



Editorial Introduction

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The idea of “person” has a long history and is endowed with innumerable facets and layers of meanings, which grow in complexity when related to other key concepts, such as subjectivity, identity, relationship, humanity, and right. Personhood is a pivotal and recurring matter in a variety of discourses—for example, legal, political, literary, and artistic discourse—and humanistic disciplines, from jurisprudence to ethics, from philosophy to theology, from anthropology to semiotics and linguistics.

The wide use of the term “person” does not entail a standardized meaning: as Marcel Mauss theorized in 1938, the notion of personhood is the fluid and unstable result of a continuous negotiation [3]. This is evident even in today’s culture, considering that some of the liveliest intellectual and ideological debates of our times, for instance in the field of ethics and especially bioethics, concern exactly the definition of personhood or, more precisely, its limits. Indeed, the issue at stake generally concerns the delimitation of the *thresholds* (or *seuils*, according to the definition coined by Claude Zilberberg [8]) between what can or cannot be considered a “person”: the shift of these boundaries has significant social, moral, and semiotic consequences. In semantic terms, while there is a kernel of *semes* widely shared, more contextual and peripheric *semes* are less widespread, thus fueling discussion and taxonomic efforts on the part of both different cultural groups and scholars of various disciplines. The incertitude of the definition of the borders of personhood mainly regards three categories. The first category is the beginning of personhood, as testified by the controversy about the status of embryos and fetuses arisen in relation to scientific experimentations and the legalization of abortion. The second category concerns the end of it, as proven by the difficulty displayed by contemporary legal systems to manage end-of-life issues like euthanasia and, in the last few decades, the online traces left by people and persisting after their death, thus granting them a sort of virtual presence even after their biological decease. The third category regards the width of the notion of personhood, as shown by some debates about human rights, but also by the current controversies about the status of animals. The idea of threshold leads in any case to the constataion of the relationality of the idea of person, which is always defined in relation to an Other [2].

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In order to tackle the complexity of the idea of person, this issue of the *International Journal for the Semiotics of Law* collects essays in which the semiotic approach meets linguistic, anthropological, philosophical, historical, bioethical, and legal perspectives, along four main research lines. The first is represented by theoretical approaches to the notion of personhood providing new insights especially thanks to the capacity of bringing together semiotics and other disciplines, in particular linguistics, philosophy, and anthropology. This first line is represented by the articles by Claudio Paolucci,¹ who interprets the notion of personhood especially through the prism of enunciation theories and looks into the semiotic idea of subject, and Massimo Leone, who explores the borders of the notion of personhood in relation to the distinction between human beings and animals by analyzing the distinction—and discrimination—between visage and muzzles in its semantic, anthropological, and philosophical aspects.

The second line collects contributions that reflect on specific notions of personhood in philosophy and theology, with an attention to their historical and cultural contextualization. In this framework, Graziano Lingua presents an articulated overview of the elaboration of the idea of “person” in the early Christian theology, which had a capital importance in the subsequent formulations of this notion in Western culture, while Francesco Galofaro presents a semiotic interpretation of the thought of Edmund Husserl, Max Scheler and Edith Stein in matters of subjectivity and individuality and suggests how these philosophical insights can today be helpful in solving juridical problems deriving from technology and AI.

The third line collects articles with prominent juridical and ethical interests. Paolo Heritier presents a critical reflection about the notion of *fictio iuris*, or legal fiction, in relation to the problematic regulation of the right to disability. The idea of personhood is explored with an attention not only to traditional ideas of adulthood, but also to the borders which are rapidly changing, regarding for instance the idea of living independently and inclusivity. The definition of this kind of concepts has to tackle new issues such as the growing complexity of the relationship between human beings, robots, and AI. Matteo Cresti, instead, reflects on the Italian law concerning informed consent and advance healthcare directives from the perspective of bioethics. Cresti relates the law on informed consent to Constitution principles, showing how the idea of person is associated to the values of equality and autonomy, and focuses on the regulation of minors’ rights.

The fourth line regards the figurativization of norms through the cultural construction of exemplary persons. In particular, the papers of Jenny Ponzio, Federica Turco, and Gabriele Marino are devoted to the study of saintly figures, based on the premise that saints are presented as models of behavior, and their figure or “character” is constituted by stratified and heterogenous representations produced by a plurality of cultural subjects. These considerations are of course applicable beyond the traditional borders of religion to other kinds of figures which do not express religious values but are nevertheless represented as examples of perfection under other aspects. Thus, Ponzio and Turco present two papers, both exploring the figure of the

¹ Who has recently published a volume devoted to personhood [4].

Catholic Saint Gianna Beretta Molla (1922–1962), whom the Catholic culture represents as a model of motherhood. Ponzio focuses on the acts of Saint Gianna's cause for canonization, showing how the personal story of Gianna is narrated so as to build a figure coherent with an ideal of motherhood that the Church intended to promote in the context of its opposition to the contemporary legalization of abortion,² while Turco considers Gianna's figure from the perspective of the semiotics of gender. On the contrary, Gabriele Marino focuses on a case of lay or secular sanctity, concerning the musician John Coltrane, who pursued an ideal of sanctity to be reached by undertaking an ascension or spiritual path through music. Coltrane's goal was recognized by a community of "disciples" who founded the "St. John William Coltrane Church" in San Francisco in the 1960s. Marino reflects on this case study by proposing to interpret the idea of sanctity through the semiotic concept of "form of life" (elaborated especially by Fontanille [1]) and points out how the construction of the saintly figure of John Coltrane is connected to the selection of a "canon" of his works coherent with such goal.

The interest that first moved the research presented in this issue lies primarily in exploring the idea of personhood in relation to ideals of human perfection built by cultural groups. This interest³ grew in the framework of the research project NeMoSanctI,⁴ which has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement No 757314). NeMoSanctI studies saints as both exceptional individuals and models to be imitated by believers: often in the course of the centuries, saints, with their words and deeds, have had a key role in shifting the edges of common worldviews and of important moral and social concepts. This issue of the *International Journal for the Semiotics of Law* shows that models of personhood, such as saints, are one pole of a wider process of negotiation concerning the meaning of "person", which changes through time and space, whereas the other pole is represented by antimodels, which serve as touchstones on which culture defines what a person *is not*.

Academic milieu, juridical and jurisprudential contexts, and the public and popular opinion are the main stages in which this negotiation takes place and have been analyzed in the studies presented in this issue. These cultural settings can in turn promote their own models—be them saints, musicians, or leaders—and antimodels, such as beasts, or other human beings to whom the status of person is denied. Therefore, research on personhood touches delicate moral issues, thus making this transdisciplinary field of study scientifically significant, but also socially and culturally impactful.

² On this topic and on the thresholds of self-sacrifice, see also [5].

³ This research also led to the publication of the volume entitled *Culture della persona* [6]. Inside this volume, see in particular Ugo Volli's semiotic definition of personhood [7].

⁴ nemosancti.eu.

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