

# Juan Manuel Burgos, Response to Alfred Wierzbicki

## 1. Why in Twentieth Century?

I have found it truly fascinating and enriching the way in which Alfred Wierzbicki presents the reasons why personalism appears in the 20th century and, in particular, the connection it establishes with the terrible experiences that Europe endured through in its own two World Wars. The vital emergence of personalism is, without a doubt, linked to that experience as is reflected in the events and lives of Wojtyła and Von Hildebrand, both personalists and both struggling with collectivism that degrade and destroy human beings. Also, the distinction and connection that is made and highlighted by Wierzbicki between practice and theory also seems very valuable to me. Praxis can generate theory and theory can generate praxis, but they are not interchangeable and can remain independent. Not every vital or social experience produces a theoretical elaboration that provides it with self-awareness, which may cause damage to that experience which, lacking intellectual guidance and self-knowledge, may weaken or distort over time once the original impulse is lost or weakened. Fortunately, this is not what happened with personalism, which, created by Mounier to solve a social problem (and previously by Bowne in the United States), was transformed into theory and was thus able to survive over the decades. That is why we can still speak of personalism today.

I find some major discrepancy with the second part of his exposition, dedicated to personalist philosophy. Wierzbicki points out, first, that I distinguish between personalism and personalist philosophy. "Personalism is the spiritual idea of resistance against denial, humiliation and violation of the dignity of man and it assumes a form of a broad and non-unitary movement of 'personalist awakening'. And finally, personalist philosophy is a new philosophical system which puts the category of person at the centre of the discourse."

In fact, I do not really distinguish them, because for me they are identical. It is true that their distinction is interesting, but it seems to me too strong a distinction and, perhaps, the connection between praxis and theory that he himself postulated could be applied here. Is it possible to clearly distinguish the personalist movement from personalist ideas and their philosophical formulation? Mounier's personal struggle, for example, was based on a vision of the person crystallized in numerous works from which his followers drew, while those who opposed communism in Spain did not do so based on personalism (they were unaware of), but in his Christianity and in his search for freedom. For this reason, their battle was different. In the Spanish case, there was a vital response to an attack on their religion and his freedom, while Mounier, on the other hand, fought for a personalistic society founded on an intellectual project. That is why it was a different fight and why Mounier's fight lasted longer.

My point is, in short, that it does not seem possible to separate so easily personalism from personalist ideas or of the defence of a vision of the person understood from a personalist point of view. Personalists have not only defended the human being, something that Christianity has always tried to do, but also defended man understood as a person endowed with specific traits, which I point out in the book, and which Wierzbicki punctually collects thusly: "Personalism in philosophy offers understanding of the subjectivity of a person, allows to connect objective and subjective dimension of knowledge, to recognize the importance of freedom, to integrate subjectivity and emotionality, to understand the personalist meaning of body and sexuality, to analyse intersubjectivity and to establish solid and realistic basis for communitarian culture, and, last but not

least, to shed new light on good and evil and thereby to restore Ethics". Whether this set of philosophical and anthropological ideas is structured is another question, and one which I will try to answer below, but that does not mean that personalism, even reducing it to the thought of Mounier, which would be unfair to, is not based on a system of relatively structured ideas. It should also not be forgotten that the first personalist was Bowne, in America, who, already in 1905 wrote a book titled: *Personalism* (which influenced Martin Luther King). And this book brings us, once again, to the same point. I do not think it is possible to separate personalist attitudes from personalist philosophy. Both are inseparably intertwined if personalism is not confused with any movement that seeks the redemption of the human being.

## 2. Is personalist philosophy accomplished?

Turning now to the second part of Wierzbicki's comments, I will focus first on the subject of method. I must begin by pointing out, first, that the method proposed in *An Introduction* is not that of personalism in general, since personalists have used several, but the one that seems most appropriate to me and that is inspired by Wojtyła, that is, the method of "Integral Experience". I could add that this is one good example of the typical tension of chapter 4 (denounced with some reason by Seifert and to which I responded above) between a synthesis of personalism in general and *my* vision of personalism. In this case, however, there is no doubt about what I present is my position regarding the method that should be followed in personalism, which is inspired by Wojtyła, and which is the method that is adopted in "Integral Personalism".

Having clarified this point, I must add that I disagree with Wierzbicki when he affirms that this method, that is, Wojtyła's, is *the* phenomenological method<sup>42</sup>. This is obviously not true because Wojtyła does not expressly affirm it anywhere, indeed, he expressly separates himself from it by not using, for example, neither the *epoche*, nor the intuition of essences because Wojtyła does not expressly affirm it anywhere, indeed, he expressly separates himself from it by not using, for example, neither the *epoche*, nor the intuition of essences. And I am surprised that Wierzbicki affirms this so emphatically because we have talked directly about this topic, and I thought he shared my opinion. In any case, it seems easy to me to explain why Wierzbicki's position is not correct. Let us first provide a *direct* justification. Talking about a phenomenological method without *epoché* does not seem sustainable. *Epoché* is an essential key to Husserl's project and cannot be removed from phenomenology. If it is eliminated (as Seifert seems to do in the book quoted by Wierzbicki), we may have something akin to phenomenology and very interesting, but we certainly do not have phenomenology in the normal sense of the term.<sup>43</sup> Phenomenology bases its epistemology on the intuition of essences, an idea totally absent from Wojtyłian experience, which rejects any type of *a priori* structure in any possible sense. Finally, phenomenology performs a phenomenological analysis, but Wojtyła seeks an ontological analysis of reality, something very difficult to find in phenomenology.

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<sup>42</sup> See Juan Manuel Burgos. (2009). "The method of Karol Wojtyła: a way between phenomenology, personalism and metaphysics". In A.-T. Tymieniecka (Ed.) *Phenomenology and Existentialism in the Twentieth Century*. Book II. Serie "Analecta husserliana", Vol. 104, pp. 107-129; Juan Manuel Burgos. (2014). "Wojtyła y Husserl: una comparación metodológica", *Acta philosophica*, Vol. 2-23, pp. 263-288.

<sup>43</sup> I have studied in detail Seifert's proposal and, more generally, realist phenomenology in Juan Manuel Burgos. (2015). *La experiencia integral. Un método para el personalismo*. Madrid: Palabra, chap. 3.2 y 3.3.

We can now look to the indirect justification. *Person and Act*, surprisingly, begins with a small epistemological treatise which starts with a description of the experience: "Man's experience of anything outside of himself is always associated with the experience of himself, and he never experiences anything external without having at the same time the experience of himself."<sup>44</sup> Then, he goes on to explicate induction, the difference between experience and understanding, etc. Now, why does Wojtyła begin an anthropology book with epistemology? And, above all, what sense can these explanations have if Wojtyła uses the phenomenological method? If Wojtyła were using the phenomenological method, he would have limited himself to indicating this. But not only does he not say so, he starts by explaining his own epistemology because he is aware of its originality and, therefore, he must describe its main characteristics. Wierzbicki, on the contrary, states that "Wojtyła himself claims that his method is truly phenomenological", but this claim is not found in *Person and Action* or in any other text of his, and, if I am wrong, I would like him to provide the reference. A separate question is to what extent his proposal is close to the phenomenological method, which it is, no doubt, in some respects, but closeness is something very different from identification.

I would add, finally, that it is often difficult to capture the philosophical originality of personalism and this problem can make it difficult to grant it the philosophical consistency it deserves. This was the case, for example, for Ricoeur, who limited personalism, as Wierzbicki very well points out, to Mounier. But, somehow, we can also find this problem in Wierzbicki himself when he points out: "The personalist turn in philosophy corresponds to the original tendencies in phenomenology, existentialism and renewed Thomism to put person at the centre of philosophizing, and probably without the impact of these philosophies a new theoretical personalist orientation could never be achieved and personalism had to remain only the noble spiritual movement lacking philosophical consistency". I agree that personalism was influenced by these philosophical currents, but this does not mean that personalism is a mere corollary of those ideas.

In the aforementioned Wierzbicki quotation, for example, it seems to be taken for granted that many philosophies have put the person at the centre of philosophizing, but this is not the case at all. Existentialism, or much of it, did not even use the term "person" (Sartre, for example). And, Thomism, although it has used this notion, has never placed it as the heart of the matter either. This is because for Thomism and Neo-Thomism, the person is a substance, substance being the key notion of their anthropology. Lastly, and regarding phenomenology, Husserl did not think "from the person" nor did it consider the notion of person as the key notion of phenomenology, but rather focused on conscience. It is true we can find this philosophical approach in some disciples of the first hour, such as von Hildebrand and Edith Stein, this is precisely the reason that they are considered personalists.

I agree with Wierzbicki, finally, that personalism cannot aspire to fully explain the person, since the human being is not reducible to any philosophical categorization, including personalism. This mistake has been made many times throughout history and will probably continue to be made. I hope that will not be the case of personalism, but, at the same time, I hope too that awareness of their limitations should not prevent it to aspire to be the best philosophical categorization of the human being, that is, of the person.

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<sup>44</sup> Karol Wojtyła, *The Acting Person*, p. 3.