

personality rules

Are we morphing from individuals into a matrix for team activities?



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KURZFASSUNG

Der Artikel in 20 Sekunden

We live by systems but still perceive through personalities. Our humanity has an infinite quantity of moving parts, but we still smile at the simple pattern of an individual **human face**. The recognizable human face must nevertheless pay its dues to systems: Recognition today requires media campaigns and many of the outstanding intellectual achievements resign themselves before the power of systems. Anyone who has participated in a well-run program must admit the virtues of teamwork. So in the end there are new hybrids of person and system evolving.

Modern civilization tends to be about systems, not persons. Our cultural economy rightly prides itself on communications, satellites, telephones, computer systems, and ever-expanding global corporations. We worship micro-circuitry embedded in TVs, automobiles, and kitchen appliances. Yet despite the centrality of systems, our daily news still features people and celebrities. Individual faces and lifestyles continue to dominate conversations. Politics still functions through leading personalities even while political life depends on complex legal and economic systems. Personalities represent distinct social agendas and instantly recognizable faces are popular symbols that proclaim entire world-views and lifestyles. We live by systems but still perceive through personalities. Our humanity has an infinite quantity of moving parts, but we still smile at the simple pattern of an individual human face.

The very complexity of our communication systems requires us to simplify our perceptions. What is shared by millions of people must be reduced to an immediately clear and unambiguous message. The first pattern that has meaning in the eyes of an infant is the human face. Graphic designers capture attention by showing us images of human eyes, by suggesting in subtle ways that the world shares the image and likeness of the human face. While anything depends on systems, the human person remains a center of fascination. *Anthropos* remains at heart a humanist.

The recognizable human face must nevertheless pay its dues to systems. Recognition today requires media campaigns, publicity wars, and advertising agencies. Electronic images, billboards, and television time are all expensive, and competition for attention is immense. We only see those faces that successfully manage to penetrate our barriers of indifference, overload, and instant skepticism. The look of a face must catch us at moments of relaxation when our guard is down. The continuous bombardment means that, from the other side, we must carefully plan when and where to gain attention and get noticed.

We market our identity through clothing, resumes, and personal property. Automobile designers notoriously market "image" in selling us transportation, and consumers grow in-

creasingly finicky about getting the precisely customized options they have ordered. We expect the conveniences that systems deliver ("Where's the light switch?") while remaining unwilling to cede everything to systematic constraints ("Are we having yet another meeting today?"). Systems cannot exist without our input, yet when was the last time you sighed, "Here's my personal opinion" without the ironic tone of another cog squeaking in a vast mechanism of tiny moving parts?

Many of the outstanding intellectual achievements of our time resign themselves before the power of systems. Prize-winning economists theorize about human behavior as movements in a massive beehive whose meaning appears only in long-range probabilistic mass-behavior patterns. The Nobel prize goes to game theorists, like Robert Aumann and Thomas Schelling, who study behavior as an echo chamber of mutually influenced actions by a massive number of simultaneous players. Human action is understood as a system of actions, reactions, and counter-reactions, usually on a scale that dwarfs the existential choices of any single individual. The anthill and the penguin colony have become models for human self-contemplation.

System thinking, intellectual historians will note, began centuries ago with system builders like Spinoza, Leibniz, and Hegel, all stemming from the medieval summaries of Thomas Aquinas. Bertrand Russell and Alfred North Whitehead built logic systems in the early 20th century. Against all these system builders, there arose a vigorous protest in the first half of the 20th century. While socialist thinking and formal logic were gaining practical traction as systems, there arose a vibrant philosophy of "personalism". In Europe, the personalist protest was post-Bergsonian vitalism which denounced the forces of mechanism and quantification. New offshoots of personalism appeared in Edmund Husserl's phenomenology, in the I-Thou encounters of Martin Buber, in the silent inwardness of Max Picard, and in the naked face of Emmanuel Levinas.

Another branch of personalism originated in Boston under the vigorous leadership of theologian Borden Parker

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Bowne (1847–1910), who strongly influenced his student Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. who was to formulate the non-violent philosophy of the Civil Rights Movement. Parker Bowne derived his personalism from Kant, Berkeley, and R.H. Lotze (“Mikrokosmos”). Persons were so dominant in Bowne’s ontology that he found it difficult to establish the existence of anything material outside of personal interactions. The Boston stream of personalism was channeled over decades by the journal *The Personalist* founded in 1920 by philosopher Ralph Tyler Flewelling at the University of Southern California, which ceased publication in 1979.

Since the early 20th century, the personalist movement existed in uneasy compromise with the masters of material prosperity, system-building, and massively scaled organizations. The conservative semantics of linguistic analysis and of Wittgenstein-inspired formalism would obliterate the issues of personalism: “What could personalists possibly be talking about? Aren’t self-questioning locutions terribly odd?” Meanwhile, systems continued to grow and achieved unanticipated success as the tools of transportation, computers, and communications threw an ever-widening net.

Even with the emergence of worldwide systems, the human face continued, nevertheless, to appear on display monitors as digital avatars, as morphed photographs, and as pixelated Photoshop fantasies. The breath-taking developments of Mega-System squeezed personalism into strange shapes. Large-scale organizations, like universities, would need to develop unusual methods for acknowledging the legacy of personalism while still servicing the mega-culture.

Universities carry forward the legacy of personalism through their tradition of what is variously called liberal arts, liberal studies, classics, or humanities. Preserving the legacy of humanism takes a number of shapes in contemporary education, from the Great Books courses advocated by populist Mortimer Adler to the specialized studies encouraged by political thinkers like Leo Strauss. Some of such academic endeavors seek to revive the anachronistic “battle between the ancients and moderns,” or to inveigh against the “two cultures”, but some college programs produce a less-polarized and more balanced hybrid.

One example of a contemporary hybrid is the Humanities Core Program at the University of California at Irvine. As a university initiative, the UCI Humanities Core program began 35 years ago with the mission of injecting into freshman education the humanistic skills of good writing inspired by reading classics from Homer to Hemingway. In September 2005, the UCI Humanities Core class of incoming freshmen totaled 1,271 students. A class of such size must of necessity break into smaller numbers to fit into a single lecture hall.

Students attend lectures on Sophocles’ *Antigone*, Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn*, etcetera, in several shifts of 450 students. To acknowledge each individual face – and to insure personalized instruction in quality writing – the students also attend section meetings taught by an additional group of over 35 lecturers who support the large-hall lectures through 59 sections of personalized teaching in classrooms of 22 students each. In this way, the texts of the humanistic tradition are studied in a team-taught setting that acknowledges the individual face while still serving the needs of a super-size multitude.

Humanists are loath to appreciate bureaucracy. Yet anyone who has participated in a well-run program must admit the virtues of teamwork. The hierarchical structure of large-scale organizations often stifles creativity, to be sure, but there are strengths in the deliberate combination of variously skilled individuals. The single face or small group in charge can prove less competent than a large number of well-synchronized and harmonious voices.

The former chief of staff to former U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell recently pointed to the dangers of circumventing bureaucracy: Lawrence B. Wilkerson showed how disastrous decisions have been to take the United States to war in Iraq without following the team-based procedures of the 1947 National Security Act, which had created the National Security Council to vet national security decisions by passing them through a group of over 100 people. While such a federal bureaucracy may appear beside the point in a time of national crisis, Wilkerson argues that “the crises the U.S. government confronts today are so multifaceted, so complex, so fast-breaking – and almost always with such incredible potential for regional and global ripple effects – that to depart from the systematic decision-making process laid out in the 1947 statute invites disaster.” Federal bureaucracy may seem the prototypical stumbling block to decisive individuals, but many cases will show teamwork to be more effective in navigating a fast-paced dangerous world.

Bureaucracies are rightly deemed “faceless”. But the humanist face has only two eyes and two ears. The individual brain can process only so much at one time. While we continue to cultivate the human person as a legacy value, we should not fail to notice important new hybrids of person and mega-system that are evolving and that seem necessary filters of future experience. Instead of fearing assimilation by a de-personalized “borg” (“*Star Trek Next Generation*”), perhaps we should consider ourselves to be avatars that sometimes materialize into a matrix for certain team activities and then afterwards return to our senses whenever we feel the need to evoke a smile from another human face by lighting a smile on our own. ■

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