

Mauss's Theory of Personhood in Contemporary Anthropology Analysis

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Personhood as a Social and Historical Construction

Personhood is an essential concept in anthropology because it concerns how societies define the individual, identity, responsibility, and membership in a social world. In many Western traditions, a person is often understood as an independent individual with a stable inner self. Marcel Mauss challenged this assumption by arguing that the idea of the person has developed historically and differs across cultures. His theory shows that personhood is not simply a natural or universal fact but a social category shaped by institutions, beliefs, law, religion, and collective life.

Mauss presented this argument in his influential essay "A Category of the Human Mind: The Notion of Person; the Notion of Self." He traced changes in the concept of the person from early societies to the modern Western idea of the individual. According to Mauss, societies have used different categories to identify human beings and assign social roles. These categories have changed over time, demonstrating that the modern self is the product of a long historical development.

The theory is important because it shifts attention away from the biological individual toward the social processes that create identity. A human being may have a body and consciousness, but society determines how that person is named, recognized, classified, and treated. Personhood therefore involves relationships, duties, rights, status, memory, and moral expectations.

Role, Name, and Collective Identity in Early Societies

Mauss examined societies in which personhood was closely connected to clan membership, ancestry, and ritual position. In such settings, individuals were not primarily understood as separate selves. Their identities came from the group and from the roles they inherited or performed. Names, masks, titles, and ceremonial positions represented social personalities rather than private identities.

A name could connect an individual to ancestors and define a place within the community. It might be transferred between generations and carry obligations, privileges, or spiritual significance. The person was therefore inseparable from the social position represented by the name. This differs from the modern assumption that a name simply labels a unique individual.

Masks and ritual performances also expressed personhood. A person wearing a ceremonial mask

could represent an ancestor, spirit, or social office. The role was recognized collectively, and the individual temporarily became the social personality associated with the mask. Mauss used such examples to show that the person was originally understood as a role or character within a structured social system.

Roman Law and the Emergence of the Legal Person

Mauss identified Roman law as an important stage in the development of personhood. The Latin word *persona* originally referred to a theatrical mask or role. It later became a legal term describing an individual with recognized rights and status. Roman law helped transform the person from a ritual character into a legal subject.

However, not every human being had equal legal personhood. Slaves had limited or no independent legal status, while citizens, family heads, and officials possessed different rights. Personhood was therefore connected to law and social hierarchy. The legal person was not simply a biological human but someone recognized by institutions as capable of owning property, entering agreements, and bearing responsibility.

This legal development remains important in contemporary societies. Modern law continues to define persons through rights and duties. It also recognizes corporations and institutions as legal persons for certain purposes. These examples demonstrate that personhood is still partly constructed through legal categories rather than biology alone.

Christianity, the Soul, and the Moral Individual

Christian thought contributed another important transformation. Christianity emphasized the individual soul and the moral relationship between each person and God. Every soul was considered responsible for sin, salvation, and conscience. This strengthened the idea of an inner self that existed beyond social roles.

The Christian person was both a member of a religious community and an individual moral subject. Confession, repentance, and personal faith encouraged reflection on internal motives and identity. Mauss argued that this development helped prepare the modern concept of the self as a unique and morally responsible individual.

Religious ideas also supported the belief that all people possess spiritual value. However, Christian societies did not always provide equal social or legal recognition. The distinction between spiritual equality and social inequality shows that different dimensions of personhood may develop at different rates.

The Modern Individual and the Western Concept of Self

In modern Western society, personhood is closely associated with individuality, autonomy, reason, and personal rights. The person is understood as an independent self who owns a body, possesses a private identity, makes choices, and bears legal responsibility. Political and philosophical traditions emphasize individual liberty and equality.

Mauss did not claim that this concept was false. Instead, he showed that it is historically specific. The modern person emerged through changes in law, religion, philosophy, and political institutions. It should therefore not be assumed that all societies define the self in the same way.

This insight remains valuable because anthropology frequently encounters societies where identity is more relational. A person may be defined through kinship, community, land, ancestors, or obligations rather than individual preference. Even in Western societies, identity depends on family, nationality, gender, profession, and social recognition. Complete independence is therefore more an ideal than an absolute reality.

Relational Personhood in Contemporary Anthropology

Contemporary anthropologists have developed Mauss's insight by studying relational personhood. This approach argues that people are created through relationships with others. Identity is not contained entirely inside the individual but emerges through family, exchange, care, work, ritual, and communication.

In some societies, personhood develops gradually. Infants may gain social recognition through naming ceremonies, feeding, baptism, initiation, or inclusion in kinship groups. Similarly, death may not immediately end personhood because ancestors continue to influence descendants. These practices demonstrate that the boundaries of the person may extend beyond the individual body.

Marilyn Strathern's work in Melanesia emphasized the idea of the "dividual," a person composed of relationships and exchanges. Gifts, substances, and social connections become parts of identity. This does not mean that individuals lack uniqueness, but that uniqueness is understood through relational composition rather than separation.

Gender, Body, and the Politics of Recognition

Mauss's theory also supports contemporary analysis of gender and the body. Societies define what kinds of bodies are recognized as full persons and what roles are available to them. Gender identity is shaped through language, law, family, medicine, religion, and social expectations.

Recognition is essential to personhood. Individuals may experience exclusion when institutions refuse to acknowledge their identity, citizenship, disability, or legal status. Debates about reproductive rights, transgender recognition, migration, and disability all involve questions about who counts as a person and who has authority over the body.

Anthropology therefore treats personhood as a political issue. Categories that appear natural may distribute rights and responsibilities unequally. Studying how these categories are formed helps reveal hidden assumptions and systems of power.

Digital Identity, Corporate Persons, and New Forms of the Self

Contemporary technology creates new questions about personhood. Digital profiles, social media accounts, biometric data, and artificial intelligence complicate the relationship between the physical individual and social identity. People may present different versions of themselves online, and institutions may make decisions based on data rather than direct human interaction.

Legal systems also recognize corporations as persons for specific purposes, such as owning property, entering contracts, or participating in litigation. Corporate personhood shows clearly that the person is a legal construction. A corporation has no biological body or consciousness, yet it can possess rights and obligations.

Questions about artificial intelligence may further challenge traditional definitions. If machines become capable of advanced communication or decision-making, societies may debate whether they deserve moral or legal status. Mauss's approach suggests that such recognition would depend not only on technical abilities but also on collective institutions and values.

The Continuing Significance and Limitations of Mauss's Theory

Mauss's theory remains influential because it demonstrates that the person is a historical and cultural category. It helps anthropologists avoid treating Western individualism as universal. It also connects identity to ritual, law, morality, and social organization.

However, the theory has limitations. Mauss presented a broad historical sequence that may simplify complex societies. Cultures do not necessarily move through the same stages, and different concepts of personhood can exist at the same time. Individuals may experience both autonomy and relational identity rather than belonging entirely to one model.

His work also relied heavily on secondary ethnographic materials available during his period. Contemporary anthropology uses more detailed fieldwork and pays greater attention to gender, colonialism, power, and the voices of local people. Nevertheless, Mauss provided a foundation for these later developments.

In conclusion, Mauss's theory explains personhood as a social and historical construction rather than a universal natural category. Early forms of identity were connected to roles, names, masks, and collective membership. Roman law developed the legal person, Christianity strengthened the moral individual, and modern Western thought emphasized autonomy and rights. Contemporary anthropology continues to explore relational, embodied, political, and digital forms of personhood. Mauss's central contribution is the recognition that societies create persons by deciding how human beings are named, valued, connected, and held responsible.

References

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