

Book Review

Introduction to Personalism

Juan Manuel Burgos.

trans. R.T. Allen

Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2018. xviii + 259pp. ISBN 9780813229874

This edition of Juan Manuel Burgos's *Introduccion al personalismo* (2012), has, in collaboration with his translators and others, been thoroughly revised for the English translation, and includes new material on British and American personalism, tailored to an Anglophone audience. The first three chapters present a historico-biographical overview of the principal personalists in the tradition, while the fourth presents a 'proposal' for the development of personalism in the future.

In the first chapter, Burgos argues that personalism arose from a sense of crisis in Europe in the inter-war period – not merely the socio-economic crisis of the Wall Street Crash and the rise of totalitarianism, but also a sense of philosophical crisis, born out of a dissatisfaction with modernism and a perceived lack of a philosophy to address this. The way had already been paved by, on the one hand, Kierkegaard's rejection of Hegelian absolutism, and on the other hand by Pope Leo XIII's 1879 call for a return to Thomism as a philosophy capable of rebutting modernist ideology. As Burgos (25) notes, 'The cultural situation of Catholicism was essential both to the rise of personalism and to the configuration of its features, since the greater part of personalists were fervent Catholics, in such a way that their religious experience was interwoven with their thinking'. This is true, for example, of the Catholic convert Max Scheler, who, in his *Man's Place in the Cosmos* (1927), repeats the Kierkegaardian theme (originating in St Augustine) that man has 'become an enigma to himself'. The development of personalist thinking, at least in Europe, was, then, a response to the intellectual advances of various 'isms' which, although often being opposed to one another, were still constituents of the modernist malaise: scientism, positivism, nihilism, relativism, capitalism, collectivism, and individualism. Personalism, while introducing another 'ism', stood outside of this milieu, resuscitating an old idea from scholasticism, but also chiming with other contemporary 'excluded alternatives' (Buber) such as phenomenological experience, subjectivity, etc.

Having thus set the scene, Burgos then goes on to explicate the lives and works of various personalists in turn. He treats them chronologically, organised by geographical area (French, Italian, Polish, German, Spanish, British, and American). While this makes for a very clearly organised book, it sometimes gives the impression that each country has its own 'national personalism' somewhat removed from global currents. While there may be some truth in this (many personalists were living under totalitarian regimes, and had little access to global literature), it does somewhat interrupt the narrative flow of the development of personalism as a whole. Moreover, the 'life and work' approach conflates understanding a thinker's philosophy with understanding *why* that thinker arrived at his or her philosophy, in a manner that is hermeneutically questionable. For example, in the discussion of Maritain we are told (45) that he 'presented Aquinas's positions with a renewed vigour because he was able to perceive ... the real intuition that had illuminated the Angelic Doctor's writings', without being told what that 'real intuition' is. Meanwhile,

in ethics, especially to be stressed are, for example, [Maritain's] interest in practical reason, his innovative studies of natural law which were aimed at moving away from its presentation as a legalistic formalism, the importance he gives to experience as the starting point for ethics, his moving from a syllogistic understanding of moral judgment to an emphasis on the unrepeatable individuality of each ethical decision because of its strictly singular character, his attempt to integrate values into the classical system of ends, and so on' (47).

While each of these listed items might well be stressed, it would be useful to know what Maritain's *argument* is in each case. For each philosopher explicated – not only Maritain – we are told what his interests were, and what he was trying to achieve, but we are left in the dark as to the logic of the argument behind each position articulated.

Sub-chapter 5.1, 'British Contributions to Personalist Philosophy', written by Burgos' translator, R. T. Allen, is happier in this respect. Allen identifies John Macmurray, Michael Polanyi, and Austin Farrer as the leading lights of British personalism. For Farrer, 'the logic of intentionality demands an "overplus", an

owner-I of acts intended' (166), and Farrer extends this analogically to the cosmological relation, so that Being-just-being-itself is exchanged for 'the God about whom we have something to do'. Real knowledge of Being is 'the product of deliberate interference with it' (167). Macmurray, meanwhile, in common with his French counterparts, reverses the Cartesian reflection on the reflective self, to insist on the reality of persons only being persons in relation to other persons (although Allen doesn't say so, this places Macmurray in alignment with Lévinas, as discussed by Burgos elsewhere in the book). Hence 'persons are agents first and knowers second', which leads to friendship being the purpose of all action. The target of Polanyi, on the other hand, is the so-called 'objectivity' of science: he argues that it requires the 'personal engagement and judgement of the scientist himself' (168).

The most significant part of Burgos' book is his final chapter, 'Personalist Philosophy: A Proposal'. A problem that Burgos identifies is that 'personalism' is not a unified doctrine: as Mounier himself pointed out, there are about as many personalisms as there are personalists. This means that personalism is not simply another 'ism' to be compared to the many 'isms' it opposes: it hovers between being a coherent philosophy, and an attitude towards other modes of thinking, particularly individualism on the one hand and collectivism on the other, neither of which respect the singular autonomy of the person in the face of the Other (to borrow a Lévinasian terminology). As Burgos notes, it is for this reason (what Ricoeur calls personalism's 'inner demons', which include its ongoing fascination with defining itself) that Ricoeur, for example, abandoned personalism in his own philosophy of the person. And Burgos is also aware that 'If personalism does not present a moderately unitary profile, but only a myriad of relatively disparate authors, every one of whom fights on his one account, then there will be a danger that none of them has sufficient strength to make himself heard in the coming decades' (193), which is a nice way of saying that, if one were to play the parlour game of 'Name the ten most important philosophers of the twentieth century', Lévinas would be the only personalist to make the list, and not for his personalism.

Burgos' response to this is to propose what he calls a 'modern ontological personalism'. A modern concept of the person, for Burgos, includes thinking the person as an 'I' and a 'who' endowed with affectivity and subjectivity. The person's ontology encompasses interpersonality, corporeality, the distinction of three basic dimensions (bodily, psychological, and spiritual), and masculinity or femininity. The personalist recognises the primacy of love, freedom as self-determination, the narrative character of human existence, and transcendence as the relationship with a Thou. This is quite a list, and Burgos' attitude to each of the items on it tends to follow that of his philosophical hero, Karol Wojtyl. Historically, personalism has been firmly rooted in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, and especially in the (Thomist) teachings of the Catholic Church: for all his 'modernity', Burgos sees no reason to depart from this tradition. This becomes problematic, for example, in the 'transcendental' dimension: personalism excludes any philosophy that might describe itself as atheist or agnostic. But such an exclusion precludes the possibility that an atheistic philosophy could have an adequate concept of the person. A pressing issue of our times is gender identity: on this point, Burgos is resolutely essentialist, claiming that 'The person, in effect, not only has a masculine or feminine biology but *is* man or woman; is a masculine person or a feminine person, because having a sexual identity affects, configures, and modulates all human structures, as neurology is currently demonstrating in an undeniable way' (230). Unfortunately, Burgos' 'undeniable' demonstration relies on Louann Brizendine's discredited *The Female Brain*, awarded the Becky Award in 2006 for 'outstanding contributions to linguistic misinformation'.

Burgos ends his book by nodding towards personalism's 'expansion' into bioethics, communitarian politics, and psychology (Carl Rogers and the logotherapy of Viktor Frankl). While these are certainly worthwhile topics of discussion, surely any philosophy worthy of the name, as personalism claims to be, must address the most pressing existential questions of our time, which, I would say, are the destruction of the environment, and the advance of so-called Artificial Intelligence (it's not actually intelligent). The philosophies best equipped to address these issues so far have been philosophies of the person that are not personalist: on the environment, philosophy of the anthropocene as exemplified by Steven Best or Zoe Todd; on AI, theories of the posthuman in the wake of Lyotard. If personalism is to remain relevant in the twenty-first century, it is to these challenges that it must rise.

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