubjectivity, Subject and Person," after explicitly criticizing Heidegger for providing an inadequate account of *Mitsein*, Gadamer writes,

Heidegger's answer seemed to me to give short shrift to the phenomenon I was concerned with. It is not only that everyone is in principle limited. What I was concerned with was why I experience my own limitation through the encounter

⁶ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Gadamer in Conversation* (New Haven: Yale University Press), 112.

with the Other, and why I must always learn to experience anew if I am ever to be in a position to surpass my limits. Here there arises a completely different conceptual tradition, and one might ask to what extent it may help us. I mean all that relates to the concept of *Person*.⁷

Also in his review of Werner Marx's *Gibt es auf Erden ein Mass?* Gadamer writes "What I miss here and what I myself do not grapple with, is a new clarification of the concept of the *person*. I also find nothing on that in Heidegger."⁸ My goal in this essay is to spell out what resources Gadamer might have available to him in the concept of the person that would serve as an alternate to the concept of a subject. The account of the person would have to fit with other claims Gadamer makes about human beings, above all about finitude, linguisticity, and the often repeated Hölderlin quotation that "we are in dialogue." If we want to defend Gadamer against those who would condemn him by association with Heidegger's renunciation of the subject, we can only do so once we have worked out Gadamer's alternative vocabulary of persons.

It also would have to be clear from such an account of person why the terminology of subject must be abandoned. Given Gadamer's concerns about subjectivity as self-consciousness,

⁷ "Subjectivity and Intersubjectivity; Subject and Person," 285. Italics added.

⁸ "Gibt es auf Erden ein Mass?" (*Gesammelte Werke vol. 3* [Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1987]) 339. Italics added. Gadamer's use of the term *Person*—an obviously non-German word with theological connotations—rather than *Mensch*, is rare and always telling. Unfortunately since *Mensch* is often translated into English as person (rather than man), working from translations of Gadamer's works will occlude the technical sense of the term in Gadamer's writings.

it is not obvious at all that the solution shouldn't simply be a return to a Greek understanding of substance. It must be clear why the Greek understanding is problematic as well. This means focusing not only on the non-Greek elements of the history of the concept of the person, but especially on the elements that don't connect directly to substantiality. As Gadamer recognizes, this requires focusing on the Christian theological innovations that arose with the dual characterization of the Trinity as three persons in one substance, and of Jesus as two natures in one person. Why this is tricky is that the Greek Fathers, and then the Latin Fathers, made explicit that the three persons of the Trinity must be understood as three "*hypostases*"—three substances. Otherwise the distinction between the persons is insufficiently emphasized and what should be a Trinitarian doctrine—three in one—becomes a thinly disguised Monarchianism. Thus if Gadamer seeks an account of the person as an alternative to a substantialist account of a subject, then he needs to be wary of the ways the persons of the Trinity were explicitly presented in Greek substantialist language.⁹ Classical Trinitarian accounts of the person are explicitly accounts of substances, albeit not defined in terms of self-consciousness.¹⁰

⁹ Gadamer and Heidegger raise concerns about a subject as a *hypokeimenon*, not as a *hypostasis*, but these two Greek terms are too closely related to think that Gadamer and Heidegger might have objections to the former that also wouldn't apply to the latter. For an exhaustive account of the meaning of the different terms for substance see Christopher Stead's *Divine Substance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

¹⁰ It is a commonplace in discussions of the Trinity to point out that what we mean nowadays by "person" is not what the Church Fathers meant by *properson/persona*. Gadamer is clearly operating in contrast to some philosophers of religion who whole-heartedly embrace modern conceptions of a person to interpret the Trinity. Richard Swinburne in *The Christian God*

I.

Preliminary Considerations. Two things should be discussed at the start. First Heidegger rules out the value of appealing to persons in place of discussing subjects. He considers such an approach anthropology rather than ontology. Second, for Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics it is not clear we need anything more than "linguisticity" as a replacement for "subjectivity." That is, it is not clear what an account of a person is supposed to explain that isn't already explained by linguisticity. I'll address these one at a time. In the same section of *Being and Time* where Heidegger dismisses founding an analytic of *Dasein* on the subject, he also rules out starting from a phenomenology of personhood. After quickly dismissing Wilhelm Dilthey's starting point—the concept of life—as too conceptually limited, he says the same problems are found in "every tendency towards a philosophical anthropology." Heidegger continues, "The phenomenological interpretation of personality is in principle more radical and more transparent; but the question of the Being of *Dasein* has a dimension which this too fails to enter."¹¹ Although he mentions both Edmund Husserl and Max Scheler as phenomenologists of personality, he focuses on Scheler since Scheler's views on the nature of the person had already been published in *Formalism in Ethics and Non-Formal Ethics of Values: A New Attempt Toward the*

(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994) welcomes the idea of divine persons as Cartesian, self-conscious individuals.

¹¹ *BT* 73.

*Foundation of an Ethical Personalism.*¹²

Scheler defines a person as “the immediately and innerly felt unity of experiencing” rather than as that being who experiences or subsists through experiences. Since personhood only comes to be through the felt unity of actions, Heidegger acknowledges that for Scheler a person is “not a Thing, not a substance, not an object.”¹³ Scheler’s view would seem to hold promise as an alternative to an account of a substantial subject, but Heidegger protests that it fails to capture the being of *Dasein* as a whole. To the extent it presents itself as containing a sense of the whole, the sense of the whole is not itself under phenomenological investigation, but is uncritically inherited. Any attempt to take person as the starting point for an analytic of the Being of *Dasein* “is an orientation thoroughly colored by the anthropology of Christianity and the ancient world, whose inadequate ontological foundations have been overlooked both by the philosophy of life and by personalism.”¹⁴ So, in Heidegger’s eyes, Gadamer’s attempt to recapture an account of the person inspired by Christian accounts of the Trinity in order to avoid modern conceptions of the subject as self-conscious, would amount to making the same mistake as Scheler.¹⁵

¹² Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973. The Husserl text he is undoubtedly referring to is *Ideas II*, where Husserl discusses the personalist attitude and distinguishes it from the natural attitude.

¹³ *BT 73*.

¹⁴ *BT 74*

¹⁵ In *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1997) Heidegger adds that philosophical ontology could never amount to more than a regional ontology. The implicit criticism is that instead of regional ontologies, philosophers should seek a fundamental ontology. Gadamer doesn’t share Heidegger’s focus on fundamental ontology.

Gadamer's reply could come from his own indebtedness to Heidegger. Heidegger specifies two corrupting features of "traditional anthropology": the interpretation of *zoon eschon logon* as rational animal and the idea of humans as created in God's image. Against the first Heidegger argues it is a mistake to think of humans as a kind of being, animal, plus something else, reason. Neither the being of animality nor the being of the *logos* are made clear in this interpretation, much less how they function together. In the second case, according to Heidegger God's being is taken to be understood and humans are interpreted as beings who, even in their finitude, are transcendent towards the divine. Heidegger seeks an account of human finitude solely in terms of human temporality, not one informed by contrasting human finitude with divine infinitude. Gadamer and Heidegger are on the same page on both of these accounts. Gadamer shares Heidegger's interpretation of *zoon eschon logon* as a linguistic being, so he doesn't make the first mistake, and he shares Heidegger's interpretation of *Dasein*'s transcendence as temporality. Gadamer is not interested in determining the nature of the person based on the person's created relationship to God as creator; Gadamer's interpretation is not a theological one. He is interested in the way the theological question of the nature of the relation among the divine persons provides conceptual resources distinct from standard Greek notions of the subject. These conceptual resources can then be used to elucidate the nature of a human person. So even if Heidegger is right about Scheler and the personalists, his concerns do not apply to Gadamer for the simple reason that Gadamer has been influenced in his own thinking by Heidegger's concerns.

Gadamer's interest in the nature of the divine persons parallels his interest in the second person as *Logos*. Famously in *Truth and Method* he argued that medieval accounts of the *Logos* as the second person of the Trinity generated an account of language that escaped the

“forgetfulness of language” found in Plato. There he was not interested in a theology of the Word, but how theological reflections on the incarnation as *Logos* helped us to better understand the nature of language, our linguisticity, and the subsequent universality of hermeneutics. Likewise, Gadamer’s interest in theological discussions of the person is an attempt to recover an alternative conceptual history from that of substance and subject.

The second preliminary question we should address, then, is why Gadamer’s account of linguisticity is not sufficient as an alternative to an account of a subject, or more accurately, of subjectivity. One thing we should expect of any account of subjectivity is that it distinguishes subject from objects, in its most general sense, it distinguishes beings that are a source of meaning from beings that are not a source of meaning. Gadamer speaks this way when he talks about the use of statistics in medicine.

We encounter, for example, the loss of *personhood*. This happens within medical science when the individual is objectified in terms of a mere multiplicity of data.

In a clinical investigation all the information about a person is treated as if it could be adequately collated on an index card. If it is done correctly, then the relevant data will all uniquely apply to the person involved. But the question is whether the unique value of the individual is properly recognized in this process.¹⁶

In this example, personhood captures something of our individuality, and thus fundamentally distinguishes us from objects.

For Gadamer having language, linguisticity, more than serves that function. It

¹⁶ “Bodily Experience and the Limits of Objectification” in *The Enigma of Health* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1981), 81.

categorically distinguishes linguistic beings from both non-living things and living, non-linguistic beings.¹⁷ He affirms Aristotle's definition of a human being as *zoon eschon logon*, as long we understand *logos* to mean "linguistically disclosing." Humans are animals that disclose the world linguistically to themselves and others. They only have something that could be considered a world in virtue of their acquisition of language. Without language, living organisms only have environments and can only respond to the features of their environments; language users acquire the ability to step back from their environment and act reflectively in response. They are free for their world. Linguisticity provides the necessary tools for reflection and responsible agency—two characteristic typically thought to define a person. What more is required for our concept of a person were it to adequately function as a replacement for a substantial account of the subject?

We already have a clue: Heidegger's concerns about Schelerian accounts of a person. What introducing an account of a person as an alternative to an account of a subject gives us above and beyond the linguisticity is a way to talk about a being *as a whole*. A subject is classically that which lies behind accidents, maintaining the unity of the being across time and across change. In a decidedly abstract sense, the problem of the Trinity is the problem of providing unity across diversity while preserving the diversity. The concept of person developed to solve this problem. With Boethius it took on the additional task of marking out individuals, which is why we should be optimistic that the concept of a person could function in the same way for Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics.

¹⁷ Some may object to Gadamer's strong anthropocentrism, here. Although we do tend to think of animals as subjects, they are not typically considered persons (thus the recent push to have them counted as juridical persons).

II.

Gadamer's History of the Concept of the Person. In invoking the conceptual history of person Gadamer seeks to explain the individuality and the wholeness of a being. The account of wholeness should not rely on a substantialist metaphysical foundation, the account of individuality should not rely on a similar metaphysical principle of individuation, and the understanding of person should connect to Gadamer's theory of linguisticity and his related claim that "we are a dialogue." Among other things we should be able to explain why the term person arises in the only place it does in *Truth and Method*: in Gadamer's discussion of what it is to treat another as a Thou. He writes,

It is clear that the experience of a Thou must be special because the Thou is not an object but is in relation to us. ... Since here the object of the experience has the character of a *person*, this kind of experience is a moral phenomenon, as is the knowledge acquired through the experience, the understanding of the other. ... A second way in which the Thou is experienced and understood is that the Thou is acknowledged as a *person*, but despite this acknowledgment the understanding of the Thou is still a form of self-relatedness. ... In the hermeneutical sphere the parallel to this experience of the Thou is what we generally call *historical consciousness*. Historical consciousness knows about the otherness of the other, about the past in its otherness, just as the understanding of the Thou knows the Thou as a *person*.¹⁸

¹⁸ *TM*, 358–60. Italics added.

To get clear on the resources the history of the concept of person has to offer Gadamer's hermeneutics we should start with how Gadamer himself presents that history. I quoted above where Gadamer suggests that in order to provide an alternative to Heidegger's account of *Dasein* and *Mitsein*, we need to consider the conceptual tradition of the person. Here, in full and at length, is how he renders that tradition.

[T]here arises a completely different conceptual tradition, and one might ask to what extent it may help us. I mean all that relates to the concept of Person. As is well known, this expression, like its Greek parallel *prosopon*, is an expression for the masks of actors and hence also for the roles played by the actors in Attic theater – and likewise by anyone in the theater of the world. The same goes for its Latin equivalent (*persona*). From here there developed the concept of person in legal terminology. Understandably in law it is not individuality as such which is of interest and is referred to, but only the reduced legal role played by the person in a law case. Now the history of the concept of person is extremely instructive. It is first coined by Boethius, after whom the 'person' is the *naturae rationalis individual substantia*. One sees here how Greek metaphysics has worked its way in the late Hellenistic period into Latin philosophical language, and it remained at work up through scholasticism. Another, highly significant Christian teaching stands alongside this one: the application of the term to the Trinity. At issue here are the three Persons of God, which are understood at once as a unity and a trinity, as Creator and Father, as Redeemer and Son, and as the dissemination of the Holy Spirit. It is obvious that it is not only the conceptual history we have just sketched that determined the formation of the concept of person in current thought; but

most important was the slow development of new social forms in the city and the nation during the consolidating period marked by the mobility of peoples. Thus, in particular, in the later Middle Ages the English model of the “Free Bill” strengthened the social dimension of the concept of person. Luther, too, was effective in this direction. He connected the concept of person most closely with that of *fides*, the rule of belief, and thus also with the role of conscience, though not at all with the concept of the theoretical self-consciousness. Ebeling has shown this in his studies of Luther. But it is then even more remarkable that in philosophical conceptual language, the conceptual shift we have outlined from substance to the modern concept of subjectivity won the upper hand. For Descartes, as for Leibniz and John Locke, the concept of person is defined through the reflective concept of self-consciousness, without the Other coming into consideration at all. New paths were only opened up by Kant’s philosophy at the time of the French Revolution, in that Kant placed the freedom of personhood and its accountability above the subjectivity of self-consciousness. Here, for the first time, we come to the concept of “subject” in the political sense. This also had its impact upon the theological debates. The concept of Person finds new receptions both in the Lutheran tradition, through Schleiermacher, and also in the renewal of the Thomistic tradition in the Catholic philosophy of our own century. Schleiermacher straightforwardly took up the banner of “Personalism,” in order to eliminate all pantheistic tendencies in the theology of the Trinity. The same goes for the reception of Personalism in the Catholic philosophy of our century, particularly due to the influence of Max Scheler and the fruitful distinction he

made in his philosophical analyses between the private sphere of the person and the social function of person. Of course, this led to a new interpretation of the concept of Christian love (throughout both main denominations), and in particular a new interpretation of the third Person of the Trinity.¹⁹

To what extent may the concept ‘person’ help us?, he asks. That question is what I will answer in the remainder of this essay. I’ve set the stage by laying out what a theory of the person should explain, how that theory must provide an alternative to a person as self-reflective, and how returning to Ancient notions of personhood will not help. Now we need to turn to working out the details of his history of the concept. Gadamer’s history is a mere sketch and does not make specific the way the various turns in the history of the concept ‘person’ serve to properly inform his view. Perhaps that is why he later writes that he did not fully “grapple with” a new thematization of the concept of a person. To do this I need to divide his conceptual history up into stages: the Greek conception of *prosopon*, the Roman legal concept of *persona*, Boethius’ concept of *persona*, the English legal sense of a person, the Lutheran modification of person, Schleiermacher’s understanding of person (particularly in contrast to Hegel’s), and Scheler’s connection between persons, language, actions, and having a world. Some explications will be refreshingly brief, some require discussing not only what Gadamer is picking out, but also what he is passing over.

The Greek word *prosopon* originally meant face (pros=about, ops=eyes) though it commonly referred to the masks used by actors to present their character and project their voices. Some write as if the *prosopon* hid the nature of the actor, but this is too modern of a sense of performance. Quick reflection on Plato’s concerns about playing immoral parts in plays and

¹⁹ “Subjectivity and Intersubjectivity; Subject and Person,” 285–86.

Aristotle's theory of mimesis should lead us to the conclusion that the *prosopon* less hides someone than makes someone present to the audience. Analogously, many of the Hebrew Bible references to God's *presence* are translated in the *Septuagint* as God's *proposon*, as is the Hebrew word for face, *paniyim*. So the original meaning in Greek was the face making someone present to someone else. It is an intrinsically relational term.

The Latin *persona* had a similar theatrical meaning as the Greek *prosopon*—the mask projected the character *per-sona*, by sound—but acquired an additional sense in the context of Roman law. A *persona* was someone who held legal status—typically an owner of land—and thus could bring claims before the courts. Women and slaves, lacking status (literally, we get the word “status” from its role in Roman law), lacked *persona*. They were not persons. The meaning has shifted slightly from the role, to the individual in the role, but the relational character remains the same. A man acquires the status of personhood in virtue of his place in society; and his personhood can be taken away from him.

Tertullian first introduces the word *persona* in order to explain the Trinity—one *substantia*, three *persona*. He was influenced less by Roman law than by the practice of prosopological interpretations of texts—interpretations where characters in a story are read as representatives of various gods. In the Bible there are passages where God seems to speak to Himself, and he refers to Himself in the plural; Tertullian's takes this as what we would now call a personification of God's various roles, especially His roles as creator, redeemer and sanctifier.²⁰ It took centuries

²⁰ For the classic discussion of the influences on Tertullian's adoption of the term persons, see C. Andresen's “Zur Entstehung und Geschichte des Trinitarischen Personbegriffes” (*Zeitschrift für die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der Ältern Kirche*, 52:1/2, [1961], 1–39). As a curious side note given Gadamer's parallel concerns about Christological

for Tertullian's language to catch on, first because speaking of three persons sounds too close to speaking of three modes—which is a classic heresy denying the reality of the Trinity in favor of the unity—and second because two Greek words, *ousia* and *hypostasis*, are translated as *substantia*. The Greek Fathers were willing to use *ousia* as *substantia* as long as *persona* was equivalent to *hypostasis*, though to Latin ears this sounded as if it merely ascribed one nature to three Gods, much like Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle share the same human nature. That

notions of the *Logos*, Tertullian first introduces the theological meaning of *persona* by referring to the double character of *Logos*, the Son, as *ratio* and *sermo*, reason and discourse. He connects the relation of the first and second person of the Trinity to thought as inner speech. “And that you may understand this more easily, observe first from yourself, as from the image and likeness of God, how you also have reason within yourself, who are a rational animal not only as having been made by a rational Creator but also as out of his substance having been made a living soul. See how, when you by reason you argue silently with yourself, this same action takes place within you, while reason accompanied by discourse meets you at every movement of your thought, at every impression of your consciousness; your every thought is discourse, your every consciousness is reason: you must perforce speak it in your mind, and while you speak it you experience as a partner in conversation that discourse which has in it this very reason by which you speak when you think in company of that [discourse] in speaking by means of which you think. So in a sort of way you have in you as a second [person] discourse by means of which you speak by thinking and by means of which you think by speaking: discourse itself is another [than you]” (Ernest Evans, *Tertullian's Treatise Against Praxeas* [London: SPCK, 1948], 5).

insufficiently accounted for the unity of God.²¹ Augustine’s solution was to emphasize the divine unity, then stressing that each person stands in a different relationship to the other two. Their subsisting *relationships* defined their personhood.²²

Person as role, face, or legal status does not yet have the ontological heft we now associate it with; that only comes with Boethius, and I expect it is why Gadamer speaks of Boethius as the one who first coins the term philosophically. Boethius moved the term beyond its Trinitarian context modifying it to refer to all rational individuals, divine and human. *Naturae rationalis individua substantia* is presented by Boethius as a straightforward translation of *hypostasis*; the emphasis on the individuating character of personhood is undoubtedly new. Where neither Plato nor Aristotle would accept the existence of individual natures, Boethius welcomes the idea. Plato shares humanity with Socrates and Aristotle, but only he embodies Platonicity, a defining accident that is “incommunicable” to other beings. Aquinas will add to Boethius’s definition

²¹ For a detailed discuss of the “one *ousia*, three *hypostases*” formulation see Joseph Lienhard’s “*Ousia* and *Hypostasis*: the Cappadocian Settlement and the Theology of ‘one Hypostasis’” (in *The Trinity*, eds. S. Davis, D. Kendall, and G. O’Collins [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000]). The difference between the two traditions was that for the Greek Fathers the issue is how to understand the unity across the three beings; for the Latin Fathers the issue is how to understand the diversity within one substance.

²² There are other aspects of divine personhood other than essential relationality. There is *perichoresis* (or, in Latin, *circumincession*)—the mutual indwelling of the three persons in one unity—and there is the unity of acts of the persons, so when one acts, all are acting. It is neither clear how these would transfer to the case of human beings nor clear how they would fit Gadamer’s hermeneutics.

existing as a whole—*completea*— and existing in itself—*per se subsistens*—in order that the soul separate from the body is not a person, and in order that Jesus’s two natures, divine and human, are not each persons. Nevertheless, Gadamer is right to point out the persistence of Greek thought in Boethius’s account of person. Instead of explicating the relational character of persons, Boethius is constrained by Aristotle’s categories to use only substantialist terminology and relegate the relations among the persons to accidents. Gadamer rightly moves away from Boethius’ account of persons as rational individuals, a version of *zoon eschon logon* already rejected by Heidegger, and turns to back Trinitarian discussions and, “most important,” the new sense of “person” that arose with guilds.

Gadamer next presents the English “Free Bill” as strengthening the “social account of a person.” It is not exactly clear what “Free Bill” he is referring to. It could be the 1100 Charter of Liberties or the 1120 Liberties of London, though neither speaks explicitly of “persons.” More likely he is referring to the *Magna Carta*, which sets out liberties and introduces a notion of a person as a bearer of rights, as someone who can make legal claims against the king. Here the notion of a person as having social standing is recovered, but also is introduced the idea that something other than individuals, such as guilds or towns, can be persons, can act, and can have rights and duties. The connection between being a person and having moral standing will persist from then on. Accompanying it is the conceptual connection between personhood and being able to act responsibly.

Luther also stresses the moral feature of personhood, though for him it is God to whom we bear our greatest responsibility. Gerhard Ebeling, who Gadamer cites, says this about Luther’s understanding of person.

The word “person” occurs in Luther in two un-reconciled, if not contradictory senses. We have already seen it distinguished from human works. There the person meant the unity and wholeness of man through his existence in the sight of God. The person in this sense is for Luther almost equivalent to the conscience. We next encounter the use of the word “person” in the meaning of countenance, appearance or looks, that is, in a meaning which is associated with what is probably the original meaning of person as a player’s mask, and, derived from this, the role a person plays or the rank he fills. Here too, man is considered in the wholeness of his manifestation and appearance, but not as the naked self which exists concealed in his heart. ... [P]roperly speaking there is no contradiction between the two concepts of person. Both are concerned with the different ways in which man shares in the nature of reality as the word, and even, if he is aware of what this means, in the activity of the word of God in the world.²³

Gadamer emphasizes the first meaning, the connection between personhood and the judgments of conscience. Luther argued that as long as we are properly trained to hear its judgments, our conscience is the voice of God showing us to ourselves as sinners in thought, word, and deed. It was the one place where we got a glimpse of ourselves as a whole since God always sees us as a whole. Luther reserves the concept of person for the sense of oneself as a whole that comes through an informed conscience. It is not self-consciousness, as Gadamer points out, but, in a

²³ Gerhard Ebeling, *Luther: An Introduction to his Thought*, translated by R.A. Wilson (London: Collins, 1970), 202–04.

sense, God-consciousness, and it helps Luther contrast his views from the Roman Catholic emphasis on works.²⁴

What is significant here for Gadamer (as for Heidegger) is the idea that by properly relating ourselves to something other than ourselves we can be given back to ourselves in our wholeness and in our individuality. The picture of how the concept of a person might supplant a concept of substance is becoming clearer. Person is a relational, not a substantial, term. Like son or father, to be a person is to stand in a kind of relation to others and to society. The relation confers moral standing, incurs moral obligation, and discloses us to ourselves as a whole and in our singularity without either positing a substantive, metaphysical *hypokeimenon* or by basing our identity on self-consciousness. As Gadamer says in his early review of Karl Löwith's *Das Individuum in der Rolle des Mitmenschen*.

The being of the *person* is fundamentally determined in its mode of being through the relationships in which it stands to other people. The human *Mitwelt* is encountered not as an unstructured diversity of individuals existing for themselves, but rather as a relation between '*personae*' that all have a 'role' for one another. A man is, for example, a son to his father, husband to his wife, father to his children, teacher to his students and vice versa; that means, however, that he exists "above all on the basis of being determined to himself through corresponding others". Only out of these always already underlying

²⁴ For a full discussion of this see Michael Baylor's *Action and Person: Conscience in the Late Scholasticism and the Young Luther* (Leiden: Brill, 1977), especially Chapter VI, and Rachel Zachman's *Assurance of Faith: Conscience in the Theology of Martin Luther and John Calvin* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 19–40.

'commitments' of relations (*Verbindlichkeit der Verhältnisse*), in which he remains, does one's ethical 'responsibility' (*Verantwortlichkeit*) arise and become defined.²⁵

Gadamer is glossing Löwith's views, and were it not for their lifelong friendship and overlapping concerns about Heidegger's account of *Mitsein*, I would hesitate to confidently assume this reflects Gadamer's considered views on the nature of the person, but as we will see, the idea of a person as generated by relations to others bears out.

One would expect Gadamer to turn from Luther (and Kant) to Hegel, for Hegel's critique of self-consciousness, his account of recognition, and even his discussion of the nature of the persons of the Trinity seem to fit exactly the concept of person that is developing from Gadamer's conceptual history. Instead Gadamer turns to Schleiermacher, who clashes with Hegel on just these points.²⁶ Why he sides with Schleiermacher instead of Hegel is instructive as we move into the home stretch of Gadamer's sketch of the history of the concept of person.

²⁵ "Ich und Du" in *Gesammelte Werke Vol. 10* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1995).

²⁶ Gadamer mentions Kant as someone who distinguished personhood from subjectivity, making possible the idea of a political subject, rather than a legal person. Gadamer most likely has in mind the third paralogism where Kant argues against an empirical account of a substantive person identical over time. It was not clear to me how this advanced the conceptual history of the person and, frankly, I found Gadamer's second claim unredeemably inaccurate. Perhaps in German "subjekt" only took on its political role after Kant; in English it was used in that sense all the way back in the 14th century. Late 16th century examples abound in Shakespeare. ("Was never subject longed to be a king, as I do long and wish to be a subject?" [2 Henry VI 4.ix.3–6].) Certainly Kant's ethics is focused on moral personality rather than self-consciousness, but for

Hegel has a neo-Platonic account of the Son and the Holy Spirit as necessary emanations of the Father, though it gets recast in Hegel's terminology of the necessary conditions of self-consciousness. God the Father needs the begotten, material son as a recognitional means to self-awareness; the two of them then need the Holy Spirit as the object of their mutual recognition. Since the relation among the three persons is modeled on Hegel's account of the dialectic of self-awareness, it might also appear to be an excellent model for Gadamer's account of a person. Gadamer does not need to worry about the theological implication of God's necessary creation; he can focus instead on the way that one becomes a person only in the mutual recognition that arises in transcending the master slave relationship. We know Gadamer's sympathies with Hegel run deep, and we know that Hegel provides the definitive criticism of explicating a subject in terms of self-consciousness alone, so why not take this route rather than appeal to Schleiermacher?

Kant self-consciousness is the condition and defining feature of subjectivity. Kant does distinguish personality from humanity in *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere of Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), but Gadamer does not address that distinction. (Heidegger does in *Basic Problems of Phenomenology* [Bloomington, In.: Indiana University Press, 1982], though there he argues that moral personhood is just a "peculiar kind of self-consciousness" [132]). At each stage of Gadamer's brief discussion I've done my best to speculate about what he saw as important for the history of the concept. I've also noted one place where he does not discuss a thinker that would contribute to the narrative, Tertullian. Gadamer's history of the concept of person is also selective, as the discussion of Hegel and Schleiermacher brings to light.

First, appealing to Hegel's dialectic of self-consciousness undermines Gadamer's own point about the importance of the tradition of the concept of a person. If Hegel's account of the divine persons is appealing only because it contains his account of the dialectic of self-consciousness, then the concept of a person is no longer playing an important role. We can skip discussions of persons altogether and focus on Hegel's account of recognition in the constitution of self-consciousness. The second reason, however is that Gadamer's discussion is in a crucial way more radical than Hegel's discussion of self-consciousness. Hegel admirably and in great detail shows how self-consciousness only arises on the back on consciousness that, in turn, requires the functioning of objective spirit. Such an argument is a model for rejecting self-consciousness as a sufficient account of the subject, and Gadamer endorses Hegel's conclusions when he claims "long before we understand ourselves through the process of self-examination we understand ourselves in a self-evident way in the family, society, and state in which we live."²⁷ Still, Gadamer has reservations about Hegel's totalizing spirit, in both senses of the way that reflection can ultimately make all its foundations conscious, and the way that everything falls under the sway of *Geist*. Hegel gives us a "splendid monologue"²⁸ and what is necessary is to replace that monological dialectic with genuine dialogue. It is instructive that when Gadamer speaks of the second way of encountering a Thou, the way of Hegelian recognition, he says, "A second way in which the Thou is experienced and understood is that the Thou is acknowledged as a person, but despite this acknowledgment the understanding of the Thou is still a form of

²⁷ *TM* 276.

²⁸ "Hegel and the Dialectic of Ancient Philosophers" in *Hegel's Dialectic* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), 7.

self-relatedness. ... This relation is not immediate but reflective.”²⁹ We need a sense of person such that when encountering another person *as a person*, we are not simply relating to ourselves through others.

In contrast to Hegel, Schleiermacher’s entry into discussing the Trinity is not through God’s absoluteness, but through our experience of the Son’s redeeming power and through our understanding of ourselves as creatures in need of, and capable of, redemption. God the Redeemer is experienced as love, and we are experienced as becoming persons only through relating ourselves to that redeeming love. We find that love embodied in the Christian community as a manifestation of the Holy Spirit. Thus for Schleiermacher, the doctrine of the Trinity is the conclusion of the realization that we come to be an integral person by relating ourselves to God as presented and preserved in the church.³⁰ For Gadamer this builds on Luther’s view that we come to have an integrated sense of ourselves as persons through God’s judgment reflected in informed conscience. Instead of a wholly internal relationship to the divine as judge, we have a social relationship to the community founded in love. Instead of Hegel’s account of the abstract unity of the Trinity based on God’s absoluteness, we have Schleiermacher’s account of the concrete manifestation of the Trinity in the event of “person-forming” through love. As Gadamer points out, such a move mitigates the tendency toward pantheism and serves as a

²⁹ *TM* 359.

³⁰ For a detailed discussion of Schleiermacher’s views, see Francis Schüssler Fiorenza’s “Schleiermacher’s Understanding of God as Triune” in *The Cambridge Companion to Schleiermacher* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 171–88, and Jacqueline Mariña’s “Christology and Anthropology in Friedrich Schleiermacher” in the same volume (151–170).

transition to his final two reference points, first, Scheler, and second, a “new account of Christian love.”

I’ve already mentioned Scheler’s account of the person—“the person is not an object or a substantial kind of being, but a continuously self-executing ordered structure of acts ... [t]he person is only in and through his acts”³¹—and that Heidegger credits him with presenting a non-substantialist account of the person. What is needed to fill out Scheler’s view is the recognition that Scheler distinguishes acts from functions. Non-spiritual beings, which for Scheler is the same as non-reflective beings—that is, beings without the use of language—, *function* in their environment according to their biological needs. Spiritual, reflective, linguistic beings *act* in their world as it is informed by their understanding. This distinction between functioning in an environment and acting in a world is what Gadamer is referring to when he speaks of “the fruitful distinction [Scheler] made in his philosophical analyses between the private sphere of the person and the social function of person” and is a distinction Gadamer whole heartedly embraces in *Truth and Method*.

To have a world means to have an orientation (*Verhalten*) towards it. To have an orientation toward the world, however means to keep oneself so free from what one encounters of the world that one can present it to oneself as it is. This capacity is at once to have a world and to have language. The concept of *world* is thus opposed to the concept of *environment*, which all living beings in the world possess.³²

³¹ *Man’s Place in Nature* (New York: Farrar Straus & Giroux, 1962), 47.

³² *TM* 443.

For Scheler, then, to speak of a person who emerges through his or her acts, rather than his or her functioning, is to posit the emergence of a reflective, meaning bestowing individual who furnishes an orientation to the world. It is to present someone emerging through and because of language. As Gadamer makes clear, “who thinks of ‘language’ already moves beyond subjectivity.”³³

The final reference in his conceptual history of “person” is to “a new interpretation of the concept of Christian love (throughout both main denominations), and in particular a new interpretation of the third Person of the Trinity.” I believe the first reference is to Karol Wojtyła’s *Love and Responsibility*, which develops an understanding of love on the basis of a Schelerian account of personhood. The future John Paul II writes, “The person is a good toward which the only proper and adequate attitude is love”³⁴ building his case on an understanding of love as the unity of the three Persons of the Trinity. Joseph Ratzinger’s developed John Paul II’s *communio personarum* into a dialogical Trinitarianism. Gadamer likely has the future Pope Benedict XVI in mind when he mentions advances in understanding the Holy Spirit, for Ratzinger stresses that the Holy Spirit must be understood not as providing the unity of *consubstantialis*, but of *communio*—the unity of communicating dialogue.³⁵ Gadamer knew both Popes personally.

³³ “Subjectivity and Intersubjectivity; Subject and Person,” 286. The “new account of a Christian love’ has been omitted for brevity and relevance. See footnote 20.

³⁴ *Love and Responsibility* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 41.

³⁵ See Joseph Ratzinger, “The Holy Spirit as *Communio*: Concerning the Relationship of Pneumatology and Spirituality in Augustine” in *Communio: International Catholic Review*, 25/2 (1998), 324–339.

Taken together we get an extremely complicated picture of the development of the concept of a person. Recall at the start we sought a substitute for the concept of ‘subject’ that could function to explain the individuality and the wholeness of a human being (though it should be noted that an important feature of the concept ‘person’ is that it can be accurately applied to things other than humans, so long as agency and legal and moral responsibility can be applied to them). What features of the concept of the person as it unfolds historically are likely to be applicable to Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics? The following stand out: a person is an appearing presence, is essentially relational and achieves a sense of wholeness through those relations. The relations are based in a fundamental experience of dependency and possible redemption, are connected to action as a unifying principle of meaning, and are expressed through love. Finally the uniqueness of the individual is realized in the relation, but not at the expense of the connection that makes the relation possible.

III.

A Person as a Participant in Dialogue? To see how these themes in the history of the concept of person might fit into Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics as a replacement account of the subject, let’s consider the context of places where Gadamer has invoked the term “person.” First, chronologically, there is his review of Löwith’s book where Gadamer says, “the Being of the person is fundamentally determined in its mode of being through the relations in which it stands to other people.” Löwith is more specific about where this relationship is realized; a section of his book is titled, “The participant in dialogue is not an individual, but a person.”³⁶ Second, there

³⁶ *Das Individuum in der Rolle des Mitmenschen* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1969), 105.

is the section of *Truth and Method* where Gadamer is discussing what it means to genuinely encounter another not just as a Thou, but as a person. Third, in “Subjectivity and Intersubjectivity; Subject and Person” he invokes the usefulness of the concept of a person to explain how it is we need to turn to others to realize our own limitations. In all three cases, Gadamer speaks about a person as coming to be through encountering others, specifically in dialogue. It makes clear sense, then, to hypothesize personhood as the being of the participant in dialogue. To see if this works, we need to see how the features of personhood derived from the history of the concept are borne out in conversation. If the hypothesis can be confirmed, it has the advantage of trivially connecting to linguisticity as a replacement for subjectivity and to the relevance of Hölderlin’s quotation, “We exist in dialogue.”

Gadamer repeatedly stresses that dialogue is necessary for understanding any subject matter, including oneself. There is no substitute for actual dialogue, and famously it can take place with texts and works of art as well as with other human beings. Dialogues are guided by the shared attempt to arrive at an articulate understanding of the matter at hand, thus they are collaborative activities where each interlocutor starts from the belief that the other individual can provide new insights unattainable simply through reflection. The relationship of the participants is best modeled on the relationship of friendship. Since dialogues are aimed at understanding the subject matter, they should be guided by the subject matter itself, by the way it is disclosed through various linguistic formulations in order that it show itself as itself from itself. The disclosure of the subject matter amounts to a fusion of horizons of the participants in the dialogue: a coming to share a vantage point on the subject matter, even if not arriving at an agreement about it. The fusion of horizons sheds light on unrealized prejudices that were

occluding understanding and thus increases the participants' self-understanding.³⁷ All this takes place even if a shared vocabulary cannot be agreed upon. If there is a shared disclosure, this is not the final word on the subject. Every unconcealing is also a concealing; there are ever new questions, new realization of the limitations of our understanding, and new recognition of the pervasiveness of our prejudices.

How does such an account of dialogue lend support to the idea that, for Gadamer, participants in dialogue are not subjects, but persons? Let's start with the most apparent connection: in dialogue we stand in relation to others and take on the role of interlocutor only in virtue of others sharing the role with us. For Gadamer it is not merely one way of interacting among others, it is essential for self-understanding and we can only become beings-in-dialogue with the help of the welcoming presence of another listener. Dialogue is essentially relational. We always presume our interlocutor has something to teach us, that is, that there is something unique about our interlocutor such that he or she can find or inspire the words we currently lack. Even though we share the same language and the same world, still the understanding from the start is that we are in the presence of someone new. In this sense, engaging in dialogue is a mutual acknowledgement of individuality amongst all we share. Though it is not love per se, friendship is the model for the relationship. We enter into dialogue out of an understanding of our own finitude and the recognition that with the cooperation of another person, these limitations while not being transcended can still be made productive. Redemption (so to speak) comes with the concrete experience of our finitude as a *condition* of meaning rather than a

³⁷ For a detailed discussion of the phenomenological roots of Gadamer's concept of the fusion of horizons, see David Vessey's "Gadamer and the Fusion of Horizons" in *International Journal for Philosophical Studies*, 17:4 (2009): 531–42.

failure of meaning. All of this occurs in language, the medium that we share, that unites us while also freeing us. Linguisticity remains the condition for community and individuality.

Personhood as being-in-dialogue captures many of the historical features of personhood without positing a substance or elevating self-reflection. Our success is not unqualified, however. What is not clear is how participating in dialogue brings to realization the wholeness of the person, nor how the participation can play the central moral, political, and legal role that the concept of person is often taken to play. Wholeness is what we sought to explain the need for an account of a person above and beyond what we already gain from Gadamer's account of linguisticity. Unfortunately that has not yet shown itself. The alternative to substantive wholeness was the recognitional wholeness found in Luther and Schleiermacher. In those cases, though, it was God's omniscience and redemptive divine benevolence (respectively) that made the wholeness of the person possible. Neither theological solution is available to Gadamer. Nonetheless, the goal of this paper has been to begin to address Gadamer's comment that "there arises a completely different conceptual tradition [the concept of the person], and one might ask to what extent it may help us"³⁸ by spelling out in detail and following the clues Gadamer's provides about that tradition. I dare say we can now better see how the concept of the person could eventually fill a crucial role in a fully worked out version of Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics.

Grand Valley State University

Grand Rapids, Michigan

³⁸ "Subjectivity and Intersubjectivity; Subject and Person," 285.