

PERSONALISM AND METAPHYSICS

IS PERSONALISM A FIRST
PHILOSOPHY?

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Philosophy of Personalism



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Introduction

Personalism was born in the twentieth century with the vocation to understand the person as a whole, in his or her complexity and in his or her unity. It was framed within the wide current of the development of philosophical anthropology which had practically just begun, but it did so from a specific understanding of the human being. The human being was unique and unrepeatable, a bodily *who*; he possessed a subjectivity which constituted him as a person; he was free and capable of self-determining himself; affectivity, which reached the spirit through the heart, formed an essential part of his being; he was the result of an interpersonal relationship and he lived in the framework of these type of relationships; he was not only temporal, but biographical and destined for a transcendent end, etc.

These features, and others which could be added, were recognized little by little and not without effort, inasmuch as they were a relevant philosophical novelty, as a powerful contribution to the comprehension of the human being, which contributed elements that either up to that moment had not been recognized, or, although known, were seen with a new depth which illuminated the path of comprehension of the human being.¹

As these contributions were being consolidated and, to some extent, became common patrimony, other topics began to develop and sought an answer. Was there some type of system or structure – not a closed one, of course – which could give foundation to these anthropological novelties? Were they part of a common vision which could be written, related, and told? Did personalism possess some method of specific knowledge, a way of accessing reality, that

¹ Personalism is a broad current with many subcurrents. The main and most widespread, today, is of European origin and fundamentally realistic in character (Wojtyła, Maritain, Von Hildebrand, Stein, Levinas, Zubiri, Marías, Marion, etc.). In addition, there is the Anglo-American current, with initially idealistic characteristics, which has its origin in a certain dependence on German idealism (Bowne, Pringle-Pattison, Brightman, etc.). The author of these pages moves in the field of European realist personalism. Two references that offer a global vision of personalism (European and American) are Juan Manuel Burgos, *An Introduction to Personalism* (Washington, DC: CUA Press, 2018), and J. N. Mortensen, *The Common Good. An introduction to personalism* (Wilmington: Vernon Press, 2017). A specific view of the origins of Anglo-American personalism in J. O. Bengtsson, *The worldview of personalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006). A brief comparison between the two in Juan Manuel Burgos, “Anglo-American and European personalism: A dialogue on idealism and realism,” *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 93, n. 3, Summer 2019, 483-495.

could account for its anthropology? Or was it limited to using methods borrowed from other philosophical projects? Could this new anthropology be applied to the areas of knowledge that, in a more or less direct way, are sustained by anthropology, such as psychology, education or bioethics?

The work of personalists in the second half of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first has attempted to respond to these questions. Personally, I have tried to contribute with the proposal of the method of integral experience, and a systematization of personalist anthropology and of its philosophical keys.² But there is still a question pending a satisfactory resolution: *the philosophical scope of personalism* or, in other words, *its position and status in the framework of the whole of philosophy*. It is necessary to establish the ultimate value of the personalist theses and their dependence on or independence from other areas of philosophical knowledge. And this implies, in particular, establishing their dependence on or independence from *metaphysics*, that area of knowledge traditionally considered to be the first and foundational area of all philosophy.

This matter is important, especially if one moves within the broad framework of what is called realist philosophy. This tradition has tended to consider metaphysics as the most radical³ area of knowledge, on which all the others depend. And, if this were true, we would have as an outcome that *personalism, inasmuch as it is anthropology, would also depend on metaphysics* and, in some way, should also submit to the latter's imperium and rules. First would come metaphysics and then personalism. Personalism would contribute significant anthropological novelties, but it would always be a step behind the foundational area of knowledge *par excellence*: metaphysics. Is this true?

Furthermore, the modern tradition has rejected this way of thinking. For a large portion of philosophy after Descartes, traditional metaphysics has no *raison d'être*, and may be considered as an artificial and abstruse attempt to answer questions that cannot be answered. Thus, traditional metaphysics' answers, and especially those of rationalist metaphysics, would be no more than fallacies that would have to be discarded and left aside, emigrating to the solid and thankful field of anthropology, proximate, accessible, and provable, to the extent that philosophy can be. From this perspective, anthropology – and, therefore, personalism – would possess a rank *as first philosophy*. Does personalism accept this way of seeing things or, on the contrary, does it

² Juan Manuel Burgos, *Personalist Anthropology: a philosophical guide to life* (Vernon Press: Wilmington, 2022).

³ [Translator's note: Throughout this work, "radical" is used in its etymological sense. That is, as relating to the roots of something, its most profound and fundamental aspects.]

consider that metaphysics – in a sense that would have to be specified – continues to be necessary and perhaps primary?

These are the questions – difficult but important – that we want to take on in these pages. The philosophical status of personalism is in play, as is the value of metaphysics in a world that no longer seems to accept it. Does one seek, with this rejection, to attack values of which metaphysics would be the final and decisive guardian? Or is it simply that anthropology (and other related sciences) has forced metaphysics into early retirement due to its inability to adapt to the times?

One final consideration. Personalism is a unitary philosophy, but also a diverse one. There are different types of personalism and not all of them are interested in metaphysics, nor would they respond in an identical way to the questions we have just posed. Thus, it is worth the effort to specify that this book is written from a specific personalist position: *Integral Personalism*⁴, which is based on the anthropology of Karol Wojtyła, as it is expressed in *Person and Action*, and the contributions of the author of these pages.⁵ In contrast to other personalisms, this one claims to be explicitly ontological and to maintain a connection with the classical tradition. And since, for this tradition, metaphysics is the final depository of that vision, it is especially important for this type of personalism to study this relationship and attempt to establish how and to what extent metaphysics is necessary as a foundation for this perspective.

Before beginning, I want to thank Professor Víctor Tirado, Dean of the School of Philosophy at the University San Dámaso (Madrid, Spain), for the decisive push he gave to this book by “obligating” me to think once again about these questions on the occasion of the invitation to impart a course in this university in June 2018. I also want to thank the Universidad Popular Autónoma del Estado de Puebla (UPAEP) for having facilitated the ulterior development of the book during my stay at this university in August 2018, in which I imparted the same course. The questions, critiques, suggestions, and commentaries of the participants were of great help to me in rethinking these complex questions and better clarifying the content of this work. In this task, the contributions of professor and friend Jorge Medina were especially gratifying and valuable. Lastly, I would like to thank my friend Benjamin Wilkinson for his effort and dedication in translating another book of mine into English.

⁴ The denomination Integral Personalism substituted the previous denomination, Modern Ontological Personalism, which was very descriptive of its content, but a little cumbersome.

⁵ Karol Wojtyła, *Person and Act and Related Essays* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2021). The connection between Wojtyła and Integral personalism is explained in Juan Manuel Burgos, “Wojtyła’s Personalism as Integral Personalism. The future of an Intellectual Project,” *Questiones Disputatae*, vol 9. N. 2 (2019), pp. 91-111.

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