

Juan Manuel Burgos, Response to Josef Seifert

I am going to structure my reply to my friend and well-known philosopher Josef Seifert around two main axes that respond to the two components of his comments: the historical and the philosophical.¹⁸

1. Personalism as a specific philosophical school

The first point I want to address is important for the definition and to make distinct the nature of personalism, namely, whether one can speak of a personalism “prior” to that of the 20th century, an issue on which Seifert and I disagree. I have always maintained that personalism (although it depends on the old term “person”) is not a 2,000-year-old philosophical current, but a contemporary current that emerged in the 20th century, led by Emmanuel Mounier and by other contemporary philosophers such as Maritain, Buber, Guardini, Scheler, Marcel, etc. Therefore, this is my thesis, before the 20th century there has been no personalist philosophy although the term “person” has been used, less rather than more.

Seifert does not share this thesis or at least he does not share it completely. This is because, for him, personalism constitutes any mode of reflection interested in the person and that simultaneously recognizes their dignity. And, therefore, in addition to the contemporary personalists and, sometimes, above them, he would also count on philosophers from the past, such as Augustine or Aquinas. Personalism, considered as a philosophy that reflects on the person, could not be limited to contemporary reflection (that of the 20th and 21st centuries) but would cover, with greater or lesser intensity and success, basically the entire Christian period. This is so since Seifert understands that the attribution of an unrepeatable dignity to the person is linked in a way to Christianity such that “to say that a Christian thinker is not personalist is to say that there is a number three that is even, or that a piece of wood is made of iron.” Based on these premises, he proposes an interesting classification that distinguishes 3 types of personalism:¹⁹

1) historical personalism, which considers personalists as only those philosophers of the 20th century who have contributed a renewed vision of the person expressible in a relevant set of philosophical concepts: corporeality, affectivity, freedom as self-determination, interpersonalit, etc.²⁰;

2) “perennial personalism” that includes all the historical contributions that clarify the greatness of the person, which would include figures such as St. Augustine or Aquinas, and that would constitute

¹⁸ This text is a revision of the answer that I gave to Josef Seifert (“Response to Josef Seifert”, *Persona*, 22 (2013), pp. 22-29) to his paper: Josef Seifert. (2013). “Sobre el libro de Juan Manuel Burgos, Introducción al personalismo”, *Persona*, Vol. 22, pp. 12-21. In this revised version, Seifert has removed some of the earlier criticisms such as his rejection of my thesis that the term “person” is an “invention” of Christianity.

¹⁹ In a previous work, Seifert had distinguished between adequate personalism (equivalent to contemporary personalism) and imperfect personalism (personalism understood in a broad or broad sense) that includes, for example, Saint Thomas. See Josef Seifert (1997), “El concepto de persona en la renovación de la Teología Moral. Personalismo y personalismos”. In AA.VV., *El primado de la persona en la moral contemporánea*. Pamplona: Eunsa, pp. 33-61.

²⁰ See Juan Manuel Burgos. (2022). *Personalist Anthropology. A Philosophical Guide to Life*. Wilmington: Vernon Press.

“one or the central part of the perennial philosophy (understood here not as Thomism but as the *summa veritatis*: authentic philosophical knowledge in all philosophers)”;

3) “ideal transhistorical or eternal personalism” understood as the full truth of the person and, which would be “above all an ideal only partially achieved rather than a historical reality, even if one considers the deepest personalists of history and of the personalist movement of the 20th century”. That is, transhistorical personalism will be an ideal even referred to as “perennial personalism”.

This classification is very suggestive and is close to that of other scholars of personalism who tend to extend the historical beginnings of this current to the origins of Christianity. As for Seifert and I, we would agree in giving special importance to the personalism of the 20th century and we would disagree in extending this personalism towards the past (perennial personalism) and towards the future (ideal personalism). I am now going to explain the reasons why I disagree with his extension in two senses.

In the first place, and looking back, I consider that the category of “perennial personalism” to be the result of a reinterpretation of the history of philosophy based on the achievements at a given historical moment. The term “personalist” or “personalism”, in fact, appears only in the 20th century, but not by chance. It appears precisely because a group of philosophers from this period became so aware of the relevance of the concept of “person”, understood in a particular way, which made it the center of their philosophy. This did not occur, prior to the 20th century for reasons that I will not delve into now, and thus we find justification for why the philosophies of the past (read: those prior to the 20th century), which focused in one way or another on the human being have received other denominations. No one thought of calling Thomism “personalism” until personalism had been consolidated as a philosophical current. Until then, it is his dependence on Aristotle that had been insisted on. For this reason, calling Thomism a philosophy of personalism *a posteriori* is akin to something like a forced baptism. This, however, does not prevent us from finding in Thomas Aquinas an important reflection on the person.²¹

However, going one step further, the category of “perennial personalism” is simply unviable and, if it were viable, it would lead personalism to its very own dissolution. Why is it unfeasible? Because the various philosophical proposals that have focused on the person throughout history, although they have shared presuppositions, differ from each other in profound ways. This prevents a minimally solid unification (this lack of unification or consensus is confirmed later by the very powerful debates that have taken place between various personalists on crucial issues). Augustine, Duns Scotus, Saint Thomas, Kant, Mounier and Wojtyła have focused their attention on the person, but is it possible to create a consistent conceptual system that everyone could share? Obviously not, since, for example, Augustine has a Platonic epistemology while that of St. Thomas is basically Aristotelian and Kant has his and Kant has his own. The first two thinkers understand freedom as free will while Kant and Wojtyła privilege self-determination. The metaphysics of Thomas, Augustine and Duns Scotus are different from each other while, in reality, neither Mounier nor Wojtyła pay attention to metaphysics, focusing mainly on the person. Meanwhile, Kant, as is well known, wrote a devastating critique of metaphysics. Thomas describes the person based on the categories of substance and accidents. Wojtyła and Mounier reject this categorization and Kant develops an interesting theory of the dignity of the person based on his particular understanding of practical reason that has little to do with the just-mentioned philosophers. These examples of a deep lack of consensus seem more than sufficient to me to prove that the problem we must face is the following: if all the aforementioned are personalists, then what is personalism? I would say, nothing because it

²¹ See E. Forment. (1983). *Ser y persona* (2^a ed.). Barcelona: Universidad de Barcelona.

could include any philosophy that considers persons even implicitly, or, if you do not want to be so drastic, any position that references the value and dignity of the human person. Now, can this subtle idea be the basis for creating a consistent philosophical system?

The solution to this difficulty is simple: accept the history of philosophy as it is. Personalism is a philosophical movement that emerged in the 20th century and not an accumulation of eternal knowledge about the person or, more precisely, about the human being. And, exactly for this reason, personalism has limits and problems, but also potentialities and the strength of being contemporary. It has, of course, ancient roots. Others before, and very long ago, have of course concerned themselves with the person. Notwithstanding, they were not able to realize the power of this notion and nor did they create a system of thought around this concept. Moreover, they did not possess a set of modern and contemporary concepts to give it a specific content and character. Therefore, pre-20th century philosophies are not personalistic, but belong to or depend on other systems of thought be they Platonic, Aristotelian, Augustinian, Thomistic, Kantian, etc.

Let us now turn to the concept of “*philosophia perennis*” or, more limitedly, of “perennial personalism”. Is this concept simply possible? Of course, it is possible to understand what the concept means, but can *its content* be determined? because if it is not the case, then its role in philosophical discourse would be irrelevant. How is it possible for one to operate with a system the content of which is unclear or even empty? Well, this is exactly what happens. For example, who would have the authority to determine the content of perennial personalism, which, by definition, is “true philosophical knowledge” about the person or, more generally, about philosophy? A specific philosopher? Of course, this would not be achievable because other philosophers would quickly appear in disagreement with the specific philosopher’s proposed theses. A specific school? Assuming that the school managed to reach a unified position or philosophy, other schools in disagreement would quickly appear and, in turn, disagree. And how should the individual philosopher or school of philosophy be designated as the correct and reigning guardian of truth? By whom? By what criterion?

Any human reflection, whether individual or developed by a school, is limited and partial. And there is no human court that can determine its truth in an unquestionable way, particularly in the philosophical field whereas science can resort to experimental verification. For this reason, there is no practicable way to establish a corpus of true knowledge, that is, that we all consider true. Given this, the establishment of a perennial philosophy or personalism simply becomes an unfeasible proposal.

Finally, regarding ideal personalism, to the extent that Seifert posits it as an unrealized proposal, that is, strictly as an ideal, it must be understood not as a defined corpus of knowledge but as an impulse towards the search for truth about the person. In this sense, it seems to me a beautiful proposal, although, in any case, this impulse is the one that must intrinsically characterize all philosophical reflection, and particularly the personalist one.

In short, the classifications of philosophical currents must adequately reflect the history of philosophy. And what history teaches is that it is *only* in the 20th century that a reflection systematically based on the concept of person appeared, one that furthermore understands the person in an original, different, and powerful way while also maintaining a certain continuity with the

classic formulations of person²². This reflection on the person has defined itself and has been described by others as personalist philosophy. Therefore, we should reserve this name for it²³.

2. Two potentially conflicting intentions in Chapter IV

I will now proceed to analyse Seifert's comments on the fourth (and newest) chapter of my book in which I attempt to make a personal synthesis of personalist thought. Seifert suggests, kindly and sharply, that I am torn between two potentially conflicting intentions: one is to establish a corpus outlying the themes that various personalists have dealt with, which would then constitute personalism; the second, much more daring, but which I would hide consciously or unconsciously under the modest concept of "personal synthesis", would be to establish what personalists have discovered about the person, and, once determined, configure it as valid and authentic personalism, regardless of whether the ideas that constitute it are in a dozen personalist authors, in half a dozen, or only in one. Since Seifert considers that I accomplish this task, he eulogizes that "the new work of our author is not only an important part of a history of contemporary philosophy, but also a fine example of authentic philosophy and genuine philosophizing.

I thank Seifert for this assessment, but going to the problem he raises I have no difficulty in agreeing with Seifert on this point, since, at the time that *An Introduction* was being written in its original Spanish version (2013), I was in a peculiar period of my intellectual development that could be described as a transition from the general diffusion of personalism to the proposal of my *own* personalist position. *An Introduction* reflects that period of transition. On the one hand, I intend in my book to analyse personalism in general, as I did in a previous work from 2000²⁴, but, on the other hand, this approach now seems narrow to me. So, in *An Introduction*, I wanted to present my vision of personalism and not a mere synthesis or exposition of the ideas of the main personalists. Seifert detects this tension. Is my description of personalism sound for all personalists or does it only represent my way of understanding personalism? The reality is that, at this point in my intellectual journey, it is difficult to separate both elements. In *An Introduction*, it is stated that this is my vision of personalism, but perhaps not in a particularly of sufficiently emphatic way.

Let us consider an example to illustrate this problem. In Chapter 4, I define as personalism those philosophies with structures centered on the concept of person. Seifert previously noted that this definition has been proffered by many personalists, but it is not true. I do not know of any writing, apart from mine, in which it is stated that an essential feature of personalism is its articulation around the concept of person. Now, the personalists do in fact articulate their thinking around the concept of the person. So, that thesis is true, although no one has expressly affirmed it before me (as far as I know). And it is the same case with the claim put forth by/ that personalists use a modern concept of person. They do indeed use it, but to my knowledge no one has explicitly stated it before *An Introduction* either. Now, to define personalism with a certain philosophical force, it is necessary to indicate these features and many others. And this is what I do in *An Introduction*, but, there, I do

²² See Juan Manuel Burgos, *Person in personalism* (Springer, in press).

²³ See J. O. Bengtsson. (2006). *The worldview of personalism. Origins and early development*. Oxford; Oxford University Press; J. N. Mortensen. (2017). *The Common Good. An introduction to personalism*: Wilmington: Vernon Press. Th. R. Rourke y R. A. Chazarreta. (2007). *A Theory of personalism*. Lanham (USA): Lexington Books; C. Bartnik. (1986). *Personalism*. Lublin: KUL Press; A. Rigobello. (1978). *Il personalismo*. Roma: Città Nuova.

²⁴ See Juan Manuel Burgos. (2000). *El personalismo. Autores y temas de una filosofía nueva*. Madrid: Palabra.

so without insisting too much that this is a specific proposal to understand personalism and rather only my personal synthesis of the ideas of the great personalists.

In short, I think that Seifert is correct in pointing out that a tension can be detected in *An Introduction* between the determination of what constitutes “personalism in general” and what I understand by personalism. In my previous work, *El personalismo (20000)*, this tension was not present since my only objective was to bring together the essential features of the main personalist authors. And, in later writings, this tension is not present either since I had already by then elaborated my own version of personalism, namely “Integral Personalism”,²⁵ and, for this reason, when I define a position or concept as personalistic, it is not necessary for me to resort to any specific author, but rather to present my vision of the problem.

3. The Philosophical Problems

Let us now turn to the list of problems that Seifert finds in my presentation of the anthropological features of personalism which, as I have just commented, is my synthesis and way of understanding some features that, however, are, I believe, present in all or in most of the personalists.

An implicitly atheistic position

In the first place, Seifert points out that “if one makes it [personalism] absolute, it is implicitly atheistic” for three reasons. It:

- a) rejects that God is the most perfect person referent;
- b) “obscures the fact that an atheistic humanism, which denies a personal divine being, recognizing only the human person as a person, is not an authentic personalism, despite its recognition of the central role of the human person in the world and in anthropology”;
- c) if God is rejected, the origin of the person could only be explained from evolutionary or biological processes, which would rule out free will and, more generally, the transcendent character of the person.

In these positions, I believe that two aspects must be distinguished: a discussion about language and a second, deeper problem. The discussion about names comes from the fact that, although it is true that I usually use the term ‘person’ to refer exclusively to man, or, in other words, I do not use the expression “human person”, but simply ‘person’, this does not exclude the acceptance of the existence of a divine Person. On the contrary, according to the main personalists, I understand that God is a Person, the *You par excellence*. I usually only use the term ‘person’ to refer to human beings for the sake of simplicity and this is a common practice in ordinary language, but I have no problem speaking of human person in principle. Therefore, both points: a) and c) (which depends on a)) can be resolved.

²⁵ See Juan Manuel Burgos. (2019). “Wojtyła’s Personalism as Integral Personalism. The future of an Intellectual Project”, *Questiones Disputatae*, vol. 9, pp. 91-111; Juan Manuel Burgos. (2020). “¿Qué es el personalismo integral?”, *Quién* Vol. 10, pp. 9-37 and Juan Manuel Burgos. (2018). “Integral personalism, Some insights into a new philosophical proposal”, *Philosophical news*, Vol. 16, pp. 29-48.

However, point b) raises a much more complex question that could be summarized as follows: Is an atheistic personalism possible? According to Seifert's statements, it seems not, even if this personalism recognizes the "central role of the human person in the world and in anthropology. However, I believe that an atheistic personalism is possible. Our philosophical reflection starts from experience (understood in a Wojtylian sense).²⁶ The person is presented directly to our experience, without the mediation of other realities, including God. People are there, we can see them, touch them, and relate to them and, based on these experiences and, above all, on the experience of ourselves, we can develop a concrete and experimental conception of being a person. Faith does not seem necessary to recognize the value and dignity of the human person. It is true that all philosophical thought comes from a hermeneutical context, and, moreover, the context of personalism is the Judeo-Christian tradition. Thus, it seems quite unfeasible that this philosophy could have arisen in another type of culture. But, once it is formulated, it can be assumed by anyone, including non-Christian thinkers, atheists, or agnostics. In short, the faith-philosophy interrelation in personalism is deep from the genetic point of view, but once a philosophical formulation has been reached based on human experience, sharing, or accepting such a formulation does not necessarily require belief in God.

On the other hand, we must not forget that we know God from the created world. And we know the personal God through the human person (and the man, Jesus Christ). Therefore, although we can suppose that the concept of person is realized in a supreme and perfect way in God, in practice, our knowledge of God consists in nothing other than attributing to God the highest degree the perfection that we see in the human person (eliminating the limits or defects). In other words, we cannot have a very different image of the perfect personal God than the one we have of the human person, which is the one we can really know, analyse, and understand in a philosophical framework.

Various problems

Lastly, I group together in this section a set of diverse considerations that Seifert's rich critique raises.

- Seifert points out that the person-man identification would lead to forgetting "the specific difference of man", that is, questions such as the fragility and mortality of man, his corporeity, etc. This thesis, very little developed, is hardly sustainable and demonstrates, in all certainty, on an incomplete knowledge of my work. All these topics are extensively treated in my anthropology²⁷ On the other hand, it is inevitable to address them, at least to some degree, since if the methodological starting point of anthropology is experience (integral experience), the first thing it encounters is actual men and not a non-existent perfect and divinized man.

- Seifert also criticizes that, due to a supposed fear of dualism, I do not use the term "soul", without which the personal uniqueness of man cannot be adequately recognized and thus "the door is opened to a materialist anthropology". It is true that I do not use the term "soul" in my philosophical anthropology, but from this, it does not follow that I do not affirm a spiritual dimension to the person. On the contrary, this dimension is expressly emphasized in my anthropology and in my diagram of the person²⁸. It seems that Seifert does not adequately distinguish, at least in this case,

²⁶ See Juan Manuel Burgos. (2016). "Integral experience: a new proposal on the beginning of knowledge". In J. Beauregard, S. Smith (eds.), *In the Sphere of the Personal. New Perspectives in the Philosophy of Person*. Wilmington USA: Vernon Press, pp. 41-58.

²⁷ Burgos, *Personalist Anthropology*.

²⁸ *Ibidem*.

realities, and their expression through concepts. There is a spiritual dimension in man for which philosophy must account. Now, is the philosophical term “soul” the right one to accomplish this task? This is the relevant question for our topic and the answer is negative. It is not possible, within the realist philosophical tradition, to use the notion of “soul” without it being automatically inserted into Aristotelian philosophy. But, since I am not an Aristotelian, and wish not for Aristotelian implications to be thought to be inherent or implied in my own thought, I therefore do not use that term. I am not anti-Aristotelian either. Many of Aristotle’s ideas seem cogent to me, but his classic categories are an obstacle for contemporary anthropology and, therefore, I do not use them, which includes the concept of soul²⁹. I have no problem using the term in other linguistic contexts (literary or poetic) in which there is no possibility of appropriation of meanings. In these cases, I would even say that it is difficult to replace the evocative capacity of the term soul with any other term.

Finally, I will comment on another observation that Seifert makes based on my thesis of the “rejection of the Greek ballast”.³⁰ This thesis maintains that Greek thought, and in particular that of Aristotle, mainly developed concepts for things, and then, through a process of extension, applied them to people. But, by proceeding in this way, what is proper and specific to the person is obscured and masked in the typical characteristics of things. When Thomas Aquinas confronted Aristotelian philosophy, he solved this problem partially, but not completely, so residues remained in scholastic thought (including the Greek ballast), producing a vision of the world that did not fully reflect the novelty of the person in relation to the natural world. This is to say that it created an excessively rigid concept of nature (specific to plants and animals), which presupposes the primacy of the concept of substance over that of person, a vision of freedom as a mere tendential appetite, etc. In summary, the thesis that I support is that we must detect the Greek ballast in the classical tradition and reject it, or, more precisely, rethink the plausible elements that underlie these formulations and assume them in an anthropology derived directly from the person and with specifically personal categories.

Seifert, however, seems to have understood that I would reject “Greek philosophy” or the Greek tradition in general, which is certainly far from my mind. My position links me (voluntarily) to classical philosophy, but, at the same time, I consider that it is necessary to go further, which may imply that concepts such as substance or soul must be abandoned. This, in turn, means abandoning what such concepts inevitably carry with them, including the Greek ballast. However, it is possible to abandon aspects without implying that the abandonment of the positive elements that they contain can and should be undertaken. But there is no good philosophical reason why we should inevitably be saddled with such concepts if they prove unsatisfactory. As St. Thomas said, philosophy deals with the truth of things, not with what philosophers said.

One more example. Causality has usually been explained by means of the four Aristotelian causes. However, it is very difficult to give a satisfactory account of human freedom derived from any of them or even from all of them together. This problem was already observed by Kant who distinguished the causality of freedom from natural causality and later, by other personalists such as Bowne, Zubiri, and Seifert himself. All of them proposed a renewal of the notion of causality and this is, in my opinion, the proper manner in which to proceed. If it is necessary to revise or suppress Aristotle's categorization of the four causes to allow for personal causation, let us do so.

Seifert concludes his exposition by pointing out “that Burgos, to more convincingly found his ‘rich manifesto of personalism’ and his ‘personal personalist proposal’ in the fourth chapter,

²⁹ A more detailed explanation of this topic in Juan Manuel Burgos. (2023). *Personalism and Metaphysics*. Wilmington: Vernon Press.

³⁰ See Juan Manuel Burgos. (2017). *Repensar la naturaleza humana* (2 ed.). México: Siglo XXI.

implicitly incorporates much more of classical and medieval philosophy than he admits". He may or may not be right. It is difficult to assess this claim. I consider my views to be in continuation with the classical tradition and, therefore, I assume many of the tradition's fundamental principles, but I assume them from a personalist perspective, which means that I only partially assume them and formalize them theoretically in a different way. For this reason, in general, my thought is not usually excessively well received in strictly classical contexts. Now, as Seifert quite rightly affirms, what counts is the truth and I try to arrive at the truth by way of propounding my understanding of personalism.