

# PERSONALISM AND PERSONALISMS

## A BRIEF SURVEY

### *1. Conventional accounts of personalism and personalists*

'Personalism' in general has been defined in rather similar ways as can be seen in the entries on Wikipedia, The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Online Britannica, the Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, and the International Personalist Forum. In short, 'Personalism' as a distinctive way of thinking, and not only in philosophy but also in theology, history, sociology and psychology, stresses the distinctiveness, unique value, freedom and responsibility of personal existence, and seeks to articulate and apply the categories and conceptions uniquely appropriate to persons, and not just those applicable to animals, organisms and merely physical entities, nor the barren and abstract ones of formal logic. But the application of the term, as can also be seen to some extent in the first three of the above entries, is often confined to certain individuals, schools or movements which have explicitly applied the term to themselves. The particular ones so designated are often selected on the grounds of geography or language. The three, or four, most commonly cited ones are:

(a). In the Latin world, and in Roman Catholic circles, 'Personalism' will be taken to mean the French school, centrally identified with Emmanuel Mounier (1905-1950) and his journal *L'Ésprit*, which is still being published. Yet in Maine de Biran and Ravaisson, and later Maurice Blondel there had been earlier personalists; contemporary ones who helped Mounier such as the Thomist Jacques Maritain and the Christian existentialist Gabriel Marcel; and later ones independent of him such as the Christian phenomenology of Maurice Nédoncelle. The hermeneutic phenomenologist Paul Ricoeur was associated with Mounier, but, identifying personalism with Mounier, later declared it to be dead, yet remained a personalist in fact if not in name. Moreover, personalist thinking in Germany, Britain, Sweden, Poland and America owes virtually nothing to Mounier and began up to 130 years earlier.

(b). Naturally in America, except in Roman Catholic circles in the USA and also in Canada, personalism is associated with the American school or two American schools, of Boston and California. The Boston school of theistic personalism began with Borden Parker Bowne at Boston University, who was succeeded by Edgar Sheffield Brightman and in turn by Peter Bertocci. At the University of California, Berkeley G.H. Howells designated his Berkeleyan idealism as 'personal idealism'. Ralph Tyler Flewelling then brought Boston personalism to the University of Southern California, and founded *The Personalist*. Another journal, *The Personalist Forum* was launched in 1985 in order to revive interest in American personalism, and continued to c. 1998. To widen that interest to include European personalisms, the series of biennial International Conferences on Persons began in 1989 alternating between the USA and Europe.

(c). Based at the Catholic universities of Lublin and Warsaw is the vigorous school of postwar Polish personalism, starting with Cardinal Wyszyński, Wicenty Granat and Czesław Bartnik and led by Bogumił Gacka, who also studied American personalism. Into this school Karol Wotyła, Pope John Paul II, brought the phenomenological personalism of Max Scheler in addition to contemporary Thomism. There is a website but it may be inactive: [www.personalism.pl](http://www.personalism.pl).

### *2. The origins of modern Personalism*

The summaries quoted above for the most part begin with the Greeks, followed by St Augustine, St Thomas Aquinas, Descartes, Leibniz, Berkeley and Kant, and then jump to the American schools or Mounier or both. But Jan Olof Bengtsson in his *The Worldview of Personalism: Origins and Early Development* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2006), argues that personalism, as a distinct orientation in philosophy and exemplified in the Boston school, arose towards the end of the 18th C. in the *pantheismusstreit* of F.H. Jacobi and then F.W.J. Schelling against the monistic idealism of the elder Fichte and Hegel, in which the individual person becomes a vehicle for the self-realisation of the cosmic *Geist*. This included distinctively modern strains of thought, from Scottish 'Common Sense' philosophers (notably Thomas Reid, studied by Jacobi, in Britain and by the Swedish school) and Romanticism, both in reaction to an abstract rationalism. In Jacobi and Schelling, the person becomes the focus of attention and not just one topic among many. The German 'speculative theists' such as I.H. Fichte, C.H. Weisse and H. Ulrici, continued this personalist reaction against Hegelian and other monisms and pantheisms, and this movement culminated in the philosophy of R.H. Lotze, the most important German philosopher of his time.

Two other personalist movements turned to these German developments, both discussed in detail by Bengtsson:

(a) In Sweden, especially at the University of Upsalla, Nils Fredrik Biberg (1776-1827), Samuel Grubbe (1786-1853), Per Daniel Amadeus Atterbom (1785-1847), Erik Gustaf Geijer (1783-1847) and Christopher Jacob Boström (1797-1866) developed a 'speculative theism' also called 'idealism of personality' and 'philosophy of personality), which again had already drawn upon Reid and Scottish Common Sense philosophy.

(b) In the 19th C., one stream of British philosophy sought inspiration from Germany in opposition to Associationist psychology, atomistic ontology and epistemology, and Utilitarian ethics, stemming from Locke, Hume, Hartley, Bentham and the Mills, and later Herbert Spencer. Starting with Coleridge and Sir William Hamilton, it turned to Reid and also to Kant. Also referring to Reid, and to Jacobi, were H. Mansel at Oxford and John Grote at Cambridge who termed his philosophy as 'Personalism'. But then Hutchinson Stirling's *The Secret of Hegel* (1865) attracted many to Hegel as well as Kant, as an alternative to reductionist 'naturalism', as seen in Andrew Seth's (later Andrew Seth Pringle-Pattison) *The Development from Kant to Hegel* (1882), which welcomed Hegel's Idealism because it also avoided both taking God to be a merely external object and ordinary pantheism.

But in his *Hegelianism and Personality* (1887), Pringle-Pattison reversed his former argument and attacked the hypostatisation of Kant's Transcendental Ego by Hegel and the impersonal monist metaphysics of the Absolute Idealists, such as F.H. Bradley, Bernard Bosanquet, E. and J. Caird, R. Haldane, Sir Henry Jones and D. Ritchie, especially in respect of its denial, most emphatically by Bosanquet, of the reality and real value of finite persons. (Later accounts of this period ascribed the decline of Absolute Idealism solely to the epistemological criticism from G.E. Moore and Bertrand Russell, and most of them totally omit the 'Personal Idealists'.)

This reaction usually goes by the name of 'Personal Idealism' a term taken from Howison (much to his annoyance) for the title of a group of essays edited by H. Sturt at Oxford (1902). Idealism, in the strict sense of the denial of the reality or ultimate reality of physical existence, was often shared in this period by monist and pantheist thinkers and their personalist opponents, in Germany, Sweden, Britain and the USA. In Britain some of the critics, such as Sturt, Hastings Rashdall and A.V. Boyce, were and remained idealists in this sense, but pluralist and theistic ones like Berkeley and Howison. Some, such as A.E. Taylor and J. Mackenzie, had been Absolute Idealists but gave up idealism altogether for philosophical theism. A third group, such as G.F. Stout and the pragmatist F.C.S. Schiller (both contributors to Sturt's collection), never were idealist. Yet 'Idealism' then and since, has often been confusingly used in a wider sense to refer to any denial of 'materialism' and 'naturalism', and so all personalist critics of Absolute Idealism get lumped under the 'Idealist' label. For his examples of this reaction, Bengtsson focuses upon Pringle-Pattison, C.B. Upton, J.R. Illingworth and C.C.J. Webb, the last two of which were never 'Idealist' in the strict sense. Curiously, J.M.E. McTaggart, with his idealist metaphysics of an atemporal plurality of only finite souls, seems not to have counted at the time counted as a 'Personal Idealist' though he has occasionally been mentioned in recent accounts of personalism. Both American Personalists and the neglected British 'Personal Idealists' looked to Lotze for inspiration, but, argues Bengtsson, they were unaware of those who had preceded him and this ignorance of the origins and distinctiveness of modern personalism has persisted until today.

Some of the British Personal Idealists, especially W.R. Boyce Gibson, had contacts with Rudolf Eucken (1863-1941, Professor of Philosophy at Basel and then Jena) and his *Lebensanschauung* ('Life Worldview'), who gave lectures in England in 1911. The Personal Idealists generally felt closer to Sir Henry Jones, and to Josiah Royce, in America, especially in his later works, than to the other Absolutists. Also James Ward was a personalist philosopher in his own way:

The clash between Absolute and Personal Idealism reached its climax in a debate staged by the Aristotelian Society in 1917 between Pringle-Pattison, seconded by Stout, versus Bosanquet, seconded by Haldane. Thereafter both Absolute Idealism and Personal Idealism faded away.

*For more on British contributors to personalist philosophy, in addition to those feature on the Home page go to [British Contributors to Personalist Philosophy](#)*

### **3. Some other personalists**

(a) **Max Scheler** (1874-1928)

Mention has already been made of Max Scheler to whom too little attention is given even in the accounts of personalism that do include him. His magnum opus is *Formalismus in der Ethik und die Materialer Wert-Ethik* (1913-6) (trans. Frings and Fink, as *Formalism in Ethics and the Non-Formal Ethics of Value*, Evanston, IL, 1973). On the basis of a detailed, searching and profound examination of Kant's ethics, Scheler builds his own 'ethics of

value' culminating in the supreme value of the individual person as a unique 'individual-personal value-essence' who is known in and through love and is himself primarily an *ens amans*. Hence the supreme moral task is so to order our loves that they correspond to the true order of values. He explored specific aspects of personal existence in works such as *The Nature of Sympathy* (tr. Peter Heath. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1954; reprinted Hamden, CN: Archon Books, 1970.), 'Ordo Amoris' in *Selected Philosophical Essays: Max Scheler*, (ed. Daniel Liderbach, Evanston, IL., Northwestern University Press. 1973), and *On the Eternal in Man* (tr. Bernard Noble, London: SCM Press, 1960). Scheler also recognised the reality and autonomy of the great missing third of life and the lived and living body between the Cartesian and still prevalent dualism of mind and (merely physical) body, while never interpreting mental existence in terms of life and biology, and insisted upon the similar reality and autonomy of the missing fourth of the person himself who *uses* his mental and bodily powers. But after *On the Eternal in Man*, he produced an immanentist cosmology in which the role of finite persons is to assist in the emergence of God, of just the sort that he had previously condemned as making the person a mere vehicle of a cosmic Spirit or Reason.

For more on Scheler, see *Appraisal* Vol. 8, Nos. 3 and 4, and for a general survey of Scheler's work, see Manfred Frings, *The Mind of Max Scheler* (Milwaukee, Marquette University Press, 1997).

(b) Luigi Pareyson (1918-1991) Personalism in Italy is represented by the journal *Prospettiva Persona*, mostly orientated to the personalism of Mounier. Yet Italy has its own and more recent personalist philosopher in Luigi Pareyson, from whose extensive publications a set of extracts in English has recently been published: *Luigi Pareyson: Existence, Interpretation, Freedom: Selected Writings*, (ed. with Introduction by Paolo Diego Bubbio, The Davies Group Publishers, Aurora, CO, 2009; see *Appraisal*, Vol. 8 No. 2). Pareyson approached the person from the perspective of existentialism, like Marcel, and also from hermeneutics, like Ricoeur. He also gave considerable attention to the liberty of the person.

(c) 'Dialogical' personalism. 'Dialogical personalism' refers to those who focus upon the 'I-Thou' face-to-face relationship by which we not only come to be aware of other persons but also of ourselves as one person among others, in contrast to the Cartesian, Empiricist, Phenomenalist, and Behaviourist separation of the solitary self from the 'external world' and other persons within it, which gives rise to 'the problem of other minds'. Other persons are thus alien beings whose behaviour is unintelligible until 'explained'. At worst, they are primarily mere bodies to whom minds have to be imputed-'I-It' and, at best our primary relation to them is that of the third person, 'I-Him' whom we only observe from a distance and never meet, look at each other face-to-face and engage in conversation. The latter, if not the former, is still the default position of much Anglophone Analytic philosophy. Dialogical personalism is principally represented by Martin Buber, Nicholai Berdyaev and John Macmurray. They show that we become persons only in the presence of other persons: as Macmurray insisted, we are essentially 'persons in relation' in face-to-face relations to each other. (This was demonstrated by the empirical studies of the cognitive development of infants and children by Jean Piaget, especially in *The Child's Conception of the World* trans. Tomlinson, London, Routledge, and Kegan Paul, 1929, which totally reversed the usual assumption that as infants we first perceive mere bodies, then some as animated and finally some of those as also having minds.) Yet Ricoeur argued that, primary as is the 'I-Thou' relation, that of 'I-He' is no less important because it yields the awareness of 'oneself as another' which is the foundation of the sense of justice: see, *Oneself as Another* (trans. K. Blarney, U. of Chicago P., 1992) and *The Just* (trans. D. Pellauer, U. of Chicago P., 2000).

#### **4. Personalism in Britain after 1920**

To ask in philosophical circles in Britain about personalism will almost certainly bring stares of total incomprehension. The valuable links that used to exist between British and Continental philosophers were broken in 1939 and, with very few exceptions, were not restored apart from those concerning formal logic, Wittgenstein, and Continental adoptions of Analytic philosophy. Even where reference is made to other forms of Continental philosophy, it is now usually confined to postmodernism, while Analytic philosophy still tends to talk, as it does with everything else, about propositions about persons, and that with the apparatus of formal logic, and not about persons themselves. Indeed, the whole subject is now often narrowed to that of the relation of minds to bodies, and still further to brains, as if they operated by themselves without the persons whose minds and brains they are. When it does get round to persons, then, as noted above, its default perspective is still that of the observer and third person observed, 'I-Him'. The consequence is that the nature and modes of existence of persons are not articulated in distinctive conceptions and categories appropriate to them, but often in subpersonal and impersonal ones.

Although no recent British philosopher has ever designated himself as a 'personalist', there have been significant philosophers in Britain, who may be justly designated 'personalists' in retrospect because they placed personal existence at the centre of their thinking and have sought to form concepts and categories uniquely

appropriate to them, as distinct from those who have interpreted personhood only in the perspective of already formulated, or tacitly adopted, concepts and categories taken from sub-personal modes of existence, usual merely physical reality, or have applied the wholly abstract ones of formal logic. Others, while not focusing systematically and centrally upon persons, have made their own contributions to genuinely personalist philosophy. In fact, personalist philosophy in Britain has a much longer history than in France. It started at the end of the 18th C. with Coleridge, became a significant movement from c. 1885-1920 in the form of the 'Personal Idealists' who reacted against the monism and denial of the reality and real value of finite persons by the 'Absolute Idealists', and then has had a succession of significant but independent contributors to the present day.