



The Porous Mask

A Theological Reflection on Concepts of Personhood and Personal Agency in the Digital Age

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Given the metaphorical and technical transitions between machines and people, what is a person? Drawing on John Locke and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Florian Höhne reflects on imaginations and practices of the digital juxtaposing a forensic imagination of personhood with a responsorial imagination of personhood, respectively, and discusses their implications regarding digital transformations.

Introduction¹

In his description of a possibly emerging “Dataism,” Yuval Harari writes about humans as “data-processing systems.”² This is remarkable for at least the following reason: The philosopher Martin Buber prominently distinguished between things and personal agents, between the “realm of it” and the “realm of thou.”³ Calling humans

¹ I thank all those who have commented on a previous version of this article – be it online or during the conference at Princeton in November 2019. Many of those comments have become part of the following version.

² Harari (2016), 427-430-440.

³ Cf. Buber (2017), 10.

“data processing systems” treats them as things, not as persons. Digital transformations have raised many questions around artificial intelligence, autonomous computer systems and singularity, questions of whether, where and how it might make practical or theoretical sense to treat computer systems as persons. A deeper question resonates in all these debates: Does it make sense to treat human beings as persons? The maybe surprising answer of Harari’s “data religion” would be that it does not make sense; Instead, human beings would function as “data processing systems.” In this paper, I want to point to a notion of personhood that makes it possible to object to dataism’s answer.

Some narratives by which people make sense of digital transformations speak about human persons in computer-metaphors. Harari’s “data religion” is one example for that. The following sentences, written by Douglas Rushkoff, are another example: “In the emerging, highly programmed landscape ahead, you will either create the software or you will be the software. It’s really that simple: Program, or be programmed.”⁴ Seeing humans as “software” and as potentially programmable or even “programmed” puts personhood in question on a metaphorical level – and it is obviously plausible to do so under conditions of digital communication. Not only the machine’s personhood but human personhood is on the line.⁵ This raises philosophical, ethical, and practical questions: What does it mean to treat another human being and oneself as persons and not only as things, systems, or software? What follows from treating each other as persons, and what makes an entity prone to being treated as a person? What is the ethical value of treating each other as persons and not just as systems or software? How do digital transformations alter our understanding of personhood and of each other as persons? Given that the Greek origin of the term “person” also refers to the mask of the actor,⁶ which features of the mask that is “personhood” make it possible to give it to people? Which features become more or less plausible under condition of digital communication? What practical differences do these features make?

While the philosophical and theological literature on these issues fills libraries,⁷ I am quite selectively interested in how we can imagine each other and ourselves as persons under conditions of digital communication in a way that maintains and establishes human agency, particularly of those not in power to program. I am interested in a sense of personhood that lies between the two poles of Rushkoff’s digital alternative

⁴ Rushkoff (2011), 12.

⁵ Hanna Reichel’s comment’s have helped me to focus on this.

⁶ Cf. Pannenberg (1979), 407.

⁷ For a brief introduction into debate on personhood see Kather (2007).

of either actively programming or passively programmed selves. The thesis of this paper is based on the distinction of two ways of imagining personal agency – two types of masks, so to say – inspired by Bernhard Waldenfels:⁸ forensic imaginations and responsorial imaginations of personal agency. My thesis is that the power dynamics in a digital age undermine forensic imaginations and the possibility of personal agency. However, the practical promotion of responsorial imaginations would counter this development. The aim of my argument is not to adapt the ethical notion of personhood to digital transformations but rather to suggest a notion of personhood that sustains human agency in a digital world.

In order to make this point, I will first explain the socio-philosophical categories I work with (1), then describe the forensic imagination of personal agency in its practical ambivalence (2), show how digital power dynamics alter these imaginations (3), and interpret Bonhoeffer's Ethics in terms of a responsorial imagination of personal agency (4). I will finish by pointing to the practical difference such a responsorial imagination makes (5).

1. Categories: Praxis and Imagination

Particularly two categories situate the following reflections and their consequences in their social context: The category of practice as used in sociological theories of praxis after the so called “practice turn”⁹ and the category of imagination as used by Charles Taylor in his writings on modern social imaginaries.¹⁰ The idea to talk about digital ethics in terms of imaginations, narratives, and social practices has been developed at the Berlin Institute for Public Theology and is explained at greater length in other publications.¹¹ For this paper, the following points are important:

Following Theodore Schatzki and Andreas Reckwitz, I understand a practice as a “nexus of doings and sayings” bound together by routine or implicit knowledge.¹² As such, practices are always socially and contextually situated¹³ and involve things,

⁸ It is particularly his description of responsibility and his notion of responsorial ethics that inspired this distinction, see Waldenfels (2010); Vogelmann (2014), 326–334.

⁹ For the “practice turn” see (O A 2001); Reckwitz (2003), 282. My understanding of “practice” as outlined in this paragraph is particularly indebted to the following works: Reckwitz (2003); Schatzki (2008); Hillebrandt (2014) Schmidt (2011); Schmidt (2012); Bongaerts (2007); Bourdieu (2015a); Bourdieu (2015b); Müller (2014).

¹⁰ Cf. particularly Taylor (2004).

¹¹ Cf. Meireis (2019); Höhne (2019).

¹² Reckwitz (2003), 290; Schatzki (2008), 89.

¹³ Cf. Schmidt (2011), 41–44.

bodies, and some kind of practical knowledge.¹⁴ For example, the practice of turning on the light in a smart home involves something like the following: a speech act that commands the computer-system to turn on the lights, the action to step into the dark room, the routinized implicit knowledge of how to talk with the computer as well as the body that speaks and acts, and the things the body has to do with – in this case: the computer, the room, the lights.

One thought from theories of social practice is particularly important here because it shifts the focus from digital technologies to cultures of digital technology use. Andreas Reckwitz has emphasized that the relation of things and actual practices is not one-sided¹⁵: Things do not totally determine a practice nor do practices totally determine things. Rather, the “meaningful use”¹⁶ of certain things that is inseparable from the actual practice is decisive. To use an example:¹⁷ The invention of the printing press has not necessitated its historic career. Rather, the spread of printing machines and printing books is due to the rise of socially situated and contextual practices that make meaningful use of printing machines and printed books – namely, the culturally evolving practices of reading and publication. Simultaneously, those practices are made possible by the existence of printing machines. Hence, there is a sociological reason to not only reflect the technology and its potential, but more importantly to reflect how people use and make sense of technology culturally.

This makes the second category – the social imaginary – crucial for a theological reflection of digital cultural practices. According to Charles Taylor, people draw on a common social imaginary whenever they act, make sense of their social existence, or participate in social practices. He writes:

By social imaginary, I mean something much broader and deeper than the intellectual schemes people may entertain when they think about social reality in a disengaged mode. I am thinking, rather, of the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations.¹⁸

¹⁴ Cf. Reckwitz (2003), 290–297.

¹⁵ For this thought and the following see Reckwitz (2003), 291.

¹⁶ My translation of Reckwitz’s “sinnhafter *Gebrauch*”, see Reckwitz (2003), 291.

¹⁷ Reckwitz himself refers to this example: Reckwitz (2003), 291.

¹⁸ Taylor (2004), 23.

According to Taylor, the social imaginary is the background for any immediate practical knowledge that makes concrete practices possible.¹⁹ In other words: it provides the horizon for meaningful practices.²⁰ It refers to the imaginations of the participants of social practices rather than to a theoretical perspective on social realities; the imagined is “carried in images, stories and legends.”²¹

How then can we envision the relation between the imaginary and concrete practices? Following Taylor and exceeding Taylor’s thinking just a little in terms of a theory of social practices, I suggest thinking of this relation as mutual: On the one hand, the social imaginary makes social practices possible and informs them.²² That we imagine others and ourselves as primarily free individuals²³ informs practices of intimate relationships as well as of administration. Simultaneously, the social imaginary persists and exists in the very practices it informs. The transformation of practices also transforms the social imaginary in whose horizon people make sense of those transformations and meaningfully participate in them.

Presupposing this interrelation of imaginations and practices, I will ask how the imaginary of personal agency persists and changes in the practices of digital communication it simultaneously informs. My starting point for this is one image from the modern social imaginary that is in continuity with modern and premodern Christian imaginations: namely, the forensic imagination of the person people hold on to when they treat each other as persons. I will use the word “imagination” to refer to individual imaginations taken from the social imaginary.

2. Imaginaries I: The Forensic Imagination of Personhood (John Locke)

What I will call the “forensic imagination of personal agency” is not decisive for all concepts of the person. Rather, it plays an important role in the western modern social imaginary²⁴: We imagine ourselves and others as accountable for and conscious of our actions and their consequences over time—and that is precisely one imagination which the word “person” refers to. By treating each other as persons, we are treating each other as accountable over time. Practically, “person” denotes an entity to which one

¹⁹ Cf. Taylor (2004), 25.

²⁰ For the use of the term “horizon” in this context see Castoriadis (1990), 274ff.; Wabel (2010), 408.

²¹ Taylor (2004), 23–4.

²² Cf. Taylor (2004), 23, 25.

²³ Cf. Taylor (2004), 20–1.

²⁴ It is this western modernity which Taylor also focuses on, see Taylor (2004), 195.

can attribute past actions and consequences, in order to hold that person accountable, to ask for a justification, or to punish and reward.²⁵ This image is forensic, insofar as it entails the image of a court-situation, be it an actual human court, the Last Judgment, or the conscience as inner court.

The relation between actor and action might sound either self-evident or ontologically given. If it sounds self-evident, this gives proof to this imagination being part of the western modern social imaginary. Yet it is still a contextual and socially situated imagination. One indication for this is that such an imagination is not equally plausible for all positions in a society. Having experienced oneself as a powerful actor whose actions make a difference in social life will make the forensic imagination of accountable agency for an individual seem more plausible. It is less plausible for those who experience themselves always and only as the object of external decision-making processes. If the relation between actor and action sounds ontologically given, a discussion of ontology is opened, which is unnecessary here, for one simple reason: What becomes socially relevant in the aftermath of an action is the social imaginary independent of the ontological reality it refers to. To put it in an example: By having even accused a person of causing harm, the social imagination of personal accountability is presupposed – independent of whether a given person actually caused a certain harmful consequence.

Historically, the forensic image of personal agency is already manifest in John Locke's famous concept of personhood.²⁶ Since Charles Taylor also refers to Locke to describe the modern social imaginary, his writings on personhood might be a good exemplification of the forensic type, even though Taylor does not refer to this part.²⁷ Locke is famous for having pinned the notion of being a person to consciousness, thereby making personal identity independent of the identity of matter and substance.²⁸ Locke writes, that the term "person" refers to

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 [...]; in this alone consists personal identity, i.e., the sameness of a rational being: and as far as this consciousness can be extended

²⁵ See Locke on reward and punishment below.

²⁶ For my dealing with John Locke the work of Michael Quante has been formative, cf. Quante (2007), 35–46.

²⁷ Cf. Taylor (2004), 4.

²⁸ Locke (1924), 189; Quante (2007), 36.43.

backwards to any past action or thought, so far reaches the identity of that person.²⁹

Thereby, Locke identifies being a person with the actual proceeding of – and not only the potentiality for – self-reflective consciousness internal to the entity. Being a person means to be self-conscious of one’s past and present actions. To put it in the aforementioned metaphor: it is the self-consciousness, the consciousness of one’s actions behind the mask that makes the mask a persona, that makes the person perform as a person.

In the end of his chapter on *Identity and Diversity* (which Locke added in the second edition of his Essay³⁰), Locke makes explicit that this is meant as a forensic notion of personhood. He also makes clear why and how consciousness is so decisive. He writes:

Person, as I take it, is the name for this self. [...] It is a forensic term appropriating actions and their merit; and so belongs only to intelligent agents capable of a law, and happiness and misery. This personality extends itself beyond present existence to what is past, only by consciousness; whereby it becomes concerned and accountable, owns and imputes to itself past actions, just upon the same ground and for the same reason that it does the present. All which is founded in a concern for happiness, the unavoidable concomitant of consciousness; that which is conscious of pleasure and pain desiring that that self that is conscious should be happy.³¹

Hence, the term “person” names an entity that – by virtue of its consciousness – can be held accountable, punished and rewarded.³² With this background, consciousness becomes the essential feature of personhood for Locke because it names the point to which past actions, future actions, consequences, rewards, and punishments are plausibly pinned: the consciousness in its continuity over time owns the person’s actions. If someone is conscious of their past actions, it makes sense to reward and punish them because of the continuity in consciousness – “the right and justice of reward and punishment” is founded in identity of consciousness.³³ Personhood – and therefore with concrete consciousness – is the condition for legal consequences for Locke, as he

²⁹ Locke (1924), 188. See also Quante (2007), 43.

³⁰ Cf. Quante (2007), 35.

³¹ Locke (1924), 198f. See also Quante (2007), 37.

³² Cf. Locke (1924), 194–5, where Locke also uses the pair “reward and punishment.”

³³ Locke (1924), 195.

writes: “to punish Socrates waking for what sleeping Socrates thought, and waking Socrates was never conscious of, would be no more of right than to punish one twin for what his brother-twin did.”³⁴ In Locke’s argument, the forensic image of personal agency is necessitated by a certain notion of justice: namely, retributive justice.

Interestingly, Locke gives the concept of person not only a juridical frame but also a theological one: He uses his idea of consciousness to think about the identity of earthly existence and the resurrected person.³⁵ Based on this, the juridical frame is ultimately a frame of Last Judgment:

And therefore, conformable to this, the apostle tells us, that at the great day, when every one shall ‘receive according to his doings, the secrets of all hearts shall be laid open.’ The sentence shall be justified by the consciousness all persons shall have that they *themselves*, in what bodies soever they appear, or what substances soever that consciousness adheres to, are the *same* that committed those actions, and deserve that punishment for them.³⁶

The juridical and theological framing of this imagination of personhood is important here because I understand them as hints to the concrete practical place of the tradition and effect of this very imaginary: the forensic imagination of personal agency persists paradigmatically in juridical and religious practices. The biblical imaginary entails images that envision and support the forensic image. Neglecting that it does not explicitly talk about individuals but about a potentially collective “you,” the vision of Last Judgment in Matthew 25 could be read as a vision of retributive justice, in which good and evildoers get their merit. This presupposes and perpetuates the image of accountable personhood. The Christian practices of confession, particularly of individual confession, presuppose and perpetuate the forensic image as well. The same holds true for the juridical system in modern societies; it needs to identify persons as accountable and liable entities.

The presuppositions of this and other forensic images of personhood is the individual’s consciousness of one’s actions. To attribute actions to an agent only makes sense

³⁴ Locke (1924), 195.

³⁵ Cf.: “And thus we may be able, without any difficulty, to conceive the same person at the resurrection, though in a body not exactly in make or parts the same which he had here, the same consciousness going along with the soul that inhabits it.” (Locke [1924], 193) According to Quante, the question of how to image continuity to post death existence is an important context for Locke’s reasoning (Quante [2007], 36).

³⁶ Locke (1924), 199.

if the agent can plausibly be imagined as the conscious author of those actions. Otherwise, reward and punishment were unjust. Locke pins this imagined authorship to consciousness behind the mask that “owns” past and present actions. Hence, what is decisive about the forensic imagination, is the imagined individual’s consciousness behind the mask, the consciousness of one’s actions.

The forensic imagination is highly ambivalent from the perspective of a theological ethic oriented by the goods as freedom, justice, participation, and peace.³⁷ On the one hand, it is emancipative and reconciling because this imagination empowers agency and names concrete responsible agents. On the other hand, the forensic image is problematic in complex societies because most problems have a structural and collective dimension. The tendency to make only one or a few persons responsible for something harmful conceals structural causes and collective contributions and thereby inhibits an improvement of the situation. For example, making individual brokers responsible for the financial crisis of 2008 conceals the contribution of everybody’s greed.

3. Transformations: Digital Cultures

Using the categories of practice and imagination, the ethical reflection of digital transformation will focus on what Felix Stalder has called “the culture of digitality,”³⁸ rather than mere technological possibilities. While much is being written on digital transformation, I want to focus on how the described forensic imagination is present in practices that make “meaningful use” (Reckwitz) of digital technologies. My thesis is this: in digital cultures, power takes forms that undermine the plausibility of the forensic imagination.

This thesis presupposes a differentiation between forms of power and presupposes that images of personal agency persist socially in power-relations. In order to differentiate between forms of power, I draw on the work of both Felix Stalder and Byung-Chul Han who themselves draw partially on Foucault’s theory of power and partially on Max Weber and David Singh Grewal.³⁹ Following them, it makes sense to distinguish at least two forms of power: repressive power on the one hand and constitutive or seductive power on the other.

³⁷ I have written about this elsewhere: Höhne (2015).

³⁸ Stalder (2016).

³⁹ Stalder (2016), 160; Han (2014).

- *Repressive power*: Both, Stalder and Han, mention the *repressive Form of the “power of sovereignty”.⁴⁰ It works through dominance and submission, hierarchies, discipline, orders, commands, rules, and (enforced) obedience.⁴¹ It forces people into obeying prohibitions and laws.⁴²
- *Constitutive/seductive power*: Drawing on Grewal, Stalder describes the *constitutive* form of the “power of sociability”.⁴³ It works through quasi-voluntary submission and acceptance of rules: People partake in a network by subtly accepting the rules and protocols that constitute that very network.⁴⁴ Insofar as “communality” is one of the main features of a culture of digitality (as Stalder claims), the constitutive form of power has gained a new prevalence in digital cultures. Nobody forces me with physical violence to accept the rules of a given social network, but in order to partake in that network I have to accept them quasi voluntarily, independent of my knowledge or consent. Similarly, Han sees a “smart” and “friendly” form of power on the rise.⁴⁵ According to Han, it is permissive and *seductive*. This form of power does not work against the individual freedom but through it; submission happens without the individual being conscious of their submission.⁴⁶ Seductive power seduces freedom into subtle disobedience through possibilities, using our needs and yearnings: It works through the subtle and psychological manipulation of the individual’s decisions.⁴⁷

From the standpoint of an unconcerned observer, the difference between these forms of power might not seem that decisive.⁴⁸ In both cases, an entity in power – be it a repressive state or cybernetic system – sets the conditions that influence the agent into a certain behavior.⁴⁹ Although repressive power works through sanctions while

⁴⁰ Stalder (2016), 160; Han (2014), 25–6. My translation.

⁴¹ Cf. Stalder (2016), 160–1.

⁴² Cf. in similar German words Han (2014), 26.

⁴³ Stalder (2016), 160.

⁴⁴ Cf. Stalder (2016), 160–1. See there also for what follows.

⁴⁵ Cf. Han (2014), 26–7.

⁴⁶ Cf. Han (2014), 26–7.

⁴⁷ Stalder has described this subtle manipulation as follows: “Ausgeübt wird Macht nicht dadurch, dass dem Einzelnen direkt vorgeschrieben würde, was er zu tun hätte. Vielmehr wird einfach die Umgebung, in der sich jeder Einzelne selbstverantwortlich zurechtfinden muss, verändert” (Stalder [2016], 226, I thank Benedict Schöning for pointing me to this passage).

⁴⁸ I have learned a lot from the comments of Benedict Schöning, Gotlind Ulshöfer, and Hanna Reichel in making the following points on different standpoints, the difference between these forms of power and “irritating moments.”

⁴⁹ For cybernetic systems and this kind of influence see Stalder (2016), 226–8. I thank Benedict Schöning for pointing me to this reference.

seductive power works through seductions, both forms of power set manipulating conditions that influence individual behavior.

But from the standpoint of the involved participant of social practices, the difference between these forms of power is obvious and decisive: Repressive power needs practices whose participants are informed by the forensic imagination because it needs to identify actors, hold them accountable, and inflict disciplinary action. It needs and produces people who understand themselves as accountable actors, as consciously deciding selves in control of their actions. Repressive power and external means of discipline make it plausible for the individual human to imagine her or himself as a person accountable for the actions she or he has consciously decided to perform because power rewards or punishes the accountable self. It also can make it plausible for individuals to identify the power with accountable persons: Both the one disciplined and the one disciplining can imagine each other as persons, accountable for and conscious of their actions. Accordingly, these practices inscribe the forensic imagination into the social imaginary because such imaginations make practical sense from the perspective of the individual agent.

Insofar as the emerging digital culture entails a shift from the repressive form to constitutive and seductive forms of power, this culture persists in practices that feed on forensic imaginations of personhood while undermining them. This shift makes a relevant difference in the practices of the acting agent. It is in these practices where the seductive forms of power undermine the agent's forensic imagination, that she or he and the other would "own"⁵⁰ their actions, insofar as they create "irritating moments" for users and hinder the attribution of power to a responsible person.

How does this happen and what are "irritating moments"? Let's take the fictional character Fritz as an example: Fritz makes the conscious and accountable decision to become part of a social network in order to stay in touch with friends and colleagues. Because Fritz likes to get "likes" for his posts, he makes the conscious and accountable decision to share certain pieces of information about himself while deliberately refraining from sharing other pieces of information. So far, the forensic imagination makes practical sense to this individual. But behind the scenes, the cybernetic system uses Fritz's data to personalize what Fritz gets to see: which ads, what movie suggestions, or which search results.⁵¹ This can create and has created "irritating moments" for social media users: Fritz gets to see an advertisement on social media that fits his

⁵⁰ See above: Locke (1924), 198.

⁵¹ Eli Pariser has described this personalization in Pariser (2012).

preferences too well – which is irritating – or refers to information he has consciously not revealed at all. Such irritating moments raise questions: Have I revealed more information than I consciously decided to? How self-determined and accountable were the decisions to share information in the first place? Were my actions really my actions? Do social media’s algorithms know me better than I consciously know myself? These questions erode the practical plausibility of the forensic imagination of oneself as a consciously deciding and accountable person. From the standpoint of the user, it seems as if the power of the cybernetic systems got behind the mask of conscious personhood. While “irritating moments” erode forensic imaginations on the one hand, they also feed conspiracy theories and apocalyptic narratives such as those summarized by Torsten Meireis:⁵² “Irritating moments” create plausibility for the narrative that the effects of digital technologies are overwhelming, compelling, mysterious, and uncontrollable.

But the erosion also afflicts the part in power:⁵³ To whom can the seductive power be attributed? Who is accountable for the manipulation or surveillance the individual feels subjected to? The permissive, smart and seductive power described by Han is not visible.⁵⁴ It has, as Stalder emphasizes, no location but is diffuse and omnipresent.⁵⁵ This diffusion and anonymity make it impossible to identify it with one responsible person in power. But if no conscious person is accountable, the forensic imagination loses plausibility.

The culture of digitalism also entails practices that make new and extensive uses of the forensic imagination, thereby perpetuating it. For example, Kristy Hess and Lisa Waller have written about the “intensified role of the media in shaming ‘ordinary’ people when they commit minor offences” in the digital age.⁵⁶ The practice of “digital pillory”⁵⁷ as they call it, rests on the forensic image of personal accountability while perpetuating it.

In view of such problematic roles of forensic imaginations, one might appreciate the practical erosion of the forensic imagination by seductive and permissive forms of power. One can also appreciate how irritating moments reveal how powers work. But

⁵² Cf. Meireis (2019), 53.

⁵³ I have learned this from Hanna Reichel’s comments on a previous version of this paper.

⁵⁴ “Die Machttechnik des neoliberalen Regimes nimmt eine subtile, geschmeidige, smarte Form an und entzieht sich jeder Sichtbarkeit. Das unterworfenen Subjekt ist sich hier nicht einmal seiner Unterworfenheit bewusst” (Han [2014], 26).

⁵⁵ Cf. in similar German words Stalder (2016), 161.

⁵⁶ Hess and Waller (2014).

⁵⁷ Cf. Hess und Waller (2014).

without alternative imaginations of personhood, the named erosion might leave one without a sense of human agency at all. Hence the question: How could we imagine personhood in a way that acknowledges those forms of power and their use of freedom working through freedom yet still sustains the person's sense of agency?

4. Imaginaries II: The Responsorial Imagination of Personhood (Dietrich Bonhoeffer)

As Locke's writings already made clear, the forensic imagination of personhood is part of Christian traditions. At least in one simple version, the idea of punishment for evildoers and rewards for the faithful on Judgment Day presupposes and perpetuates the forensic imagination of personhood as conscious agency. Teachings of justification by faith alone as well as confutations of human free will challenge such narratives and their images. This hints towards another way of imaging personhood and human agency in Christian traditions that we can call responsorial imagination of personhood. Bernhard Waldenfels' work on a "responsive Ethik" implies this type.⁵⁸ He differentiates between a communicative (or forensic) and a responsorial ethic: While the former needs an autonomous self to attribute actions to, the latter works with a self that responds to claims.⁵⁹ I will interpret some of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's writings as theological exemplifications of the type "responsorial imagination of personhood" in order to make the point that imaginations of responsorial personhood make better sense in and of practices in digital cultures while sustaining human agency.

Already in his doctoral thesis, Dietrich Bonhoeffer puts a thesis forward on how moral personhood emerges, drawing on I-Thou-philosophy. It is the encounter with the Other in which one is a person: When faced with the claim of the Other, experienced as a barrier to one's own will, one is a person through having to decide.⁶⁰ For Bonhoeffer, it is the divine "Thou" that creates the person in the moment:⁶¹ "Der Einzelne wird im 'Augenblick' immer wieder Person durch den 'anderen'."⁶²

Bonhoeffer maintains this basic relational structure up into the fragments of an *Ethics*, while altering the characterization of the Other. Already, the basic structure of this imagination differs from the forensic one: The forensic imagination pictures a three-

⁵⁸ Waldenfels (2010), 76.

⁵⁹ Waldenfels (2010), 71–2., 74, 79.

⁶⁰ Cf. Bonhoeffer (2015a), 25–32.

⁶¹ Cf. Bonhoeffer (2015a), 33–4.

⁶² Bonhoeffer (2015a), 34.

figure-relation in which action A is attributed to agent B either by the agent herself or by a (divine) judge C. The responsorial imagination is characterized by a two-figure-relation in which the agent is confronted with the claim of the Other and challenged to respond. Already, this shifts the focus away from the attribution of actions to a person and towards the claims made on the person. This makes every action in question essentially social: The agent is a person in relation⁶³ to others affected by her or his action and is not only a person in the eyes of a disaffected judge or *qua* having an internal consciousness. This also shifts the focus away from the conditions for attributing actions and personhood towards the claim of the other and the dynamic of the encounter.

In his unfinished *Ethics*, Bonhoeffer describes the figures in the two-figure-relation of the responsorial imagination differently than in his early writings. With this change, he also deepens the gap with the forensic imagination. In this later work, he uses the term “the responsible” more often than the term “person” for the position of the agent which already mirrors the turn to a responsorial imagination. And – more importantly – he narrates the position of the other not primarily as a “claim” but as the Christ-Reality which encompasses creation, judgment, reconciliation and redemption.⁶⁴ This change is theologically significant: While the claim would name what Lutherans call “law,”⁶⁵ the Christ-Reality emphasizes the unity of the word of God as both law and gospel. Bonhoeffer stresses that God reconciled the reality of the world in the Christ-Reality.⁶⁶ It is this reality to which the life of the Christian should correspond and respond.⁶⁷ Hence, what humans respond to is not primarily the external and overwhelming reality of God’s claim but the encompassing reality of God’s reconciliation. Moral agency as personhood is not induced by a claim; rather, personhood is created in the encounter with the already reconciled reality. Thereby, the theological standpoint has changed over against the forensic imagination: Personhood evolves not in the contested state of open judgment but as a response to justification.

⁶³ For the relationality in Bonhoeffer see Bonhoeffer (2015a), 29.

⁶⁴ Cf. Bonhoeffer (2015b), 32–35, 40, 250, 253–4. See paradigmatically: “Weil in Jesus Christus Gott und Mensch eins wurde, wird durch ihn im Handeln der Christen das ‘Weltliche’ und das ‘Christliche’ eins. Sie stehen nicht gegeneinander als zwei ewige feindliche Prinzipien, sondern das Handeln der Christen quillt aus der in Christus geschaffenen Einheit von Gott und Welt und Einheit des Lebens.” (Bonhoeffer [2015b]: 252).

⁶⁵ Cf. for a similar thought: Lichtenberger (2006), 298. For the topic “gospel and law” in Bonhoeffer see also Soosten (1992), 47.83.

⁶⁶ Cf. Bonhoeffer (2015b), 33–35, 37, 40–1.

⁶⁷ Bonhoeffer (2015b), 253f.

With this background, the features of the evolving personal agency are decisive. They question the forensic image of a person that consciously “owns and imputes to itself past actions” (see above). As I interpret Bonhoeffer, he imaginatively dispossesses the person of their own actions in three ways.

First, he pictures the agent as a responsible person who always acts on behalf of others.⁶⁸ She or he is not only the conscious I, as for Locke, but “unites in his I the I’s of multiple people”; the “father for example” unities the “I of his family-members [...], for whom he is responsible.”⁶⁹ Hence, the agent’s actions are never only actions on their own behalf, but they are done on the behalf of others.

Second, Bonhoeffer pictures the agent as reflecting and acting under conditions of evaluative insecurity: The agent’s consciousness does not own the moral evaluation of his actions. She or he has to be conscious of the potential consequences of the actions. She or he has to weigh advantages and disadvantages and hence acts in the “twilight” of relative decisions, not knowing about their moral quality.⁷⁰

[D]ie Entscheidung fällt nicht mehr zwischen dem klar erkannten Guten und dem klar erkannten Bösen, sondern sie wird im Glauben gewagt angesichts der Verhüllung des Guten und des Bösen in der konkreten geschichtlichen Situation.⁷¹

Daring to act, faced with the disguise of good and evil, means being dispossessed of, being unconscious of the moral and historic meaning of one’s own actions. Accordingly, the freedom in this imagination is not the freedom of a person that owns, reflects, and consciously controls their own actions, but the “dangerous freedom”⁷² of a person capable of acting, daring and deciding while not knowing the final quality of one’s actions.

Third, those responsibly dared actions may retrospectively turn out not to have been the person’s actions alone. Thereby, Bonhoeffer opens the notion of acting so that the powers which are active in one’s free action are made obvious. In Bonhoeffer’s

⁶⁸ Cf. Bonhoeffer (2015b), 219.256–258.

⁶⁹ My translation of parts of the following quote: “Der Einzelne handelt nicht für sich allein, sondern er vereinigt in seinem Ich das Ich mehrerer Menschen, gegebenenfalls sogar einer sehr großen Zahl. Der Familienvater zum Beispiel kann nicht mehr handeln, als wäre er ein Einzelner. In sein Ich ist das Ich seiner Familienglieder aufgenommen, für die er verantwortlich ist” (Bonhoeffer [2015b]: 219).

⁷⁰ Cf. Bonhoeffer (2015b), 220f.224.

⁷¹ Bonhoeffer (2015b), 220.

⁷² Bonhoeffer (2015b), 220.

account of this, the believing person can come to see those dared actions as God's actions in history:

Gerade als der in der Freiheit eigenster Verantwortung Handelnde sieht er sein Handeln einmünden in und fließen aus Gottes Führung. Freie Tat, wie sie Geschichte bestimmt, erkennt sich zuletzt als Gottes Tat, reinste Aktivität als Passivität.⁷³

This allows for thinking of one's own actions as retrospectively also somebody else's action: It disowns the actor of its free action. In Bonhoeffer's description of responsible action, it is God who is active in the human person's activity. Formally and fundamentally, this opens the question of which other powers might be active in one's activity. And it does so while simultaneously acknowledging that the action has been a free daring to act for the agent in the moment in which it was performed.

Thereby, Bonhoeffer imagines the responsible agent as acting not on his own, not by his own agency, and not conscious of the moral quality of his own action. The mask "person" is imagined to be porous. That is, they are permeable to the pending internalized claim of the other "I" and to the action of the other "Thou" in one's own personhood. While this imagination of responsorial agency clearly disowns the agent of their own actions and inscribes the questionability of imputation into the imaginary, it encourages the person to act responsibly on their own and on behalf of others: the imagination is not inhibitory, but conceptualized as empowering. Therefore, the responsorial imagination of personhood provides the horizon in which to imagine oneself and others as acting persons under conditions of digital communication.

5. Proceedings: Imaginations and Praxis

Let me finish by naming three practical proceedings to show that the difference between forensic and responsorial imagination makes a practical difference.

First, people make sense of the cultural reality in which they live. This includes digital technologies. Doing so in the horizon of the forensic imagination of personhood makes it necessary to hold persons accountable. This has the disadvantage of making the imputation of one action to one person an essential art of the imagined personal agency. Under conditions of seductive and constitutive powers in the digital age, the

⁷³ Bonhoeffer (2015b), 225.

imagination of distinct imputation loses some of its practical plausibility. In the horizon of the responsorial imagination, the response to a given reality is more important than the distinct imputation of any given action. What constitutes responsible personhood according to this image is that one responds to reality by their actions, rather than the clear imputation of actions. The forensic imagination's necessity to impute is replaced by the constructive question of how to respond. This, of course, can lead to holding those in power accountable but as a matter of responding to a challenging reality and not as an imaginative precondition for moral action as such.

Second, if the distinct imputation of actions loses plausibility due to the work of constitutive and seductive powers, this will undermine the idea of personal agency in the horizon of forensic imaginations: Who am I to make a difference, faced with the global players of the www-world? On the other hand, the responsorial imagination allows for maintaining a sense of agency as both porous and personal under conditions of complexity, insecurity and ambiguity. This imagination expresses a certain habit of understanding oneself as an agent, as having the right to speak and ask questions. The responsorial imagination asks which powers have been operative in one's free action as free action. It makes that question possible, without letting its answer undermine a sense of personhood and agency. By making those questions possible and equipping people with the sense of having the right to speak and ask, the responsorial imagination is all but a cover-up for a lack of human agency: In the horizon of this imaginary, it becomes possible to name efficiencies of agency and respond to powers.

Third, the ethical and practical reflection of imaginations makes a difference for educational and ecclesial practices insofar as it makes one favor certain narratives over others. If responsorial imaginations of personhood are taken as ethically advantageous over purely forensic imaginations, narratives will need to be told that transport and envision responsorial imaginations – in class rooms as well as on the pulpit. Most likely, those stories will be less about the impermeable mask of the hero, whose actions change history. More likely, they will be about people who work together, in relation to each other, in solidarity with each other, sympathetic for each, sensitive to the ambivalence of contemporary existence, conscious of the powers that work through one's own activity and simultaneously not willing to stop working for relative betterment. They will be about the porous masks on stage, which come to be called persons.

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