What we mean here is that the making of the mask is one of the forms through which technology, in constructing a representation, constitutes itself as an activity mediating between human “doing” and the world of objective presences (be these divine, natural, mythological). In other words, we have the humanisation of natural reality and the sacralisation of the human productive act. Correspondingly, we have a double attitude of man with regard to the production of the mask: on the one hand man will continue to produce this object; on the other hand, in the context of myth, he will explain the origin of the mask as the gift of a god, or of mythical ancestors, or of some other supernatural being.

In 1952 the young Italian sociologist, Alessandro Pizzorno, wrote an essay in Italian, “Saggio sulla Maschera”. The essay appeared in abbreviated form in 1960 in a small French journal as “Le Masque”.1 The translation into French was solicited by Edgar Morin (who had read the piece by chance) and was not printed in its entirety until the text was published in 2005 in Studi Culturali, and then as appendix to Pizzorno’s 2007 book Il velo della diversità.2 What follows is the first translation of the essay in English. Pizzorno (born 1924, Trieste) wrote the essay during his stay in Paris where he was exposed to a series of experiences that made him reflect on the mask. As correspondent to Italian radio, Pizzorno reported on museum exhibitions, theatre and “culture” in general, while his Parisian period also brought him into contact French academia, and especially with anthropology. As the reader will note from the essay, Pizzorno started to gather a considerable amount of ethnographic material on the mask, written in French, German and Italian. Pizzorno discusses this material and in doing so brings it into contact with a variety of disciplines or genres (Greek theatre, ancient history, philosophy). In a most general way, the essay offers a reflection on the relationships between material and artistic forms, on the social life of symbols and rituals, on cultural manifestations of divinity, on reality and its manifestation in art and writing, and on role, personhood and “identity”. The richness in content is balanced by a writing style which is free and uncomplicated. There is a remarkable lightness to the read. The concrete, direct and spontaneous nature of the text remains in the excellent English translation offered to us by Monica Greco.

In both form and substance the essay reminds of Marcel Mauss’s famous essay on “The Person” [Une catégorie de l’esprit humain: la notion de personne et celle de ‘moi’]. The essay zooms in and out between the singular case and the general observation with the same elegance; it has the same balance of ethnography, philology, classical history and sociology. Substantially the essay approaches the question of “the person” albeit from a different angle. The convergence between the two essays becomes explicitly clear toward the end of