

Ecce Homo: Theological Perspectives on Personhood and the Passions

Patrick McArdle

Abstract: Here I will outline some of the background philosophy and theology relevant to *The Passions* exhibit from the stand point of Christian Anthropology. Secondly, I will briefly outline two ways in which theology and philosophy have tended to understand what it means to be a person; that is, the person as a metaphysical substance and as a relational subject. The final section of the paper is a personal reflection on how I think Viola's work can contribute to our deeper self-understanding. In my view his art enables us to come to a new perspective on the phrase *Ecce Homo* – here is the person, one which takes account of our rich intellectual and artistic heritage but which also prompts us to develop our thinking into new avenues. In this final section my comments will focus on *Emergence*.

Key Words: contemporary art; human person – nature; individuality; relationality; Bill Viola; human emotions – depictions; *The Passions*; *Emergence*

Ecce Homo, Hieronymus Bosch 1490.

See image at Staedel Museum:

<http://www.staedelmuseum.de/sm/index.php?StoryID=1029&ObjectID=168>

ORIGINS OF THE TERM 'PERSON' IN CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

The phrase "Ecce Homo" derives from Pontius Pilate displaying Jesus to the crowd during his trial and saying "here is the man" (Jn 19:5), though the Latin term homo is better translated as 'person' rather than the gendered 'man.' The phrase has become associated with images of Christ with the Crown of Thorns and having been scourged and now almost certainly aware that he is about to be condemned to death.

Ecce Homo is also the title of Friedrich Nietzsche's autobiography subtitled, "How One Becomes What One Is." In the Preface of that work Nietzsche writes "*Hear me! For I am such and such a person. Above all, do not mistake me for someone else.*"¹ This cry for recognition is not unique to Nietzsche; it is the cry of every person and it seems that across the span of human existence our self-articulation and the points at which we call for this recognition are intrinsically linked to the pivotal points of human emotion. Those points in the lives of individuals when they must confront who and what they are without any dissembling; the points at which individuals are exposed to the world, regardless of

¹ F. W. Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo: How One Becomes What One Is*, trans. Anthony M. Ludovici (New York: Macmillan, 1930 [original 1888]), preface.

whether they choose to be so exposed or not. Viola has taken up this tradition of art and thought and has begun to explore them through a very contemporary medium that is nonetheless tied to the very origins of the exploration of human personhood.

Observance, Bill Viola 2002

See photo by Kira Perov of video at National Gallery Australia:

<http://nga.gov.au/viola/passions6.cfm>

See colour video diptych at:

<http://video.ilsole24ore.com/SoleOnLine5/Video/Cultura/Arte/2010/viola-bill-Observance/viola-bill-Observance.php>

Silent Mountain, Bill Viola 2001.

See the colour video diptych at <http://youtu.be/IEVZ1gN4fB8>

The term 'person' finds its origins in a rich legacy of meaning and ideas that have developed over centuries.² The Latin term *persona*, meaning mask, has evolved into the term 'person.' However, the Latin term in turn derives from the Etruscan word, *persu*, for face.³ These two meanings, *face* and *person*, have links in other ancient languages: the Hebrew word *panim* also means both face and person; likewise, the Greek term *prosopon* means person, but also had an original meaning of face.⁴ It is obvious that this historical meaning, centred on the face or countenance has resonance in Viola's recent work, particularly this exhibition. This can be seen in most of the works and typically in *Observance* and in *Six Heads*.

Christian theology about persons originally derives from two distinct sources: Greek philosophy and Hebrew theology. These have bequeathed to Christianity very different but very rich legacies surrounding the concept of personhood.

In Hellenistic philosophy the term 'person' signified that the human being was the bearer of certain values,⁵ but was not an ontological concept,⁶ in the sense of referring to the fundamental, or metaphysical, characteristic(s) which make(s) a being *that* particular kind of being. In other words, the Greek view of persons was not a principle of differentiating one kind of being, say a cat from another, say a dog. Both these kinds of beings are animals, their proper state is to be living, they are carnivores, they are of a particular level of intelligence. Ontology is concerned with what makes the cat, "cat" and the dog, "dog." While the Greek philosophers used metaphysical categories, the term "person" was not one of them. Plato (428-348 BCE) and Aristotle (384-322 BCE) were principal architects of establishing an understanding of person as an ontological category. They had quite different views about this, but agreed that what constituted a person as such was intrinsic and generic. In other words, they were not particularly focused on what

² Stanley Rudman, *Concepts of Person and Christian Ethics*, New Studies in Christian Ethics (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 124.

³ Karl Rahner, ed., *Encyclopedia of Theology: A Concise 'Sacramentum Mundi'* (London: Burns and Oates, 1975), 1207.

⁴ H. G. Hubbeling, "Some Remarks on the Concept of Person in Western Philosophy," in *Concepts of Person in Religion and Thought*, ed. H. G. Kippenberg, Y. B. Kuiper, and A. F. Sanders (Berlin and New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1990), 9.

⁵ J. J. Oosten, "A Few Critical Remarks on the Concept of Person," in *Concepts of Person in Religion and Thought*, ed. H. G. Kippenberg, Y. B. Kuiper, and A. F. Sanders (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1990), 26.

⁶ J. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1993), 27-29.

makes an individual but on what it is that individuals share that enables them all to be persons.

A very different strand of thinking about persons in Christian theology derives from its roots in the thinking and theology of Ancient Israel. Hebrew theology presents the view that humanity is only genuinely understandable in terms of the relationship with the Divine Being.⁷ Persons are those created by the one God to be in relationship with the Divine Being. This was understood in an absolutely fundamental fashion. Humanity is created in the “image and likeness” of God (Gen 1:26). While this reference is to all of humanity, and is not as strong a claim for the distinctiveness of humanity as Christian theology often asserts, it is clear, in the way that the theology of the Hebrew scriptures develops, that it differs from the ontology of the Greeks in two ways: it gave an essential prominence to the special significance of *each* person, since each one is created in the image and likeness of God; secondly, this personal significance was understood as the concept which binds all humans together into a community. A human person is a whole entity, a body in a fundamental spiritual relationship with God and with other human persons. Early in their theological tradition the Hebrews articulated a materialist view that understood human personhood as co-terminus with the existence of the body. Immortality was understood as the endurance of the community, especially through children. Gradually this view gave way to one that included an understanding of personal immortality and a sense of after-life.

Woven through the theological perspectives of the Hebrew scriptures is a third view of persons which is implicit but did not form a substantial part of the ancient theological reasoning – the idea of a person as relation. It is clear that persons are in relationship with each other, the rest of creation and with God, and that these relationships shaped the individual and the community of Israel in basic ways. But the idea of an individual being formed and shaped by the relational encounters of their lives was not developed beyond an embedded sense by Hebrew theologians. That task was taken up in Christian theology. The Hebrews did not have the need for a philosophical ontology of persons because what distinguished humans from non-humans was their particular relationship with the Divine: humans are created in the image and likeness of God to serve God in ways powerfully different to other creatures.

Whatever the linguistic origins of the term or category of “person” in Greek, Etruscan and Latin usage, the development of the understanding of person in late Republican and the Imperial Roman culture gave to the term ‘person’ a conceptual framework which established it as a category for philosophical reflection in its own right.

The development of the Latin term “persona” into the concept of a legal entity in Roman society had several important influences on the understanding of ‘person.’ Firstly, the term became closely associated with the use of an individual’s *name*. Linked to this is idea that the name and the image of the person are in some sense aspects of the person.⁸ Mauss traces the development of the legal term principally through trials related to people usurping the name of a family or individual. This was viewed by the Roman courts as an attempt at impersonation and a violation of the personhood of the individual.⁹ We can see

⁷ H. G. Kippenberg, “Name and Person in Ancient Judaism and Christianity,” in *Concepts of Person in Religion and Thought*, ed. H. G. Kippenberg, Y. B. Kuiper, and A. F. Sanders (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1990), 109-112.

⁸ M. Mauss, “A Category of the Human Mind: The Notion of Person; the Notion of Self,” in *The Category of the Person: Anthropology, Philosophy, History*, ed. Michael Carrithers, Steven Collins, and Steven Lukes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 15-17.

⁹ *Ibid*, 17.

that there are echoes of this in Nietzsche as well. From this it can be argued that, in taking the name of another, one is offending the individual. This reasoning moved the meaning of the term from that of a role that one had or of a part that was played, to a meaning linked with the nature of the individual.

As Christianity appropriated the theology of the Hebrew scriptures, and the philosophy of the Greeks and Romans, the term *person* and its range of meanings (face, mask, theatre character, individual, human being, being of some value)¹⁰ became crucial for the articulation of Christian theology.¹¹ To the Greco-Roman understanding of person as a role, and the philosophical distinction between beings and as a legal entity, Christianity added the sense of a being with an interior life, a self-reflective entity possessing a conscience.¹² The Hebrew view of the special relationship with God was further developed in Christianity through a deeply personal sense of relationship between God, through Jesus, with each person. The changes in thinking about persons in Christianity so dramatically altered the concept that several Christian theologians argue that the concept of 'person' is a specifically Christian idea. W. Pannenberg (1928-) and J. D. Zizioulas (1931 -) both contend that while the *word* derives from Greek and Latin sources, the concept of an unique subsistent individual in relation with other unique subsistent individuals derives from the Christological and Trinitarian controversies of the early Christian communities.¹³ Zizioulas traces the development of 'person' from primitive uses of the term in Greek theatre to indicate the non-personal, to a personal concept. Particularly interesting in this account is the dissonance between the ancient Greek and Roman philosophers/authors who strove for a personal concept of person but were frustrated by the prevailing cosmology which was the context for their thinking.¹⁴

These ancient origins of the term and concept of person have not been abandoned in more recent thinking; they remain part of how the term has been understood across time. As I indicated at the beginning I want to now turn to an outline of how human personhood has been understood philosophically and theologically. The first approach to personhood can be termed, the person as metaphysical substance and, the second, person as relational subject.

Person as Metaphysical Substance

The term 'person' is intrinsically linked with the evolution of Christian thought and Christian doctrine. Gil Bailie, among others, has argued that only in Christianity did the term acquire the rich and profound meaning that we glimpse today. Bailie extends this view to claim that our appreciation of the depth of meaning which the term acquires in Christian theology is still to be fully understood and articulated.¹⁵ 'Person' has been used as the vehicle for expressing Christological beliefs – that is, how Jesus can be both fully human and, at the same time without any loss of humanity also divine; the reality and nature of the Trinity – that the one God can be three persons without intrinsic division;

¹⁰ H. Rheinfelder, *Das Wort, Persona* (Halle: 1928).

¹¹ Rudman, 127ff.

¹² Michael Carrithers, Steven Collins, and Steven Lukes, eds., *The Category of Person: Anthropology, Philosophy, History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), vii.

¹³ Pannenberg cited in David Coffey, *Deus Trinitas: The Doctrine of the Triune God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 67.

¹⁴ Zizioulas, ch.1.

¹⁵ Gil Bailie, "The Christological Truth About History, the Paschal Truth About Human Culture, the Eucharistic Truth About the Human Person," *Australian eJournal of Theology* 5 (2005).

and, the relationship between humanity and God.¹⁶ The basic theological definition of the concept 'person' from antiquity is that of Boethius (480CE-525CE): *persona est naturae rationalis individua substantia*, "a person is an individual substance with a rational nature."¹⁷ This definition has served as the philosophical standard over a considerable period of time.¹⁸ As a statement of anthropology concerning persons, it is consistent with, though not identical to, a range of Christian theological views.¹⁹ Essentially, the phrase of Boethius has been used to convey the Christian conviction that person is an ontological category or, in other words, a person is a member of a particular category of beings which have a common substance or essence. To hold that 'person' is an ontological category is to hold that there is an objective reality to which the term 'person' corresponds.²⁰ A person is a being. The raw statement of Boethius was qualified in several ways during the late medieval period (c.1100-c.1450). Richard of St Victor (d.1173) emphasised the relational and transcendent dimensions of persons; Bonaventure (1217-1274), Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) and Duns Scotus (c. 1265-1308) focused on the independence and dignity of the person.²¹

Even prior to Boethius, Christianity was moving toward accepting an ontological understanding of personhood. Colin Gunton (1941-2003) notes that the distinction of Irenaeus (c.130-c.200) between image and likeness is the beginning of the process that lead to reason becoming "both a chief ontological characteristic and a criterion of difference between human and non-human."²² This process develops in Christianity in such a way as to promote an idealist and dualist perspective that radically affects anthropology through to Descartes (1596-1650).²³ The argument holds that fundamental aspect of human persons is that in which they image God. This cannot refer to the body since God is incorporeal, and so must reflect the mind or soul.²⁴ A consequence of this kind of thinking has been an excessive emphasis on individuals as distinct from communities and also the tendency to divorce humanity from the rest of creation.

This mode of thinking about persons has developed into a range of moral precepts, especially the idea of the sanctity of human life. For the purposes of this topic, the doctrine of the sanctity of life can be taken in its broadest sense – there is something uniquely worthwhile about human individuals which means that they have infinite value. While the precept is under significant practical challenge in the contemporary world, there is little sign that communities or nations are prepared to simply abandon the idea of there being something intrinsic to human persons that is morally significant and which includes some basic presumption that human life is special. Viola can be seen to embrace aspects of this

¹⁶ See Rudman, Part 2 for a full discussion of the evolution and uses of the term in Christian theology. I draw extensively on Rudman's research, but do not intend to recreate his study.

¹⁷ Boethius, "Contra Eutychem et Nestorium" Section III, col. 1343D – 1344A, from *Patrologia Latina* Database, Volume 64.

¹⁸ Hubbeling, 10.

¹⁹ For example Cassiodorus, cited in Mauss, 20.

²⁰ J. Zizioulas, "On Being a Person: Towards an Ontology of Personhood," in *Persons, Divine and Human: King's College Essays in Theological Anthropology*, ed. C. Schwöbel and C.E. Gunton (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), 33.

²¹ Brian M. Nolan, "Person, Divine," in *The New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. J. A. Komonchak, M. Collins, and Dermot A. Lane (Dublin: Gill and MacMillan, 1987).

²² Colin Gunton, "Trinity, Ontology and Anthropology: Towards a Renewal of the Doctrine of the *Imago Dei*," in *Persons, Divine and Human: King's College Essays in Theological Anthropology*, ed. C. Schwöbel and Colin Gunton (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), 48.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

view. His art focuses almost exclusively on the human person. When the art includes other items, imagery or artefacts these serve to focus or re-focus attention on the person or persons. *Emergence* is a classic example of this with the use of the altar, water and the vibrant colours of the clothing worn by the women, all serving to focus our attention on the three persons who each 'emerge' in the course of the video re-presentation. *Six Heads* also reflects this concern to explore the specialness or uniqueness of human existence.

Six Heads, Bill Viola, 2000.

See photo of video display by Kira Perov at National Gallery of Australia:

<http://nga.gov.au/viola/passions.cfm>

We are asked to explore with Viola the essence of these beings and their experiences which though unique to the individuals are also the emotional journey of all humans. The cycle of life and death is part of what defines these beings as persons... yet the experience of the various dimensions of the cycle is utterly unique.

This metaphysical mode of thinking about persons has been dominant in Christian theology; it is contested by a second way of thinking about persons as relational subjects. In my view, it is this latter view which Viola engages with, despite drawing inspiration from mediaeval art which is steeped in the anthropology of the former method.

Person as Relational Subject

In the post-modern era (c.1968-) the understanding of personhood is transformed in a radical way. The human person is considered to be the ultimate subject, though this is established differently in post-modernism than is the case in the modern paradigm. Both these frameworks for thinking about the contemporary world have their roots in the philosophical, religious, social and political movements of the past. They emphasise process over product, patterns over events, factors over outcomes. In this Viola mirrors the philosophical movements which have shaped the contemporary world. His art challenges traditional ideas about processes in art and about the static or objective nature of products. It is not possible to view this art without becoming part of the process and, in a sense, without becoming part of the product. This is the case with all human relationships since human persons are relational beings who become who they are through their relational encounters.

To justify this claim it is necessary to lay out an argument about the development of the understanding of persons as relational beings. Post-modernity calls the inherent optimism of modernity into question. It argues that the promises of modernity have not been realised, that the power, prosperity and liberation that has been achieved has been only for a few, powerful people and societies, and at the cost of greater impotence, poverty and oppression for the majority of the world's people.²⁵ The watershed for post-modernity was the impact of the modern revolutionary movements. The communist revolutions of Russia, China and parts of Asia, and the Fascist revolutions of Spain, Germany and Italy, became emblematic of the failures of modernity. In the public mind, abuses of persons through medicine and biological research are closely associated with these regimes, though only the Nazis in Germany had a systematic program of abuse. These revolutions came to be associated not with the freedom and improvement that they promised, but

²⁵ Charles Lemert, *Postmodernity Is Not What You Think* (Malden, Mass.: Balckwell, 1997), xii.

totalitarianism characterised by the authority of uniforms.²⁶ As an aside, it is interesting that the revolutionary movements still viewed as valid and libratory never adopted distinctly recognisable uniforms.

The authoritarianism of social and religious structures, which modernity sought to expose and reject, was transformed, it is argued, into more violent manifestations which were too powerful for individuals to successfully oppose, at least in the short term, and which the previous institutions had been rendered powerless to overcome. In place of the traditions and hierarchies of the past, modernity offered the power and promise of the centre, the corporate structure able to deliver unending development and prosperity.²⁷ These structures, while claiming to uphold individual freedoms, frequently and systematically oppressed people on the grounds of their membership of particular groups and communities, for example, the Jews in Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Russia, members of other religious groups in Franco's Spain and Communist China, members of minorities based on culture, ethnic origin, and sexual preference.

In place of the centralist idealism of modernity, post-modernity calls attention to the periphery and the real state of most people's lives. It argues that comparatively few, if any, have benefited from the "progress" of the modern era. The voiceless people in traditional hierarchies are still unheard and have been joined by those who have been marginalized and rendered mute by modernity.²⁸ It might be interesting to speculate whether this is part of the reason for a lack of sound in Viola's presentation of the Passions. When these works become the focus in the dark and silence, they become impossible to ignore. The same is true when we focus on the marginalized: they are generally easily to ignore but, when we do focus on marginalised persons, it becomes impossible not to be moved by their plight.

Persons in modernity are conceptualised as the rational autonomous (hu)man. While gender is not explicitly indicated as a criteria, the very functional and rational nature of the person emphasised in this way of thinking is established in such a way as to discount the insights of women. The model of person presented by modernity is one which focuses on, and increases the power of, those at the centres of power. It does not challenge existing structures so much as reformulates them with greater power. In contrast, the person of post-modernity, the person as relational subject, is conceptualised as a being only partially grasped and only able to be understood in the context of relationships. While not denying that persons have a rational dimension and are free to make choices, the relational person is one whose rationality and autonomy is circumscribed by her/his relational matrix.²⁹ The focus is not so much on what the person can do, or how the person functions, as on an understanding of "human relations characterised by equality and mutuality."³⁰

To argue that, in the last century or so, the concept of person has become one of *person as relational subject* actually encompasses a wide set of views. Within post-modernity there is a spectrum of ideas and interests.³¹ Broadly, however, just as these

²⁶ Zygmunt Bauman, *Postmodernity and Its Discontents* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997), 17ff.

²⁷ Lemert, 99-100.

²⁸ Bauman, ch. 2, especially pp. 18-20.

²⁹ Carol S. Robb, "A Framework for Feminist Ethics," in *Feminist Theological Ethics*, ed. Lois K. Daly (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 28.

³⁰ Margaret A. Farley, "Feminist Theology and Bioethics," in *Feminist Theological Ethcis*, ed. Lois K. Daly (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 196.

³¹ Lemert, ch. 1.

movements reflect on social structures in a different way from those of preceding philosophical movements, so too do they think of person in a different way. Previous models of understanding persons were concerned with person as an entity in terms of existence or, if you like, what kind of being is a person or, in terms of functionality, what can this kind of being do. The post-modern contribution takes up the modern concept of the person mapping a certain space but, in contrast to modernity post-modernity argues that the space articulated and created is a social space. Viola demonstrates this concept particularly in *Catherine's Room*.

Catherine's Room Bill Viola, 2001

See photo by Kira Perov of Viola's video polyptych at National Gallery Australia:

<http://nga.gov.au/viola/passions5.cfm>

The inspiration from this comes from the idea of a 'nun's cell,' but the monastic image is not a removal from the world in Viola's interpretation; it is a social space within which the identity of the person is explored

Post-modernity holds that the modern emphasis on reason, the ego and the creation of an interior space for the 'I' encourages and formalises a "sociology of strangers."³² The "strangers" are those who are excluded by the social group, even when remaining members of the society (the poor, unemployed, disabled, people of colour, women, etc.) and can also be those who are outside the boundaries of the society (those of other nationalities, ethnic origins, sexual orientation or who think very differently).³³

In contrast, post-modernity argues that persons are entities that occupy a *public* space created in and through discourse. In *Catherine's Room*, which is clearly a personal space, it is not private because the viewer is invited into the space, not as a voyeur but as a participant in the discourse of Catherine's life. The narratives or discourses that form the identities of persons are subjected to critique of a particular kind, usually termed "deconstruction." This should not be thought of as destruction, though it is often characterised that way by opponents, but rather a critical examination of the history of a concept or story to determine the baggage and political effects this has given rise to.³⁴ 'Discourse' means that persons are always in the public sphere, since they enter into 'conversations' with other persons. The discourse gives shape to public space in which the conversation takes place, the kind of person one is conversing and even to one's self. The thinking of the post-modern era challenges the link which modernity made between rationality and personhood; it challenges the modern view of sameness or equivalence of persons. The former is accomplished by demonstrating the constructedness of the concepts and actuality of rationality and personhood, the latter by noting difference and the significance of the other.³⁵

Contesting the sociology of strangers, post-modernity argues that the subjectivity of the "I" enables a profound recognition of the "not-I." In recognition of the "other" there is the possibility not of two individuals who are strangers to one another, but of becoming

³² C. S. Campbell, "Religion and Moral Meaning in Bioethics," *The Hastings Center Report* 20.4 Special Supplement (1990).

³³ Bauman, ch. 2.

³⁴ Linda Nicholson and Steven Seidman, eds., *Social Postmodernism: Beyond Identity Politics*, ed. J. C. Alexander and Steven Seidman, Cambridge Cultural Social Studies (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 10.

³⁵ Graham Ward, "Introduction," in *The Postmodern God*, ed. Graham Ward, Blackwell Readings in Modern Theology (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 1997), xxvi.

subjects-in-community. It is when this is recognised that there is the possibility of love, integration and transformation.³⁶ The inclusion of the social dimension enables a recognition that the term “person” is a community term and focuses moral attention on the vulnerable and the victims.³⁷

To call an individual a person is for society to confirm the significance of the being’s identity.³⁸ The individual and person should be distinguished, according to Radcliffe-Brown (1881-1955), in order to make it clear that person is a social concept and that to be a person is to be a “complex of social relationships.”³⁹ Persons are beings formed in and through relationships. They have, as it were, an ontological or intrinsic relationality which can only reach its fullest expression in and through interpersonal relationships. Pannenberg has argued that all human life has this characteristic which, following Buber (1878-1965), he terms an I-Thou relation. This relation is the basic form of community and directs or calls the self into relationship with others.⁴⁰ Characterising relationships as “I-Thou” recognises the interpersonal dimension present, or at least as a possibility, in all encounters between persons.

Emmanuel Levinas (1906-1995) critiqued this understanding of interpersonal relations as being too positive. Instead of a relation in which the I and Thou are essentially the same and equal beings responding to the other, Levinas argues for a relation of essential difference.⁴¹ Levinas’ philosophy takes account of human suffering and misery. Writing after the Holocaust, Levinas argues that relations between persons are not constituted by nurture but as a fundamental challenge to personal identity.⁴² For Levinas, the relation that constitutes persons is a relation through which I am challenged by the face of the other. In meeting the eyes of the other I am subject to the call, “do not kill me.”⁴³ The Other is never reducible to the same as I, but always preserves the Otherness.⁴⁴ The relation as understood by Levinas cannot be reduced to a selfish reinforcement of the “I,” or a form of possession. Instead recognition of the other, in their otherness, will lead to forms of self-denial. Recognition of the Other makes me responsible for the other, such that I take my own food to give to the other in their need; it involves a dislocating of the self.⁴⁵

There are a number of fairly obvious links between this way of thinking and Viola’s art. In my view they clearly link Viola to this understanding of the human person as a relational subject. This is apparent in the works which involve more than one person, but I think it is intrinsic to Viola’s premise in all of these works.

³⁶ Graham Ward, *Theology and Contemporary Critical Theory*, ed. David Jasper, 2nd ed., Studies in Literature and Religion (Basingstoke, Hampshire: MacMillan Press, 2000), 93-94.

³⁷ Bailie.

³⁸ J. S. La Fontaine, “Person and Individual: Some Anthropological Reflections,” in *The Category of Person: Anthropology, Philosophy and History*, ed. Michael Carrithers, Steven Collins, and Steven Lukes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 124.

³⁹ Alfred R. Radcliffe-Brown, “On Social Structure,” in *Structure and Function in Primitive Society: Essays and Addresses*, ed. Alfred R. Radcliffe-Brown (London: Cohen and West, 1940), 193-194.

⁴⁰ Wolfhart Pannenberg, *What Is Man?: Contemporary Anthropology in Theological Perspective* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970), 89.

⁴¹ Damien Casey, “Levinas and Buber: Transcendence and Society,” *Sophia* 38.2 (1999): 70.

⁴² Ward, *Theology and Contemporary Critical Theory*, 99.

⁴³ Emmanuel Levinas, “The Face of a Stranger,” *The Unesco Courier* 7-8 (1992): 67.

⁴⁴ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1981), 43.

⁴⁵ Myra Bookman and Mitchell Aboulafla, “Ethics of Care Revisited: Gilligan and Levinas,” *Philosophy Today* 44 (2000): 171.

VIOLA, THE PASSIONS AND PERSONHOOD

Bill Viola in this series, *The Passions*, has linked himself to an era of transition in the past. While the late mediaeval period retained the philosophical, theological and many of the art-forms of the ancient world, new ideas, new forms of creative imagination, were beginning to be explored and to take hold. In this sense, it is not unlike our own time.

Using the inspiration of the art and mysticism of the mediaeval period, Viola is tying himself to an exploration of personhood which is inherently social in nature. The reason that diptychs and portable religious art became relatively common rather than popular in this period was due to the increase in affluence which gave rise to an increase in mobility for significant numbers of people. This is also a feature of our own time. Perhaps in contrast to our own era, mediaeval people were also rooted to a deeply religious culture which meant that expressions of wealth and of piety were linked to religious art. For part of the mediaeval period, for example, a person of a certain wealth or social status would carry with her/him a diptych of their favourite saint, image or religious scene but would not carry with them a book which was considered far too valuable for the most part. While we would generally consider some “long haul” flights appropriate for a ‘trash novel’ we would not, usually take a work of art with us. That being said, many of us might carry images of loved ones in mobile phones or pdas. My point here is simply that Viola’s links to the art of the past is not simply due to the types of images portrayed... it is also because of his, perhaps innate, recognition of art as also being an exploration of the meaning of human existence at a time of fundamental social change.

Two features of Viola’s art link him with the post-modern emphasis on the person as relational subject: his focus on the emotional life of persons and how that fundamentally shapes personhood and, secondly, the way Viola seeks to shape the social space between persons. I want to explore each of these with reference to what I consider to be the pinnacle of the collection: *Emergence*. This work is very obviously religious in character and investigates a fundamental religious theme. It is also, in my view, the most pertinent in terms of the exploration of what it means to be a human person.

Emergence is linked to a tradition of religious art which focuses on the dead Christ figure and on the grief of the women surrounding him, particularly his mother.

Pieta, Apollonio de’ Bonfratelli 1545.

See image at National Gallery of Australia:

<http://nga.gov.au/international/Catalogue/Detail.cfm?IRN=43065>

This interpretation of the *Pieta* by Bernini demonstrates the style which Viola has taken up. The images here are of grief, death and the promise of afterlife as indicated by the presence of the angels who prefigure the two angels announcing the resurrection. Again in the Masolino *Pieta* we see a very obvious visual connection with *Emergence*.

Pieta, Masolino, 1424. Museo Diocesano, Empoli, Italy.

See image at <http://www.friendsofart.net/en/art/masolino-da-panicale/pieta>

Emergence, using the possibilities opened by video instead of static images, however, focuses on the emotional power, the idea of death being a re-birth and the cycle of death within life in discrete stages:

Emergence, Bill Viola, 2002.

See photo by Kira Perov of video display at National Gallery of Australia:

<http://nga.gov.au/viola/details/138682.cfm>

See video from Yale University Art Gallery at: <http://youtu.be/ys2s4FGxtDw>

Watching the entire sequence of this video it is impossible not to see the images as joined and as representing the life of every person. From the moment of conception, through our emergence into life, we are intimately and profoundly linked to other persons and, at the same time, the seeds of our mortality are present. Part of that sense of mortality or recognition of the connections between life and death is the impact that the phases of a person's life have on the relationships which give shape, meaning and context to our lives.

Part of the fallacy of the model of personhood in the modern era is that the pinnacle of human existence is the autonomous rational individual who is able to choose and function independently of all other persons. The reality is that such a life is not worth living and that such a person, if it is actually possible to be such a person, is not someone most of us would want to know. Instead, Viola presents in *Emergence*, and other works in this collection, persons as beings who are fundamentally in relationship with each other.

Note in this particular work that the central emerging figure is never really alive. The emerging person is the dead person; the pain of grief is never separate from the joy of witnessing a person's self creation or emergence. The supporting women are not crippled by their grief but motivated by their connections to each other and to the emerging one. This is one perspective on the story of human personhood. I do not think that the scenario need be grief or those emotions we usually consider in a negative light but, as George Khushf writing in a very different context indicated, it is these moments of pressure, of confrontation, which highlight for humanity the frailty, the need for relationships which is always present but able to be ignored. It is in our insufficiency we turn to others; it is in our times of crisis that our truly relational natures are revealed. The grief or other crisis emotions do not create this need, rather it is unveiled by the crisis.⁴⁶ Viola is capturing not just the imagery of the grief or even the story of the human life-cycle. He is also representing the need of persons for persons; even though we know relationships are always tied to loss and to suffering they are what enables us to be persons.

At the beginning of this paper I suggested that *The Passions* could develop our self-understanding in new ways. This art blurs the boundaries of what is permissible and what is not; what is possible and what is not. From a relational perspective, this is a key feature of human existence. The human person is a being who is on the one hand is a given, an entity that derives existence and meaning from participation in metaphysical category. From a relational perspective this static understanding of personhood is always insufficient. Human persons are relational beings that are formed in and through the relationships which call them into being. Viola's art challenges our preconceptions of art both through the forms he uses, the subject matter he explores and in that he attempts to call forth the viewer through an engagement which allows the person watching to, as it were, enter the art. The setting of the exhibition in silence and darkness disengages the audience from the outside world but, on reflection, it is also the case that the boundaries between the art and the viewer are blurred. The time necessary to watch these images unfold functions to draw in the viewer so that passivity is rejected and engagement and

⁴⁶ George Khushf, "Illness, the Problem of Evil, and the Analogical Structure of Healing," in *On Moral Medicine: Theological Perspectives in Medical Ethics*, ed. Stephen E. Lammers and Allen Verhey (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1998), 34.

participation are demanded. This is also the story of what it means to be a person. There are times when all of us wish we could simply live the life of the autonomous rational individual or the member of the collective whose identity is assured because of an unassailable metaphysical status. Human personhood is more wonderful and more tenuous than that: the only way to be a person is to engage with others and to participate in the relationships to which we are called to commit ourselves. It is our relationships which call us forth, which shape the kinds of persons we can be.

Author: *Patrick McArdle is currently the Head of Theology for the Canberra and Sydney campuses of Australian Catholic University. He has recently submitted his doctoral dissertation on Christian anthropology.*

Email: p.mcardle@signadou.acu.edu.au
