

# Personalism and Global Bioethics: The contribution of the Modern Ontological Personalism of J. M. Burgos

*Personalismo y Bioética Global: la contribución  
del personalismo ontológico moderno de J. M. Burgos*

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**Resumen:** La *Enciclopedia de Bioética Global* (Springer, 2015) incluye una entrada sobre personalismo realizada por el académico estadounidense Thomas O. Buford, lo que constituye una nueva oportunidad para que el personalismo pueda influir en el diálogo internacional. Buford sugiere que una bioética plenamente desarrollada y defendible debe tener dos características: 1) un fundamento metafísico de la dignidad humana y 2) una teoría de las personas.

Siguiendo el ejemplo de Buford, este trabajo considera la contribución potencial a la bioética global del personalismo ontológico moderno en la obra de Juan Manuel Burgos. El personalismo ontológico moderno ve a la persona como la clave de su arquitectura conceptual, y desarrolla su pensamiento en categorías específicas para la persona que se concreta, por ejemplo, en la importancia fundamental de la afectividad, la dimensión social de la persona, la primacía de la acción, y una rica comprensión del cuerpo humano entendido como la primera manifestación de la persona, que abarca las dimensiones físicas, biológicas y espirituales. Esta nueva perspectiva parece tener capacidad para promover el diálogo sobre diversos temas relativos a la salud, incluyendo los inicios de la vida, la naturaleza de la salud y la enfermedad, la genética, la final de la toma de decisiones en las fases finales de la vida, la autonomía y el consentimiento informado, y los temas ecológicos más amplios relativos al uso de la tierra y del agua como su impacto en la salud mundial.

**Palabras clave:** J. M. Burgos, bioética global, personalismo ontológico moderno, personalismo, la antropología filosófica.

**Abstract:** The *Encyclopedia of Global Bioethics* (Springer, 2015) includes an entry on "Personalism" by American scholar Thomas O. Buford, thereby presenting a new opportunity for personalist thought to influence interna-

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tional dialogue. Buford suggests a fully developed and defensible bioethics must have two characteristics, 1) a metaphysical foundation for human dignity and 2) a theory of persons.

Following Buford's lead, this paper considers the potential contribution to Global Bioethics of Modern Ontological Personalism in the work of Juan Manuel Burgos. Modern Ontological Personalism sees person as the key to its conceptual architecture, and develops its thinking in categories specific to persons as embodied, the fundamental importance of affective life, persons as social, and the primacy of action, and a rich understanding the human body as the first manifestation of the person, encompassing physical, biological and spiritual dimensions. This new perspective seems to have a big potential in promoting dialogue on a variety of health care issues, including the beginnings of life, the nature of health and illness, genetics, end of life decision making, autonomy and informed consent, and larger ecological issues of land and water use as it impacts global health.

**Keywords:** J. M. Burgos, global bioethics, modern ontological personalism, personalism, philosophical anthropology.

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## 1. Introduction

Springer Publication's new *Encyclopedia of Global Bioethics* includes an entry on "Personalism" by American personalist scholar Thomas O. Buford, bringing personalist philosophy to an international dialogue in a new way. In this article, Buford identifies two interrelated ways that personalist philosophy can contribute to the development of Global Bioethics: first, through articulating a metaphysical foundation for the dignity of persons, and second, by presenting a theory of persons. He identified a number of topics in bioethics that can be dealt with from a personalist perspective, including the allocation of limited healthcare resources, the uses and limits of genetic manipulation in medicine, informed consent, death and dying, family relations and the use of limited land and water resources as they impact global health<sup>1</sup>. I would like to follow Tom's lead today by considering a vision of Person in the context of the international bioethical debate.

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<sup>1</sup> TH. O. BUFORD, "Personalism" in *Encyclopedia of Global Bioethics*. Springer, Dordrecht, 2015. With regard to bioethics and personalism, see also J. M. BURGOS *¿Qué es la bioética personalista? Un análisis de su especificidad y de sus fundamentos teóricos (What is personalist bioethics?: An analysis of its specificity and its theoretical foundations)* en "Cuadernos de Bioética", 24, n.º. 1 (2013), pp. 17-28.

## 1.1 Sources and Traditions

There are multiple personalist traditions arising from different parts of the world and from different religious traditions: American personalism, British personalism, European personalism in many manifestations, African personalism, Hindu personalism, Buddhist personalism, Islamic personalism, Christian personalism. In his Global Bioethics article Buford focuses on the American tradition founded by Borden Parker Bowne. I would like to approach the same topic from a complementary perspective, that of the Modern Ontological Personalism developed by Spain's Juan Manuel Burgos and first presented to an English-speaking community of scholars at the ICP conference in Lund, Sweden two years ago. That presentation has developed into a continuing conversation, most recently at the British Personalist Forum at Oxford this past March<sup>2</sup>.

## 1.2 Global Bioethics

The term “global bioethics” has arisen in the context of the wider discussion of “globalization”, a conversation that recognizes that the world is far more interconnected technologically and economically now than was understood even a decade ago, and equally important, the growing realization that human impact on the environment as a global phenomenon with an ethical dimension<sup>3</sup>.

In this context, what is it that makes *bioethics* global in nature? In 1988, Potter used the term “global bioethics” to describe “biology combined with diverse humanistic knowledge forging a science that sets a system of medical and environmental priorities for acceptable survival”<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> J. M. BURGOS, “Comprehensive Experience (*experientia integral*): A New Proposal on the Beginning of Knowledge”. British Personalist Forum Conference, “British Contributions to Personalist Philosophy”, Oriel College, Oxford, England, 18-19 March, 2015. Note: English language quotes from Burgos’ work are my own.

<sup>3</sup> CH. KLEIST, “Global Ethics”, in *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, characterizes global ethics this way: “Globalization, broadly construed, is manifested in various forms of social activity including economic, political and cultural life. Practicing global ethics entails moral reasoning across borders. Borders can entail culture, religion, ethnicity, gender, race, class, sexuality, global location, historical experience, environment, species and nations. Ethicists ask how we best address issues of globalization—that is, how we begin to address conflicts that arise when vastly different cultural norms, values, and practices collide”.

<sup>4</sup> P. VAN RENSSLAER, *Global Bioethics: Building on the Leopold Legacy*, Michigan State University Press, East Lansing, 1988. *Project MUSE*. Web. 25 Jun. 2015. <<https://muse.jhu.edu/>>. Accessed 2 June, 2015. He coined the term “bioethics” in 1970 as a discipline that sought to integrate “biology, ecology, medicine and human values”. Even then, he noted the connection between bioethics and environmental ethics, though these were not necessarily linked in the minds of many at the time.

These descriptions have in common an attempt to recognize the deep interconnection of human life across the globe, life lived in a shared environment, each impacting the other which will be made explicit at the international conference on climate change to be held in Paris December 2015 and addressed earlier this year by Pope Francis in his encyclical *Laudato Si*. This contemporary understanding of the deep interconnectedness of human life with the environment provides fertile ground for personalism to deepen the bioethical dialogue.

### 1.3 Global Healthcare

There is a need for a concerted effort to address health care on an international scale. Recent data from the World Health Organization, which maintains statistics on health across the globe, gives ample evidence of the need for an increase in health care organization and delivery. For example, at the global-environmental level they documented some 7 million deaths from air pollution, with deaths among children under the age of five at the highest rates in Africa and Southeast Asia<sup>5</sup>. Deaths related to burden of disease from inadequate water, sanitation and hygiene in low and middle-income countries number in the thousands in many countries worldwide<sup>6</sup>. Deaths from disease number in the millions worldwide<sup>7</sup>. In addition, the health care workforce, the

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<sup>5</sup> 306,600 deaths for children under five in Africa, 155,800 in Southeast Asia, and 8,100 in low and middle countries of the Americas. Source: World Health Organization, *Global Health Observatory Data Repository*, "Deaths, Data by Region", at [www.who.int/gho/data/node.mainGHECOD?lang=en](http://www.who.int/gho/data/node.mainGHECOD?lang=en). Accessed July 3, 2015.

<sup>6</sup> Death rates from inadequate water, sanitation and hygiene per 100,000 in 2012 included Democratic Republic of Congo (65.8), Angola (65.5), Central African Republic (65.3), Sierra Leone (55.4), Chad (54.3), Burundi (42.5), Nigeria (30.7), Niger (39.6), Mali (35.8), Sudan (20.3), (India 15.6). Data by country is available at the World Health Organization, "Burden of disease".

"Inadequate water, sanitation and hygiene in low- and middle-income countries", <http://apps.who.int/gho/data/node.main.INADEQUATEWSH?lang=en>. Accessed 3 July 2015.

In addition, life expectancy varies greatly by region. WHO reported the following data for 2013 life expectancy: Africa, 58; Americas, 76; Southeast Asia, 67; Europe 76; Eastern Mediterranean 68; Western Pacific 76. See <http://apps.who.int/gho/data/view.main.690?lang=en>. Accessed 3 July 2015.

<sup>7</sup> WHO data as follows: Estimated deaths for the years 2000-2012 were 55, 843,142 for all ages and causes including communicable diseases, infectious and parasitic diseases, tuberculosis, sexually transmitted diseases, diarrheal diseases, measles, meningitis, encephalitis, hepatitis, preterm birth complications, birth trauma, neonatal sepsis and infections, malnutrition. Data for each of these disease categories is available at the World Health Organization, "Causes of Death", at [who.int/gho/data/node.main.GHECOD?lang=en](http://who.int/gho/data/node.main.GHECOD?lang=en). Accessed 3 July 2015.

availability of health care technology, and distribution of resources varies widely by country and region<sup>8</sup>.

I would like to suggest that, following Buford's insights, considering an adequate theory of person can provide a basis for discussion across cultural and political boundaries to inform debates about health care on a global scale, to the betterment of the human condition.

## 2. Theory of Person

To do this, I would like to focus specifically on Juan Manuel Burgos' 2013 book *Anthropology: A Guide to Existence*<sup>9</sup>, in which he gives sustained attention to the nature of person and the role of our bodies in our personhood, factors of ongoing concern to bioethics<sup>10</sup>. Modern Ontological Personalism has several defining characteristics. I will touch on these main characteristics briefly, and then move to more specific focus on the body as a central concern of bioethics, but the body as understood in a personalist context.

For Burgos, personalism encompasses the following features:

1. In common with all personal philosophy, *the structural centrality of person* in philosophical anthropology and metaphysics.
2. The importance of using *categories both specific and exclusive* to persons, rather than adding to animal or biological categories in order to define persons. We are not "animals-plus", but persons. Among these categories he names reason, freedom, human dy-

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<sup>8</sup> For data on the geographic distribution of health care workers, see the "Health Systems" section of the World Health Organization website, [www.who.int](http://www.who.int). Accessed 3 July, 2015.

<sup>9</sup> J. M. BURGOS, *Antropología: Una guía para la existencia*, 5ª edición. Palabra, Madrid, 2013 (hereafter *Antropología*). Burgos presents his philosophical anthropology in detail in this work. For an overview of his broader personalist perspective and the structure of Modern Ontological Personalism, see J. M. BURGOS, *Introducción al personalismo*, Palabra, Madrid, 2012, especially Chapter IV, "La Filosofía personalista: Una propuesta." In addition, Burgos has addressed the topic of bioethics directly in J. M. BURGOS, *¿Qué es la bioética personalista? Un análisis de su especificidad y de sus fundamentos teóricos* (*What is personalist bioethics?: An analysis of its specificity and its theoretical foundations*). "Cuadernos de Bioética", 24, n.º. 1 (2013). In this article he references the work of Italian scholar Elio Sgreccia, in E. SGRECCIA, *Manuale di bioetica* (2 vol.) (3ª ed.), Vita e Pensiero, Milano, 1999. It should be noted that Sgreccia moves from a personalist position, in his case explicitly Thomistic, which differs from the Modern Ontological Personalism of Burgos in several respects.

<sup>10</sup> J. M. BURGOS, *Antropología: Una guía para la existencia*, Chapter 2, "El cuerpo", pp. 67-84.

namism, the good<sup>11</sup>. The question then becomes not “*What* is a person?” But “*Who* is a person?”<sup>12</sup>.

3. *Past and Present*: Burgos has, in his writings, engaged in a dialogue within the broad Western philosophical tradition, taking what is best from past tradition and integrating it with the categories of modernity (such as subjectivity, consciousness, action and the self).

In this personalist context, Burgos has developed a philosophical anthropology that takes into account the multiple features of the human person, attempting to avoid dualist and monist notions of person, and instead embracing a unified and interpenetrating vision that he describes as body, psyche and spirit<sup>13</sup>. An essential feature of this unity is the interrelatedness of these three dimensions or levels, each impacting the other. He also engages in a rehabilitation of our emotional life as a “primary anthropological dimension”<sup>14</sup>, as well as to the social nature of the person grounded in the dynamism of human action internally, between persons, and in the larger context of person and community. Within this context, he presents a personalist vision of embodiment that is, I want to suggest, useful for the broader bioethical debate. Persons, for Burgos, cannot ultimately be defined, but rather described, through a series of successive approximations examining the different but integral dimensions of persons, including personal continuity through change, intimacy and subjectivity, the body understood in a personalist context, and the dignity of persons as an intrinsic and constitutive dimension of who we are, a dignity that is absolute

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<sup>11</sup> J. M. BURGOS, *Antropología: Una guía para la existencia*, p. 20. Burgos contends that animal categories and analogies, are incapable of fully capturing who we are as persons, meaning that the biological categories of nineteenth century science on the one hand the material and mechanical categories of the early Scientific Revolution on the other cannot capture persons in their uniqueness. In addition, John Macmurray has written of the need to begin with persons, and that our categories of organic/biological and mechanical/material are achieved by a process of subtraction from the personal. See John Macmurray, *Interpreting the Universe* Amherst, New York: Humanity Books, 1993 (originally published 1933), and his later works, *The Self as Agent* (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1995, first published in 1957) and *Persons in Relation* (New Jersey: Humanities Press International, 1993, first published 1961).

<sup>12</sup> On the transition of the question from “What?” to “Who?”, See also Robert Spaemann. *Persons: The difference between ‘Someone’ and ‘Something.’* Trans Oliver O’Donovan. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996 especially Chapter 3, “How We Identify Persons”, and Chapter 18, “Are All Human Beings Persons?”

<sup>13</sup> J. M. BURGOS, “A New Personalistic Proposal: Modern Ontological Personalism”. Paper presented at the *12th International Conference on Persons*, Lund, Sweden, 7 August 2013, p. 9.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

and that cannot be instrumentalized, diminished or substituted by something else, such as biomedical concepts of respect and autonomy<sup>15</sup>.

From the perspective of modern ontological personalism, Burgos develops a vision of the human person in which “person” serves as a radical philosophical concept. A key notion from the phenomenological aspect of Burgos’ personalist methodology, men and women are beings who possess an intrinsic perfection that distinguishes them from the rest of the natural world and “this perfection has a specific name: dignity” and dignity possessed in a “radical sense”<sup>16</sup>. This dignity, for Burgos, has several practical consequences for philosophical anthropology; dignity is both intrinsic and constitutive of persons, and persons cannot be viewed or treated merely as means to an end because the value of persons is absolute. This dignity is the foundation of human rights, and each person, each man and woman, is unrepeatable and unsubstutable<sup>17</sup>. It is within this broader vision that the human body is understood, including the interaction of persons with the health care system.

### 3. Person, Body, Bioethics

Given that medical care intimately involves every aspect of the human body (and consequently, of the person), my focus is the bodily aspect of Burgos’ examination of persons as a route to consideration of Global Bioethics. In his consideration of the bodily aspect of persons, Burgos presents three dimensions: corporeality, specialization, and a personalist anthropology of embodiment.

#### 3.1 Someone Corporeal

In the second chapter of his *Anthropology: A Guide for Existence*, Burgos considers the human body from a personalist perspective. He describes the body as “the first manifestation of the person”, as a dimension of being a person. We are “someone corporeal”. He puts it this way:

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<sup>15</sup> J. M. BURGOS, *Antropología: una guía para la existencia*, Chapter One, “The Person: Dignity and Mystery” especially section 3, “The dignity of the person”, pp. 47-52. In addition, Burgos identifies further elements of a personalistic approach to bioethics in the Modern Ontological Personalist tradition, including the influence of the pro-life movement, the role of the magisterium of the Catholic Church, and the importance of a realist philosophy as the basis for personalist bioethics. See J. M. BURGOS, *¿Qué es la bioética personalista? Un análisis de su especificidad y de sus fundamentos teóricos (What is personalist bioethics? An analysis of its specificity and its theoretical foundations)*, cit., pp. 17-28.

<sup>16</sup> J. M. BURGOS, *Antropología: una guía para la existencia*, cit., p. 48.

<sup>17</sup> See J. M. BURGOS, *Antropología: una guía para la existencia*, cit., pp. 48-50.

“a human being is a corporeal being, that is to say, that human existence cannot be comprehended without thinking of the body. In each human action (external or internal) corporeality is implicated. One way to express this fact is to affirm: ‘I am body’, but it is more precise and less ambiguous to say: ‘I am corporeal’. That is to say, I, a person, a spiritual subject with consciousness of myself, I am, I, at the same time and inseparably, a corporeal reality. The body forms part of my being, it is not external material that I utilize or an instrument that I employ for ends that are of interest to me. I am the body, I am my hands, I am my brain, moreover I am more than my hands, my brain or my muscles. The body is my organic–material dimension but, at the same time, my body has a subjective and spiritual dimension”<sup>18</sup>.

The body, then, has a dimension that is organic and material, but for the personalist this dimension is also the locus of subjective, psychological and spiritual manifestation of personal activity<sup>19</sup>. If we center our notion of person around an integrated vision such as this we can escape Platonic, Christian and Cartesian dualisms one the hand, and materialistic monisms on the other.

### 3.2 *Specialization: Human Bodies and Animal Bodies*

Burgos moves beyond a general persons/nonperson distinction to the level of the body, where he contends that human bodies themselves are fundamentally different from animal bodies, which has personal implications. In this regard, he delves into the issue of specialization. Animals, in general, are physically highly specialized, a process that developed over the course of evolution and that governs much of an animal’s existence. We can see this in examples such the giraffe, the anteater, the cheetah, birds of all varieties, ocean creatures and so on. Their bodies are geared to very specific types of activity that promote their survival but that also limits them. Human beings, the other hand, can be characterized as lacking bodily specialization, which Burgos terms the corporeal base of freedom, in the sense that our bodies place far fewer limits on our activities that what is seen across the animal kingdom. At the same time, we do possess bodily structures unique to us including the degree of brain asymmetry all humans possess (which is, for example an essential foundation of our linguistic abilities), bipedalism, our visual field and very importantly, our hands. In addition, human beings take much lon-

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<sup>18</sup> J. M. BURGOS, *Antropología: una guía para la existencia*, cit., p. 68.

<sup>19</sup> J. M. BURGOS, *Antropología: una guía para la existencia*, cit., p. 70.

ger than animals to develop and reach a state of maturity, a development in which our physical, psychological and higher personal capacities develop together, a process in which we are not subject to instinct in the way that animals are. Human skills are complex, encompassing motion, and sensation and perception, but are integrated at a level of complexity unknown in the animal kingdom.

### 3.3 The Anthropological Dimension of the Body

Burgos describes this aspect of personal being and activity “as the relation that we establish with our body and the bodies of others”<sup>20</sup>. We are, again, “someone corporeal” living and interacting from the beginning of our lives in a relational context<sup>21</sup>.

Persons then, in Modern Ontological Personalism, are integrated, unified and their many aspects or dimensions and any interaction between persons needs to occur in this embodied context, fully appreciating the complexity of human nature. In the richness of the body and our personal interactions we come to the other issue that Buford raised, that of human dignity

<sup>20</sup> J. M. BURGOS, *Antropología: una guía para la existencia*, cit., p. 79.

<sup>21</sup> J. M. BURGOS, *Antropología: una guía para la existencia*, cit., pp.79-84. He names these anthropological/personal dimensions of embodied action:

1. *The face*: Much of what is most explicitly human is conveyed through our faces, a gateway to our private world, language and our emotional life, and a foundation for personal transcendence. The expression “the eyes are the mirror of the soul” captures the sense in which our faces convey who we are.

2. *Beauty*: “Both fascinating and captivating”, Burgos writes, “it has inspired artists of all times, can mark the lives of persons, and can even influence in the course of history, as was shown by Helen of Troy and Cleopatra”. This is also a dimension of person that, when not integrated into life, can lead to the depersonalization and objectification of others.

3. *Clothing*: While this might not be typically considered in terms of philosophy of person, it is something that is a constant across cultures, and that conveys important messages about who we are personally and within a given society.

4. *Body language*: Human communication is both verbal and nonverbal, and it is the integration of these two aspects that gives rise to inter personal communication. At the same time, verbal and nonverbal communication do not always operate in a harmonious tandem, and there are times when body language can convey the truth of our inner life when our words may be a smoke screen.

5. *Physical contact*: For Burgos to touch the body is to touch the whole person. A caress or a kiss from a loved one, for example, is not merely physical contact, but conveys the inner life and relationship between persons. In a negative sense, this is demonstrated in the damage that can be done as a result of physical contact forcibly imposed against one’s will

6. *The Body: Male and Female*. The bodies of men and women have important and profound differences that impact on the way we experience our personhood, touching on obvious sexual differentiation, but also differences in physical structure, hormonal activity, communication conveyed by body language, etc.

#### 4. Human Dignity

Attempts to define human dignity have generated sustained controversy in bioethics. Many contemporary bioethics scholars reference Ruth Macklin's 2003 comment that "appeals to dignity are either vague restatements of other, more precise, notions or mere slogans that add nothing to an understanding of the topic"<sup>22</sup>. Despite such criticisms, notions of dignity have continued to play an important role in contemporary bioethical debate<sup>23</sup>. Historically, notions of human exceptionalism were directly attacked from the beginnings of the scientific revolution and through the subsequent development of evolutionary theory. However, the 20th century saw attempts to reclaim the notion of human dignity as an inherent reality in the wake of the two World Wars, especially the Second, 1939-1945<sup>24</sup>.

Why has there been no commonly accepted definition of human dignity? Certainly, one can consider different visions of person and the role of the person vis-à-vis community in different cultural and religious traditions, and certainly different political traditions that insist that human

<sup>22</sup> R. MARCKLIN, *Dignity is a Useless Concept*. "British Medical Journal", 327, pp. 1419-1420.

<sup>23</sup> In the West, the concept of dignity has deep roots in classical Greek and Roman tradition, as well as Judeo-Christian tradition. It has origins in issues of social position, distinctiveness and recognition in Greece and Rome, and became into his grounded in the *imago Dei* of the Judeo-Christian tradition. See J. M. BURGOS, *Antropología: una guía para la existencia*, Chapter One: "The Person: Dignity and Mystery", 25-59. For the wider personalist tradition, see book J. M. BURGOS, *Introducción al personalismo*, Palabra, Madrid 2012, which is currently being translated by Richard Allen.

<sup>24</sup> The concept of dignity as it impacts contemporary bioethical thinking has been described by David H. CALHOUN as developing along 6 streams over the past 150 years. He identifies these as

*Adapters*, such as John Stuart Mill and William James who spoke of human dignity as a psychological state;

*Debunkers*, (Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, B.F. Skinner) who deemed the concept of dignity as an empty or incoherent and thus to be rejected;

*Saboteurs* (Darwin, Dennett), who have attacked traditional notions of anthropology, deeming human persons as more evolved animals possessing no unique capabilities or distinctions;

*Cautionary prophets* (Heidegger, Sartre), who while abandoning traditional philosophical anthropological concepts, moving from being to doing, seeking new foundations for understanding human dignity and freedom;

*Caretakers*, (Kierkegaard, Bonhoeffer, Maritain, Leon Kaas), who have maintained a more traditional anthropology and continue to argue for inherent human dignity;

*Restorers* (20th century diplomats and workers in international organizations) who were often eyewitnesses to the massive violations of human rights through the two World Wars, and for whom "Appeal to a principle inherent value in human persons seem necessary, even if the meaning of that value was unclear and even if the principal did not come with a ready-made justificatory strategy. As a result, increasing attention was focused on the idea of human dignity as a principal for governing relations".

See D. H. CALHOUN "Human Exceptionalism and the Imago Dei" in Stephen Dille and Nathan J. Palant, Eds., *Human Dignity in Bioethics: From Worldviews to the Public Square*. Routledge, New York 2013, p. 32ff.

rights are granted by the state, and therefore can be taken away by the state. But, from a personalist perspective, there may be a more deep-seated problem, namely with the notion of definition itself. Like persons, dignity can be described in detail, but perhaps never fully defined. While this has been criticized as a weakness by some bioethicists, we might instead see it from a personalist perspective as a strength that recognizes and respects the open-ended nature of persons, and recognizing multiple ways of approaching this descriptive process<sup>25</sup>.

It is the processes of description and recognition that gives us some clues about how one might approach the concept of dignity in the contemporary world from a personalist perspective. Persons, Robert Spaemann has written, are not defined, but recognized, and that this occurs in “a community of mutual recognition”<sup>26</sup>. As persons, we recognize other persons and it is perhaps in this domain of recognition that a discussion of human dignity can find a grounding.

This process has already begun as a result of the human rights violations that occurred during the two World Wars. It was in the wake of this extended global conflict that the United Nations *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* was written. It has been noted that the concepts of human dignity and human rights are repeatedly invoked in the Declaration, but are not specifically defined, a fact that some of those involved in framing the document have said was intentional<sup>27</sup>. The document is, in a sense, grounded in an intuition and recognition of dignity prompted by the Nazi genocide. This intuition has arisen multiple times in the second half of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st in the wake of conflicts around the world in which the innocent have been brutalized and killed under such terms as “ethnic cleansing”<sup>28</sup>.

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<sup>25</sup> As children of the Scientific Revolution and the Enlightenment, we live in a world in which scientific ways of knowing tend to dominate discussion. In its extreme form, this vision asserts that scientific knowledge is the only form of knowledge and that that which cannot be observed through the senses does is not worthy of examination, or simply doesn't exist. Dignity, in this sense, can be seen as cognitive construct, a fiction with no empirical basis, indefinable and therefore not worthy of consideration.

<sup>26</sup> R. SPAEMAN, *Persons: the difference between 'Someone' and 'Something'*. Trans Oliver O'Donovan. Oxford University Press, Oxford, pp. 199, 236.

<sup>27</sup> Jacques Maritain has commented in this vein, suggesting that a common recognition of dignity could have multiple justifications across cultures. See D. H. CALHOUN, Human Exceptionalism and the *Imago Dei*, in S. DILLEY and N. J. PALPANT, Eds., *Human Dignity in Bioethics: From Worldviews to the Public Square*. New York: Routledge, 2013, p. 38.

<sup>28</sup> Oddly enough, the notion of recognition and definition entered American parlance of definition versus recognition in a 1964 Supreme Court case (*JACOBELLIS v. OHIO*, 378 U.S. 184, 1964) in which Justice Potter Stuart, commenting on pornography, wrote, “I shall not today attempt further to define the kinds of material I understand to be embraced within that shorthand description; and perhaps I could never succeed in intelligibly doing so. But I know it when I see it, and the motion picture involved in this case is not that”. (Italics mine).

To address the concept of dignity it may be more fruitful to begin with an examination of what happens to individuals at the margins of life, and our responses to experiencing or witnessing them rather than to seek a closed definition. In a *via negativa*, we appear to recognize the presence –and absence– of dignity at the moment of its greatest violation, and this recognition has spurred individuals and nations to action, albeit typically too late. A question then, is what happens when we move from recognition through description to national and international policy? It is here the personalism can play a key role, bringing together the two goals that Tom has outlined in his article - namely a grounding for human dignity and a theory of person.

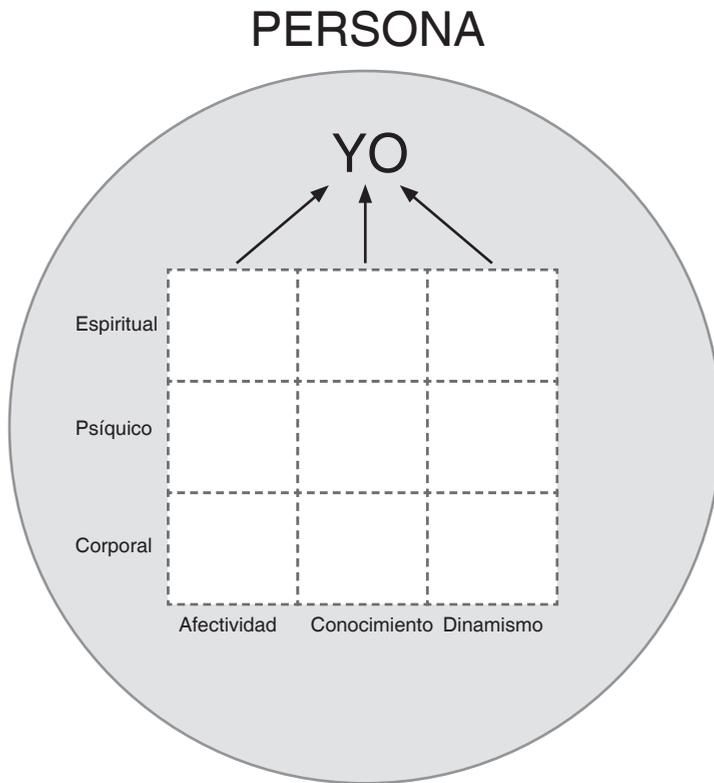
## 5. Personalist Bioethics

Bringing these strands together, to begin with persons is to begin with recognition, to be confronted with persons and to consider what this means in all human interactions, which, because they are personal, are moral. Burgos has written that persons fully conceived, in which the body is a dimension or manifestation of person, implies a notion of the good and of the common good as that which promotes human flourishing, a notion that can guide bioethical thinking and activity on a global scale to stand in defense of human dignity, to avoid falling into the trap of a functionalism that defines persons as present only when observable personal activities occurring (activity that is usually defined by others in a manner that limits human life); rather, we could view human beings in an integral fashion in which all aspects and activities are manifestations of person, including our corporeality, the recognition that our bodies have a personal dimension deserving respect even when personal functioning is not immediately obvious to the external observer. Personalism could contribute to global bioethics through understanding who persons are, through recognition of the dignity and complexity of the human person, through the identification of human good and human flourishing, and through bioethical considerations that encompass the whole gamut of our personal activity, corporeality, identity, and the narrative of personal life and meaning<sup>29</sup>.

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<sup>29</sup> Burgos addresses these issues in detail in J. M. BURGOS *¿Qué es la bioética personalista? Un análisis de su especificidad y de sus fundamentos teóricos*, cit.

Burgos' Model of Person:



*Diagrama de la persona según Burgos*