

MOIRA, PERSONA, ETHOS

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TIMELINE

~800 BC
Homer composes *The Iliad*
and *The Odyssey*

490 BC
Aeschylus begins writing

~460? BC
Sophocles begins writing

428 BC
Plato born

~450s-408 BC
Euripides flourishes

399 BC
Socrates executed

384 BC
Aristotle born

43 BC
Roman poet Ovid born

~8 AD
Ovid publishes *The Metamorphoses*

17/18 AD
Ovid dies

The ancient Greeks had three interesting words for describing the human person: *moira*, *prosopa*, and *ethos*. *Moira* meant both “fate” and “character”—that is, that you are born with certain qualities and have them throughout your life —“your fate is your character, your character is your fate.” *Prosopa* (later, in Latin, *persona*) was the word for the masks that the actors wore in the drama, that they “sounded through”, and this concept of the person emphasizes that we all wear many masks and have many different personalities that we play. *Ethos* comes from Aristotle, and suggests that we build our character every day by the choices we make, and most importantly by the choices we make habitually. All of these contribute to the Christian concept of the person, but they leave out the crucial Christian contribution: the gift of grace.

MOIRA

Moira means both “fate” and “character”, but how can that be? How can the same word mean two such very different things, and what sort of a culture equates those two terms?

Fate is commonly understood as something locked in; you might be familiar with the image of the three Fates from myth. Character tends to refer to certain traits that are ours, that make us who we are. Both of these stand in contrast to the modern American idea: “You can be whatever you want to be.”

Moira means “who you are is what you will be become”: your character is your fate, and your fate is your character. The most famous example is Oedipus Rex and his terrible fate to kill his father and sleep with his mother. But the play is actually about one day in his life when he finds out what he has done. It’s about a day where he finds out his *moira*—not just his “fate”, but his “character”: a colossal temper, titanic impatience, but also a truth-seeker.

PROSOPA (PERSONA)

Prosopa (Greek) or *persona* (Latin) refers to the drama mask that someone “sounds through.” This word captures a conception of the human person as someone who wears masks. In some respects, this is true. We wear different masks; we act differently around different people. We have different possible ways of dealing with people and situations.

Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* takes this concept to the extreme. He puts the human person through a series of metamorphoses, resulting in the notion of the radical Ovidian Self: all we have are these different masks we put on, with no real person underneath them.

ETHOS

The term *ethos* comes from Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*. In Aristotle’s understanding, we construct who we are through the choices we make. Who we are comes from the habits we create: to put it another way, show me your habits, and I’ll show you who you are.

Our choices build us up into the character we are. If we decide to be kind or temperate, we build a character that is that way. We form a self through these choices. For Aristotle, we are not trapped in a *moira*, nor are we just a series of masks, but we are the character we construct through our choices and habits.

THE CHRISTIAN VISION OF THE PERSON

If we take each of these ancient terms and view them through the lens of the Christian understanding of the human person, we can come to a greater understanding of our nature.

The Christian conception of *moira* is that we are born with a nature, formed as a person at our conception. God knows us as a person, with a nature, with a character, with talents and abilities.

The concept of *persona* preserves a sense of freedom that is crucial to Christianity. We can choose how we will be, and how we will relate to others. This freedom is absolutely central to a Christian conception of a person.

Finally, *ethos* preserves choice and adds consequences to our choices. We shape the person we are by the choices we make, and it is difficult to go back once you have shaped a character by your choices.

What is missing from all three is the unique Christian contribution to the understanding of the human person: the concept of grace.

Questions for Consideration

1. What is your *moira*? What dispositions do you feel that you really cannot change? (Perhaps you can access some of this through tests like the Myers-Briggs test.)
2. What personas do you play in different situations? How different are they from one another? Is this a good thing or a bad thing?
3. How have choices you have made in the past shaped who you are today? How have they slowly built up your *ethos*?
4. How might a Catholic sense of the human person add to these concepts and help you to know yourself better?
5. How might these concepts lead into the next series—The Person: Action and Influence?

With grace comes the concept of conversion, of *metanoia*—we can change in a radical way. Ultimately, we have the freedom to be the person God created us to be.

St. John Paul II's Personalist notion of holiness tells us that holiness consists in being more like ourselves, in being more the person God made us to be, not being like someone else. So, perhaps we might say that holiness means making the choices (*ethos*) to fulfill our *moira*.



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Further Reading and Additional Resources

Sophocles. *Oedipus Rex*.

Aeschylus. *The Oresteia*.

Euripides. *The Bacchae*.

Ovid. *Metamorphoses*.

Augustine. *The Confessions*.

John Paul II. *Person and Act*. (This is a difficult reading but introduces his ideas of Personalist holiness.)