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Personalism



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Synonyms

[Personalist ethics](#); [Person-centered ethics](#); [Person-centered philosophy](#)

Definition

Personalism refers to a set of philosophical currents developed in the twentieth century facing the depersonalization of some precedent philosophical approaches and ideologies, such as radical individualism and collectivism. Personalism is structured around the centrality of the person, considering his or her individual and social dimensions. Some streams of Personalism also include the transcendent dimension. Underlying Personalism there is an elaborate philosophical anthropology of the person, which also supports Personalistic Ethics. This latter emphasizes the primacy of the person over things, human dignity, and the personal calling to human development,

which is not independent of an effective concern for others.

Description

Personalism refers to a set of philosophical currents born in the twentieth century and structured around the concept of the person.

There are several relevant currents of personalism, including communitarian personalism (Mounier), Anglo-American personalism (Bowne and others), phenomenological personalism (Scheler, Von Hildebrand, Stein), classical ontological personalism (Maritain), and modern ontological personalism (Wojtyła, Crosby, Burgos).

Most authors within personalism assume a modern concept of the person which is much more elaborated than the old ontological definition where the person is considered as a rational subject. The modern conception entails a rich anthropological perspective as we will discuss below.

Social and political theory and applied ethics can take personalism as a philosophical base. Personalist ethics, often related to personalism, presents a wide range of understandings; however, authors of personalist ethics generally agree that the human person is central and foundational for ethics. The norms for making true moral judgments are grounded in being a person endowed with intrinsic dignity.

Historical Overview

In a broad sense, personalism has a story as long as that of the concept of the person, a notion created by Christianity in its first theological developments. However, the standard position is that personalism, as a philosophical current, was born in the twentieth century through the work of Borden Parker Bowne (1847–1910) in the USA and Emmanuel Mounier (1905–1950) in Europe. Both thinkers developed the first theories of personalism – though with different theoretical backgrounds. Bowne had philosophical followers and also influenced civil rights activists such as Martin Luther King, Jr. Mounier was very successful in creating a strong social and intellectual movement in Europe, which had great influence in events as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights or the building of the European Constitutions after World War II.

This initial social movement has evolved to a solid philosophical position, thanks to the contribution of a very important group of thinkers like Jacques Maritain, Maurice Nédoncelle, Max Scheler, Dietrich von Hildebrand, Edith Stein, Martin Buber, Karol Wojtyła, Romano Guardini, Gabriel Marcel, Julián Marías, and Xabier Zubiri, among others. Most of these have a coherent approach to ethics.

Main Thesis of Personalism

Although personalism includes different sensibilities and approaches, some common elements can be found in all of them (Burgos 2017a):

- (a) *The structural centrality of the person* is the key feature of personalism and this means not only that it values the person or takes the person into account in one way or another in its anthropology, but that the concept of the person is the key to or hinge of anthropology and ethics. One important consequence of this assumption is that anthropology has to work with personalist categories, that is, categories exclusive to the human person,

which adequately reflect the features which univocally characterize the person.

- (b) *Calling each person to transform the society.* Every human being is called, by means of his or her action, to influence and modify the world which surrounds them, and can achieve this with particular efficacy through those instruments he or she masters especially well. For the philosopher, those instruments are the theoretical constructions which he or she can evaluate, analyze, or create. Personalist thinkers have shared this way of understanding philosophy and, in general, have tried to transform society in accordance with the personalist way of thinking and avoid an exclusively academic philosophical approach.
- (c) *Turn from a “what” to a “who.”* Personalism maintains that every individual has something special that makes him or her unique, which means, in another words, that he or she is not a “what” but a “who” (Spaemann 2006). 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,” has been described as the personalist turn of contemporary philosophy.
- (d) *The “three-dimensional” structure of the person.* Personalism distinguishes three levels in the person: the somatic, the psychological, and the spiritual. This approach achieves two very important objectives. It avoids any possible operative dualism (which could appear from dividing man into body and soul), and it opens up a more sophisticated anthropological structure which permits a more detailed and complete analysis of psychological, emotional, and experiential dimensions in the person.
- (e) *Endowment of affectivity and subjectivity.* Affectivity is understood by personalism as a basic anthropological category. Feeling is neither knowing nor wanting. It is an original anthropological dimension that extends to the threefold structure of the person: body,

psyche, and spirit. There is a bodily affectivity – the way in which we feel the body; there is a psychological affectivity, the emotions, and there is a spiritual affectivity which, in addition, gives account of some of our most profound personal experiences, the relations of affection and of love with our loved ones.

Affectivity is framed in the context of subjectivity and consciousness. To experience oneself, to have a unique and unrepeatable personal world, is an essential feature of the human being which, in addition, is exactly what makes him or her a “who.” Attention to subjectivity is, therefore, wholly decisive in the construction of a personalist anthropology, since if there is no subjectivity there is no subject and thus no person.

- (f) *Interpersonality*. This refers to interactions between persons and the subsequent relationship established. The person is born of a relationship between two parents and, just after being born, establishes with them – especially with the mother, even in the womb – a very intense bond which decisively affects his or her future. Likewise, relations with friends, education, and culture influence the construction of his or her identity. Personalism stresses the relevance of interpersonalit in the construction of the personal identity.
- (g) *The primacy of action and praxis over the intellect*. Personalism emphasizes the relevance of will, action, and praxis trying to overcome the primacy of intellect in some philosophical currents linked to Aristotle. Will, taken to be self-determining freedom, is, from this perspective, ontologically superior to purely intellectual activity. In doing so, the practical aspect, praxis in its multiple dimensions, becomes decisive in as much as it is the medium in which the person expresses and transforms him- or herself. This orientation has made it possible to tackle many important anthropological aspects like work, economics, social philosophy, and politics in a correct way.
- (h) *Corporeality of the person and the distinction between male and female*. Corporeality appears in personalism as a personal reality, that is, as the overcoming of a merely biological vision of the body on which the spirit would exert influence. The body is the somatic dimension of the person, and, in this sense, it is inseparable from him or her. There is not a body without a person. Going further, sexuality can then be understood, as Marías and Wojtyła did, as a particular dimension of being a person, rooted in biology, but transcending it and affecting the very constitution of the subject. The person, in effect, not only has a masculine or feminine biology but is man or woman and is a masculine person or a feminine person, because having a sexual identity affects, configures, and modulates all human structures before birth, as neurology is currently demonstrating (Ruigrok et al. 2014).
- (i) *Communitarian dimension of the person*. Personalism anchors itself between the extremes of liberal individualism and the collectivism, with the objective of avoiding both the risk of making the individual a mere appendix of the social body (collectivism) and that of making him or her an active and relevant being but lacking in solidarity and seeking only personal good, disinterested in his or her fellow citizens (individualism).
- (j) *Openness to transcendence*. The perfection of the person contrasts paradoxically with the prominence of his or her limits, with illness, finitude, and ignorance. The human mind is faced with questions which it cannot resolve by its own means: the ultimate meaning of life, the justification of the existence of suffering, the meaning of death and the mystery of the hereafter, and the identity of God. These ultimate questions, as well as the very structure of the person, which the person does not produce alone but finds in his or her own being, postulate for personalists the existence of a superior Being who gives reason to human nature and an answer of those ultimate questions of the human existence.

- (k) *Ethics focuses on the person.* This considers the dignity of the person, the primacy of the person over things, and the human development of each person.

Personalistic Ethics

The starting point of personalistic ethics is a deep reflection on the intimate meaning of human existence, including the uniqueness of each person, and on the interpersonal relations, being conscious of the human dignity, going beyond any specific religious perspective, and invoking human reason. In spite of their diversity, personalistic ethics thinkers generally emphasize that the person internally experiences the reality of the wrong and the good as a kind of act that builds the persons or harms him or her.

In a broad sense, some classic thinkers can be considered as personalistic ethicists. Thus, Aquinas defined the person as a rational subject – and developed an ethical system around virtues, rooted in human nature, which improve the person as a human being. Kant held that no person should be treated merely as a means to an end, but only as an end.

In the twentieth century, personalistic ethics can be found, for instance, in dialogical philosophy and existentialism (Martin Buber, Gabriel Marcel, and others), who generally emphasize the role of one's own personal conscience in determining the moral rightness of an action. It can be found also in some way in phenomenological personalism, which focuses on phenomenological analyses of ethics and on a subjective axiology, which, nevertheless, depends on an objective ontology (Max Scheler and Dietrich von Hildebrand). An original proposal, which can also be included within personalist ethics, is that of Emmanuel Levinas, through what he termed *the ethics of the Other*. According to Levinas, the face of the Other comes toward me with an infinite sense of responsibility. Ontological personalism (Maritain) strongly defends a natural moral law ethics as the philosophical basis for human rights, personal virtues, and common good defined in terms of proper human ends. Modern

ontological personalism seeks the foundations of ethics in the structure of human person, essentially equal for all human beings. The whole person, including his or her relational and social aspects, and what contributes to fulfilling human beings as persons, is the criterion for establishing the goodness of an action and vice-versa. This approach connects the centrality of the person with principles and virtues through the personalistic principle and the common good principle (Melé 2009) and can be applied to professional, economic, and business ethics.

According with the personalistic principle “No human being should ever be treated as mere means to an end. On the contrary, persons should be treated with respect and also with benevolence and care.” The common good principle has been formulated as: “In acting within a community, persons and social groups have to subordinate their own interests in all that is indispensable for the realization of the common good, and contribute in accordance with the needs of such a community and their respective capacities to the common good of the community.” (Melé 2009).

Ontological personalism, both classical and modern, has been suggested for bioethics (Sgreccia 2012), business management (Alford 2010, Acevedo 2012; Melé 2009), and leadership, as theoretical support of “servant leadership” (Whetstone 2002).

Regarding the economic system, it has been argued that personalism can provide new directions to economics (Gronbacher 1998), overcoming the *homo oeconomicus* model, dominant in many economic and managerial theories (Melé and Canton 2014). The “civil economy,” which has now been rehabilitated (Bruni and Zamagni 2007; Zamagni 2012), can also be considered as personalist, since it is based on persons and their relationships – particularly the principle of reciprocity – values community, and pursues the common good. It also emphasizes the principle of exchange of equivalents and the principle of redistribution.

Personalistic ecologism (Ballesteros 1996) sees the human being as a personal body, dependent on the rest of nature and at the same time endowed with a particular dignity that makes it

possible to take care of the rest of creation, as well as giving primacy to the problem of their living conditions, and obliges this. This contrasts with both dominative anthropocentrism and biocentrism and even more with eco-centrism.

In recent years, certain progress has been made on personalism and personalist ethics, principally in Europe and Latin America. Additionally, Catholic social thought incorporates some elements of this stream of thought, particularly that developed by John Paul II (Karol Wojtyła).

Although personalism is not mainstream in applied ethics, some of its key elements such as human dignity and the centrality of the person are shared by many around the world.

Cross-References

- ▶ [Catholic Social Thought](#)
- ▶ [Humanistic Management](#)
- ▶ [Levinasian Ethics in Business](#)
- ▶ [Notion of Personhood from a Spiritual Perspective](#)

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