

Annual Lecture 2012

# The Person and the Individual: Human Dignity, Human Relationships and Human Limits

Dr. Rowan Williams

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# **The Person and the Individual: Human Dignity, Human Relationships and Human Limits**

Dr. Rowan Williams





The following is a transcript of the  
Theos Annual Lecture 2012, given by Dr Rowan Williams.

The lecture was delivered on  
Monday 1st October 2012 at Central Hall, Westminster.

# human dignity, human relationships and human limits

Mishal [Husain], Elizabeth [Oldfield] and our hosts here at Central Hall, my thanks to you for your welcome and introduction. And my thanks to Theos for the opportunity of sharing some thoughts with you this evening.

I've taken the chance of stepping back a little bit from some of the more obvious immediate current debates to do some thinking about the whole notion of the person in religious thought, and specifically in Christian thought. That's the thread that connects what I want to say tonight. I shall eventually get on to some slightly more practical questions (so don't give up too soon!) and I'll be very glad to explore that further in our conversation after I've finished the lecture.

In 1955 a Russian theologian living in Paris published an essay, not a very long essay, on The Theological Notion of 'The Human Person'. It was quite a technical study that focused largely on the vocabulary of the early Christians, but it is in fact something of a watershed in modern theological thinking. From that relatively brief discussion in 1955 a whole strand of thinking within the eastern Christian world developed and has in turn affected the western Christian world. It united its emphases and concerns with some very deep themes that were already being explored in western Christianity earlier in the 20th century. But by the end of the 1960s, it was possible to trace what many people have called a 'personalist' style of theology emerging across the Christian world in its diverse traditions – a style of theology deeply connected with a particular way of analysing relations.

The theologian in question was Vladimir Lossky. Exiled from Russia at the beginning of the 1920s, he died prematurely in the 1950s having produced a rather small body of work – but a body of work that is of significance out of all proportion to its size. In this particular essay the substantive conclusion that he proposes is this: as Christians, he said, we don't yet have a proper vocabulary for distinguishing between two things that it's absolutely vital to hold apart.

Those two things are, first, a subject – which is simply one unique instance of its kind – and, on the other hand, that quality, whatever it is, that makes a conscious thing or subject of this kind ‘irreducible to its nature’. Let’s pause on this to begin with.

Something that is simply ‘one unique instance of its kind’ is an object that stands alongside other objects, distinguished by certain particular features. There are a lot of dogs, they all share the characteristic of being dogs, only one of them is Fido, one of them is Rover, and so on. That in itself simply tells you there are lots of examples of this kind of thing. But it doesn’t quite do duty when it comes to thinking about what we are like as persons.

There is something about us as conscious agents that doesn’t simply boil down to being one example of a kind of thing. That’s not to say you have to search for some specific element that makes us personal rather than otherwise – intelligence or freedom or whatever. It’s more like an observation that when we talk about being ‘a person’, we’re talking of something about us as a whole that isn’t specified, that isn’t defined just by listing facts that happen to be true about us. Lossky says that there isn’t really a concept that will do this work at all. We simply haven’t got the word. We know what we mean when we distinguish between personal and impersonal, and we know roughly what we mean when we talk about persons in relation. But we struggle to pin this down, this idea that somehow we are not to be reduced to our nature, to the things that happen to be true about us. And Lossky says that just as when we try to talk about God, we’re left here with a kind of space, a kind of mystery, something we can’t really manage in third person descriptive terms. Here’s what he says towards the end of his essay:

Under these conditions, it will be impossible for us to form a concept of the human person, and we will have to content ourselves with saying: “person” signifies the irreducibility of man to his nature— “irreducibility” and not “something irreducible” or “something which makes man irreducible to his nature” precisely because it cannot be a question here of “something” distinct from “another nature” but of someone who is distinct from his own nature, of someone who goes beyond his nature while still containing it, who makes it exist as human nature by this overstepping of it.<sup>1</sup>

Third person categories, description at arm’s length, don’t work. Something more needs to be said. We establish ourselves as human by stepping beyond the bundle of facts that we might use to define humanity in general, even the bundle of facts that distinguish us from another example of the same kind of thing, that might distinguish Fido from Rover. What makes me a person, and what makes me this person rather than another, is not simply a set of facts. Or rather it’s the enormous fact of my being here rather than elsewhere, being in these relations with those around me, being a child of these parents, a parent of these children, the friend of x, the not-so-intimate friend of y, the Archbishop

of Z for that matter. I stand in the middle of a network of relations, the point where the lines cross. While it may be true to say I am the sum total of all the things that have happened to me, as soon as I say I am the sum total of all the things that have happened to me, I change the sum total of the things that are true about me. I make a difference to the facts of nature. I do so because of, and in the light of, the relations in which I stand. And by saying and acting and responding, I create fresh facts. But there in the middle is that elusive, mysterious area, that something which is not just a something, not just a capacity, not just a fact about me, something mysterious, something not open to third person analysis.

So as a person I embody, I carry with me, all the things that have happened to me – the things that are, as a matter of fact, true about me. But moment by moment I respond to that agenda in different ways, I activate what is there in different ways, and I set up new chains of connection and relationship.

In this 1955 essay, Lossky builds all of that around a very complex and very sophisticated analysis of how Christians, especially in the early centuries, talked about God as trinity and talked about the divine and the human in Jesus. If I had another three hours or so I would try to spell that out a bit further, but it might emerge a little later when we have some questions. The point I want to focus on here is that he is arguing for an essential mysteriousness about the notion of the person in the human world, an essential mysteriousness that one can't simply deal with by listing it in a number of things that are true about us so that I am intelligent, loving, free and mysterious; which is something about the place I occupy in terms (as I said earlier) of being the point where the lines of relationship intersect. It's because a person is that kind of reality, the point at which relationships intersect, where a difference may be made and new relations created. It's in virtue of that that we are able as believers to look at any and every human individual and say that the same kind of mystery is true of all of them and therefore the same kind of reverence or attention is due to all of them. We can never say for example that such and such a person has the full set of required characteristics for being a human person and therefore deserves our respect, and that such and such another individual doesn't have the full set and therefore doesn't deserve our respect.

That of course is why – historically and at the present day – Christians worry about those kinds of human beings who may not tick all the boxes but whom we still believe to be worthy of respect, whether it's those not yet born, those severely disabled, those dying, those in various ways marginal and forgotten. It's why Christians conclude that attention is due to all of them. What that means, we may still argue a lot about. But the underlying point is quite simply that there is no way of, (as it were), presenting a human individual with an examination paper and according them the reward of our attention or respect

only if they get above a certain percentage of marks. Any physical, tangible member of the human race deserves that respect, never mind how many boxes are ticked.

Another way of putting this is that we ascribe personal dignity or worth to people – to human individuals – because of that sense that in relationship each of us has a presence or a meaning in someone else’s existence. We live in another’s life. To be the point where lines of a relationship intersect means that we can’t simply lift some abstract thing called ‘the person’ out of it all. We’re talking about a reality in which people enter into the experience, the aspiration, the sense of self, of others. And that capacity to live in the life of another – to have a life in someone else’s life – is part of the implication of this profound mysteriousness about personal reality. Deny this, and you are back with that deeply unsatisfactory model in which somebody decides who is going to count as human.

There was a phase in science fiction writing about 20-30 years ago, where the question often came up of how you might recognise something as human on another planet or in some cyborg future. How might you accord to some other being the status of a person? How might you imagine conversing with them? It’s a good question to ask as a thought experiment, but as soon as you try to answer it in terms of what I’ve called ‘ticking boxes’ – they have this or that characteristic – you’ve rather missed the point. You would only really discover whether you could treat them as a person by a longish process of trying to form relation, trying to converse, trying to see what sort of exchange emerged as you related to that other. There are rules of thumb; there are helpful shortcuts we can apply. Very broadly speaking, 99 times out of 100, it’s something to do with language that helps us decide how to treat, and whether to treat, someone else as a person. And language of course means not only the words we speak but gestures, the flicker of an eyelid, the movement of a hand. But even that doesn’t quite do it. At the end of the day we can only say this is something we could discover exclusively by taking time and seeing if a relationship could be built.

Here is another theological philosopher, this time a Roman Catholic, writing about this subject – the German Catholic philosopher Robert Spaemann:

Each organism naturally develops a system that interacts with its environment. Each creature stands at the centre of its own world. The world only discloses itself as that which can do something for us, something becomes meaningful in light of the interest we take in it. To see the other as other, to see myself as thou is over against him. To see myself as constituting an environment for other centres of being, thus stepping out from the centre of my world, is an eccentric position that opens up a realm beyond substance. We find in ourselves the idea of the absolute, the infinite, as that which cannot be derived, as Descartes noted, from our finite and conditioned nature.<sup>2</sup>

As human beings in relationship we sense that our environment is created by a relation with other persons, we create an environment for them, and in that exchange – that mutuality – we discover what ‘person’ means. That’s at the heart of what I want to reflect on a bit further tonight, the distinction between that mysterious, relational, conversational, environment-building activity that we call ‘the person’, and the individual as simply one example of a certain kind of thing.

In modern debate we quite often find ourselves faced with the alternative of individualism or communitarianism, the individual or the community. What I’m suggesting this evening is that that’s not quite the right polarity to start from. It’s not the individual and the community, but the individual and the person that we need to begin with – the difference between two ways of imagining and understanding what we are as agents, as speakers, as presences in the world. We can build into our sense of ourselves the ‘individual’ feeling, that basically we’re just the centre of a world or one example of a certain kind of thing. Or we can take the risk of the second kind of talk about ourselves, the personal – more frustrating, more elusive, and yet more adequate to what we actually as human beings do and say most of the time – but I’ll come back to that later.

Now behind all this lies one very basic theological assumption which Lossky in his essay underlines and which goes back a very long way in Christian thought – at least as far as St Augustine at the beginning of the fifth century. That assumption is that, before anything or anyone is in relation with anything or anyone else, it’s in relation to God. And, said Augustine, the deeper I go into the attempt to understand myself, who and what I am, the more I find that I am already grasped, addressed, engaged with. I can’t dig deep enough in myself to find an abstract self that’s completely divorced from relationship. So, for St Augustine and the Christian tradition, before anything else happens I am in relation to a non-worldly, non-historical everlasting attention and love, which is God.

But if that is true of us, if our first relationship is with that energy that made us and sustains us in being, then of course, when I look around, my neighbour is also always somebody who is already in a relation with God before they’re in a relation with me. That means that there’s a very serious limit on my freedom to make of my neighbour what I choose. Because, to put it very bluntly, they don’t belong to me, and their relation to me is not all that is true of them, or even the most important thing that is true of them. That’s true of everything in the world in a certain sense, which is one reason why there’s a good Christian ground for being concerned about the environment. But it’s true in a very intense sense of other persons, who see me as I see them, who relate to me and affect me as I relate to and affect them. I’m not on my own and I can’t pretend

that the basic form of my relation with the world is this little atom here controlling and mapping and planning all those other little atoms out there. I'm seen, I'm engaged with, and before even human engagement and vision is that relationship with God at the root of everything.

This is one of the most fundamental differences between an individualist and a personalist perspective on our lives as particular people and our lives as a society. Human dignity, the unconditional requirement that we attend with reverence to one another, rests firmly on that conviction that the other is already related to something that isn't me. And without that conviction, we are in serious ethical trouble. That's why some people like to say, as Robert Spaemann does in the same book I quoted a moment ago, that there is a connection between the notion of human dignity and the notion of the sacred – not only the specific ways in which this or that religion talks about the sacred, but in the sense that there is in the other something utterly demanding of my reverence – something which I cannot simply master or own or treat as an object like other objects. For the Christian, and for most religious believers, that is firmly rooted in the notion that the other, the human other, is already related – in other words, outside my power and my control.

I think we can push that further and say that when we claim human dignity when we claim the right to be respected – when we claim our 'human rights' in fact – we're not just asserting that somewhere in us there is something making imperative demands. We're trying to affirm a place, a proper place, in relation with others. We're trying to affirm that we are embedded in relationship. I am, and I have value, because I am seen by and engaged with love – ideally, the love we experience humanly and socially, but beyond and behind that always and unconditionally the love of God. And the service of others' rights or dignity is, in this perspective, simply the search to echo this permanent attitude of love, attention, respect, which the creator gives to what is made.

A language about human rights that is simply about some fact in us which makes it imperative that other people respect us, can become very dry and very abstract. A language of human rights which is about the search for proper, mutual attention and reverence for a universal dignity, has a bit more energy and I think a bit more depth. But of course as Robert Spaemann indicates in his essay which I quoted, to step outside the realm of the individual, the one thing of its kind, the centre of its universe; to step outside that, to respond actively and creatively to our environment, to shape and alter our environment, to be an environment for others and to be the environment they create – to go 'beyond our nature' – requires acts of faith. Living as a person is a matter of faith – stepping out.

It's in many ways a lot easier to believe and to act as though each was in fact an atom, a world to itself. It's somehow very typical of the modern sense of self that when we speak about 'self confidence' these days, we're often talking about relying on something that is in us – rather than having the courage to engage, to venture out, to be confident enough to exchange perspectives, truths, insights, to move into a particular kind of conversation or dialogue. I turn here to another influential writer, not a theologian this time but a sociologist, Richard Sennett of the London School of Economics, whose recent book entitled "Together" touches on some of these matters. Here he is, speaking about this question, and quoting from the Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin: "A conversation affirms man's faith in his own experience. For creative understanding it is immensely important for the person to be located outside the object of his or her understanding".<sup>3</sup>

Instead of trying to absorb things into ourselves, or to be absorbed into things outside ourselves, we seek to engage. We seek to set up a relationship. And that is a venture of courage which requires self-confidence, not in the terms of being assured that there is something solid inside me, but to be assured that I am related already to something that holds me, engages me, and carries me through. Without that we end up with what he elsewhere speaks of in terms of alienation from others, an individualised withdrawal, which, he says, "seems the perfect recipe for complacency. You take for granted people like yourself and simply don't care about those who aren't like you. More, whatever their problems are, it's their problem. Individualism and indifference become twins." And he quotes there from the great 19th century French writer, de Tocqueville, who in his second volume of "Democracy In America", published in 1840, wrote "Each person withdrawn into himself behaves as though he is a stranger to the destiny of all the others".<sup>4</sup>

And that, for de Tocqueville and for Sennett, is the opposite of a personalist approach. If we begin from the individualist perspective, if we assume we are each of us a world to ourselves, that there is in us some solid core which sustains who we are independent of anything else, we shall indeed end up alienated from the destiny of others. If we begin from the assumption that we are standing always in the midst of a network of relations, we don't ever know whose destiny or whose reality will and won't affect ours. That's a risky place to be, and it may indeed seem simpler, as Sennett says, to withdraw.

But part of the force of Sennett's analysis is that he applies these rather abstract ideas to some features of our world today, and suggests that we're seeing more and more the evolution of an 'uncooperative self' – a self that assumes that what comes first is this isolated interior core which then negotiates its way around relations with others but always has the liberty of hurrying back indoors. He says that if you look at how labour, production, business work across the centuries, you see a gradual trend towards



this non-cooperative self, away from a sense of belonging with each other and taking responsibility for each other. Part of the purpose of this book, and indeed of other writings by Sennett, is to ask exactly what has gone wrong and exactly how might we get around it or rethink it.

An aspect of this, which Sennett notes in passing and which other philosophers and writers have observed at greater length, is that if you do still take for granted a basic individualist model, the hard core to which everything has got to accommodate itself, you drift towards a steady expectation that the best relationship you can be in to the world is control. The best place to be is a place where you can never be surprised. We want to control what's strange, and we want to control what doesn't fall under our immediate power. We're uneasy with limits that we can't get beyond because limits, of course, of whatever kind, remind us that there are some things that are just going to be strange and difficult wherever we are and however hard we work at them. This can show itself in our corporate unease with limits, our exploitation of the environment, our expectation of an endless spiral of prosperity.

It can manifest in individual ways and the aspiration for the perfect body, the perfect marriage, the perfect home and the perfect job. Here is a modern psychotherapist, Patricia Gosling, writing about this in a recent book:

One sees [this notion of perfection and perfectibility] in the current obsession with the perfect body, the perfect home, the perfect lifestyle. One sees it getting out of control in mounting personal debt, in anorexia nervosa, in that slogan of Gestalt Theory that 'we can become anything we want to be'. Not true; and in that denial of reality lies a denial of our biological roots. Yes, we all have undeveloped potential. However it is also true that we each have our limitations, innate and circumstantial. The skill of living a satisfying life lies in using the transitional space between the two.<sup>5</sup>

Patricia Gosling, like so many other writers in the analytic and therapeutic world wants to underline the problems that face us if we assume that the ideal relationship to our environment is control, moving towards a perfect static situation where we have nothing to lose, to fear, or to gain. Behind all that is an impatience with the passage of time itself, which may well be thought of as one of the factors of life in the developed modern world. Personal reality, in the way I've been defining it, unfolds itself and declares itself in time and in the body. Individualist awareness resents both time and body, resents unfinishedness, resents limitation.

To go back for a moment to Richard Sennett: he's written extensively on the interrelation between all this and the loss of craft skills. Learning slowly by physical limitation over a long time, by the process of repeatedly engaging with material – you can only do that

in a cooperative framework. You learn of, and by, gestures. You accumulate a shared acquaintance, a shared familiarity, with the material alongside those who work with you and those who are shaping you as a worker. You win authority that is worthy of trust in that context, and you learn how to manage conflicts in language, not by violence. All of that is part of the 'craft' mentality, what shapes us as workers engaging with a world that we know we're not ever going to master completely and that we have to learn to negotiate with together.

Reading a passage like that we may very well think of the various kinds of resistance to this that appear in aspects of our modern culture. We may think of the way in which, at several different levels of society, people refuse language – that is, they refuse the actual difficulties of patient and civil argument. We may think of the strange fear of being 'looked at' which some people apparently sense, whether it's the rather extreme case of the youth on the tube at night who says "Are you looking at me?" or whether it is our unwillingness and unease about honest scrutiny in various other ways, our fear of transparency (which leads us, of course, by a typical overreaction to attempt to enforce transparency by regulation, but that's another story). It's an impatience, in some ways, with the very process of learning.

It struck me as I was preparing this lecture that the enormously popular and vivid programme "The Apprentice" offers us a model of apprenticeship which is completely the opposite of what apprenticeship is normally about. An apprentice is historically somebody who learns in a nurturing environment, from someone whose task it is to make them capable of independence by sharing with them a carefully accumulated authority and setting them free to engage constructively with the task they share. Now I make no comment on the ethics of "The Apprentice" itself – it's excellent drama – but it's not about apprenticeship. It may well be that relearning what apprenticeship is all about is one of the (perhaps unexpected) consequences of beginning our theology and our philosophy from a personalist basis – taking time, building relation. I'm genuinely delighted that The Evening Standard, in its outstanding campaign in the last couple of weeks about youth unemployment in this city, has so foregrounded apprenticeships as a simple and practical means forward in addressing what is increasingly a toxic, corrosive problem.

So we are in a cultural and work environment where it seems individualist assumptions prevail, assumptions about control, assumptions about unavoidable conflict, assumptions about there being always a private area into which we can retreat and shut the doors, a culture in which all of those things work against what I began with as a personalist model. Yet Sennett can say, very importantly, towards the end of his book that "Cooperation is not like a hermetic object, once damaged beyond recovery;

as we've seen, its sources – both genetic and in early human development – are instead enduring; they admit repair.<sup>6</sup> If we live in an uncooperative environment, if we've developed uncooperative selves, the field is not lost. Something can be reclaimed. But it can be reclaimed only by a careful, systematic challenge to those assumptions about what the human is which so imprison us – a challenge to our (in the broader sense) educational philosophies. That's a challenge which needs clarity about what a person is and isn't; clarity about the difference between the person and the mere individual; clarity about the capacity of human agents to do what my sources describe as transcending the merely natural, transcending the simple list of things that happen to be true about me. And that clarity is not easily available either for a simply materialist view of human life – the human individual as a machine – or for a purely spiritualist view of human life – human identity is just the sovereign iron will that lives somewhere in here and imposes itself on the world. Somewhere in between is an understanding of human identity, human personality, as fascinatingly and inescapably a hybrid reality: material embedded in the material world, subject to the passage of time, and yet mysteriously able to respond to its environment so as to make a different environment; able to go beyond the agenda that is set, to reshape what is around; above all, committed to receiving and giving, to being dependent as well as independent, because that's what relation is about. I'm neither a machine nor a self-contained soul. I'm a person because I am spoken to, I'm attended to, and I'm spoken and attended and loved into actual existence. Which takes us back to the question of human dignity and the sacred, and to that pervasive, mysterious, nagging sense that there is always already something about the other person related to what I can't see and haven't yet mastered.

But, finally, this is all, as a matter of fact, a lot more simple than it sounds. Because if we ask how we do, as a matter of fact, relate to one another, we may notice a number of things. We relate to one another as bodies. We notice that there is a fundamental bodily difference among human beings that has to do with gender, and we notice there's a fundamental bodily fact about us which is that our bodies wear out and that we're going to die. We talk to one another and we expect to listen to one another. We expect, in other words, relationship to evolve in language. I should be very surprised and rather disappointed if you repeated back to me phrases that I'd used in the last three quarters of an hour as if that were your contribution to our conversation. On the contrary, you will probably disagree and will certainly have perspectives you want to bring to bear, and I am committed by my presence here to listen to those, as you, I'm afraid, have been committed for the last three quarters of an hour to listen to my side of the conversation. But this is how we behave. We behave as if relationship mattered, as if we were not, in fact, capable of setting our own agenda forever and a day. And when we encounter people who apparently don't behave like that we regard them as, to put it mildly, a bit problematic.

The question is, can we find a language for this simple everyday fact about us – that we speak and we listen, that we recognise our bodies and their difference and their vulnerability? Can we find a language for living that kind of life, because neither the ‘machine’ language nor the ‘independent soul’ language will do the job. We need a language of personhood. And Vladimir Lossky, with whom I began, was quite right to say that it’s really very difficult to get a clear concept even if we do know what we’re talking about.

But that does land us with the final and, I find, rather appealing, paradox. People quite often say that theology is about describing unreal relations between unreal subjects. Nietzsche said it famously in the 19th century, and many have said it since, but what I’m really suggesting is that when it comes to personal reality the language of theology is possibly the only way to speak well of our sense of who we are and what our humanity is like – to speak well of ourselves as expecting relationship, as expecting difference, as expecting death. And, of course, for a Christian and people in other faith traditions, expecting rather more than death too – but that’s perhaps for another occasion.

Where I want to leave you is simply with the sense that it is in turning away from an atomised artificial notion of the self as simply setting its own agenda from inside towards that more fluid, more risky, but also more human discourse of the exchanges in relations in which we’re involved, and grounding that on the basic theological insight that we are always already in advance spoken to, addressed, and engaged with by that which is not the world and not ourselves – it’s in that process that theology comes into its own. And this is exactly what I believe Theos is interested in: connecting up the vision of the faith that we share with the urgent and sometimes tragic questions of the society we live in.

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6. Sennett, *op. cit.*, p219



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# the person and the individual

"I've taken the chance of stepping back a little bit from some of the more obvious immediate current debates to do some thinking about the whole notion of the person in religious thought, and specifically in Christian thought. That's the thread that connects what I want to say tonight...In 1955 a Russian theologian living in Paris published an essay...on The Theological Notion of 'The Human Person'. It was quite a technical study that focused largely on the vocabulary of the early Christians, but it is in fact something of a watershed in modern theological thinking. From that relatively brief discussion in 1955 a whole strand of thinking within the eastern Christian world developed and has in turn affected the western Christian world."

The Theos Annual Lecture 2012 was delivered by Dr. Rowan Williams and chaired by BBC news presenter Mishal Husain on Monday 1st October 2012 at Central Hall, Westminster.