

3. James A. Harold, Review of *An Introduction to Personalism*

This book is a tour de force. It is particularly insightful to me, especially to someone like me less given to scholarship. I need to have the “lay of the land” laid out for me from someone who really is scholarly, and I got that from this book. I, therefore, have a debt of gratitude to Professor Burgos. Whatever criticisms I may have in the following text needs to be tempered through the prism of this gratitude, together with the realization of how much I have learned from his work.

Some of my criticisms may be reducible to misinterpretations or exaggerations of what was actually meant; they will hardly constitute an attack from an intellectual enemy. We are dealing here with a situation more akin the relationship Socrates to Theaetetus than between Socrates and Callicles. Neither of myself nor Burgos will be interested merely in “making points,” by fair means or foul, while continually arguing past one another. Even when one of the discussion partners is a Socrates, if the other is a Callicles, then the consequent discussion will tend to go nowhere, as a Socrates will have to fight through the mendacity, cynicism, and the intellectual and moral blindness of a Callicles. But if a discussion is one between people who are open to truth and to being corrected, the results will typically be far more productive. We shall see which of us will play the role of Socrates. Perhaps we can alternate. It is with the spirit of Socrates’ conversation with Theaetetus that I want to approach this discussion with Juan Manuel Burgos’ book.

In what follows I want to make seven points, which run the full spectrum of criticism, praise, as well as calls for clarification.

1. Where is Chapter One?

I had the feeling reading this book that topics seemed to me to be a bit out of focus. No doubt this will be partly my fault. I could bear down and better study a challenging work of philosophy. But I also wonder if that feeling is partly due to a missing chapter focusing not on schools of thought on personalism, but rather on the more fundamental question of “What is a person?” The person is, after all, the primary reality, and the various theories of personalism constitute the secondary, derived reality. There is with Burgos a strong tendency to look more towards scholarship than a direct seeing. He does a great job of mapping out the different schools of thought on personalism, but scholarship shouldn’t swallow up philosophy.

Someone could reasonably respond by noting the benefits of a scholarly review before stating one’s own position. While granting this point, one might also grant the advantage of an initial analysis noting what is clearly and sometimes even obviously given about the subject matter, namely, persons. That would provide us with a yard stick for then measuring the adequacy of the consequent scholarly evaluation. For example, that *Responsibility presupposes freedom*, that *The intellect and will are specifically and uniquely personal powers* and that *The value of the being of a person ranks higher than that of a pure animal* are all truths not difficult to see. And we all know that scholars will sometimes miss the obvious.

Perhaps some of the above points may need explanation. And further mysteries—as well as objections—lurk around every corner. Then the role of scholarship will be to investigate these mysteries and answer those scholars who deny those clearly given truths providing the structure for the mysteries.

This beginning chapter could have dealt some of the following topics: What distinguishes the realms of person and non-person? What is it that is unique about persons? Specifically, what is it that distinguishes a person from, say, a higher order animal? This distinction can go in two directions: outward towards knowledge of transcendent beings to the self and inwards towards personal subjectivity. Is it really true that a person is ordered to transcendence? And then what does that transcendence mean? Animals, after all, are ordered poised to pay attention to external objects given to them via sense perception. Are they then ordered to transcendence too? What is the difference? Furthermore, animals are conscious beings insofar as they possess the power of sense perception. Does that mean they have an interior life? What does it mean to have an interior life, which I would say uniquely characterizes persons? Just what is this subjectivity that Burgos at times mentions?

2. Overemphasizing what people think in contrast to asserting what is the case.

Notice the focus of the above questions: they are not directed primarily towards scholarship—that is, to what *people think* about the person as an end in itself—but rather to *the nature of the person* as such. In the end, the purpose of scholarship is to “stand on the shoulders of others only as a means to help oneself see fundamental, philosophical reality more clearly, which, in this case, concerns the person. Scholarship ought not dominate, much less replace this fundamental seeing.

Someone could grant the importance of “fundamental seeing” while thinking that perhaps I am still making a mountain of a molehill. There is, after all, not much difference between the content of philosophical scholarship from philosophy. Also, isn’t Burgos himself just one more scholar among others? What is so significant about his opinions?

There are at least two reasons why emphasizing this distinction—between scholarship and philosophy—despite the obvious overlap of content, is worthwhile. The first point concerns the role of truth, which I can illustrate with the following comparison: The assertion “ $2+2=5$ ” is obviously false. But the assertion that “Scholar A claims that “ $2+2=5$ ” could very well be true if, of course, scholar A asserts it. There is, in other words, all kinds of mischief possible if one is doing scholarship, for there is a real difference between what people think about numbers or persons as opposed to what is the simple truth about them. Secondly, it is not just that scholarship goes back to and is grounded in a “fundamental seeing,” but also that this seeing provides a crucially important three-dimensional experience which theory alone cannot replicate. Theoretical positions are always “limping” and one-dimensional compared to the infinite richness of a direct, phenomenological contact with reality itself. For example, it is not enough to have a theoretical contact with the notion of, say, intrinsic value. You also must go out into reality itself and grasp it. Scholarship alone is too theoretical, missing other important dimensions, easily leading to ivory towers.

It is unnecessary to speak in absolutes. There are times in which Burgos tells us what he thinks really is the case, thereby really making truth claims and thereby doing philosophy. However, the heavy predominance of his analysis, especially in the first three chapters, concerns what people think is true without sufficiently coming to terms simply with what is true. This was why I was a bit disappointed to read at the beginning of his last, fourth chapter. What follows in this chapter is intended to avoid this premature eulogy on personalism ... which, in the author’s opinion, “reflects

the nucleus of *the thought of the authors* surveyed above and, in addition, can ensure the future and fruitfulness of this philosophy” (179, emphasis added).⁴⁵

I do not understand why Burgos would look (in the above quote) for the “nucleus” of personalism in “the thought of the authors.” This strikes me as a kind of category mistake. He seems to be looking at one category of reality (scholarship about philosophical topics) when the answer is to be found in quite another—even if related—sphere (our lived experience). Philosophy investigates the nature or essences of things, including the person, which, in turn, is ultimately located in transcendent lived experience.

It is not as if Burgos does not care about transcendent reality, insofar as he rightly emphasizes the role of transcendence in the thought of the personalists. So, after the scholarly survey of the different schools of personalism in the first three chapters, I was looking forward to a turn to a direct contact with lived experience in Chapter 4. And, sure enough, in his last chapter he wants to find the “nucleus” or essence. It is just that you don’t do that by making yet another survey of what people think. In the end, to grasp the “nucleus” of personalism means to look at the source of all this scholarship: at the person to find the essence of this kind of being. The person is, after all, the primary reality, and people thinking about personalism is the secondary, derived reality.

I might mention that despite his threat at the beginning of Chapter 4 to do yet more scholarship, I did get from that chapter what he actually claimed personalism to be, thereby pivoting from scholarship to philosophy. Thus, he gave insights not going back to some consensus, but rather because they correspond to the transcendent truth about the person, such as the idea that a person “emerges forcefully from the world as radically distinct” (206) from all other non-personal beings. For example, freedom is found nowhere else than with persons. “Freedom is not a tendency, it is a response, freely caused by a man capable of self-determination and of generating an irreducible and unique decision” (206). Also, that what is subjective is “entirely nontransferable to what is exterior in objective terms” (207). Furthermore, that “personalism adheres to a realist epistemology” because—and this is the important point—“it affirms the human ability to know an objective reality that exists independently of him” (218); that “self-determination” exists “not in? Sartre’s vacuum, but [transforms] the person who already exists” (220); that “personalism fully adopts the basic presuppositions of realist ethics” (221); and that man is open to the “*religious dimension*”, asking and to some extent answering “*ultimate questions*” (221).

One of the best aspects of Burgos’ understanding of personalism is his continual attempt, in various ways, always to look for and find the unity of man: such as body and soul (specifically, “how the body is the somatic dimension of the person” (229); how the somatic, the psychological, and the spiritual are unified together; how the affective dimension can be incorporated into the spiritual dimension of the person; how the personal dimension is not merely intellectual, as in Aristotle, but extends also to affection, action and love. And finally, he discusses how the “personalist understanding of community and society” (231) can exist without “making the individual a mere appendix of the social body (collectivism)” (231).

In doing justice to Burgos’ work, it is important not to overemphasize his rather obvious heavy emphasis on scholarship, as if I am asserting that he simply omits looking directly at the content of our lived experience. That is not true. Thus, he states, “personalism has moved to a direct

⁴⁵ Juan Manuel Burgos, *An Introduction to Personalism*, 179. All future quotations from this work will be followed by the pagination in parentheses in text.

experiential analysis of the human being, similar to the phenomenological method” (207). In this respect, I do not think the “phenomenological method” is just one more method among others; it is rather the method that all good philosophers must use, whether they call themselves phenomenologists or not.

3. Overemphasizing differences of positions.

Burgos gives a valuable set of distinctions of differing positions within the realm of personalism, but in doing so at least runs the risk of overemphasizing them, as if we are dealing with discreet wholes. That is, he seems to be at least implying that the emphases of one position are somehow absent or even insufficiently present in the others. For example, the heavy emphasis of Buber is on relationism, such as the ‘I-Thou’ relation. This is a wonderful emphasis, but it is not like it is simply missing in the other positions. It seems to me this relationism is fully present in von Hildebrand and the phenomenological position, even if it is not the defining moment of the philosophy.

4. Giving definition to personalism

I felt from this book that I got a good look at the “breadth” of personalism that I would never have received except from reading it. But there was also something missing. This breadth seemed to be missing definition. An idea receives its definition both positively and negatively. A reader needs to know the positive content of an idea. And part of getting this content is by distinguishing it from what is not. Thus, it is helpful to distinguish ‘this from that.’

It was not until the last chapter that I got any idea as to what the criteria is between a theorist who is a personalist from one who is not. Until that last chapter, I kept wondering why Plato, Aristotle and Thomas were not on the personalist list. But then in chapter 4, it seemed that he came up with at least three criteria for qualifying as a personalist: First, that personalism is a later, twentieth century phenomenon: A point which seems theoretically weak. Secondly, that personalism be a central feature of the philosophy, which does distinguish these earlier philosophers from the later personalists. And then thirdly, he clearly distinguishes personalism from what he calls the ‘Greek ballast.’ He explains,

By the ‘Greek ballast’ we mean the tendency, originating in Greek philosophy, to describe man by using philosophical notions developed to explain things or animals, applying minor modifications to them, with the result that what is specifically human, what constitutes man as person, is obscured, or even disappears, when one thinks about man as a thing or an animal, but with some special characteristics. ... [F]or example, we develop the category of appetite or tendency to explain the dynamism of the animal and vegetable world, and we then apply it to man, the peculiar characteristics of human freedom are obscured (205-6).

This point is extremely important and well worth making, by guarding against reductionism of freedom to instinct, knowledge and truth to sense perception, person to animal, while from the opposite direction anthropomorphizing animal experience. And this distinction helps give me definition to specifically identifying personalism as a philosophical position, distinguishing it from other systems which gloss over what is distinctive about the human person.

5. Does the Aristotelian/Thomistic philosophy on substance gloss over what is distinctly personal?

It is worthwhile giving the extended quote. Burgos explains, “Generally, personalism has no problem in taking up a philosophy of being as the final principle for explaining reality, but the same is not true of the Aristotelian categories understood as transcendental or a ‘deductivist’ explanation of reality. The concept or notion of being seems unavoidable for explaining the essential structure of what is real. But it is a very different question whether the Aristotelian categories can assist in interpreting all reality. In fact, it is not so. As we have mentioned in speaking of method, beings, and particularly man, *are so different as to require their own exclusive categories*. The indiscriminate application of some general concepts—such as the four causes, *substance*, or accidents—to any type of being is an unjustifiable application because of the complexity of existence” (210-11, emphases added).

Is it true that the Aristotelian notion of “substance” is inapplicable to persons because they “are so different as to require their own exclusive categories”?

In response, we might first notice that when Aristotle explains his notion of substance, all his concrete examples of them are of material, individual beings, which are admittedly “below” the level of persons⁴⁶. And, of course, there is a difference of kind between personal and non-personal being. Does that then mean that the notion of substance, explicitly mentioned by Burgos as inapplicable to the idea of person? If the notion of substance were a univocal term, this criticism would be justified.

The problem is that this idea decidedly not a univocal in nature. It is an analogous term, which grants a difference of kind between personal and non-personal being while at the same time noting a real similarity.

We can even grant that Aristotle may not have suspected the extent of the analogous power of his notion of substance, insofar as all his examples of substances are material in nature. But that doesn’t mean that it still cannot be used by philosophers to describe the personal soul, which is substantial in nature, albeit incomplete in nature calling for a body for completion.

Nor could Burgos claim that the notion of substance is more properly attributed to lower material things in nature, for just the opposite is the case. Not only is the notion of a personal, immaterial, substantial being perfectly reasonable, when we use the idea of personal soul as our example of what a substance is, we can have a far better understanding of what a substance is. This is because a person is a being whose centre lies “in itself,” insofar as it is a being that can will and think for itself. Only a being that is radically centred in itself can be free, while in contrast there is no “centre” of a mountain, with the result that everything purely material has the tendency to flow into everything else. Thus, while the notion of substance is less perfectly fitted to explaining material beings, it is perfectly fitted toward explaining the personal soul.

The analogical nature of substance even goes further. Not only is it better fitted to describe personal beings, but it is also perfectly fitted to describe the Absolute Being. The Absolute Being not only exists as centred in itself, but it is also in no way dependent on any being not itself. Thus, the notions of substantiality and absoluteness interpenetrate with the Absolute Being.

⁴⁶ Aristotle. (1941). *Categories*. In *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, Edited by Richard McKeon. Oxford, Oxford University Press, pp. 9-14.

6. Investigating inner subjective life on its own terms.

This notion of subjectivity is extremely important for our topic of personhood because through it, we have a new way of studying persons. Persons are to be investigated not only via the method of objective analysis and reflection, but also via subjectivity. For example, consider Karol Wojtyła and Dietrich von Hildebrand on sexuality. It is one thing to investigate human sexuality objectively, with its emphasis on the purpose of sex on procreation and the moral law governing sexual behaviour. But it is another thing to see the subjective dimension of sex, which is oriented toward the inner experience of spousal love. This is the difference between *Humanae Vitae* and Wojtyła's *Love and Responsibility*. Nothing said in *Humanae Vitae* is denied by *Love and Responsibility*, but the latter work adds a whole new dimension missing in *Humanae Vitae*: the inner, subjective dimension of spousal love.

Analogously, something similar perhaps can be said with Burgos' *Personalism* book: It seems to be an approach to the person analogous to *Humanae Vitae*: looking at the person from a too exclusively objective a point of view, without bringing in the inner, subjective dimension. Certainly, Burgos acknowledges everything about this new dimension of personhood found in subjectivity, such as an inner subjective life, freedom, conscience, intellect, affection, etc., but he only seems to approach these topics from an objective point of view. It is like having a cool race car, talking (objectively) a lot about it, but then never (subjectively) driving it. In saying this, I am not espousing any turn to subjectivism. I am, rather, suggesting that an investigation of inner, subjective experience should not only proceed from an objective reflection, but also subjectively.

One evidence for Burgos finding refuge in the objective while avoiding subjectivity is his attitude toward Descartes cogito. Burgos states, "Modern thought's starting point was an error: the cogito of Descartes. This fact could not be denied, and the consequences were readily visible: the development of all the idealist philosophy with its atheist cadence..." (46). Here we notice in this quote Burgos' fear that an investigation into inner conscious states in their own setting and context will inevitably lead to subjectivism, relativism, and idealism. But does that really follow?

It seems to me this point does not necessarily follow at all. In fact, what the cogito unveils is not some transcendental ego, but the individual, concrete self who is consciously experienced as the one performing psychic acts. There is, in fact, no executing concrete, individually real psychic acts of loving and willing without a personal self who performs them. And, furthermore, this "I" who performs psychic acts is not merely the product of some inference—as Descartes mistakenly asserts when he famously states, "I think, therefore I am"—it is also the personal self that is immediately given in all cases of the performance of conscious acts. Thus, for instance, the experience is never "thinking has taken place," but rather "I think" and "I will." The "I" is directly and immediately given, albeit subjectively, in the experience itself.

Notice that if this "I" were some transcendental ego, it would not itself be directly given to us in experience, but would be continually veiled from us, as with all the other "things-in-themselves" in the idealist, Kantian worldview. But Descartes does not think this "I" is veiled, as he more appropriately says in the *Meditations*, "I think, I exist."⁴⁷ The existing "I am" is given in the thinking

⁴⁷ "Thus, after everything has been most carefully weighed, it must finally be established that this pronouncement "I am, I exist" is necessarily true every time I utter it or conceived it in my mind." Rene Descartes. (2000). *Meditations on First Philosophy* (Second Meditation). In *Readings in Modern Philosophy*, Vol 1, ed. Roger Ariew & Eric Watkins. Indianapolis: Hackett, p. 30.

for Descartes. And this “I am” given in thinking is also not some mere appearance of some other veiled noumenal reality, as no mere appearance can perform psychic acts. Only a really existing, in fact, a substantially existing being, can perform free acts.

It seems to me that the cogito is one extremely important “entry way” into the inner, subjective life of the person. Because it is through the cogito that one directly and immediately encounters the inner, conscious self. It is through the cogito that I get at this new world of subjective inwardness: of my own encounter with myself. I am, after all, present to myself as the one performing conscious acts. It is this lateral self-presence that I encounter myself *as a subject* as opposed to an object.

Not only is our inner subjective life revealed via lateral self-presence, but this inner life is also the condition for the possibility of the full grasping of transcendent objects. Certainly, pure animals possess sense perception, but they cannot grasp *that something exists* or *that it is such-and-such*, which requires a reflexive approach grounded in self-presence. Thus, for example, a horse can surely perceive me, and it lacks the inner resources to know *that* it is perceiving me. It cannot grasp transcendent facts. Thus paradoxically, if this is correct, a robust inner, subjective life is a necessary condition for getting at the full transcendence of things “in the world”.

7. Does the *cogito* really lead to a radical dualism?

Although Burgos states as his central problem with Descartes the threat of subjectivism, no doubt a second problem with the cogito is that it leads to a radical dualism. In his book, Burgos gives an extremely valuable critique of radical dualism with his work emphasizing the unity of human nature already mentioned above. The question, however, is this: Does the cogito somehow inevitably lead to radical dualism? Or can these two positions be separated? Granted that both positions are to be found in Descartes both the cogito and his radical dualism. The question is whether there is some kind of intrinsic connection between both ideas, as if his position on the cogito then makes necessary radical dualism.

What the *cogito* explicitly establishes is not some radical dualism as such, but specifically the distinction between body and soul, as only an immaterial substantial being can perform psychic acts of willing or thinking: for only a substantial being that “stands in itself” can freely will in its own name. In contrast, if a being were ultimately “grounded in something else,” then any kind of willing would go back to that being. Furthermore, it is completely unnecessary to suppose that the being who is the subject of free acts must therefore “stand in itself”, disembodied from its own body. No, the conscious self who is performing these acts is an embodied self, imperfect without its body, calling for a body to complete its being. As a result, this conscious self can then act in through its body, while the body, in turn, can be expressive of the soul.

Let us grant that Descartes was himself a radical dualist, who only admitted to causal interactions between body and soul. That does not mean his cogito then only makes sense within the context of his own radical dualism.

This analysis of the *cogito* is extremely important for Burgos’ topic, which is the person and personalism, as it is through the cogito—specifically the dimension of lateral self-presence given through the cogito—that we get at this dimension of subjectivity. We do not merely possess objective being, but also possess an inner life: the inner life of self-presence. I am present to myself

as the one performing conscious acts. It is through self-presence that I directly get at my own "I," not objectively as some object, say, of a self-reflection, but subjectively as the one performing other conscious acts.

Burgos does not seem to ever make use of this subjective approach, so important for getting at the inner life of the person. Because of this inwardness of self-presence, I can then not only perceive, but know *that* I am one perceiving states of affairs. This power of grasping facts is crucial to then attaining to truth, which is the adequacy of a judgment to some fact of reality. Here we come to a unique characteristic of persons: the power of grasping the truth of reality.

And, what really makes the cogito important is the further notion of lateral self-presence, insofar as a person can only get at one's self subjectively via self-presence. Granted that we can also reach the self objectively via self-reflection; it is through self-presence that we get at the self subjectively.

All this, perhaps, sounds more of a criticism than it really is. This is because I emphasized the problems or at least questions I had instead of praising the ocean of agreement. It is not only this agreement, but there is also a real sense of gratitude for explaining the world of personalism to me.