Chapter 3

A Christian Theological Understanding of the Self

Introduction

The relationship of a professional with a client has two dimensions: the personal and the professional. Both are vital, for when a lawyer is counseling a client, he is a human self as well as a professional drawing on his knowledge and experience. But what is a human self? I shall argue that the language implicit within the Christian theological framework inspires an understanding of the self that fruitfully informs both the personal and professional dimensions of professional practice.

The concept of “self” is distinguished from that of “person” and, following Kristjánsson, those of “personality” and “character” (Kristjánsson, 2010, pp. 25–28). “Personality” covers our moods, dispositions, and habits, which are the products of “conditioning,” whereas “character” is concerned with moral worth and therefore subject to development by reason. The term “person” is both more general and more particular than the term “self.” There is also the question of the relationship between the term “soul” as Christians conceive it theologically and the term “self” as discussed more generally in philosophy. I begin with some reflections on “person.”

“Person”: Some Approaches in Philosophy

P. F. Strawson regards “person” as a necessary, irreducible concept without which we would be unable to do justice to our first-person experience. “M-predicates,” Strawson argues, refer to the material body (e.g., finger, brain), but they inadequately express what
we believe about ourselves; there is, Strawson says, an essential role for “P-predicates” (e.g., in such sentences as “I remember,” “I am warm”; Strawson, 1959, pp. 87–116).

The concept of “person,” including both M- and P-predicates, has for some philosophers a substantial reality in contrast with that of “self”—the very existence of which is contentious. Thus one may point to a person: “He’s over there, the person in the brown suit.” One cannot, on the other hand, point to a self: “Who is that self with the red tie?” The self is an interior, first-person reality to which, according to Plato, I have exclusive access. This is disputed by Aristotle, who points out that friends may show me features of myself of which I was previously ignorant and thus enable me to make more equitable moral judgments. However, since I am the person who knows whether or not what friends tell me is true, notwithstanding the fact that I may learn something about myself from interacting with others, I have access to my self, which no one else possesses. Thus I have a responsibility for myself, which I share with no one.

But is there such a thing as the self, and if there is, what is it? Hume rejects the very idea of the self as an object of perception; the self is an illusion because when he looks into himself, he has no firm and consistent impression of his self, only a series of impressions and ideas that he imagines to have reference (Hume, 1951, pp. 46–52, 251–52).

But while Hume claims that each time he looks into himself, he has a new impression that brings into question the persistence of the self, he nevertheless later suggests that experience leads him to feel that he is a moral self—the product of emotional experience and subject to consistent development (Hume, 1951, pp. 275–90; Kristjánsson, 2010, pp. 46–52).

Searle affirms the reality of the self:

In order to understand my visual perceptions, I have to understand them as occurring from a point of view, but the point of view itself is not something that I see or otherwise perceive . . . The point of view has no substantive features . . . it has to be that point from which my experiences take place . . . Now similarly the notion of a self that I am postulating is a purely formal notion but it is more complex. It has to be an entity, such that one and the same entity has consciousness, perception, rationality, the capacity to engage in action, and the capacity to organize and reason, so as to perform voluntary actions on the presupposition of freedom. If you have got all of that, you have a self. (Searle, 2004, p. 297)