

Potential Persons or Persons with Potential? A Thomistic Perspective

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Summary German and French abstracts see p. 110

An article published in an earlier issue of this journal advanced the thesis that «the embryo is a potential person, because it will develop into a person if nothing prevents it» (1; p. 79). The interesting thing about this claim is not the statement itself but the author's attempt to support his claim by reference to a tradition which he traces back to Thomas Aquinas. However, the idea of potential personhood is incommensurate with Thomas Aquinas' understanding of personhood. For a Thomistic thinker the phrase «potential person» is a «*contradictio in adjecto*», a contradiction in terms. Showing why is what this essay is devoted to. It defends the thesis that there is no such thing as a potential person if we assume (with Thomas Aquinas) that a person is an individual substance which possesses a rational nature.

By doing so, this article is not only meant to render more precise the way we think about persons but also to refocus the content of our disputes about the problem of personhood. When we think about personhood it is not the dispute between the doctrines Baertschi (1; p. 77) has suggested to name actualism, dispositionalism and capabilitism which we should devote our attention to but a more fundamental question, namely whether personhood can and should be reduced to a mere property (or a set of mere properties) or has rather to do with ontology and substantial being.

In all likelihood, the choice of our stance on the question of the personhood and thus dignity of unborn human beings is not only one of the most complex but also one of the most serious philosophical challenges. It is complex because we have to critically assess and choose from a variety of competing and often contradicting philosophical positions; and it is serious because our choice not only predetermines how we treat human life at its beginning but also during its later stages and, especially, at its end: the choice either grants or denies human beings the most fundamental right there is – the right to life. Unless one were to deny the importance of the concept of personhood altogether or cast doubt on its being the source of (inherent) human dignity, moral status and hence the right to life, the gravity and complexity of the question of what makes a person a person thus deserves that we strive for precision and clarity of thought.

Perusing earlier issues of this journal, it was this endeavour that made me turn my attention to an article that advanced the thesis that «the embryo is a potential person, because it will develop into a person if nothing prevents it» (1; p. 79). What caught my attention and

made me – intellectually speaking – stumble was, however, not so much the claim that there allegedly is such a thing as a «potential person» (for, this or similar expressions can be found in the writings of e.g. Peter Singer, Mary Anne Warren, Norbert Hoerster, Norman M. Ford, Michael Tooley or in a very recent and highly contested article by Alberto Giubilini and Francesca Minerva on post-natal abortion [2]), but the author's attempt to support his claim and position by reference to a tradition that he traces back to both Immanuel Kant and St. Thomas Aquinas: «On this point too, our tradition is generally in agreement; it has coined a special term to denote the entity that possesses reason: a person. Here too, Aquinas and Kant go hand in hand.» [1; p. 77]¹

The Problem and why it matters

Baertschi seems to assume that both Thomas Aquinas and Kant share his account of personhood that allows him to deduce that the embryo is a potential person, namely that personhood is grounded in the possession of reason. While this assumption might be upheld as far as Kant is concerned², it is, unfortunately, not true to the philosophy of Thomas Aquinas. For Thomas Aquinas (and with him the Catholic Church [24; n. 9]) «person» is not a «special term to denote the entity that possesses reason» [1; p. 77] or «possess(es) somehow some relevant kind of rationality» [1; p. 77] but a special term to denote an individual substance which possesses a rational nature («*persona est rationalis naturae individua substantia*» [4; I^a q. 29 a. 1 arg. 1]³).

1 By «reason» Baertschi seems to understand rational capacities, such as e.g. self-consciousness.

2 For Kant, personhood is rooted in the fact «daß der Mensch in seiner Vorstellung das Ich haben kann» [26; Ak 127]; for him a person is «dasjenige Subject, dessen Handlungen einer Zurechnung fähig sind» [27; Ak 223]. Kant's definition resembles John Locke's functionalist understanding of personhood: for Locke a person is «a thinking intelligent being, that has reason and reflection, and can consider itself as itself, the same thinking thing, in different times and places» [3; Book II, Chapter XXVII, Paragraph 9].

3 With this definition Thomas Aquinas follows Boëthius («*persona est naturae rationalis individua substantia*» [5; ch. 3]). Boëthius, in return, owes the term «person» to Tertullian who – in his work «*Adversus Praxeum*», a defence the Catholic doctrine of the trinity and unity of God – was the first to take the term «person» from the realms of theatre (where «person» [Greek: «*πρόσωπον*», «*prósopon*»]; Latin: «*persona*») referred to the masks used in ancient Latin and Greek comedies and tragedies [cf. 10; q. 9 a. 3 co.] and grammar and introduce it to the realms of philosophy and theology in the late 2nd or early 3rd century AD.

Though only differing by the word <nature>, these definitions of personhood are incommensurate and must not be mixed. As will be shown in this article the Thomistic definition does not allow for the syllogism that there is such a thing as a <potential person>. It might be logically sound to conclude that there is such a thing as a <potential person> if one assumes that the relevant property for personhood is the possession of reason or rationality. The aim of this article is to establish that and also why it is not possible, however, to draw this conclusion – as Baertschi seems to do – from the Thomistic premise that the relevant property for personhood is the possession of a rational nature.

This essay is structured according to the conditions of personhood as given by the definition of Thomas Aquinas. The following sections will elaborate on the conditions of (1) being an individual substance and (2) having a rational nature.⁴ The insights developed will enable us to establish that and why – from a Thomistic perspective – there are no potential persons but only persons with potential and why Thomas Aquinas cannot be part of a tradition that can be cited to back an alleged potential personhood of the embryo.

This task is highly relevant as its successful completion can help us bring more clarity to a bio-ethical debate that not only prominently features but hinges on the concepts <personhood> and <potentiality>. It can enable us to see that when it comes to the question of who should be granted personhood (and from which moment) it is not the discourse between the doctrines Baertschi (1; p. 77) has suggested to name actualism, dispositionalism and capabilitism to which we should devote our attention⁵ but a more fundamental question, namely whether personhood can and should be reduced to a mere empirical-functionalist property (or a set of such properties) or has to do with ontology and substantial being.⁶ When it comes to deciding about bio-ethical matters such as abortion, in vitro fertilisation (IVF), preimplantation diagnosis (PID), euthanasia, physician assisted suicide etc. it is this problem which should be scrutinised more often.

The Person as an Individual Substance

As mentioned above, Thomas Aquinas takes a person to be <rationalis naturae individua substantia> (4; I^a q. 29 a. 1 arg. 1). Applying the Aristotelian category (cf. 6 as well as 7; 1045b27 and 9) <individual substance> to a person does not mean that he is some merely material thing. Rather, he is a particular kind of basic entity (a <primary substance⁷>) and as such a <fundamental subject of predication> (8) which exists in and by itself and which is not attributable to and cannot be predicated of any other thing. As an individual, i.e. primary, substance a person is a particular, existing, unique, unrepeatable, complete subject of some kind, species or genus (= <secondary substance>) – a some-one.⁸

The Person as Individual Substance of a Rational Nature

But a person not only is an individual but an individual of a rational nature: <omne individuum rationalis naturae dicitur persona> (4; I^a q. 29 a. 3 ad 2). The genitive <rationalis naturae> is usually translated in a literal fashion with <of a rational nature>. But, what does it mean for something to be <of a rational nature>? If we state that <X is of Y>, we usually want to express that X has or possesses certain features: If something is of value, this is meant to express that this something has value; if something is of importance, this is meant to express that this something is important, i.e. has the quality of being important. Generally speaking: that which is predicated of a subject in the genitive form is had by that subject as a quality or property. Being of a rational nature, therefore, means to have or possess a rational nature.⁹ Therefore, an <individuum rationalis naturae> is an individual (endowed) with a rational nature; accordingly, a person is every individual who has or is endowed with a rational nature; nota bene: what is had is not <rationality> or <reason> but <a rational nature>. It is this subtle difference that is absolutely crucial in explaining why – according to the Thomistic tradition – there is no such thing as a potential person. In order to understand this we have to further our understanding of the Thomistic concept of <nature>; we can do so by having a closer look at the concept of primary substances.

According to Aristotelian-Thomistic philosophy, any primary substance is a <hylomorphic compound> (8) and has two structural components: matter and form. Matter is the stuff of which the primary substance consists and form is the structural law of formation

4 Although not explicitly mentioned, it should be added that personhood always necessitates life; only living, i.e. animate beings, can be persons [also cf. 16; ch. 2].

5 For, in order to participate in this discourse one has to first accept its underlying premise, namely that <person> denotes an entity that possesses reason.

6 Sullivan [28; p. 17ff] has named these two options <empirical functionalism> and <ontological personalism>.

7 As far as the Boëthian definition of person is concerned, it is disputed whether the term <substance> taken by itself signifies a primary or secondary substance. It seems probable that it pre-scinds from both, and is restricted to primary substance only by the addition <individua> [cf. 10; q. 9 a. 2 ad 7 as well as 4; I^a q. 29 a. 1 ad 2]. For an explication of the Aristotelian category <substance> and the distinction between <primary substance> and <secondary substance> cf. 16; p. 241ff.

8 Whereas an <individual> is taken to be <quod est in se indistinctum, ab aliis vero distinctum> [4; I^a q. 29 a. 4 co.; also cf. 4; III^a q. 16 a. 12 ad 2], i.e. that which is indistinct in itself but distinct from others. Unlike the higher branches in a Porphyrian tree, an individual cannot be further subdivided; it is one in number. A person is never an abstract but signifies <proprietas qui non convenit nisi uni soli> [11; IV, 6], i.e. stands for the property of a unique subject.

9 This understanding of the genitive <rationalis naturae> as a genitive of quality (i.e. a special form of genitivus possessivus) is also in line with the <Lexikon der Bioethik> that translates this genitive with the construction <ausgezeichnet durch> [29; p. 5] as well as other scholars, such as Seifert who translates this genitive with <endowed with a rational nature> [30; p. 72].

which informs the way «that stuff is put together so that the whole it constitutes can perform its characteristic functions» (8). In short, the form is what kind of thing a primary substance is and the matter is what it is made of.¹⁰ Having established this, it is interesting to note that, according to Thomas Aquinas, the terms «nature» (Greek: φύσις (physis), Latin: natura) and «form» express the same idea and can, therefore, be used synonymously: «forma igitur rei naturalis est eius natura» (14; lib. 4 cap. 35 n. 4; also cf. 4; I^a q. 29 a. 1 ad 4 as well as 5; ch. 1 and 4; I^a q. 76 a. 1 s.c. and 10; q. 9 a. 2 ad 11 and 31; p. 38 and 33; p. 39). In consequence, nature is that which gives form or essence to a primary substance; it is its formal cause. If a person is said to have a rational nature, this amounts to saying that a person has a rational form. And if a person is said to be an individual substance of a rational nature, this amounts to saying that he is a unique individual subject composed of matter and a rational form.

According to Thomas Aquinas, the form of all living things is the soul (Greek: ψυχή [psyché]; Latin: anima).¹¹ Therefore, «person» can only be predicated of living things because only living things possess a soul respectively because that which distinguishes an animate being from an inanimate object is that the former possesses a soul whereas the latter does not.¹² Consequently, an individual subject composed of matter and a rational form is nothing else but an individual subject composed of matter and a rational soul.

In the light of these findings, the problem of potential personhood boils down to a question of rational ensoulment, i.e. the point in time when a human being can be said to have a rational soul. If personhood were only about possessing a biological soul¹³, then it would be perfectly clear that all living beings are persons from the moment they start until the moment they stop having a soul; there would be no potential persons. However, the life principle in question is not just any soul but a rational soul. If there is no rational soul, then there can be no person. But, when can human beings be said to have a rational soul, a soul with the operative power of reason?

Given the tripartition of soul (nutritive, sensitive and intellectual/ rational; cf. 4; I^a q. 78) this amounts to asking when (if so) a human being receives the quality «rational» in addition to the qualities of «sensitive» and «nutritive». In an attempt to argue that human beings receive a rational soul only some time after conception, some authors (cf. 18) quote St. Thomas Aquinas who held that the embryo receives a rational soul only some 40 to 80 days after conception. Although it is true that St. Thomas Aquinas was a proponent of a delayed or belated ensoulment theory (14; lib. 2 cap. 89 n. 11; for an explication of his position cf. 19), he was so because he could not know better. The scientific state of knowledge of his time led him to believe that the embryo's and thus man's soul gradually develops from a vegetative, to a sensitive and then to a rational, i.e. human,

soul. However, as Breuer (20; p. 85ff; also cf. 21 as well as 22; p. 22ff) has argued, the scientific basis for Aquinas' position and the theory of successive animation is outdated and untenable.

St. Thomas Aquinas holds that «a rational soul does not inform a physical body unless the body is properly disposed for that type of soul» (22; p. 26), i.e. has «a principal organ capable of being the efficient cause of the activities specific to a human person» (21). Strictly keeping to the biological scientific state of the art of his time (for an account of this state of the art cf. 20 as well as 21), St. Thomas Aquinas took this principal organ to be the sense organs and the brain (as contemporary thinkers often still do, too); he was thus forced to resort to the hypothesis that the human body is properly disposed for a rational soul only some 40 to 80 days after conception. However, what he could not know back then was that scientific progress in the field of biology has revealed «that the matter out of which the human body is generated is already highly organized at conception» (21) and that the zygote's nucleus is already sufficiently disposed for a rational soul as «it is the epigenetic primordium of the primitive streak, and thus of the brain and nervous system» (22; p. 41). It is, therefore, not only reasonable but also perfectly possible that all human beings get to have a rational soul at the moment of conception, i.e. once a new human genome has been constituted by means of a self-sacrificial combination and union of a human spermatozoon and human ovum.¹⁴

10 In order to also allow for immaterial realities, Thomas Aquinas refined that position and distinguished between «substantia prima composita» and «substantia prima simplex» [12; cap. 1]; the former equals Aristotle's hylomorphic compound, the latter is composed of form alone [cf. 13; a. 1 ad 6] but is of no concern for us here.

11 As Thomas Aquinas states it belongs to the very notion of a soul to be the form of a body («Est enim de ratione animae, quod sit forma alicuius corporis.» [4; I^a q. 75 a. 5 co.; also cf. 15; 415b]), whereas the soul not only is the formal but also efficient as well as final cause of a living being's being alive [15; 415b10]. Although the soul is only experienced and given in an indirect way, there can be no life without some «ψυχή» («psyché»), i.e. life-principle which is really distinct from the physical-chemical make-up of a body («anima dicitur esse primum principium vitae in his quae apud nos vivunt» [4; I^a q. 75 a. 1 co.; also cf. 4; I^a q. 76 a. 1 co.], i.e. the soul is the first principle of life of those things that live.). The soul brings life to whatever contains soul. It is life's source, origin and primary seat. The human soul, furthermore, is not just any form but «ultima in nobilitate formarum» [4; I^a q. 76 a. 1 co.], i.e. the highest and noblest of forms.

12 For a masterful treatment on the soul as the principle of life cf. 32; also cf. 16; p. 24ff.

13 I.e. the life principle that is at work in all living beings, be they plants, animals or human beings. A biological soul is sometimes also called vegetative or nutritive soul.

14 I have dealt with the so called twinning- or individuality-charge (which also advanced by Baertschi [1; p. 79; also cf. 23; p. 118]) and which doubts the individuality (i.e. an essential aspect of personhood) of the zygote and the early embryo elsewhere [cf. 16; p. 259ff]. This charge can be easily refuted once we realise that twinning is a natural occurrence of a process mankind has mastered to copy artificially: cloning. If we consistently applied the individuality-charge not only to the process of natural but also artificial cloning, then nobody would be a person because all human beings can be artificially cloned during all of their lifetimes – and perhaps some time after their death. Given the fact that we do not consider ourselves non-persons until we have been cloned, twinning does

Is there such a thing as a potential person?

By now, it has been established that the Boëthian-Thomistic understanding of personhood (individual substance of a rational nature) states that a person has to be an individual subject composed of matter and a rational soul. Assuming that all human beings come in material form, this amounts to saying that a person has to be a (bodily-material) individual who has a rational soul. It has also been shown that it is philosophically sound to hold that human beings are individuals and possess a rational soul from the moment of their conception. What does this mean for the purpose of this article? We set out to find out why there is no such thing as a potential person if we assume that a person is an individual substance of a rational nature. So, is there such a thing as a potential person?

In order to answer this question, it is crucial to understand that what confers personhood (according to the Boëthian-Thomistic definition of personhood) is not the possession of some rational capacity but the possession of a rational soul. Having pointed this out, it is helpful to now introduce two concepts on which the lion's share of the debates about the moral permissibility of abortion, PID etc. seems to hinge: potentiality (Greek: δύνάμις [dynamis]; Latin: potentia) and actuality (Greek: ἐντελέχεια [entelecheia]; Latin: actus).¹⁵ By means of an analogy Aristotle explains that form (and thus soul) can be said to be actual in two ways (cf. 15; 412a11; also cf. 15; 402a25–26):

- a) <first actuality> (<actus primus>): someone possessing knowledge without making use of it
- b) <secondary actuality> or <second actuality> (<actus secundus>): someone possessing knowledge and making use of it (by e.g. an act of thinking or speaking)

In both cases, the knowledge had is had in actuality, i.e. is around regardless of whether it is made use of or not. Besides the distinction between first actuality and second actuality, Aristotle also distinguishes between first potentiality and second potentiality (cf. 15; 417a20).¹⁶ The person who is having some (actual) knowledge but is not making use of it (case [a] just mentioned) can be said to have this knowledge in first actuality. But at the same time this knowledge can be said to be an instance of potentiality, too: for, it can be made use of potentially. Therefore, for Aristotle having something in first actuality also implies to have this something in second potentiality. In order to understand first potentiality, we have to consider a third aspect of the analogy of the knower mentioned above:

- c) first potentiality: someone who has a mere potential to gain knowledge but no actual knowledge as mentioned above, form (and thus soul), if had, is always actuality. But what kind of actuality? Again, we can turn to Aristotle, who specifies the soul as the first actuality of a natural body (15; 412a27 as well as 4; 1^a q. 78 a. 1 co.). This means that the rational soul

of a person is had in first actuality and second potentiality, i.e. in the same way as knowledge is had even when it is not utilised. And as knowledge is around, even if one cannot put it into practice, so the rational soul is around even if there is no sign of rational behaviour. Possessing a rational soul does not imply the potential to become rational, i.e. develop (or not develop) rational capacities at some time in the future (which would imply first potentiality); rather, it implies the possession of an actual capacity to engage in the activity or behaviour which is the corresponding second actuality, namely rationality.

A person can only act rationally because he has always been a rational being to begin with; and he will have always been a rational being to begin with even if he will never be able to show any sign of rational behaviour – i.e. even if the rational soul's infrastructure (the matter and the bodily-material prerequisites respectively [e.g. the internal and external sensory organs] needed for rationality to work) will never allow for it. If we take the Boëthian-Thomistic definition of personhood as a starting point, we have to, therefore, conclude that there is no such thing as a potential person but only persons with potential – the potential to become the rational beings they already are. A living being is either a person or not but it cannot develop from non-personhood to personhood. Therefore, for a Thomistic thinker the term <potential person> is a <contradictio in adjecto>, a contradiction in terms.

Concluding Remarks

This article set out to defend the hypothesis that Thomas Aquinas cannot be part of a tradition that can be cited to back an alleged potential personhood of the embryo; and it should have succeeded in doing so. According to the Thomistic tradition (and along with him the Catholic Church), personhood is a mode of existence or being. The property that is of such high value that it grants personhood is not reason or the possession of some rational capacity but the principle

and cannot imply that there is no individual prior to twinning. The only modification the individuality-charge gives us reason to make is that not all persons begin at the moment of conception.

15 These two concepts are closely linked to the distinction between matter and form and are meant to explain how change comes about. According to Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas, it is characteristic of matter that it can be some or another way and could be (i.e. is potentially) something it (actually) is not. As subject of change, matter, therefore, is potentiality; in contrast, as a hylomorphic compound's and thus matter's blueprint form is actuality [cf. 15; 412a10 as well as 4; 1^a q. 76 a. 1 co.], i.e. the principle of determination according to which matter is formed or organised over time and which perfects the potentiality of matter («forma perficit totam potentialitatem materiae» [4; 1^a q. 9 a. 2 co.]). In a nutshell: potentia is the determinable being, actus the determined being.

16 A further distinction that is, however, not of concern for the purposes of this article is the distinction between active potentiality and passive potentiality [also cf. 16; p. 273ff].

that is causally responsible for the rational behaviour¹⁷ of living beings and which enables them to go about the business of rationality, namely their rational soul. What is valuable for Thomistic tradition is the cause of our rational capacities, man's substantial being, not the capacity itself that is only a symptom of man's substantial being.

If we assume that the relevant property for personhood is the possession of reason, then it is hard to explain how something, which does not show any signs of reasons, can be a person. For, how are we to judge the possession of reason but by its actualisation (in the sense of second actuality)? Given the definition that 'person' is a «special term to denote the entity that possesses reason» (1; p. 77) the only sound answers are the doctrines Baertschi has named actualism (which holds that someone is a person if he exercises, i.e. actualises, rationality now) and dispositionalism (which holds that someone is a person if he has exercised, i.e. actualised, rationality at least once and it has, therefore, become apparent that he could do so again under normal circumstances). For, why should a human being who has not yet shown any signs of rationality be granted personhood – as capabilitism claims? How should we know that this human being will ever show these signs? This is where Stanley Benn is right: «For if A has rights only because he satisfies some condition P, it does not follow that B has the same rights now because he could have property P at some time in the future. It only follows that he will have rights when he has P. He is a potential bearer of rights, as he is a potential bearer of P. A potential president of the United States is not on that account Commander-in-Chief.» (17; p. 143)¹⁸

The only way out of this dilemma is to take refuge to the concept of 'nature' which serves as an explanation of why certain abilities can be taken to be innate. In order to know that something that we cannot empirically assess (as it has not been actualised [in the sense of second actuality]) is around as a disposition that can be exercised in the future, one has to find a common denominator that allows to establish that there is something that all items that belong to a certain genus of things have in common. Baertschi writes that «we can say that a particular piece of glass is brittle before it breaks, and even if it never breaks» (1; p. 79). But why can we say so? Because it is characteristic of glass that it can break; because there is something in the nature of glass that is common to all pieces of glass that makes it brittle. The problem with this line of reasoning is that by accepting this insight one tacitly denies and alters the underlying premise: The term 'person' would, then, not signify an entity that possesses reason but an entity that possesses a nature that grants him some yet unobservable rational capacities (or as Baertschi calls them 'dispositions') that can (or cannot) be actualised in the future; what is valuable would not be the possession of some rational capabili-

ties (as these, undeniably, are simply not around yet) but of a rational nature.

What I am trying to say is that capabilitism as Baertschi advances it is a self-refuting doctrine as it denies the very premise it is based on. It is contradictory to hold that a person is an entity that possesses rational capacities (which can only be taken to mean observable rational capacities) and at the same hold that it is not the possession of rational observable capacities which is important for personhood but the possession of something that cannot be observed, namely some 'nature'.¹⁹ One cannot have a cake and eat it ... Those holding that personhood has to do with nature, form or soul (i.e. accept the Boethian-Thomistic definition of personhood) should not engage in the dispute between the three Baertschian doctrines. Rather, they should acknowledge that their premise is different and that a solution cannot be found unless we address the root of the problem, namely the dispute between empirical functionalism and ontological personalism.

But, why does Baertschi think that his understanding of personhood and capabilitism is backed by the authority of Thomas Aquinas? One reason could be a misinterpretation of the traditional understanding of personhood as developed by Boethius and Thomas Aquinas: «Even when the old Boethius' definition of the person is quoted (rationalis naturae individua substantia), it is usually intended to mean 'an individual able to perform rational acts or intellectual operations', so that what is considered worthy is not the being itself which develops, possesses and practices these operations, but rather the operations themselves.» (25; p. 17) That this seems to hold true for Baertschi's, too, can be seen by the fact that he cites from Thomas Aquinas 'Disputed Questions on the Power of God'²⁰ to support his statement that «a 'person' includes in its meaning the most dignified nature: reason» (1; p. 78). However, his translation (or paraphrasing) seems to be incorrect: Thomas Aquinas does not state that the most dignified nature is reason but that the most dignified nature is a rational nature.²¹ And as we have seen, this makes a

17 Such actualisations of rationality range from thinking, communication, self-awareness/reflexivity to affectivity and religiousness [cf. 16; p. 269ff].

18 Baertschi acknowledges this problem when he writes (R* stands for rationality): «there is a special difficulty in the case of an embryo: an embryo as such never manifests R*, has never manifested it and will never manifest it.» [1; p. 79].

19 This is why it is – to my mind – wrong to take the position of Thomas Aquinas and the Catholic Church as examples for capabilitism. They are not as they do not share capabilitism's underlying premise, namely that 'person' is a «special term to denote the entity that possesses reason» [1; p. 77].

20 The sentence he cites is: «Natura autem quam persona in sua significatione includit, est omnium naturarum dignissima, scilicet natura intellectualis.» [10; De potentia, q. 9 a. 3 co.] However, he seems to have forgotten to also cite the last words of this sentence which read: «[...] scilicet natura intellectualis secundum genus suum».

21 As we can find elsewhere, Thomas Aquinas holds that it is of high dignity to be the bearer of reason but to subsist in a rational nature («magnae dignitatis est in rationali natura subsistere» [I^a q. 29 a. 3 ad 2]).

difference. What is important for St. Thomas Aquinas is the fact that we have a rational soul, i.e. that we are what we are; his understanding of personhood is ontological. Reason, however, cannot be said to be soul; it is a quality of soul²² but not the soul itself. A quality of something cannot be the thing itself.

That this is so can be seen from the following example: If we were to claim that a golden crown is the most dignified of all crowns, it would sound plainly wrong to paraphrase this by stating that the most dignified crown is goldenness. For a crown to be most dignified it has to be a crown and it has to be golden. A golden bracelet is not a golden crown; and an iron crown is not a golden crown. So, why should it be fine to state that – assuming that the most dignified nature is a rational nature – the most dignified nature is reason? Neither reason nor any other non-rational kind of nature, are a rational nature. By leaving aside the term <nature> or equalising it with <reason> we lose half of what it means to be a person: to have a soul, i.e. be an animated being.

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Zusammenfassung

Potentielle Personen oder Personen mit Potential? Eine Thomistische Perspektive

In dieser Zeitschrift wurde vor einiger Zeit ein Beitrag veröffentlicht, der zugunsten der These argumentierte, «der Embryo ist eine potentielle Person, weil er sich zu einer Person entwickelt, wenn dies durch nichts verhindert wird.» (1; p. 79) Interessant an dieser Position ist nicht der Standpunkt selbst, sondern der Versuch des Autors, diesen zu stützen, indem er sich auf eine Tradition beruft, die er auf Thomas von Aquin zurückführt. Tatsächlich ist die Idee eines potentiellen Personseins jedoch nicht mit dem Thomistischen Personenverständnis vereinbar. Für einen thomistischen Denker ist die Rede von einer «potentiellen Person» vielmehr eine *contradictio in adjecto*, ein Widerspruch in sich selbst. Das soll in diesem Essay erläutert werden. Es wird die These vertreten, dass es so etwas wie eine potentielle Person nicht geben kann, wenn wir (mit Thomas von Aquin) annehmen, dass eine Person als individuelle Substanz einer rationalen Natur zu verstehen ist.

Der Artikel möchte nicht nur verdeutlichen, wie wir präziser darüber nachdenken können, was Personen sind, sondern auch die Debatten wieder auf die Frage nach dem Status der Person zurücklenken. Wenn wir über das Personsein nachdenken, sollten wir nicht auf die verschiedenen Ansichten eingehen, die von Baertschi (1; p. 77) unter den Begriffen Aktualismus, Dispositionalismus und Befähigungsansatz diskutiert

werden, sondern unsere Aufmerksamkeit grundlegenden Aspekten zuwenden, namentlich der Frage, ob Personsein auf eine bloße Eigenschaft (oder ein Set von Eigenschaften) reduziert werden kann bzw. soll oder ob das Personsein nicht eher mit Ontologie und substantiellem Sein zu tun hat.

Résumé

Les personnes potentielles ou le potentiel des personnes. Le point de vue thomiste

Un article publié dans un numéro préalable de cette revue avançait la thèse que «l'embryon est une personne potentielle, car il va se développer en une personne si rien de l'en empêche» (1; p. 79). Ce qui est intéressant dans cet énoncé n'est pas son contenu en tant que tel, mais la tentative de l'auteur de le lier à une tradition qu'il fait remonter à Thomas d'Aquin. Cependant, l'idée de personne potentielle est incompatible avec la compréhension d'une personne chez Thomas d'Aquin. Pour un penseur thomiste, l'expression «personne potentielle» est une «*contradictio in adjecto*», une contradiction dans les termes. Le présent article montre pourquoi. Il défend la thèse qu'il n'y a pas de personne potentielle si nous présumons (avec Thomas d'Aquin) qu'une personne est une substance individuelle possédant une nature rationnelle.

Ce faisant, cet article n'a pas pour seule intention de rendre plus précise notre manière de penser ce qu'est une personne, mais vise également à recentrer nos débats sur le problème du statut de personne. Lorsque nous pensons au statut de personne, ce n'est pas la tension entre les doctrines que Baertschi propose d'appeler actualisme, dispositionalisme et capabilitisme (1; p. 77) qui devrait nous occuper, mais une question plus fondamentale: à savoir si le statut de personne peut et devrait être réduit à une simple propriété (ou à un ensemble de simples propriétés) ou s'il a plutôt à voir avec l'ontologie et l'être substantiel.

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22 For, according to Aristotelian-Thomistic philosophy there also are vegetative, sensitive and rational souls.

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