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Between an Object and a Person: an Inverted Image / Icon

The notion of respect in contemporary philosophy is commonly seen as a problem of ethics, politics and similar fields of philosophy. In this respect, much has been said concerning problems of social and intersubjective relations, which we are inclined to value as positive if they are marked by respect. Therefore, this notion is often restricted to interpersonal relations, and, possibly, to relations human beings can have with natural beings, like animals, or cultural artefacts and objects.[1]

Nevertheless, it has also often been noted that interhuman relations tend to take the form of human/object relations, or, to put it more clearly, that human beings

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[1] Cf. P. Lucas, *Ethics and Self-Knowledge: Respect for Self-Interpreting Agents*, Dordrecht 2011, pp. 11–12.

have a tendency to treat other human beings as if they were objects. Remarks of such sort can be found, for example, in Kant's categorical imperative, which demands that we consider other human beings as ends in themselves, and not only as a means to an end, thus clearly showing at least two possible forms or characteristics of interhuman relations.[2] Similar points were developed by the authors of the Frankfurt school, like T. W. Adorno and M. Horkheimer, within their influential theory of instrumental reason.[3]

In this paper, however, I would like to address the issue in a somewhat inverted manner. That is, I would like to focus on the possibility of treating objects as if they are human beings, that is, persons. In my opinion, such a perspective could help us to better understand this much criticized tendency of reifying other persons, but it could also elucidate possible ways of thinking and behaving which could invert reification from within and teach us how to, once again, see other humans as persons.

In order to do this, I will concentrate on a very special example – namely, on the example of *icons*, as a particular type of inanimate objects given respect within Christian religious practices. To be sure, icons are not and were not the only type of objects treated as if they were persons; many such examples can be found, mostly works of art.[4] Of particular interest are examples of inanimate objects being put on trial before the law, judged and made to 'endure' legal sentences, more or less in the same way as a human being.[5] Nevertheless, I believe the example of icons is of special concern for my purposes, because icons are, for many doctrinal reasons, directly related to the issue of human nature and the relation between a human being and God.

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[2] Cf. T. Irwin, *Ethics Through History: An Introduction*, Oxford 2020, pp. 203–204; M. Bell, *On the Virtue of Taking Oneself Lightly*, in: *Oxford Studies in Normative Ethics*, vol. 9, ed. M. Timmons, Oxford 2019, pp. 176–177.

[3] Cf. M. Horkheimer, *Critique of Instrumental Reason*, London 2013; M. Jay, *Reason After Its Eclipse: On Late Critical Theory*, Madison 2016, pp. 103–104.

[4] Cf. M. Tamen, *Kinds of Persons, Kinds of Rights, Kinds of Bodies*, "Cardozo Studies in Law and Literature" 10 (1998) No. 1, pp. 7–8; M. Ferraris, *Art as Document*, in: *Wittgenstein and Aesthetics: Perspectives and Debates*, eds. A. Arbo, M. Le Du, S. Plaud, Frankfurt am Main 2012, pp. 184–185.

[5] Cf. M. Tamen, *Kinds of Persons, Kinds of Rights, Kinds of Bodies*, pp. 3–4.

Also, I will concentrate on the iconoclastic debate, which took place over the period of a century and a half in the Byzantine empire. This is because the iconoclastic debate actually revolved around the issue of respect for icons – whether or not should they be respected, (worshiped or venerated) and, if so, how this particular respect for icons should be defined.[6] The iconoclastic debate, I would like to add, was more than a theological problem; it defined politics and public life in the Byzantine empire at the time. Not only was it Emperor Leo the Third who issued the infamous decree prohibiting the veneration of icons in the first place, giving the debate a strong political tone, but the debate really had an impact on the lives of ordinary people, who were engaged in the practice in their daily lives.[7]

My approach to the notion of respect is, obviously, concerned with aesthetics, that is, with icons as artworks. What I wish to suggest here is not an analysis of the iconoclastic debate and the semantics of icon veneration as such. Rather, I would like to use this example as an interesting tool for gaining a new perspective on our contemporary problems. I believe that such a perspective, focused on icons as artworks of a specific kind, could offer some new ways of understanding predominantly ethical, or even political issues. My aim is, therefore, to examine what is usually considered as an ethical issue from the perspective of aesthetics. In this, I subscribe to a tendency of contemporary aesthetics attracting more and more scholarly interest in the past decade – a tendency to question predominantly modern ideas of divorcing aesthetics and ethics into two separate fields of philosophy, with the result that some traditional aesthetical issues, like moral beauty, are cut off from contemporary aesthetical research.[8]

The attempt to question modern ideas on aesthetics and ethics, understood in the way we today usually understand these, can turn in the

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[6] Cf. L. Brubaker, J. Haldon, *Byzantium in the Iconoclast Era, C. 680–850: A History*, Cambridge 2011, pp. 41–42; J. Herrin, *Byzantium: The Surprising Life of a Medieval Empire*, Princeton 2009, pp. 111–113.

[7] Cf. L. Brubaker, J. Haldon, *Byzantium in the Iconoclast Era*, pp. 79–81.

[8] Cf. J. Levinson, *Aesthetics and Ethics. Essays at the Intersection*, Cambridge 1998, pp. 1–2.

direction of pre-modern philosophies, especially medieval ones; this is the line of thought I will follow.[9] Therefore, I am taking the liberty of using the term aesthetics in a more flexible manner, denoting all the philosophical theories dealing with art, beauty or aesthetic experience. In other words, although the term itself was coined by A.G. Baumgarten, the founder of aesthetics, and although aesthetics was in fact founded only in the 18th century, I believe that we can follow Baumgarten's definition of its subject (art, beauty and aesthetic experience together) as a standpoint from which many traditional theories, predating Baumgarten, would be seen as aesthetical too. It is on these grounds that we can consider what medieval Byzantine aesthetics might teach us about the very ethical issue of respect.

The trouble with images

The iconoclastic debate, as was already mentioned, revolved around the issue of whether images/icons should be respected (worshiped or venerated) in the religious practice of Christianity. The original spark of the debate was actually the shift in artistic practices of making icons and (re)presenting Christ. While in the centuries predating the debate the usual practice was to (re)present the image of Christ in a symbolic manner – for example, as a lamb, artists started to use anthropomorphic representations, that is, to represent Christ in a human form.[10] This sparked a fierce debate, in which there were three main positions: *the iconoclastic* one, refuting any legitimacy to such representations;[11] *the iconolatric* one, equally extreme, allowing for it with no restrictions;[12] and *the iconophilic* one, confirmed, in the end, in the Seventh Ecumenical Council (Second

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[9] Cf. J. Levinson, *Aesthetics and Ethics*, pp. 5–6.

[10] Cf. A. Karahan, *Byzantine Iconoclasm: Ideology and Quest for Power*, in: *Iconoclasm from Antiquity to Modernity*, eds. K. Kolrud, M. Prusac, Farnham 2014, pp. 80–81.

[11] Cf. C. Mango, *The Art of The Byzantine Empire 312–1453. Sources and Documents*, Toronto 2004, pp. 166–169.

[12] Cf. A. Besancon, *The Forbidden Image: An Intellectual History of Iconoclasm*, Chicago 2000, p. 143.

Council in Nicaea), allowing for the veneration of icons, but developing a complicated and a very interesting theory about the exact character of such veneration.[13]

What was at stake here was actually the relation between the image/icon and its archetype; that is, between a representation and the person represented, between an object and a person. For iconoclasts, the representation was no more than that – a mere representation; an icon is merely a material object. Now, this poses no problems if the thing or person represented is a created one, if it is a creature, because representation and the thing/person represented would share the same ontological character, they would both be creatures. The problem arises when this ontological balance is disturbed, as in icons representing Divine persons: while icons themselves are surely creatures – even the products of human activity, here the person represented is of another sort, a divine person.

In this respect, the iconoclastic debate recalls early Christian debates between pagans and Christians on the difference between pagan idols and Christian use of material objects in religious practice, including use of images like icons and frescoes.[14] Church fathers would usually consider pagans to be worshiping and venerating material objects *per se* (a statue of Zeus, for example), and therefore not God who is of a spiritual nature – worshiping creatures, and not the creator. A somewhat more refined account can be found in St. Augustine, who, in response to some refutations of such accusations, claims that even if pagans do not worship material objects *per se*, but certain spiritual entities they stand for and which they represent instead, such spiritual entities could nevertheless only be creatures (probably demons), and therefore the intention of pagans is equally misdirected.[15] As we can see, the line of the argument is still the one contrasting creature and creator, and its

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[13] Cf. A. Besancon, *The Forbidden Image*, pp. 131–132.

[14] Cf. A. Karahan, *Byzantine Iconoclasm*, p. 82.

[15] Cf. C. Ando, *Signs, Idols, and the Incarnation in Augustinian Metaphysics*, "Representations" (2001) No. 1, p. 30; Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, Oxford 1995, p. 145.

nature is ontological. Augustine's own solution to the problem is also interesting for our purposes, in that he concludes that the *differentia specifica* separating idols and material aids to prayer in Christian use would be the presence of the Holy Spirit in the latter group.[16] Therefore, the idols/icons issue could be interpreted as a representation/presence one.

In the case of the iconoclastic debate, however, another problem was at stake. This was that the entire debate revolved around (re)presentations of Christ, and, in the second place, of saints; both sides were of the opinion that the Father could and should not be (re)presented, in that his essence (*ousia*) is beyond any comprehension, let alone that related to perception. For iconoclasts, the problem was that, in their opinion, icons could perhaps capture only the human side of Christ's person, and not his divinity, thus inviting heretical positions.[17] The one who would worship an icon of Christ would, according to this view, worship only Christ's human nature, and therefore he wouldn't worship Christ at all – he would act as if he were a pagan.

Both iconophiles and iconolatrists refuted this argument, insisting on the necessary relation of the representation and the archetype, the icon and Christ himself, actualized by the mediation of the Holy Spirit.[18] The general idea behind this was a sort of inversion in the semantics of the notion of representation: instead of *representing*, icons are actually *presenting*, *making present* the archetype. Therefore, if one worships an icon, he does not worship a beautiful painting, a material and created object – he worships the archetype presented and present in/through the icon: "The icon of Christ, primarily and immediately, and from the first look, manifests to us his visible form, and conveys his recollection.

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[16] Cf. C. Ando, *Signs, Idols, and the Incarnation*, p. 43.
[17] Cf. A. Karahan, *Byzantine Iconoclasm*, pp. 84–85.
[18] Cf. M.-J. Mondzain, *Image, Icon, Economy: The Byzantine Origins of the Contemporary Imaginary*, Stanford 2005, pp. 236–237.

Indeed, we behold him [429 A] who is placed in the icon [as] being reflected, as in a mirror."[19]

In other words, the relation is not one that starts with the representation and moves towards the archetype; it is exactly the opposite: the relation starts with the archetype and proceeds towards the (re)presentation. Therefore, all icons are canonically done with so called inverted perspective, and the light in which they are painted is not the light of the world, but the divine light (often accentuated by the use of gold, silver or precious jewels). The one who worships an icon, being himself a created being, would in fact start with the (re)presentation, but in the process, he would be invited to change his views – both literally and symbolically – and to accept and take part in the icon's divine perspective. Icons would, so to say, serve as a special means of communication and communion, a sort of bridge between two worlds, the created and the uncreated one.

To explain such inversion, iconophiles devised complex theories and terminology. To illustrate, here I will mention only one example – the difference between *latreia* (worship) and *proskynesis* (devotion), as they were defined by St. John of Damascus, and later inscribed in the official canons.[20] Namely, *latreia* (worship) is reserved for God, who alone deserves this form of respect according to his very nature.[21] On the other side, *proskynesis* (devotion, veneration, *adoratio*) applies to icons – it is a kind of worship and respect given to the archetype presented, but through the mediation of the icons.[22]

In other words, this kind of respect is a complex one: starting from the perspective of the one worshiping, firstly it is directed towards icons, but through them it is actually additionally directed towards the archetype. We are, therefore, invited to respect icons only because the archetype

[19] From *Antirrhetic* by Nikephoros, Patriarch of Constantinople. See: M.-J. Mondzain, *Image, Icon, Economy*, p. 242.
[20] Cf. L. Brubaker, J. Haldon, *Byzantium in the Iconoclast Era*, p. 139.
[21] Cf. John of Damascus, *Treatise III*, in: *Three Treatises on the Divine Images*, New York 2003, pp. 87, 125–126.
[22] Cf. John of Damascus, *Treatise III*, pp. 104–105.

represented is actually present in this complex relation in a specific manner. So, our respect and worship are primarily directed to the archetype, and only consequently to the icon. Given all this, we can conclude that an inanimate object, an icon, is in some sense respected and worshiped as if it were a person, while only because it can be considered in this way does it deserve respect.

What to see and where to look

Now, what can we learn from all this concerning the issue of respect in our contemporary context? The first point would be the very inversion I've mentioned before: if interhuman relations can have two modalities – the one in which one human being treats another as a human being, and the other one, in which one human being treats another as if he were an object – here we have a third possibility, to learn how to see objects, or entities we currently see 'as objects,' as (if) they are human beings. In my opinion, this alone can provide us with a more human and more flexible position, as shown in many eco-aesthetical theories.[23]

Nevertheless, there is more to be learned from the icons. Namely, what we have with icons is not the perspective of 'an object as a human being,' but 'an object as a person.' Of course, in the case of icons, the person in the case would either be the divine person of Christ, or a sort of divinized (sanctified) human person of a particular saint. Still, if we try to apply the model of respect pertaining to icons to human beings, the result would be that we should not respect other human beings *as human beings*, but *as persons*. Such a conclusion would even have its dogmatic basis in the Biblical notion of a human being as the icon of God, for the *imago Dei* is not merely an essence of humanity, not an abstract concept, but an instance of the person-like nature of the God himself, specific for every single individual.

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[23] Or, for example, in Habermas's account on nature. See: D.H. Rees, *The Postsecular Political Philosophy of Jürgen Habermas: Translating the Sacred*, Cardiff 2018, pp. 5–6; N. Stern, *Ecological Aesthetics: artful tactics for humans, nature, and politics*, Darmouth 2018, pp. 10, 19.

The difference I am alluding to here is the following. To consider another human being *as a human being* means to subscribe to a particular logico-ontological mindset – the one determining the history of Western metaphysics, and stressing the common nature shared by the members of a certain set.[24] Therefore, to respectfully consider another human being as a human being would imply that we are respecting someone else only in view of what the two of us have in common (our shared human nature).[25] Leaving aside all the candidates for what this common nature could be (reason, language, ability to discern between good and evil, to name just a few), the very logic of this way of thinking imposes a set of restrictions on the notion of respect for the other, delimitating it to only those properties which we recognize as our own and which we can, starting from ourselves, know about this other.

To give a prosaic example. If I am debating some political issue with a friend, I can learn that my friend is, say, inclined towards positions utterly different from my own. In this case, I should recognize that my friend is equally free to make his own judgements as I am, and therefore I should respect both him and his ability to form such judgements; of course, I am not obliged to share or value those judgements, but I am obliged to respect the other person's right to form them freely. Although I do not share his opinion, I do realize that he is a human being as I am, and that he has all the rights I consider myself to enjoy. It is easy to see that this line of thinking is fundamental for modern ethical and political conceptions, philosophical or otherwise.

On the other hand, if I respectfully consider another human being as a person, I am subscribing to a rather different set of ideas. Namely, in this case, I would take into account that the other is entirely different from me – different, in fact, beyond the point of exhaustive comprehension. Or, to put it more simply, while getting to know another person, I am never in a position to exhaust the entire individuality, contingency

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[24] Cf. R.M. Chisolm, *Person and Object: A Metaphysical Study*, London 2013, pp. 89–90.

[25] For an interesting expansion of this line of thought see: D. West, *Object Thinking*, Redmond 2004, pp. 103–104, 107.

and all the potential attributes of this other person. In principle, I am not in a position to fully know this other, just as I can offer some kind of definition of a human being, but not of a particular individual, like Una Popović. To respectfully consider another human being as a person would, therefore, imply that the focus of my respect is directed exactly towards what escapes me regarding this person – that I should (respectfully) allow this other to be who he is, even if I don't understand him, and exactly because I do not understand who he is. Even if we do not agree among each other, even if one's opinion presents a difficulty or a challenge for the other, there should be respect for the person and his or hers freedom of choice and life.

The link to the example of icons is very easy to follow: when I pay my respects to the icon, I am not worshiping some abstract divinity, but a particular person, and this person escapes my comprehension at least in some aspects. Nevertheless, respect that I give to the archetype through the mediation of the icon is directed to the whole person, not only to those features which I know and recognize. Otherwise, I would worship only a material inanimate object, or, at best, only Christ's human nature. Therefore, it is exactly what I cannot know regarding the archetype that makes this inanimate object which (re)presents it worthy of respect.

Further: if we look at the matter from the inverted perspective of the primacy of the archetype, those features of the (re)presentation I can in fact recognize and understand – which I 'share' with it – are infused with novel and transcendent meanings. Therefore, the golden coating I see is not a golden coating at all, but the light and the glory of God, while the same material used to decorate a representation of a creature, say a king or an emperor, would still count as a golden coating, even if it would additionally imply some other meanings, like the divine-like role of this king or emperor in his realm.

Coming back to interhuman relations, we can conclude that this model of respect would oblige us to see others not only through the looking glass of their social or political roles, their bodies and the way those are inscribed in the governing discourse, or even their abstract human

nature, as explained before.[26] What we are obliged to do is to see Una Popović not behind this professor of philosophy, but, so to say, before it; to consider the person first, and all the roles and functions this person represents and embodies only secondly. Or, to put it otherwise, to learn to see through the complex web of intersocial roles and meanings and find a concrete person behind it – not as an abstract subject to which all these predicates can be attributed, and which is nothing more than the complex set of such predicates and their relations, but as a living and breathing 'human being.' If that could be accomplished, then the same person should leave the margin he or she is confined to and step into the center of our respectful gaze, while all the social constructs and relations in which this person participates should be pushed to the background in such a view.[27]

What I am suggesting here is, therefore, not that we should disregard the fact that in most cases we are considering others as representatives or subjects of certain social roles and practices. Such a thing would not be possible; for example, for my students I will always *be* a professor, and they will treat me as such. What I am suggesting is that we can learn to invert our understanding of others so that their personality and individuality would be more emphasized, and that we can develop other modes of respectful relations by doing that. In my opinion, such a practice would protect against many dangers of over-rationalizing the way we relate to others – not only in terms of treating them as if they were objects, but also in terms of treating them as 'such and such' – as minorities, as women, as barbarians, etc.

I am also not suggesting any kind of ontological commitment to a 'substance' behind all the 'attributes,' which is undefinable and ineffable, but nevertheless ontologically prior to its manifestations. In fact, although it is probably not possible to avoid such considerations

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[26] Cf. D.A. Kenny, *Interpersonal Perception: A Social Relations Analysis*, New York 1994, p. 2.

[27] In the case of a more fundamental relation of, say, being a (fellow) child of God, the same applies: in those relations too the only thing that matters is the person, and not who or what he or she represents. No matter how important the (social) role is, it gets its full realization only through a life and acts of a specific person.

entirely¸ at this point I would rather leave them aside. Instead, I only wish to point to a possibility of a different viewpoint on the other – or, so to say, to a possibility of *double vision* of the other. Such double vision would be constituted by our understanding of all the social and common meaning-relations this other is involved with and through which he is also related to me, but also with the understanding that a person cannot be reduced to any such set of relations, no matter how complex they might prove to be. In other words, such double vision would go back and forth between the essence and personality, between the type and the token, between who someone represents and who he is.

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Abstract

Between an Object and a Person: an Inverted Image / Icon

Relations between persons in the contemporary world often resemble those of the same persons towards objects. We are accustomed to 'use' – and even *see* – others as if they are, to put it in Kantian terms, merely a means to an end, and not as if they are an end in themselves. Such blurring of lines between objects and persons surely has significant moral and political consequences. However, in this paper I reach instead for a very traditional example and suggest it as a possible model for understanding these contemporary issues. I'd like to offer an analysis of icons, with regard to the concepts of *latreia* (worship) and *proskynesis* (devotion), developed and discussed in the Byzantine empire during the era of iconoclasm. By revisiting this old quarrel, I wish to invert the issue of persons becoming (like) objects, since in the case of the icons the question is whether an object can and should be treated as a person. Such an inverted image could, in my opinion, offer us a new perspective on contemporary intersubjective relations and present us with a *double optic*, which can teach us to distinguish between esteem for objects and respect for persons.

Keywords