

**PERSONALITY AND
THEISM:
TWO ESSAYS**

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Personality and Theism: Two Essays by Frederic Henry Hedge

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PERSONALITY AND THEISM

Two Essays

BY

FREDERIC HENRY HEDGE



CAMBRIDGE
JOHN WILSON AND SON

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PERSONALITY:

A PAPER READ BEFORE A CLERICAL CONFERENCE.

WORDS exercise a fatal influence on thought and belief. When turned from their original import and fixed in some perverted use, they breed misconception and propagate endless error.

The word *persona* (from which our English "person") meant originally a mask such as ancient actors wore upon the stage. In the Greek and Roman drama all the parts were performed in masks. The mask was called in Greek *προσωπεῖον*, from *πρόσωπον*, "face;" in Latin, *persona*, from *persono*, "I sound through." Hence very naturally these words came to signify the part performed, the character represented. We say in English to *personate* a character; that is, to wear the mask of that character.

From the boards of the theatre the phrase was transferred to the scenes of life. *Persona* was used to denote the character which an individual presented to the world, the part he enacted in

social life. The part might be genuine or feigned, guise or disguise, nature or art. Livy says, *personam alienam ferre*, "to act a foreign part." Cicero uses the expression, *tantam personam sustinet*, "he acts so important a part." But the fact is, every man in society acts a part. Conscious or unconscious, feigned or true, with or without simulation or dissimulation, every man is an actor; and all that we really know of any man is the part he acts, — his appearance in the eyes of his fellow-men. The real man is never seen, but only his simulacrum. And as that simulacrum is inseparable from the individual, as it represents the individual to his kind, so the word *persona* came to signify the individual himself. *Mea persona*, or *nostra persona*, says Cicero; that is, "I myself."

We use "person" in the same sense; we say indifferently "person" or "individual," making no distinction between the two. For ordinary purposes we are justified in so doing, since all we can know of individuals is their persons, their manifestation of themselves to the eye or ear. Only it behooves us to remember that there is something deeper in man than his person, and that though the person is the outbirth of the individual, is constituted by the individual, it nevertheless is not the individual, is not identical with the innermost being, but something exterior and distinct.

What then is that interior something that underlies the person,— the ultimate ground of our being? Most men, I suppose, identify it with the *I*, the *ego*, the conscious self. This seems to be the prevailing opinion; it is a very natural one. When we say "I," we seem to express our innermost being, for the obvious reason that consciousness can no farther go; the *ego* is the deepest that consciousness knows. But the application of scientific analysis to the act of consciousness will show that the *ego* is not the deepest in man, is not the ground of our being.

Observe that consciousness is not a stated condition, but an occasional one. Being is perpetual, consciousness is not. The most inveterate egoist cannot be always aware of himself. Consciousness is the product of occasion; moreover, it has a physical origin,— it is the result of certain specific motions of the brain. In the case of simple consciousness,— that is, conscious sensation,— what causes the motion is some impression from without. Consciousness is the response of the mind to that impression. The connecting link between the motion in the brain and the consciousness which ensues, is a mystery. That which produces consciousness must of course be antecedent to consciousness,— consequently out of the reach of consciousness.

Still less in the case of compound or self-consciousness can consciousness detect its own origin. All we know is that on some provocation, represented by a motion in the brain, it is born out of the unfathomable abyss of the unconscious which lies behind it. The nearest approach to an explanation of it is to say that it is the product of two factors, — the unconscious spirit, and a human brain.

Such is the genesis and natural history of the ego. And I suppose the ego to be peculiar to man. The brute I suppose to have only simple consciousness, not the reflected consciousness of self. The brute does not think *I*. The action of spirit in that sphere of life is too feeble — or, what is the same thing, the brain is of too coarse a fibre — to produce a conscious self. Neither, at the other end of the scale, can I ascribe self-consciousness to God. Self-consciousness is inconceivable without a body or some kind of framing. Its prime condition is limitation. Self is made self by self-circumscription. In order to be self-conscious God must part with his infinity; that is, cease to be God. When the Scriptures represent him as saying "I," the thought imputed to him is as much an anthropomorphism as the imputation of articulate speech.

From this view of self-consciousness it follows that the human ego, so far from being the real

man, our innermost nature, is merely an incidental phenomenon. It is not a being, but an act, a thought, an occasional reflection of an unknown being in a human organism. I exist only in the act of self-consciousness. Destroy self-consciousness,—and there are lesions of the brain which have that effect,—and I cease to exist. 'T is a fact of vulgar experience that the ego is not, *a parte ante*, conterminous and coeval with our being. There is a time, varying, I suppose, from the second to the fourth year, when a human individual first says to himself, "I." There was a day, an hour, a minute, of my history when, having for some years existed for others as a person, I was born to myself. Sometimes, but rarely, an individual is able to recall the moment of that nativity. Jean Paul, in his autobiography, boasts that experience. "Never," says he, "shall I forget what as yet I have told to no one, a mental transaction whereby I assisted at the birth of my self-consciousness, when all at once 'I am an *I*' rushed before me like a flash of lightning from heaven, and since then has remained luminously persistent. Then for the first time my *I* had seen itself, and forever." What is the psychological import of that experience? We are apt to regard it as the rising into view of the deepest in man, of the whole man. But observe that the act of