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1. Personalism and the “human crisis”

An Introduction to Personalism contains a serious and diligent analysis of the history of personalism. It includes personalist ideas of thinkers from France, Italy, Spain, Britain, America, Poland, and Germany. The origins of this philosophical movement, and the common ground, as well as the differences among its main representatives was surveyed and assembled in this one work. It is also important to understand what personalism amounts to today, identifying its weaknesses and strengths. Research and reflection on those questions are found in the second part of his book, which is less historical, while offering important observations upon basic principles of personalism and its place in our contemporary times. This movement unfairly lost the attention of philosophy during the latter half of the 20th century. In the 21st century, we have the opportunity to revive it, bringing it back into philosophical academic discourse and inserting its ideas into our society’s public discourse.

It is obvious that our world faces multiple crises in many spheres such as global politics, personal identity, and international interrelations, which involve different levels of social politics, economics, education, and so on. The most complicated matter is the way that our problems may be more than “crises”, but representative more of a broader global instability, which might be solved by applying political power or pressure at both individual and public levels in individual countries and on the world stage. Of course, we cannot compare today’s situation with the world crisis and horrors of two World Wars during the first half of the 20th century. But, these days, we get news and information through mass media all over the world about troubled economic circumstances and political conflicts such as authoritarian actions or violent clashes in various countries, which reflect not only on those countries, but also affect the people who live there.

The main problem arose (and still arises) when people who have opposite views come into conflict, while each feel sure that they are right. This reason for conflict might become a justification for war, whether a “real” war, a “cold” war, an economic war, a virtual (cyber) war, or an information war. Also, postmodernity has brought its own changes and challenges for people who must respond to what is happening in the surrounding world and in that social environment. And in this situation of instability and crisis, it appears that there is an absence of “real” and fundamental values, able to be shared by most people, including people in power. This difficult process increases an interest in philosophy since people and society still need something that can be considered as a core basis, which can be clear to all. In my opinion, this must be a significant time for personalist philosophy, which is based on authentic and comprehensible humanistic values. These fundamental values should become part of a new worldview.

The new worldview needed by all societies resonates with personalists’ idea of engagement, which was introduced in the middle of the 20th century⁶⁸. The only pathway towards the “sane society”, according to the personalists, is the education of publicly involved, open-minded, and highly responsible persons. The personalists proclaimed that human individuality and respect for the individual should become the highest principle for every society. The “creation” of self, its formation, is the growth of an active and responsible person able to affirm reality and the world around her. In

⁶⁸ Emmanuel Mounier. (1999). Манифест персонализма [The Personalist Manifesto]. Trans. by I. Vdovina. Moscow: Respublica (In Russian)

its metaphysical meaning, a person is originally and initially free, entirely and completely. She possesses the freedom to choose her own path. From an understanding of this existential premise, a person can begin exploring and understanding the world.

An individual's engagement within society, undertaken with a renewed sense of self-determination and self-actualization, is an activity which can overcome a feeling of despair in situations of conflict and division. During one's life, a person encounters manifestations of estrangement in different spheres of life and on different social levels. For this reason, in general, a human life is a permanent rotation among different types and modifications of estrangement and personal efforts to overcome it – what we mean by “engagements.”

Personalists proceeded from the fact that the “human crisis” is a consequence of the crisis of civilization, which was obvious in Europe in 1920s and 1930s. However, since a person is a co-creator of historical events, one's activity and development in a particular direction of action can lead to various forms of estrangement, and hence, helped bring civilization to that crisis. In essence, this is a dialectical process. One's personality has influences upon society and one simultaneously experiences those effects upon oneself. The influence of the individual over society and that historical process usually appears to be negligible. Yet, like a mosaic, individual actions build up a picture of society and life as a deterministic process. The probability that a single person can influence another person by some action, and hence, that one can consequently determine the further possibility of a chain of events, forces us to consider each individual as a valuable and valued member of the entire life process. Recognizing this, personalists turned to the philosophy of the person (“Le personnalisme”), since only spiritually healthy and properly oriented subjects could rise out of the crisis. In other words, the individual's engagement with the social situation can be considered as the way to soften or overcome alienation or even the way towards estrangement's “removal.”

2. Individuality, individualism, and collectivism.

The individualism of the 20th century (which is common to the European and American societies) was a natural development of European individualism, which began to fully develop with the theological reforms of Martin Luther and John Calvin. There is also an important difference between that individualism having an estrangement or alienation from others and from oneself as its consequences, on the one hand, and, on the other, that same individuality displaying the uniqueness of each person as an important positive phenomenon. On mere individualism, being an individualist means the separation of oneself from the others and caring about own interests. Such a person might lose an important connection with the Other and may become detached and lonely. Reflecting on estrangement from oneself, I would like to mention one key manifestation: losing interest in developing one's own individuality and holding onto a desire to follow accepted social models of life, even if they do not resonate with one's essence. To achieve a certain social status, “to be successful”, one needs to fit the mould. This is to say that one must have a certain type of car or watch or earn a certain level of income. That habit of “corresponding to the status” stems from childhood when we are taught how to behave properly. We are taught how to dress, express ourselves, to act like a boy or a girl, how to show that one is a child from a good family, how to be a decent person, and so on. We are often guided by the stereotypes dictated to us from above since our childhood and we continue to follow this path by inertia, often without thinking about any rational explanation for our actions or about clarifying our desires and motivations, but instead we are guided only by the

standard telling us “this is normal.” A person thereby loses his or her essence, and it becomes a natural state where one feels quite comfortable.

Even though many people find this sort of “normal” life to be satisfactory, self-realization is still necessary. It is necessary to inspire people to be further-reaching and that helps to define an artistic elite. And, here, help arrives from the outside, that is, from mass media. However, mass media only imposes a new cult upon us, namely, the cult of consumption. This cult has captured America and Europe from the 1960s-70s and then reached the developing countries with its usual delay. We are told everywhere that it is necessary to buy something to feel happy, to get rid of problems, and to gain more free time. The paradox follows that a person spends his or her free time watching advertisements for a “necessary” product or object... So, we may lose ourselves by cultivating laziness, idleness, and our own alienation.

As *An Introduction to Personalism* recounts, personalists defended individuality (in the sense described above, that is, in a sense different from the standard individualist model) while speaking out against individualism as one of the core problems of the person. According to a religious approach (here we refer to the Christian notion), each person is unique and special, having one’s own talents and an imprint of God’s image within them. It means that each person is an individuality. The communitarian spirit, counter to selfish individualism, means the reduction of estrangement between people through sincere communication and a solidarity among people, due to mutual feeling and a mutual understanding of our species-essence.

An opposite phenomenon of individualism is collectivism. I disagree that only until the 20th century were these paired trends of individualism and collectivism presented.⁶⁹ These trends were represented in the world in earlier European and Eastern (including Slavic and Russian) civilizations and cultures. They have their long origins and slow development, but it is true that their strong opposition perhaps only became apparent by the 20th century. However, it cannot be said that the confrontation between countries (or blocs of countries) was rooted precisely in this division and the ideological differences based upon them. In my opinion, individualism and collectivism only reinforced these differences, making them more obvious.

In Russia in particular, the word "collectivism" is associated with the Soviet past and the name of Karl Marx. In his works, the phenomenon of collectivism is closely connected with the class consciousness. It means that an individual understands oneself as a part of the group of people (the class), of the species-essence, and a part of society. It is a vast question, if Marx subordinates everything, including the person, to the single large goal of establishing communism (as Burgos claims on page 13 of *An Introduction*). According to Marx, communism would come about inevitably when the crisis of the capitalist stage of development would become obvious and unavoidable.

Unfortunately, on the practical side of the matter, Marxism was politically realized as totalitarianism, or, as the total submission of a person to the endeavours and interests of the ruling party. In fact, this result discredited Marx’s theory in the eyes of different countries and societies, especially those that did not try to “build communism” but were witnesses to what was happening in and on account of the Soviet Union. At the same time, Antonio Gramsci wrote about the danger inherent to a dictatorship of the proletariat, which easily becomes the dictatorship of one political

⁶⁹ Burgos, *An Introduction*, p. 30.

party in his *Prison Notebooks*.⁷⁰ And in that sense, personalism opposes the vulgarized and simplified perception of Marxism.

3. An importance of humanities and creativity in education

Juan Manuel Burgos mentions an interesting matter when he writes, “the atmosphere of scientism which influences, by way of reaction, many personalists, driving them to proclaim the primacy of the spiritual”⁷¹. I would like to add to this that the tendencies of anti-scientism, an assurance that the world cannot be comprehended only with logic and reason, all gave rise to various irrational philosophical studies and inquiries since the late 19th century. Without doubt, the development of science inspired positivism and strengthened people’s belief in science and human intelligence. But any action arouses a counter reaction. The stronger the scientific tendencies, the brighter become the trends of irrationalism. In many ways, religion was rejected as a part of an “outdated” worldview, which for many scientists and thinkers of those days (such as Sigmund Freud, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Karl Marx, all under the great influence of Charles Darwin) was something that weighs down upon science and society in general.

At this present time, there is a similar contest in attitude towards science and humanities. The former are placed on a pedestal while the latter are declared secondary and less important. Governments and funding sources invest money mostly in the sciences (especially technosciences and the life sciences) while the role assigned to humanist knowledge is to “service” those “real sciences”. Humanistic disciplines have a far greater value than just that service. They tell us about past struggles to raise humanity to the level on which we are now and offer a vision of the mature human and what to expect from oneself. Persons cannot be understood without the humanities because people are complex creatures that cannot be reduced to biological processes.

Although personalists opposed the absolutization of science, they did not oppose science as a whole. They were attempting to overcome the tendency to regard the scientific method of knowing and its understanding of humans and reality as the only correct knowledge. Personalists also resisted a tendency favouring the utilitarian view that everything must be reasonably practical and provide a profit.

The great problem of our modern age is that almost everything is designed for satisfying that main criterion of utility. At an ordinary level, this represents comfort, welfare, entertainment, convenience, and the satisfaction of desires. People of “higher status” are attracted not only by wealth, but also by power. If these requirements are met, then no other aspirations are motivating. Pragmatically oriented people are not interested in happiness of the others. Utility for its own sake has turned into a romantic plan for another world reconstruction accompanied by plenty of impulsive actions and bloodied victims. Certainly, dreams of a better future and peaceful coexistence among people are fine and the utopian nature of such dreams does not mean that we cannot accept them as a model. We should always imagine the result by thinking about what we are striving for, what we are reaching for, and what we are trying to achieve. However, it is very important to evaluate such goals and ideas strictly and cautiously; they should not be cultivated and declared as the only true ideals. If we do not blindly follow dogmas and avoid fanaticism, it will help people to improve their lives, to be inspired by great ideas, but not to be use violence for implementing them.

⁷⁰ Antonio Gramsci. (1991). Тюремные Тетради [Prison Notebooks]. Electronic Library “Civil Society in Russia”. Electronic resource: <http://www.civisbook.ru/files/File/Gramshi,tetradi.pdf> (In Russian), pp. 351-352.

⁷¹ Burgos, *An Introduction*, p. 4.

While recounting the origins of personalism, Burgos pays attention to existentialism and mentions Søren Kierkegaard who is considered as one of its influential precursors. Before Kierkegaard, there also was Blaise Pascal, who influenced existentialism, and it is not fair to ignore him. The history of personalism is quite rich and it is appropriate for this author to highlight the ideas of principle thinkers who can also be considered as Personalists. Mentioning Mounier as one of the most influential personalists, the author tells us that he had a positive perspective on technology.⁷² But I would not say that Mounier was optimistic about technology since he well understood how technology is an instrument and, thus, any consequences of using it would depend on who uses it and how it is used. He wrote that if people allowed technology to dominate life by itself, we would immediately be led to complacency (comfort), a loss of independence (rigid centralization), and disunity (specialization), that many complications would be introduced into our lives (civilization), and finally, it would lead to alienation.⁷³ So, there is a danger of "enslaving" a person by technological progress and all kinds of technical means. We can see modern mass-media as an example of thoughtlessly using advanced technologies.

Juan Manuel Burgos rightly notes that there is no common goal to encompass all the members of this philosophical tradition. He does provide a list of countries that have "generated" these prominent representatives of personalism.⁷⁴ For my part, I would like to say a few words about the Russian personalist Nikolai Berdyaev who was mentioned several times by the author. Engagement has been identified in this essay as one of the most important Personalist ideas. It is closely related to the development of the creative nature of an individual, especially through an engagement in the arts. Here, we can find similarities between French and Russian personalists. The Russian personalist and Christian thinker Nikolay Berdyaev held that creation is the road towards an individual's freedom and the blossoming of a true spiritual self.⁷⁵ In accordance with the analogy of the human-creator, an individual, who creates, at the same time attains the role of the original creator (God). Any sincere act of creation can be compared with the creation of our world. Since God has absolute freedom in this world, humans who become closer to God get closer to their own freedom. So, according to Berdyaev, acts of creativity lead to more freedom for an individual. Certainly, a creative and artistic activity brings pleasure and satisfaction. The more creative and self-realized a person can be in a career, the freer and happier she would be in general, for example. There is an understanding of a person (personality) in the Russian Christian tradition, which is grounded in conceiving of the human being after the image and likeness of God as a Holy Trinity. In this long-standing Russian tradition, philosophical ideas about persons operated within that religious worldview.

According to Berdyaev, any profession may be creative by opening a person's potentials and skills. So, there is no necessity for young people to get the ideal diploma or be an exemplary scholar just to attain social status. If someone feels that he or she has found an activity which satisfies his or her own heart, then one should go with that opportunity. There is not only one way to open one's inner creativity, to find the creative self, because every person can display their own special talents in some field or another. Education should help every person through this difficult task of finding an individual path. Both a person and society (including the state) should be principally interested in the development of personhood and the disclosure of the best essential features of a person. This is an important task for any person and for her teachers, and ultimately, to the surroundings and society.

⁷² Burgos, *An Introduction*, p. 77.

⁷³ Mounier, *The Personalist Manifesto*, p. 73.

⁷⁴ Burgos, *An Introduction*, p. 33.

⁷⁵ Nikolai Berdyaev. (1994). *Философия свободного духа* [The Philosophy of Free Spirit]

The fruits of human activity and creativity are necessary for a person to live a full and complete life, and society also needs these goods. It turns out that this is a mutually beneficial process.

In our society, an employed person often perceives oneself as a thing that should be “rented”. If her qualities are not attractive enough for the market, she loses confidence and feels disposable. Even the term “labour market” itself equates a person and her capacity to work to a commodity for sale. Personalists criticized their contemporary society in which the possession of material goods was placed above the spiritual development of the individual. These factors of a market-driven society show us different manifestations of alienation, which were noticed by many philosophers and psychologists of the 20th century.

4. Personalism, ideologies and propaganda

In his book, Juan Manuel Burgos raises an important question: is personalism a philosophy, an ideology, a movement, or just a doctrine? Today, we can observe that personalism is not an accomplished and finalized philosophy. This is one of the reasons why it is not so widespread and well-known even in the broader discipline of philosophy. It combines elements of a social movement, intellectual action, and, of course, philosophy. Another important question is whether personalism is an ideology. Important personalist thinkers, such as Jacques Maritain and Jean Lacroix, criticized this assumption. According to them, personalism is not an ideology and cannot even become such a thing. Yet, at the same time, in our world today, most ideas could be converted into an ideology, if those ideas were found to be useful. This does not mean that personalism is an ideology, but it could be applied and considered that way. Of course, there are positive and negative aspects to this. On the one hand, personalism is based on positive ideas such as humanism, defending the dignity of the person, critical thinking, human freedom, and Christian values (as listed by Burgos). We cannot say that these values are harmful or negative if people start to share them and strive for them. It is obvious that governments use mass-media, internet, movies, books, and, of course, education, to promote preferred ideas. So, how could it be wrong if people have the same sort of opportunity to learn more about humanistic values? If those values were considered and presented as a truly normative standard for action in life (and not merely in words), that reception would help to spread the main personalist ideas.

Mass media has a huge set of tools for information transmission, including endless staff to receive and process information, a bright and entertaining form of presentation, opportunities to share information remotely, and many more simultaneous functions. Mass media can surely be used as a tool for educating and enlightening people. Broadening intellectual horizons online on the internet, along with educational TV and radio programming, offers greater accessibility than the route of obtaining a professional education. However, at the same time, it has its weaknesses because mass media does not use methods of teaching. This is because it lacks sufficient knowledge, skills, and abilities in the field of pedagogy. In addition, the information given by a teacher is typically verified first, and, as an academic, a teacher tries to convey emotionally neutral information to listeners. By contrast, mass media usually resorts to adding emotional colouring to the information provided.

On the other hand, if we are talking about ideology, we know that there are some special methods (including propaganda), that are used to spread ideological ideas. Here, those methods try to avoid any judgment from critical thinking, as we have already mentioned, and they also violate or attempt to bias the human freedom of choice. To succeed, any ideology needs the peoples’ support, rather than any analysis and freedom of thought. Hence, transforming personalism into an ideology

would diminish its philosophical component and would go against its basic tenets and principles. Philosophy should not be transformed into ideology to maintain its core and independence.

5. Conclusion

In the section “Concepts, Definitions, and Clarifications”. Burgos informs us about key characteristics of the terms “personalism” and “personalist” philosophy that were formed in the 20th century.⁷⁶ He also reflects on three dimensions of the person: the somatic, the psychological, and the spiritual.⁷⁷ Here the author refers to Karol Wojtyła and Viktor Frankl, and writes about body and soul, and the theme of personal embodiment in two genders (male or female). We must admit that today’s realities of life, with regard to gender, we no longer need to talk about limiting ourselves within that binary of a male/female system. Looking beyond that system, as we now can see that a person may not feel sure about one’s own gender or that a person may refuse to identify with one gender.

This example illustrates another important point, specifically, that personalism should consider all the personal and social changes that happen in life. As personalism upholds the person as its basic value and focal point, these changes must be noticed and considered for personalist philosophy to remain lively and relevant. That flexibility does not mean that there is no stable foundation to personalism, in which its principles are key points able to address the changes and needs of one’s time. The basic ideas of personalism must remain the same, as discussed by Burgos (Chapter 4). Therefore, this timeliness is about modifying the view of a person with the consequence of gaining a new understanding of a person as one’s self. Society should change to increase freedom in people’s lives and historical progress displays that increase to us. According to that trend, a person obtains more freedom for learning and understanding oneself. That is why we can ask more questions that should be considered by modern philosophy, including personalist philosophy.

Another important point here is religion. Traditionally, personalism is Christian or Judeo-Christian humanism.⁷⁸ This history raises the question whether it is possible to “extend” personalism towards an atheist humanism (Burgos, 2.1.3: “Personalism and Humanism”) or towards Buddhist, Muslim, or other sorts of religious humanism. This is also a question about origins, traditions, and further possibilities of development for personalism. I cannot see serious obstacles that might prevent this widening of personalism. Christian and Judeo-Christian traditions are common to European culture where personalist philosophy itself arose. At the same time, our globalizing and changing world could bring new influences and philosophical ideas that might also have the same basic humanistic ideas but may differ in their religious approach. Overall, religion itself should not become a stumbling block to bringing together people who share personalist views. Christianity itself teaches that a person should accept other people, to never condemn and judge them, and to try to look positively on the other and to regard them as “brothers” and “sisters”. Christian ethics promotes an engagement with human society, emphasizing love, loyalty, and compassion.

Burgos’s important and timely book reminds us about key points of personalism and its main representatives. It also raises questions, which are still highly relevant ever since the beginning and middle of the 20th century. These questions seem even more important today (questions such as: What is person? Who might be considered as a person? What is a person’s freedom and limitations?

⁷⁶ Burgos, *An Introduction*, p. 194.

⁷⁷ Burgos, *An Introduction*, p. 224.

⁷⁸ Burgos, *An Introduction*, p. 196.

How can we defend human dignity? How can people become engaged in their lives and the life of society? How can one resist alienation? and many further issues connected with valuing persons and personhood). Discussing those questions in the personalist manner, and bringing up this discussion beyond narrow bounds, would help to increase interest in the personalist philosophy and personalist ideas.