A Notion of a Person in Epictetus

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Abstract and Keywords

This chapter explores the way in which Epictetus' philosophy contributed to the development of the concept of a person, a process by which the term 'person' (prosōpon/persona) progressed from meaning a dramatic part to its modern sense of a rational being, which it attained in late antiquity. The term first acquired the sense of a role one plays in life, for example, that of father, senator, philosopher; then the Middle Stoic Panaetius gave the concept a philosophical twist by introducing the role of a human being as such, a rational agent, and also that of the distinctive individual we are. Finally, Epictetus in Discourse I.2 combines the various roles recognized by Panaetius into the single notion of 'the person one is', a combination of the various roles we play in life, with that of a human being taking precedence. From here it is a short step to the modern notion of a person as a rational being.

Keywords: Panaetius, person, prosōpon, persona, rational agent, roles

Epictetus uses the word 'prosōpon' remarkably often, some eighteen times in what remains of his 'Dissertations'; 'prosōpon' is the word which in Latin was translated as 'persona', and both words, 'prosōpon' and 'persona', from a certain point onwards came to be used also in the sense of 'person'. Epictetus uses the word 'prosōpon' not just remarkably often, but also in quite a number of different, though related ways. What is of interest, if one is interested in the notion of a person and its origin and history, are two of the ways he uses the word, namely in some sense or other of 'person'.
He does not use the word in the way we usually use the word ‘person’, either in ordinary discourse or in philosophy. In ordinary discourse we say such things as ‘The person I talked to on the telephone told me that the office is closed in the afternoon’ or ‘Only seven persons attended the meeting.’ I will call the notion of a person involved in this use of the word the ‘ordinary’ notion of a person. But, when in modern philosophy at least from Locke onwards and down to the present day one talks of persons, one is, as a rule, appealing to a certain reflective understanding of how one should think about human beings, namely not just as things or objects, to be studied by natural science, but as moral beings, to be studied by moral science. Locke, for instance, in this context defined a person as ‘a thinking intelligent being, that has reason and reflection, and can consider itself as itself, the same thinking thing, in different times and places; which it does only by that consciousness which is inseparable from thinking, and, as it seems to me, essential to it’ (Essay, II.27.11). Clearly this is not our ordinary notion of a person. But what our ordinary use and the philosophical use of the word have in common, is that a person in either use is always that same person. You now, and as long as you live, are the same person as the person you (p. 154) were when you were born. I will call this an absolute use of the word ‘person’.

Epictetus, then, does not use the word ‘prosōpon’ either in our ordinary or in a modern philosophical sense of the word ‘person’. But he does use it both in the sense of ‘the sort of person somebody is’ (cf. II.10.7; 8) and in the sense of ‘the person somebody is’ (cf. I.2, title; 7; 14; 28; 30; IV.3.3). What I am interested in is the notion of a person involved in his talk of ‘the person one is’.

In order to understand this, though, we need to do quite a bit of preliminary work. Hence, before I proceed to discuss Epictetus’ notion, I should perhaps give some provisional explanation of what Epictetus seems to have in mind, when he talks about the person one is. The title of Diss. I.2 is ‘How one always might preserve accord with the person one is’. The point Epictetus wants to make is this. People, in what they are doing, in thinking about what they ought to do, should always keep in mind who they are, the person they are, to make sure that what they do fits them, accords with the person they are. To be able to do this one has to know oneself, and one has to practise taking oneself into account in doing what one does. People, though, often are oblivious to themselves, to who they are, to their own person (I.2.14). For instance, if you are a father, being a father is part of the person you are. But fathers often, in what they are doing, do not think of, do not take
into account, the fact that they have children and that the children might be affected by what they are doing. Hence what they are doing might not be in accord with the person they are. Similarly somebody might try to be a mathematician, to do mathematics, oblivious to the fact that he lacks the necessary natural talent for this, that he is not that sort of person to do mathematics, namely somebody with a natural talent for mathematics.

Epictetus offers several examples of men who knew how to preserve accord with the person one is. One of them is Helvidius Priscus, a Roman senator, known to us independently for his Stoicism and his republican leanings (I.2.19–21). The Emperor Vespasian tells him not to attend the meeting at which the emperor wants to address the senate. Helvidius Priscus responds that Vespasian can have him struck from the rolls of the senate, but, that as long as he is a senator, he has to attend its meetings. Vespasian's response is that in case he insists on attending he at least should not speak up at the meeting; otherwise he will have Helvidius Priscus killed. As a matter of historical fact Helvidius Priscus did get murdered. But to the emperor he responds that as a senator he has to say what he thinks, if he comes to the meeting. So Helvidius Priscus faces a stark choice. He has a choice between continuing to live peacefully in Rome and suffering exile or even death. Put in these terms, the choice is obvious; other things being equal, any reasonable person will prefer a peaceful life at home to exile or death. But to look at the matter in these terms is to fail to take oneself, the person one is, into account. Helvidius Priscus does take into account the person he is, and being a Roman senator is seen by him and by Epictetus as an important part of the person he is. This is why he is going to go to the meeting and speak his mind, even if this means exile or death. It is emphasized that the situation would be quite different, if the emperor had him struck from the rolls of the senate (I. 2.19). Then he no longer would be a senator and hence no longer the person he had been. And it would no longer be appropriate for him to go to the meeting, let alone to speak in the senate.

It thus clearly is a mistake when some translate the title of our text as ‘How may a man preserve his proper character upon every occasion?’ What is at issue here is not Helvidius Priscus’ character, though of course it is true that he is serious about being a Roman senator, and quite generally about the person he is, and not moved by threats of exile or death. But what is at issue here is the person Helvidius Priscus is insofar as he, among other things, is a Roman senator. The reason why he ought to go to the meeting, and thinks he ought to go, is that he is a Roman senator. Even if he were moved by the emperor's threats, it still would be the case that, being a Roman senator, he
ought to go. If he in fact does go, it is, of course, because he is not oblivious to the person he is, but these are two different matters. For the same reason a translation like J. Souilhé’s is inadequate; ‘Comment on peut toujours sauvegarder sa dignité personnelle.’ It is not the case that Helvidius Priscus thinks that he ought to go to the meeting and goes to the meeting, because in this way he maintains his personal dignity. He thinks that he ought to go to the meeting and goes to the meeting, because this is what is in accord with being a Roman senator and thus the person he is. This, in any case, is how Epictetus presents the matter.

(p. 156) Now we, too, talk of the person somebody is, or—for that matter—of the sort of person somebody is. We say, for example, ‘Given the person he is, Peter would never do such a thing.’ What we may have in mind in saying this might be the following: we know Peter to be absolutely reliable and trustworthy; he does not break promises; he is that sort of person. Hence we say ‘Given the person he is, he would not fail to do what he promised.’ Epictetus’ use of the word ‘prosōpon’ in the sense of ‘the person somebody is’ and our use of this phrase have something in common, but also importantly differ. They have in common:

(i) That being a certain sort of person is part of being the person one is. This is how the person I am and the person you are will differ. You, for instance, have a natural talent for mathematics and hence are this sort of person, whereas I have absolutely no talent for mathematics and hence am that sort of person.

(ii) Both our use of the phrase ‘the person one is’ and Epictetus’ use of the word ‘prosōpon’ in this sense differ from the way we generally use the word ‘person’.

As I have already indicated, a person, both in the ordinary and in the reflective, philosophical sense we are familiar with, is something such that it always is the same person. But this does not hold for Epictetus' use. As we just saw, Helvidius Priscus, if he were struck from the rolls of the senate, would no longer be the same person, but a different person. And the same holds for our use of ‘the person somebody is’. People change. Peter was not born as somebody who is absolutely reliable and trustworthy, keeping his promises. He only became like this, as he grew up. So he had been a different person before. And, for one reason or another, Peter may change again and become unreliable and untrustworthy. Thus we say such things as ‘he no longer is the person he used to be’ or ‘he has become a completely different person’. In this way of talking it is not the person a certain human
being is, but the human being which has changed and thus has become a different person. This much the two uses have in common. But there also is a significant difference. When we talk of the person, or the sort of person, somebody is, we mainly think of the character or the personality-traits of somebody. This certainly is not what Epictetus primarily is thinking of. This is why I earlier was objecting to the translation of ‘prosōpon’ in the title of I.2 as ‘character’. When Helvidius Priscus no longer is a senator, he is a different person, but his character will not have changed one iota. The sorts of person the individuals are which Epictetus holds (p. 157) up as examples in I.2 are a Roman senator mindful of his being a senator (12–18), another Roman senator (19–24), an athlete, more precisely a man who had won in the Olympic games (25–6), and a philosopher (29), that is individuals not sorted according to their character or personality-traits. In the rest of the Dissertationes sorts of person Epictetus mentions as such are a son (II.10.7) and a brother (II.10.8) and by implication a city-councillor, a young man, an old man and a father (II.10.10). Obviously being a beggar is being a sort of person. All these have nothing to do with personal character. It would rather seem that for Epictetus the person one is crucially also has something to do with one's social role or status. In any case, there is this striking difference between our notion of the sort of person somebody is and Epictetus' notion.

We now have given a rough characterization of Epictetus' notion of the person one is, in part by distinguishing one way in which he uses the word ‘prosōpon’ from various ways in which we use the word ‘person’. Epictetus assumes that each of us is a person in the sense that one is the person one is. The person one is is something complex. One is the person one is by being this sort of person, that sort of person, any number of sorts of person, a mother, a sister, a councillor, a teacher or a philosopher. Each sort of person you are is relevant for how you live your life, as long as you are that sort of person. For in doing what you are doing you should take into account, where relevant, that you are that sort of person. For, if you do not take that into account, you let yourself down, do not take yourself seriously, and undermine yourself, perhaps for some superficial gain which is not balanced by the loss you suffer as a person. As Epictetus says repeatedly, for instance also in I.2 (11), you who know yourself should know how much you are worth to yourself and for how much you are willing to sell yourself.

This is a very rough characterization of Epictetus' notion. To understand the notion better and to get a sense of its complexity, it greatly helps to see it in historical context. It is an obvious fact, but one little attention has been paid to, that down to the end of the fourth century BC nobody in extant Greek
literature talks of human beings as ‘persons’. Neither Plato nor Aristotle in their voluminous works ever speak of human beings as ‘persons’ in any sense of the word, let alone in our ordinary or our philosophical sense of the word. The first time we clearly and unambiguously find something like the absolute, reflective (p. 158) use of the word with which we are familiar from modern philosophy is in Boethius. In *Contra Eutychen et Nestorium*, ch. 3, Boethius defines a person as ‘an individual substance of such a nature as to be rational’. I doubt that this is Boethius’ invention. Yet we do not find this kind of notion of a person in earlier texts. We also find what looks like our ordinary use of the word ‘person’, but such use is rather late and quite rare. What we do find from the third century bc onwards is that the Greek word ‘prosōpon’ and then later the Latin word ‘persona’ come to be used in the sense of ‘sort of person’. Now I should note that very little literature, in fact hardly any philosophical literature, is left from the crucial period in which the various notions of a person evolved. We are fortunate, though, in that a large number of Cicero’s and Seneca’s works have survived. Both use the word ‘persona’ strikingly often. And since both draw on, or are heavily influenced by, Greek sources, also in their use of the word ‘persona’, 6 there is just about enough material to try to reconstruct how we ever came to talk and think about human beings as persons.

The way to begin, perhaps, is to look a bit more closely at the semantic development of the Greek word ‘prosōpon’ and the Latin word ‘persona’ quite generally. ‘Prosōpon’ originally means ‘face’, more precisely the face as you offer it to the sight of somebody who looks at you (cf. the formation of the German word ‘Antlitz’). It, on the basis of this, develops a number of secondary meanings, like ‘mien’ or ‘countenance’, but also ‘front’ or ‘façade’, ‘the part of something facing something else’. But the most important of these secondary meanings is that of ‘mask’, the mask worn by actors in a drama representing the characteristic features and mien of the character played. From this secondary meaning a series of further meanings evolved. The word came to refer to the figures or characters in a drama, that is to the dramatis personae, played by actors with the appropriate masks and costumes, the figure of King Oedipus, or the Persian King, or a guard, a nurse, a herald, a servant or slave, a paedagogue, or the figure of Socrates, as in Aristophanes’ *Clouds*. From there the use of the word naturally was extended to a (p. 159) figure or character as presented in any kind of account. Thus one can talk of the figure of Odysseus (*prosōpon*) in Homer (Polybius, 12.27.10) or the figure of Pericles in Thucydides. The crucial step was to extend the use of the word to the role a real human being plays in real life or to the person or the sort of person somebody is, for instance ‘the
person of King Eumenes’ (Polyb., 27.7.4) or ‘the person of a beggar’ (Teles, VI.52.3 Hense). Finally it came to mean ‘person’ in something like the ordinary sense, if not in the ordinary sense. Latin ‘persona’, perhaps from its very origins, meant ‘mask’, for instance a ritual mask, but then also the mask of an actor. And from there its semantic evolution ran parallel to that of the Greek word. It, too, finally came to be used to refer to persons in the ordinary sense or something like it. The parallelism for the most part seems to me to be due to the influence of Greek on Latin and in particular the fact that ‘persona’ was used to translate ‘prosōpon’.

It is sometimes suggested, though, that Latin had an influence on Greek which may explain why ‘prosōpon’ from some point onwards came to mean ‘person’ in the ordinary sense. In the second century ad Gaius in his Institutiones expounds Roman civil law under three headings, ‘persons’, ‘things’ and ‘actions’. It is clear that the distinction between ‘persons’ and ‘things’ goes back much further in Roman law. And it is often assumed that ‘personae’ in the context of Roman law just means ‘persons’ in the ordinary sense. F. de Zulueta, for instance, in his commentary on Gaius (page 23) says ‘Persona . . . to Gaius . . . meant simply “human being”’. Thus one might think that it was under the influence of Roman law that ‘prosōpon’ came to mean ‘person’ in the ordinary sense. But this is wrong. To begin with, ‘person’ is never, even nowadays in its ordinary use, just another word for ‘human being’.

Moreover, if one looks at Gaius’ Law of Persons, what he is actually discussing are the various status of human beings under Roman law and what the conditions for change of status are. So personae are sorts of persons, that is human beings as they are sorted into different categories for the purposes of Roman law.

At this point I may note, quite generally, that, our dictionaries notwithstanding, ‘prosōpon’ or ‘persona’ very rarely means ‘person’ in the ordinary sense. But one can easily see how the mistake arises. In fact I believe that the ordinary use evolved from the use of the sense of ‘sort of person’. Seneca (Ep. Mor. 18.15) says ‘in omnes personas hic exardescit affectus’. He is talking about rage. We might think that he is saying that people are prone to go into a fit against anybody, against any person. But the context shows that what Seneca means is that people get (p. 160) into a rage against any sort of person. Seneca quotes Epicurus as saying ‘Unbridled anger makes one crazy’. And he tells Lucilius, the addressee of the letter, that he should know how true this is. For Lucilius has had slaves
and enemies. But, the point is, rage is directed not just against slaves and enemies, but against any sort of person. So a slave is a sort of person, and so is an enemy. But one can get enraged about any sort of person. Similarly Seneca in Ep. Mor. 94.1 talks about a part of moral philosophy which tries to formulate precepts, not for man in general (‘in universum . . . hominem’), but ‘propria cuique personae’. Again, it becomes clear from the context that this must mean, not precepts ‘specific for each person’, but ‘appropriate for each sort of person’. For he goes on to talk about precepts for people who are husbands or fathers, or masters of slaves. If, with this in mind, we check other passages in which ‘prosōpon’ and ‘persona’ are used for human beings, it turns out that it is hardly ever used in the ordinary sense of ‘person’, but usually in the sense of ‘sort of person’.

But however this may be, it should be clear, given the original use of both words, ‘prosōpon’ and ‘persona’, that the word ‘person’, in some sense or other of ‘person’, is borrowed from the theatre, that its use for actual human beings is a metaphorical use. The question to ask, then, is what exactly the metaphor is supposed to be. This is difficult to answer, since there is so little evidence to go by. But it is crucially important for our purposes to have a clear view about this. At first one might assume that we are supposed to think of ourselves in real life as the dramatis personae of a large drama. Yet the little evidence we have unambiguously points in a somewhat different direction. The idea rather seems to be this. We are like actors (rather than the dramatis personae) in a drama. Actors have been given a certain dramatic part or role to play, and what matters is not the role they have been given, but that they play it well. Similarly we in real life have acquired a certain role to play, and what matters is not the role we have acquired, but that we play it well. It is clear from a number of passages that this is how Epictetus thinks of the metaphor (cf. e.g. Diss. I.29.45; frg. XI). I will just quote from the Encheiridion (17):

Remember that you are an actor in a drama. It is the teacher who gives you whichever role he wants to give you . . . whether he wants you to play a beggar, so that you also play a beggar well, or a lame man, or a ruler, or somebody without office. It is your part to act the given role well. To choose your role is somebody else's matter.

This view goes back to the beginnings of Stoicism, that is to about the time when the word ‘prosōpon’ first appears to have been used also in the sense of ‘person’. For we are told (Diogenes Laertius, VII.160) that Aristo of Chios, a student of Zeno, earlier in the third century bc, said that a wise
human being is like a good actor who plays his part equally well whether he plays the role (prosōpon) of Thersites or that of Agamemnon. We find the same view in Teles (dated to the third century bc and classified as a Cynic). According to an epitome of his work he is supposed to have said in his ‘On Circumstances’: ‘Fortune (tuchē) is like a poet. She creates persons (prosōpa) of many kinds, that of a ship-wrecked man or that of a beggar, a fugitive, a man of high repute or of no repute.’ He went on to explain that a good human being had to be able to play any role well which Fortune imposed on him, be it that of a rich man or of somebody who had become poor (p. 52, 2–5 Hense). Similarly, in ‘On Self-sufficiency’, Teles explained that just as a good actor has to play any role well which the playwright gives him, so also the virtuous man has to play well the role which Fortune gives him. But then Teles went on to refer to Bion of Borystheneia (earlier in third century bc) who had said that Fortune like a poet sometimes gives one the role of the protagonist, say that of a king, sometimes that of a minor character, say that of a vagabond. If one has a minor role, one should not want to have the role of the protagonist. For one will do things which are not fitting. Some people are good at ruling, others at being ruled (p. 5, 2–6, Hense, 2nd edn, Bion F16A Kindstrand). Bion seems to have talked about persons, for an anecdote about him in Diogenes Laertius (IV.46, Bion F1A Kindstrand) involves a complex play on the ambiguity of the word ‘prosōpon’.

These testimonies take us back to the time when the word ‘prosōpon’ first came to be used in some sense of ‘person’, namely the sense of ‘the sort of person one is’. They strongly suggest that the comparison made by the metaphor is that between human beings and the role or roles they have in real life, on the one hand, and actors on the stage and the dramatic parts they play in a drama. And the point of the comparison clearly is this. In the theatre what matters, as far as the actors are concerned, is not the role they play, but whether they play it well. One is not a good actor by playing the role of the king, as opposed to that of the servant, but by being able to play the role of the king, or—for that matter—any role one is given, well. Similarly in life what matters is not the role or status one has, say that of a king rather than that of a beggar, but whether one plays whatever role one has well. To think otherwise, (p. 162) Epictetus says (I.29.41), would be like an actor's thinking that he is his mask, his cothurn, his costume. A good or wise person is one who will play any role he is given well.

Thus the way the notion of a person seems to enter philosophy is as the notion of the sort of person one is by playing a certain role in life. It is a normative notion. It is part of the very notion that the role you play in life
as such does not matter. It thus makes the worthiness of human beings independent of the role they play in life. But it also is part of the notion that whatever role you play carries with it certain demands. And we judge you, not by your role, but by whether you live up to the demands of your role.

It is time to say something about the roles we are supposed to play in real life, that is to say the roles with reference to which we are this or that sort of person. We have already seen from the examples that the way human beings are sorted or categorized is largely according to their social role and status. This is what we should expect from members of an ancient society. Somebody who lives in antiquity is naturally going to sort the people living in one's society, at least in the first instance, according to the role they have in this society, that is according to social roles. One is going to distinguish between slaves and free persons, between relatives and non-relatives, and among relatives different kinds of relative. One will distinguish between friends and those who are not friends. One will distinguish between rulers and ruled, and among the former different kinds of office-holders. One will divide people into rich and poor, into young and old, and so forth. Moreover ancient society attaches to each of these roles quite elaborate expectations and norms, expectations concerning dress, the way you wear your hair, posture, language, what one can say and what not, and, in particular, what it is appropriate for one to do or not to do. What is fitting and appropriate for men is different from what is fitting for women. What is fitting for slaves is not what is fitting for free citizens. One thing is fitting for young people, another for the elderly. You never contradict your father, you do not beat him, and you would not take him to court. Behaviour is highly regimented according to roles. Popular judgement as to the worth of a human being, and hence what we might call popular morality, is largely determined by two factors, by a ranking of people according to their roles and by how well somebody plays his role.

Those who introduce the notion of a person clearly are revisionist in that they reject the ranking by roles. The very notion of a person thus understood as a result imposes a certain restriction on what can count (p. 163) as a role and hence as a sort of person. Being a tyrant for instance, or being treacherous, or having any bad-character-trait, cannot count, because that is not a role a good human being could play well. But what those who think of human beings as persons do retain is the idea that being a sort of person brings with it certain demands on one which one has to live up to, if one wants to live a good life, be a good human being. And this has the effect that living a good life, acting as you ought to act, does not amount to the same thing for
everybody. It is relative to the sort of person you are. There is not a single set of rules which define, let alone decide, how one should act, which hold for everybody. There are, as we saw in the Seneca passage referred to above (Ep. Mor. 94.1) different precepts for each sort of person to provide guidance as to what one ought to do. Now this has the further effect that, since many, if not most, of the roles are relational, as social roles are bound to be, you are not going to treat everybody in the same way. Being a friend means that if you deal with somebody who is your friend, you are not going to treat him in the way you treat everybody else. Being a son means that you are not going to treat your father and your mother the same way as everybody else. This is what it is to be a good person. This is what living a moral life largely consists of, in practice.

Now it seems to me that there is something rather attractive about this. We as a matter of fact do not want to treat everybody in the same way. Nor do we want to be treated by others like everybody else. Just imagine what it would be like if you were a husband and you treated your wife the way you treat everybody else, or the way you treated all other women, or the way you treated all other wives. No, we expect you to treat her like your wife, in the particular way which is responsive to the way she is your wife. The same, equally clearly, with being the father of young children.

But there also are obvious problems. They in good part arise from the fact that each of us has quite a number of roles, in effect being many sorts of person. Suppose, for instance, that one sort of person you are is a judge, and another sort of person you are is a friend; unfortunately, as it happens, a friend of the accused. Cicero (De Officiis III.43) suggests that in such a case you lay down the role of a friend (‘personam amici’) the moment you act in the role of a judge. But things are more complicated, as Cicero himself sees, when he allows the judge to make certain concessions to his friend. We need some way to decide in the case of conflict of roles.

(p. 164 ) The next great step in the history of the notion of a person, as far as we can see, is taken by Panaetius, a Stoic in the second century bc. And it goes some way towards dealing with such conflicts. Panaetius distinguishes four types of role or sort of person and ranks them in a certain order of precedence. We know of Panaetius' personae theory mainly through Cicero's De Officiis (I.107 ff.). The roles or sorts of person explicitly mentioned so far in the texts we have considered all are accommodated by the third and fourth type he distinguishes (I.115 ff.). The surprise results from the first two types. They are given to us by nature (I.107), whereas the third is a matter
of fortune (τυχή) and time, for instance having some office or being rich or poor (I.115), and the fourth is a matter of our wanting to play this type of role, for instance be a philosopher or a lawyer (I.115). The first type of role given to us by nature is that of being a human being. And the crucial thing about this role is that in virtue of it we have a share in reason, are rational and guided by reason, and are thus superior to mere animals (I.105–7). What is surprising about this is that it should be considered as a type of role or sort of person, since one would assume that only human beings can have roles or be a sort of person, and that hence being a human being cannot itself be a role. At this point it will be useful to appeal to a piece of specifically Stoic doctrine which also helps to explain why the Stoics in particular were so ready to think of human beings on the analogy of actors on stage, playing a role in a drama. The Stoics believe that the world and everything in it, including the different human beings, are created by God so as to constitute the best possible world. The course the world takes, the course of events which unfolds in the world, is governed providentially by a Divine plan to the effect that what happens in the world is for the best. In this plan human beings play a special role. Whereas mere animals in what they are doing are guided by mere impulse, human beings are created in such a way as to do what they do for reasons, and moreover in such a way as to be able to do what they do for the right reasons. Obviously it is assumed that the world is a better world for there being beings in it which are able to do what they are doing for the right reasons, namely because they understand that this is the right thing to do, that the world is a better place for their doing this rather than something else. So human beings have been given a special role to play in the way the world unfolds. It is in this sense that being a human being is to play a role. One is supposed to act rationally. And this one can do well or badly, by doing the right thing for the right reasons or doing either the right thing, but for the \(\text{p. 165}\) wrong reasons, or the wrong thing. One acts well by doing the right thing for the right reasons. Otherwise one acts badly. 7

Now the crucial significance and special status of the first type of role or person is somewhat hidden in Cicero’s account in a small subordinate clause. Cicero very much emphasizes the fact that as a human being you should behave like a human being and not like a beast. The subordinate clause says that everything that is good and fitting (‘honestum decorumque’) has its source in this role. That is to say, what makes a piece of behaviour a good and fitting action is that it is the right thing to do and done for the right reasons. That is what it is to act well, virtuously, wisely. So there is one universal imperative: whatever you do, do the right thing for the right reasons!
But, needless to say, to be told that is not very helpful, if you do not know what the right and reasonable thing for you to do is. And this is where the other types of role or sorts of person come in. In thinking about what you as a rational being ought to do, you have to take into account the sort of person you are. With this we can turn to the second type of role, or sort of person, Panaetius distinguishes. To understand this type better we should take into account two further pieces of Stoic doctrine. There is a metaphysical doctrine, which also plays a role in Stoic epistemology, namely the view that any particular or individual of any kind is a member of this kind by sharing a common quality (koinē poiotēs) with the other members of this kind, but is the particular individual it is by a quality peculiar to it (idia poiotēs) which distinguishes it qualitatively from all other members of the same kind (cf. Simplicius In Cat. 48.15). So any human being qualitatively differs from all other human beings. Here the uniqueness and individuality of a human being for the first time is given a metaphysical status. The second piece of doctrine is that, according to the Stoics, Divine providence governs the world down to the smallest detail. It is not just that according to God's plan there have to be human beings, there have to be the very individual human beings there are. Each has its role to play and accordingly is endowed with its own nature suited for the particular role it has to play. As a result different human beings have a different natural bodily constitution. Some are naturally physically (p. 166) robust, others rather frail. Some naturally are good at running, others are not. Correspondingly different human beings by nature have a different temperament, a different psychological make-up. Some by their natural constitution easily panic, get into a fit, others are particularly clever or intelligent, or good at doing geometry. The relevance of all this for what one ought to do is obvious. One ought to do things, or try to do things, which are suitable for the particular human being one is, for instance eat the food appropriate for one, pursue things which one has a particular talent for. By contrast, one should avoid things not suitable for the particular human being one is. For not to do so would be to be unreasonable. I already briefly have talked about the third and the fourth type of role, or of sort of person, Panaetius distinguishes. We are familiar with these types from the texts which we had considered earlier.

With this I can finally return to the notion of the person one is which I want to ascribe to Epictetus. It is clear that we do not find this notion in Panaetius, as Cicero reports his view. But it is easy to see how, from the kind of view we find in Panaetius, one naturally arrives at the notion of the person one is. It is essential to Panaetius' view that each individual human being instantiates each of the four types of persona, that for each human being at least the first
type of persona, namely one's being a human being and hence a rational agent, should take precedence over all other roles, and that some roles are not easily combined, if at all, with other roles you might want to play. If, for instance, you have a weak voice and a serious congenital speech-defect, you should think twice about aspiring to be an orator. So Panaetius himself clearly is thinking about the different roles or sorts of person as they might be combined in one individual human being. Hence, given Panaetius's view, it is easy to arrive at the notion of the person one is as the combination of the different roles one has or sorts of person one is. And this is exactly what Epictetus does.

Epictetus does distinguish types of role or of sort of person, though not quite in the same way as Panaetius does. He starts out Diss. II.10 with the remark ‘Look at who you are. The first thing is that you are a human being . . . Consider, then, which things you are distinct from in virtue of your rationality. You are distinct from wild animals, you are distinct from sheep.’ This obviously is the first type of role distinguished by Panaetius, and, as in Panaetius, is supposed to take precedence over all other roles or sorts of person you are. Then Epictetus goes on to say (II.10.3): ‘Next, you are a citizen of the world and a part of it . . . You are able to understand and to follow the way God has arranged the world (p. 167 ) and to figure out what follows from this.’ This clearly is not the second type of persona we find in Panaetius. I do not here want to discuss the Stoic notion of world-citizenship. I take it that what Epictetus has in mind is this: we, being rational, and thus able to understand the natural order of things, have the role of maintaining this order in our lives in the light of our understanding of it. Epictetus then goes on to talk about being a son, a brother, a member of the council, that is the sorts of person which fall under Panaetius' third and fourth type.

So also Epictetus thinks of various types of sort of person as being instantiated in one individual human being. For the individual he addresses is supposed to be a human being, a citizen of the world, and a son. Moreover, he thinks of the first role as taking precedence over the others. It is an important part of Epictetus' thought about persons, which unfortunately I have no time to address, that various roles or sorts of person do not mix (IV.2.10). You cannot, he says, be pleasant to be with in a company of people given to heavy drinking and at the same time modest, orderly, decent (IV.2.6-10). This is as if you wanted to play both the role of Thersites and of Agamemnon. So Epictetus is concerned with what we might call an integrated, coherent personality. This is what he praises about Socrates (I.25.31: hen echōn prosōpon aei dietelei; cf. III.5.16). It is in this way that
Epictetus in some places, like in I.2 or IV.3.3, comes to talk about the person one is.

But, once one has this kind of notion of the person somebody is, it is easy to see how one also naturally would arrive at the kind of absolute, reflective notion of a person we find in Boethius, in the Middle Ages, in Locke and Kant, and down to the present day. On Epictetus' notion of the person one is, the persons we are are different in that we are different sorts of persons. But the persons we are all do have something in common, and what they have in common is for each human being the source of its being the person it is. In each case it is part of the person somebody is that he, being a human being, is rational, a rational agent. Whatever else is part of the person one is only is part of that person, because in the first place one is rational. If, for instance, it is part of the person you are that you are a father, this is so because you have some rational understanding of what it is to be a father and of what this means as to how you should think about what you ought to do, and, in particular, as to how you should behave towards your children. Thus the role of being a father as a role, the person one is in being a father as a sort of person, presupposes one's rationality. And thus in the light of this one might naturally come to talk of human beings as persons in our absolute reflective sense of the word just insofar as they are rational or rational agents. For it is only by being rational, that we can be any sort of person at all. And it is on this basis that we think we are justified in expecting a certain kind of behaviour from human beings. We call them 'persons' in this sense to mark the fact that, given that they are rational, we regard certain forms of behaviour as appropriate and others as inappropriate for them.

I have now, very roughly and with some gaps, sketched a history of the notion of a person in antiquity in which Epictetus' notion of the person one is plays an important role. But in conclusion I want to note that the fact that this history in late antiquity ends with the kind of notion of a person we find in modern philosophy, in Locke or Kant, does not mean that some notion of the person one is, like Epictetus', no longer is of interest. It perhaps is true that we human beings as rational beings are persons and that as persons we have a certain dignity or intrinsic worth which demands that we treat ourselves and others with due respect. But even if this should be true, it does not seem very helpful, given its abstractness and generality. We want to know what in concrete terms it means to treat oneself and others with the respect due to a person, due to any person as such.
It seems to me that the Epictetean notion in a way offers an answer to this question. In Epictetean terms you treat yourself with due respect, if, in doing what you are doing, you always take into proper account the person you are. You treat others with due respect, if, in doing what you are doing, where this affects others, you take them into account as the persons they are. If, for instance, you ask somebody to do something which, given the person he is, he cannot possibly do, you would fail to treat the person with due respect, if you do know, or should know, that he, for no fault of his own, is the sort of person who is not able to do this.

Obviously it would be a major task to work out in detail an appropriate notion of the person somebody is. But this is not the task I set myself here. What I tried to do here was just to shed some light on how we came to think of human beings as persons.

Notes:

(1) pόs an tis sōzoí to kata prosōpon en panti. I will try to justify this translation later.


(3) In the Budé edition of Epictetus.

(4) For the use of ‘prosōpon’ and ‘persona’ in the sense of ‘sort of person’ see below.

(5) I am perfectly aware of the theological use of the word, in particular in Latin theology since Tertullian. But this is a complicated subject on which I have detailed views of my own which I cannot go into here. But given the way the word is used in Greek theology, for instance in John of Damascus, I doubt that the original theological use is the reflective philosophical use we find in Boethius; though Boethius’ treatise is theological, it tries to clarify theological questions in terms of philosophical concepts.

(6) This is obvious at least in the case of Cicero, for instance from his De Officiis.

(7) It is also relevant here that the Stoics do not think that we are the only rational beings which have been created. There also are divine beings or
gods, like the planets who are rational and have their role to play. So being a human being in the first instance is a matter of being rational, but then also of behaving specifically like a human being.