

## 2. Alfred Marek Wierzbicki

### Itinerary of personalism

The contribution of Juan Manuel Burgos' book, *An Introduction to Personalism*<sup>31</sup>, is twofold. First, the Spanish scholar offers an account of the historical development of the personalist movement and its main ideas. Second, he seeks also to put personalism in the terms of rigorous philosophical discourse. In other words, he attempts to show that personalism is not only a new wave in the contemporary mentality, but it is, or rather it should be, a new philosophy. I am going to comment on both aspects of Burgos' work. This allows for the opportunity to understand why personalism emerged relatively late in Western Thought. Further, it may allow us to prove whether a rich 20<sup>th</sup> century personalism has been achieved successfully to the point of a philosophical systematization.

### 1. Why in Twentieth Century?

Let me begin with the following question: Why did personalism come to the fore so late or why was it scarcely known and practiced before twentieth century? According to Burgos, the personalistic awakening was caused by the crisis of humanism in the age of the totalitarianism presented by communism, Nazism, fascism, and some other authoritarian ideologies. Because of the tension between individualism and collectivism, a value of the human individual as a value of the human community were overshadowed. Human dignity became subject to different kinds of violation and there was even the attempt to murder a whole ethnic or religious group as was the case of the Holocaust. In the face of such a denial of human dignity and real attack on human dignity, the scientifically oriented philosophy of positivism, which dominated in the last decades of the 20th century and in the first decades of 21st century, remained insufficient or even idle in dealing with the existential and moral questions of the men and women in search of the fundamental meaning of their lives. A more human-oriented philosophy emerged as a response to the anthropological crisis of the 20th century. Beside phenomenology, existentialism and Thomistic renewal, personalism also attempted to give an adequate intellectual answer to the most important questions of that era.

It is not easy to separate personalism from existentialism, phenomenology, nor from Thomism. Some eminent protagonists of personalism were adherents of those philosophies. Despite being involved in different ways of restoring personalist philosophy in the 20th century, and despite differences in their methods and sources, all the personalist thinkers propound the idea of the very exceptional significance of the reality of the human person. Therefore, the personalistic turn in philosophy seems to be broader than personalism or personalistic philosophy as declared by the philosophers who considered themselves to be the personalists.

It should not be forgotten that the name "personalism" was coined by Emmanuel Mounier to designate a revolutionary movement promoting the non-violent and non-collectivistic transformation of bourgeois society. In Mounier's understanding, the roots of personalism were primarily practical, for it aimed at providing an ethically consistent vision of social revolution. It would be pointless to speak about his alleged dependence on Marx since Mounier rejected violence

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<sup>31</sup> Juan Manuel Burgos, *An Introduction to Personalism*.

based on a class struggle paradigm of revolution. He cherished a dream of the personalistic revolution, which would solve the practical antinomy between individualism and collectivism. He hoped for a culture, which would be able to recognize and to restore the irreducible place of each person among the community of the persons. His idea of non-violent personalistic revolution was intimately associated with the idea of community, which itself had deeply ethical content.

In the last years of his life, as Burgos points out, Mounier became aware of presenting personalism not exclusively in the terms of an ethical attitude aiming at non-violent revolution, but also in terms of a philosophical theory. It does not matter so much that he failed in this project; what really matters is that he realized the need of unification of praxis and philosophy. In my opinion, it is not necessary that praxis is always preceded by theory. What is truly needed is philosophical reflection on the intuitions that emerge within moral experience. In this sense, morality which manifests itself in the human experience is prior to philosophy, including ethics, which is nothing else but philosophy of morality. The experience of the dignity of the person is prior to any philosophy of person. On the other hand, philosophical systematization sheds new light on the content of experience. One may even speak about circularity between experience and theory or between praxis and contemplation. Personalism seems to be a case of philosophy that arises from a strong ethical concern for real human persons, but it does not follow at all that philosophy itself is reducible to praxis.

I would like to extend my remarks concerning the relationship between experience, theory, and praxis to the historical context of the work of Wojtyła. In his letter to Henri de Lubac, he testifies to how the contemporary history of sufferings of millions of the people and degradation of the uniqueness of the human person had a decisive impact on his personalistic research in philosophy.<sup>32</sup> The shock caused by the immense denial of the dignity of the human person led him to think about mystery of the human person, which is endowed with the absolute dignity and, at the same time, vulnerable to a maximum. Behind his rigorous synthesis of the classical philosophy of being and the modern philosophy of consciousness stands his recognition of the reality and uniqueness of every human person. The realistic method to approach the reality (being) of the person requires the inclusion of consciousness as an essential aspect of the being of the person. His philosophical synthesis, which bridges two opposed philosophical paradigms, corresponds to the primordial data that awakened his sensibility to the truth about persons. Let me repeat once more: this is a concern for the good of the person, and in particular, a concern for the restoration of the violated good that compels a philosopher to rethink the whole philosophical tradition. In philosophy, On the one hand, Wojtyła's personalism is a response to the anthropological crisis and, on the other hand, to the weakness of philosophy which lacked realistic integrity.

How deeply his concern is practical is confirmed by the last chapter of *The Acting Person*<sup>33</sup> in which he discusses a theory of participation. In his vision, participation is just a remedy for alienation. He rejects the Marxist interpretation of alienation in terms of external economic and social relations. To understand the evil of alienation, one must grasp the truth about the self-fulfilment of the person in acting together with others. If a person is not affirmed for his/her own sake, there is no authentic participation, which presupposes not only sharing in the external goods, but first, sharing in the humanity of the other person. So personalism can be fully accomplished only if the practical level is achieved. Its philosophical novelty is related to its existential and practical vigour. Theory and praxis are inseparable and yet they are not identical.

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<sup>32</sup> See. H. de Lubac. (1993). *At the Service of the Church*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, pp.171-172.

<sup>33</sup> See. K. Wojtyła. (1979). *The Acting Person*. Dordrecht: D. Reidel, ch. VII.

Recognition of the practical character of personalism does not mean that every personalist book has direct impact on history. At the same times, the ideas and their creative potentiality go beyond the books. The Polish workers who initiated the non-violent revolution of Solidarność in 1980 were not readers of Wojtyła's philosophical books at all. In fact, only a few Catholic intellectuals were somehow acquainted with the philosophical thought of Cardinal Wojtyła from Cracow before he was elected Pope John Paul II in 1978. Nevertheless, Wojtyła's personalism was a seed that was put in the fertile soil and, so, it could bear a fruit in the history of Poland and other nations of Eastern Central Europe together with the collapse of communism in 1989. The personalist vision of man, work, politics, and culture was a core of the ethical message in the teaching of John Paul II. The personalist ideas were spread in his sermons and coincided with sentiments and desires of the people who strived for liberation from totalitarian oppression. St. John Paul II could become the spiritual leader of the non-violent revolution not because he himself directed social actions, but because the social and political activists found in his preaching the clarity of ideas to which they were committed. Such a dense synergy of theory and practice is very seldom found, and it is almost a miracle or ideal, which in the given conditions may become flash.

The life of Dietrich von Hildebrand offers an example of a personalist philosopher who opposed the evil of Nazism based on his Christian faith and in very advanced philosophical studies on value, personhood, and community. He was deeply convinced that idolatry of state, racism, and antisemitism are contradictory with the personalist world outlook. In his anti-Nazi papers, he constantly refers to the inviolability of human dignity and calls for a respect of it in every person. His personalism allows for the rejection of social and religious prejudices, for due to his personalism, he was extremely immune to racist propaganda and to any abuse caused by hostile feelings. He declares: "God is offended regardless of whether the victim of a murder is a Jew, a Socialist, or a bishop".<sup>34</sup> His ethical universalism is justified on account of his philosophical insights into the essence and the value of person. His practical anti-Nazi attitude, or as he calls it himself, a battle against Hitler, is clearly motivated by his philosophical views. Though we cannot say that von Hildebrand developed his personalist philosophy in response to Nazism, it is the case, however that emergence of the Nazi totalitarianism in Germany in the 1930s turned his attention to the question of the relationship between person and community. Von Hildebrand was not a revolutionary. He was just a philosopher who felt a responsibility to bear witness to the truth about the person. For this reason, his Anti-Nazi papers should not be treated as his marginal writings, even if in the domain of philosophy, they are secondary with respect to his chief works. They show how much personalism in the philosophy of 20<sup>th</sup> century is rooted in the tragic and dark history of that age.

Personalism is a philosophy of 20<sup>th</sup> century. It emerged after the crisis of the First World War (1914-1918) and grew in many intellectual circles after the Second World War (1939-1945). According to Burgos, "The whole complex combination of problems merged slowly and in very diverse ways into what has been called 'the personalist awakening.' Personalists became aware that to face these questions and, above all, to surpass them, it was necessary to have recourse to the concept of person and to construct, from there, a new philosophical project, a new anthropology".<sup>35</sup> The world after atrocities of total war and massive genocide was not the same as it was before. This was almost a common experience after 1945. The philosophical expression of the catastrophic condition of humankind was given by Theodor Adorno. His claim that poetry is no longer possible after Auschwitz is not to be understood in the naïve sense that nobody would write verses

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<sup>34</sup> D. Von Hildebrand, (2014). *My Battle Against Hitler. Faith, Truth, and Defiance in the Shadow of the Third Reich*. New York: Image, p. 82.

<sup>35</sup> Juan Manuel Burgos, *An Introduction*, p. 2.

thereafter, but that the humanism inspiring poets became dead together with the industrial, entirely depersonalized and systematized killing human beings. At the same time, Adorno claims that Hitler imposed the categorical imperative in a new way. Although according to Adorno, besides negative metaphysics, there cannot be any other philosophical way to ground a categorical imperative, the personalists point out the validity of a positive metaphysics of “person”.

There is obviously continuity between classical and modern philosophy of the person and contemporary personalism and personalist philosophy, and yet personalism is a new way of conceiving of human beings. This is because it bears the tremendous experience of the anthropological crisis of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The Christian concept of the person supplemented a gap in the categories of the classical Greek metaphysics. Though it entered to the vocabulary of Christian theology to solve Trinitarian and Christological questions, it was a philosophical concept, which did not abolish a metaphysics of substance, but differentiated and enlarged it. The metaphysical significance of the category of person grasps the thought of St. Thomas Aquinas when he says: *persona est aliquid perfectissimum in tota natura, scilicet substantia*. The ethical significance of the same category is only grasped by Kant in his famous personalistic formulation of the categorical imperative. However, it cannot be said about Aquinas or Kant that they were personalists, for they lacked the dark experience of the total negation of the human dignity by means of the political totalitarian systems. Personalism assumes its philosophical shape as a response to the radical negation of the absolute value of person or, in other words, it arises from the double awareness of the dignity of the person and its vulnerability.

Perhaps most contemporary people who live today, already 75 years after the end of World War II. is not capable of perceiving the true depth of the personalistic revolution in defence of the sinking culture of traditional humanism. Should this mean the end of personalism? Even if we do not face so extreme attacks on the lives of the human persons, our Western Civilization is far from being the best world among all possible ones. Human ontological greatness is constantly and almost progressively neglected. The amount of alienation is growing tremendously. Personalism was born as a pure voice in the time of darkness and somewhat similar voices are to be listened to also in our days without pronouncing a mere word “person”. It seems that words such as “tenderness” assume nowadays a cultural power to inspire spiritual revolution similarly like was once the case with the word “person” a few decades ago. It is the key concept in presenting Gospel by Pope Francis. The Polish Noble Prize Winner Olga Tokarczuk, who is the secular postmodern writer, presents the task of a writer to become a tender narrator. The great quest for spirituality in her novels does not come from Christian sources and goes beside Christian personalist imaginary and, nevertheless, it portrays the same sensibility to the uniqueness of the human existence, which requires a response of the human heart, a response which may be called just tenderness.

## 2. Is personalist philosophy accomplished?

As I have mentioned in the beginning of my essay, Burgos' contribution to the debate about personalism is not limited to a mere historical account, but rather, the Spanish philosopher aspires also to outline the chief characteristics of the personalist philosophy. His true theoretical achievement, in my opinion, is a clear distinction between: 1) philosophy of person, 2) personalism, and 3) personalist philosophy. Philosophy of person is a part of the legacy of classical Christian philosophy and of modernity. Personalism is the spiritual idea of resistance against denial, humiliation, and the 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 that puts the category of person at the centre of philosophical discourse. Now is the question that shows the problem to be discussed: Is personalist philosophy an entirely new school of philosophy or should it be treated as a continuation of some previous philosophies in their new transformation?

Burgos maintains that most personalists make use of a specific personalist method. Instead of projecting the general categories of all manners of being, they seek to explore the richness of data accessible through the direct experience of the person. Thus, the analysis of the person's ego and its ontological density leads to grasping the difference between person and non-person, and further, to conceive of being in the light of disclosure of being in personhood. Though this method resembles the phenomenological method, according to Burgos, it is not identical with it. He argues that because of the use of *epoche*, the phenomenological method is deprived of realism.

His critique of *epoche* is correct. But already Roman Ingarden, as a young disciple of Edmund Husserl, pointed out that it deviated Husserl's philosophy from its original realistic aspiration and therefore moved phenomenology toward idealism. In fact, Ingarden and other realist phenomenologists do not consider *epoche* to be necessary in a phenomenological approach to reality. On the contrary, they see in it a source of some of Husserl's errors. This issue is broadly presented in an excellent book of Josef Seifert in which he attempts to lay bare the phenomenological foundations of classical realism.<sup>36</sup> He proves that knowledge of an object is objective and transcendent and does not presuppose a method of *epoche*, but that knowledge rather needs to be based on the direct intuition of a thing in itself. Without entering into the details at this point, we may notice inner controversy within phenomenology concerning the phenomenological method.

Burgos' distinction between personalist and phenomenological methods seems to be supported by an account of the philosophical methodology in a major work of Wojtyła. The starting point for the personalist analysis is the experience of a person in acting. But Wojtyła himself claims that his method is truly phenomenological and that any metaphysics of "person", which is accomplished as a goal of his philosophical investigation cannot be anything else than trans-phenomenology. This interpretation is entirely confirmed by the study of Rodrigo Guerra López on Wojtyła's philosophical method. According to him the metaphysics of person in Wojtyła's work possesses phenomenological foundations and therefore turns us back to things in themselves, which, in turn, means back to person.<sup>37</sup> At least with respect to Wojtyła's philosophical method, we should correctly say that his personalist method overlaps with phenomenological method, but it may be also extended to some other outstanding personalist philosophers to conclude that personalist method belongs to phenomenology unless one limits it to a work of its founder. Therefore, it is more so necessary to distinguish different currents of phenomenology and their correspondingly diverse methods than to separate personalist method from phenomenological method.

My objection to Burgos' view on personalist method does not touch the core of his claim concerning the existence of the original personalist school in philosophy. "This intellectual process which has transformed the anonymous rationalist subject into a singular and unrepeatable person, and converted a *what* with a human nature into a personal and irreducible *who*, can be described as the *personalist turn of contemporary philosophy*, to which practically all the personalist philosophers

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<sup>36</sup> See Josef Seifert. (1987). *Back to Things in Themselves. A Phenomenological Foundation for Classical Realism*. New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, pp. 77-117.

<sup>37</sup> See Rodrigo Guerra. (2002). *Volver a la persona. El método filosófico de Karol Wojtyła*, Madrid: Caparrós Editores.

have contributed: Marías, Wojtyła, Marcel, Guardini, Polo, Zubiri, Mounier, and so on.<sup>38</sup> The personalist turn consists in passage from cosmological accounts in anthropology like “homo animal rationale” or “homo microcosmos” to attention to that what is irreducible in man. That is, it turns attention to his subjectivity, which manifests itself in the lived experience<sup>39</sup>. So, the personalist turn in philosophy involves a reversal of relationship between anthropology and a theory of being. In the cosmological approach to man, anthropology is derived from general ontology, while personalist philosophy discovers a new way to conceive of being. Robert Spaemann goes so far to hold that perception of person is a paradigm of perception of being.<sup>40</sup> Such a view does not abolish realistic metaphysics and cannot lead to subjectivism, On the contrary, it strengthens the evidence of the real existence of being in its tremendous ontological division in “Someone” and “Something”. Person is a paradigm of being since “Someone” possesses a higher ontological density than “Something.” In a certain sense, personalist philosophy arrives to the point, which was always in the horizon of the classical metaphysics, and which dared to ask a question about a real being (*ontōn on*). This question is not new, for it encouraged Greeks to think metaphysically, but new is an answer which is given by the personalist philosophers.

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 would have had to remain only a noble spiritual movement lacking philosophical consistency. Burgos outlines a proposal of a singular personalist philosophy by considering the main theoretical achievements of the personalists. Personalism in philosophy offers understanding of the subjectivity of a person, allows for a connection between objective and subjective dimensions of knowledge, for the recognition of the importance of freedom, to integrate subjectivity and emotionality, to understand the personalist meaning of body and sexuality, to analyze inter-subjectivity, to establish solid and realistic bases for communitarian culture, and, last but not least, to shed new light on good and evil, and thereby, to restore Ethics. I believe this is not an eclectic list of the personalist topics since they all may be derived from the same principle, and, namely, from an analysis of the difference between “Who” and “What.” Personalist philosophy has its own principle around which all problems of philosophy are set up. Even if concepts like subjectivity, identity, substance, subsistence, cognition, freedom, soul-body relations, and inter-subjectivity were discussed in the different traditions of classical philosophy and particularly in modernity, personalist philosophy gives to them fuller meaning in the light of *mystery of person*. Thus, personalism considered as an attitude from which arises personalist philosophy protects the “object of philosophy” which is a person from any reduction to a mere object. In this sense, we may say that personalist Ethics is not only a separate field of inquiry by personalist philosophy with its own subject matter, but it constitutes, above all, the hidden roots of personalist philosophy, for to know a person is to affirm him or her for his or her own sake. Similarly, to know a person is to be in relation to a person and to render to them their due value response. This ethical density of personalist philosophy corresponds to the metaphysical density of such a being like person.

It is necessary to agree with a paradox of Paul Ricoeur who says: “personalism is dead, the person returns.”<sup>41</sup> Obviously, he expresses the critical evaluation of personalism as it had been

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<sup>38</sup> Juan Manuel Burgos, *An Introduction*, p. 223.

<sup>39</sup> See. K. Wojtyła. (1978). *Subjectivity and the Irreducible in Man*, “Analecta Husserliana”, vol. VII.

<sup>40</sup> See. R. Spaemann. (2017). *Persons. The Difference between “Someone” and “Something”*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>41</sup> Paul Ricoeur. (1983). “Meurt le personalism, revient la person”, *Esprit*, Vol. 73, n. 1, pp. 113-119.

conceived of by Mounier in terms of the social spiritual revolution. But his remark may be also referred to such as an equally ambitious claim/project like personalist philosophy. For the reality of the person is deeper and greater than any philosophical attempt, which aims to systematize it. The itinerary and goals of personalism cannot be concluded in philosophy, and yet philosophy is indispensable to make personalism alive. Practical and theoretical dimensions of personalism are intimately interwoven, and therefore, personalist philosophy has also a task to reinforce personalism as an attitude, a culture, and as praxis.