

# Personalist Republicanism. Particularity and Pertinence of French Personalist Political Philosophy

*Republicanism personalista. Particularidad  
y pertinencia de la filosofía política personalista francesa*

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**Abstract:** This article identifies the particularity and pertinence of the political theory of French personalism in light of the revival of republicanism in contemporary political philosophy. Contemporary republicanism is usually interpreted as being divided in two branches, civic republicanism and civic humanism. I argue that French personalism, represented by authors such as Jacques Maritain, Emmanuel Mounier and Paul Ricoeur, contains a third variant of republicanism. The personalist political philosophy meets the defining criteria of modern-day republicanism: freedom as the absence of domination, the idea of a mixed constitution and the emphasis on vigilant and active citizenship. However, the personalist view of mankind distinguishes this philosophy from conventional articulations of contemporary republicanism. This will become evident, first, in the reasons why personalists distance themselves from the core idea in civic humanism, namely that active participation in the self-government of the political community is intrinsically valuable, for self-government has no intrinsic value in personalist thinking. It is a negative argument –the fact that political conditions for the realization of our positive freedom would otherwise be compromised– that connects freedom and self-government in an instrumental manner. Like civic republicanism, the personalist political philosophy can also be understood as an instrumental republicanism. Again the personalist anthropology makes an important difference with respect to this form of modern republicanism because it is able to link civic virtue to an underlying ethical pursuit for what Ricoeur describes as “the good life with and for others in just institutions”.

**Keywords:** personalism, republicanism, freedom, non-domination, citizenship.

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**Resumen:** Este artículo identifica la particularidad y pertinencia de la teoría política del personalismo francés a la luz del renacimiento del republicanismo en la filosofía política contemporánea. El republicanismo contemporáneo se interpreta generalmente como dividido en dos ramas, el republicanismo cívico y el humanismo cívico. Yo sostengo que el personalismo francés, representado por autores como Jacques Maritain, Emmanuel Mounier y Paul Ricoeur, contiene una tercera variante del republicanismo. La filosofía política personalista cumple con los criterios definitorios del republicanismo moderno: la libertad como ausencia de dominación, la idea de una constitución mixta y el énfasis en una ciudadanía vigilante y activa. Sin embargo, la visión personalista de la humanidad distingue a esta filosofía de las articulaciones convencionales del republicanismo contemporáneo. Esto se hará evidente, primero, en las razones por las que los personalistas se distancian de la idea central del humanismo cívico, a saber, que la participación activa en el autogobierno de la comunidad política es intrínsecamente valiosa, ya que el autogobierno no tiene valor intrínseco en el pensamiento personalista. Es un argumento negativo –el hecho de que las condiciones políticas para la realización de nuestra libertad positiva estarían comprometidas de otro modo– que conecta la libertad y el autogobierno de manera instrumental. Al igual que el republicanismo cívico, la filosofía política personalista también puede entenderse como un republicanismo instrumental. Nuevamente, la antropología personalista marca una diferencia importante con respecto a esta forma de republicanismo moderno porque es capaz de vincular la virtud cívica a una búsqueda ética subyacente de lo que Ricoeur describe como “la buena vida con y para los demás en instituciones justas”.

**Palabras clave:** personalismo, republicanismo, libertad, no dominación, ciudadanía.

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In this article I will identify the particularity and pertinence of the political theory of French personalism in light of the more recent revival of republicanism in contemporary political philosophy<sup>1</sup>.

## 1. The Republican Revival

Republicanism returned to the top of the agenda of political philosophy during the nineties, in an effort to resolve the stalemate in the dilemma between the individual and the community by means of the concept of citizenship<sup>2</sup>. It was not at all something new. Republicanism is a political philosophy at least as old as the Roman republic and it was the dominant theory of liberty in Europe until the eighteenth century, when liberalism took up the baton. The contemporary neorepublicanism takes up the core ideas of this ancient theory. Philip Pettit sums up these core ideas as a threefold concern: the first is a conception of freedom as non-domination, the second is the idea of a mixed constitution and the third is the importance of a vigilant citizenry<sup>3</sup>.

The idea of freedom as non-domination appeared to be an important correction with regard to the liberal non-interference, which Isaiah Berlin describes as follows: "I am normally said to be free to the degree to which no man or body of men interferes with my activity. Political liberty in this sense is simply the area within which a man can act unobstructed by others"<sup>4</sup>. The republican conception contains a double criticism of this liberal conception of freedom as non-interference. First, republicanism claims that not every interference with the exercise of free will is an infringement on liberty<sup>5</sup>. We may have taken part in the realization of this interference, as an expression of power-in-common, within a democratic decision procedure. In that case there is no domination and hence no infringement of liberty. Second, the liberal conception of freedom is not only too encompassing, but in another sense also too narrow. Domination does not necessarily require actual interference<sup>6</sup>. North Korean

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<sup>1</sup> This article broadens the conclusions concerning personalist republicanism that I have previously published with a focus on the work of Paul Ricoeur in X1 and X2.

<sup>2</sup> W. KYMLICKA & W. NORMAN, *The Return of the Citizen: A survey of recent work on citizenship theory*, in "Ethics", 104 (1990), pp. 352-381; C. LABORDE & J.W. MAYNOR (ed.), *Republicanism and political theory*, Blackwell, Oxford 2008.

<sup>3</sup> P. PETTIT, *On the People's Terms: A Republican Theory and Model of Democracy*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2012, pp. 5-8.

<sup>4</sup> I. BERLIN, *Two Concepts of Liberty*, in *Four Essays on Liberty*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1969, p. 122.

<sup>5</sup> P. PETTIT, *Republicanism. A Theory of Freedom and Government*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1997, pp. 35-41, 65-66.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 31-35, 63-64; Q. SKINNER, *Liberty Before Liberalism*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1998, pp. 84-93.

men and women who join the army out of their own volition –because they are looking for adventure or they consider it to be the best way to get ahead in life– are strictly speaking not unfree in this regard in the liberal interpretation. This absence of unfreedom, however, is dependent on the alignment of their will with the ruling power. If they change their minds and refuse to join the army, then they suddenly do become unfree, without having any influence on the rule that inflicts these restrictions on them. Although not interfered with yet, the North Koreans are subject to a dominating power, which may inflict arbitrary restrictions. Therefore, they are not free.

In sum, according to republicanism a free individual requires a political community without arbitrary domination. This republican conception of freedom brought us beyond the stalemate between liberalism and communitarianism, because it links individual liberty to the liberty of the political community. The other two core ideas of republicanism that Pettit sums up ensue from this: a political community without arbitrary domination requires a mixed constitution, which is a constitution that sufficiently restricts those in power, and it also requires a vigilant citizenry, a citizenry on the lookout for infringements of the authorities on their rights and liberties and willing to act against any such transgression. So, republicanism sets the bar very high for democracy, as the republican ideal of freedom is dependent on a dynamic democratic process with conscientious citizens<sup>7</sup>.

The revival of republicanism broadened the scope of contemporary political philosophy. However, republicanism was not immune to the influence of the conflict between liberalism and communitarianism. As a result two distinct currents of contemporary republicanism came about. On the one hand we find so-called civic republicanism, on the other hand civic humanism. Another terminology talks about a neo-Roman and neo-Athenian version of republicanism<sup>8</sup>. Civic republicanism<sup>9</sup> conceives of civic duties from the perspective of freedom as non-domination: self-government, in an active manner, is a necessary countermeasure

<sup>7</sup> P. PETTIT, *Republicanism*, cit.

<sup>8</sup> C. LABORDE & J.W. MAYNOR (ed.), *Republicanism and political theory*, cit., pp. 8-13.

<sup>9</sup> Prominent examples are Q. SKINNER, *The idea of negative liberty: philosophical and historical perspectives*, in R. RORTY, J.B. SCHNEEWIND & Q. SKINNER (ed.), *Philosophy in History*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1984, pp. 193-221; C. SUNSTEIN, *Beyond the Republican Revival*, in "Yale Law Review", 97 (1988) 8, pp. 1539-90; P. PETTIT, *Republicanism. A Theory of Freedom and Government*, cit.; J.W. MAYNOR, *Republicanism in the Modern World*, Polity Press, Cambridge 2003; V. COSTA, Neo-Republicanism, Freedom as Non-Domination, and Citizen Virtue in "Politics, Philosophy, and Economics" 8 (2009), pp. 401-19; F. LOVETT, *A General Theory of Domination and Justice*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2010.

against domination. This freedom as non-domination should be interpreted –in light of Berlin’s two concepts of liberty<sup>10</sup>– either as an enlarged negative conception of freedom as non-interference or as a distinct third conception of liberty. Either way, civic republicanism is opposed to any positive conception of freedom. Civic humanism<sup>11</sup>, on the other hand, is also based on the three core elements that Philip Pettit puts forward, but the distinguishing feature is the interpretation of the concept of freedom. Civic humanism interprets republican freedom as a positive concept of freedom. Absence of domination is, in that regard, read as self-government. The core idea is that self-government, which requires active and conscientious citizenship, is an intrinsically valuable, necessary and primary prerequisite for the fulfilment of human life.

However, the division between civic republicanism and civic humanism reflects the same shortcomings of the liberal-communitarian divide. Civic republicanism struggles to set itself apart from liberal individualism<sup>12</sup>. On the basis of the same individualist presuppositions, it struggles to induce and support the very civic duty that it so much requires<sup>13</sup>. Civic humanism, for its part, is dependent on one particular and controversial interpretation of the good life, focused on political action<sup>14</sup>.

End of story? No. Because republicanism is richer than we generally assume. We can learn from conceptions of republicanism that have been overlooked so far. Conceptions that took place in the long period of supposed hibernation of republicanism in the nineteenth and twentieth century. What I want to argue is that the political theory of French personalism is in fact a branch of republicanism, and not just another

<sup>10</sup> I. BERLIN, *Two Concepts of Liberty*, cit., pp. 118-72.

<sup>11</sup> Prominent examples are H. ARENDT, *The Human Condition*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1958; B. BARBER, *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1984; A. OLDFIELD, *Citizenship and Community: Civic Republicanism and the Modern World*, Routledge, London 1990; P. RAHE, *Republics Ancient and Modern: Classical Republicanism and the American Revolution*, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill 1992; M. SANDEL, *Democracy’s Discontent. America in Search of a Public Philosophy*, Belknap Press, Cambridge 1996; I. HONOHAN, *Civic republicanism*, Routledge, London 2002; D. HEATER, *Citizenship: The Civic Ideal in World History, Politics and Education* (3rd ed.), Manchester University Press, Manchester 2004.

<sup>12</sup> W. KYMLICKA, *Liberal egalitarianism and civic republicanism: friends or enemies?* in *Politics in the vernacular. Nationalism, multiculturalism and citizenship*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2001, pp. 327-46; A. PATTEN, *The Republican Critique of Liberalism*, in “British Journal of Political Science”, 26 (1996) 1, pp. 25-44; J. RAWLS, *Political Liberalism*, Columbia University Press, New York 1993, pp. 205-06.

<sup>13</sup> M. SANDEL, *The Procedural Republic and the Unencumbered Self*, in “Political Theory”, 12 (1983) 1, pp. 81-96; M. SANDEL, *Democracy’s Discontent*, cit.; C. TAYLOR, *Cross-Purposes: The Liberal-Communitarian Debate*, in N. Rosenblum (ed.), *Liberalism and the Moral Life*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1989, pp. 159-82.

<sup>14</sup> J. RAWLS, *Political Liberalism*, cit., pp. 205-06.

branch, but a branch that gets us beyond the main shortcomings of both civic republicanism and civic humanism.

## 2. French Personalism

When I talk about French personalism, we need to go back to the interbellum. Just like elsewhere in Europe a “Third Way” was envisioned, a new social guideline that would turn around the prevailing malaise without lapsing into alternatives that are just as detrimental. This was the breeding ground for this intellectual movement that would be known by the name of “personalism”. Spurred on by a shared aversion to what was branded as the “bourgeois society”, mainly Christian intellectuals, such as Jacques Maritain, Emmanuel Mounier, and later on, Paul Ricoeur, pursued a new society. They rejected the liberal individualism that dominated the failing societies of which they were part, but they also disapproved of the collectivist alternatives of communists and fascists. The core of their alternative was a vision of mankind that did not reduce human beings to self-sufficient individuals or subservient parts of a larger entity, but rather took the entire human being into account, with both a temporal and a supratemporal dimension<sup>15</sup>. Moreover, this vision of mankind attributed to every human being an absolute dignity as a person, that is to say as a social and spiritual being that depends on a moral community for its flourishing, but that transcends the community and the common good on the basis of its personal vocation in life. It is in that regard that one tried to answer the question of the task and responsibility of the person as citizen<sup>16</sup>.

In the context of the failing democracies during the interbellum period, they argued for a personalist democracy<sup>17</sup>. Democracy received an ethical interpretation, which took it as more than the right of the majority. Personalist democracy was, in essence, a political system that was to create a framework for freedom, responsibility and justice in which every human being could discover and realize her vocation, fostering her development into a fully-fledged person. This is the *bonum commune* that politics has to aspire to. At the same time, however, personalism was well aware of the frailty of the democratic system. This is why personalist democracy is also characterized by a fundamental distrust of power,

<sup>15</sup> J. MARITAIN, *Humanisme Intégral*, Paris, Aubier, 1936; E. MOUNIER, *Manifeste au service du personalisme*, in “Œuvres” Tome I, (1931-1939), Seuil, Paris 1961, pp. 479-649.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. X3 and X4.

<sup>17</sup> J. MARITAIN, *Man and the State*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1951; E. MOUNIER, *Manifeste au service du personalisme*, cit.

as without boundaries, power lapses from support of the person into oppression.

The sustainability of true democracy is not only dependent on a constitution that formulates boundaries and checks and balances, but especially on a vigilant and active citizenry that reins in political power. This focus on the political responsibility of every individual is characteristic of the political theory of French personalism. It is part of the positive conception of freedom that constitutes the guideline of personalist discourse. Freedom is, for them, not negative, meaning that one can do whatever one wants as long as one does not harm anyone. Rather, it is the liberty to do good; the liberty to find your personal vocation in life and to commit yourself to its actualization.<sup>18</sup> While personalist democracy is responsible for the conditions of this liberty, every human being, as a citizen, is responsible for the functioning of that democracy. Freedom presupposes taking on responsibility in the struggle against political domination and the abuse of power. Only then is it possible for the political community to approach the level where everyone can truly live out their freedom<sup>19</sup>.

The need for active citizenship inspired personalists to a radical reformulation of political practice, on the institutional as well as on the ethical level. On the institutional level, personalists pled for federalism and subsidiarity. Classical parliamentary representation was under fire and while most personalists acknowledged the role of the parliament, they considered the events of their time to be an indication of its shortcomings. Citizens had to be able to contribute to the political process in a more active manner. Therefore, personalism wanted to establish extensive forms of bottom-up politics. As such, they sought to guarantee maximal participation and control by the citizenry. In the words of Maritain: “[T]he program of the people should not be offered from above to the people, and then accepted by them; it should be the work of the people”<sup>20</sup>.

On the ethical level, the personalists emphasized the need for commitment. In light of the build-up to the Second World War, this also implied resistance against naive pacifism. Throughout the personalist political theory is the idea that we should not be paralyzed by a desire for

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<sup>18</sup> E. MOUNIER, *Le personalisme*, in “Œuvres” Tome III (1944-1950), Seuil, Paris 1962, pp. 427-525.

<sup>19</sup> J. MARITAIN, *Education at the Crossroads*, Yale University Press, New Haven 1943; J. MARITAIN, *Man and the State*, cit., pp. 119-26; E. MOUNIER, *Le personalisme*, cit.

<sup>20</sup> J. MARITAIN, *Man and the State*, cit., p. 68. See also E. MOUNIER, *Manifeste au service de personalisme*, cit., pp. 619-26.

purity. Politics is a risky but necessary occupation. Although we have to be led by the good, in practice this sometimes amounts to having to choose the lesser evil. We have to commit ourselves to the good despite the shortcomings of every historical attempt to put values into practice<sup>21</sup>. Given the need for generalized active citizenship, this is not a dilemma reserved for political leaders, but a task for every human person. Nobody escapes this rather tragic responsibility.

These ideas were shaped in different ways, on the basis of a Neo-Thomism for Maritain<sup>22</sup>, on the basis of an existential-phenomenological paradigm for Mounier<sup>23</sup>, or later on, on the basis of hermeneutic phenomenology for Ricoeur<sup>24</sup>. Nevertheless, we can talk about a shared and distinctive personalist political philosophy. Shaped by its own historical context, French personalism was very influential in the politics of the mid-twentieth century. But this political theory remains relevant today. What personalism clarifies is that politics concerns us all, but not because politics is a lofty affair in the Aristotelian sense. Personalists focused on the dark side of politics, power play, oppression and the pretense of democracy, but they also recognized that politics is necessary to build and safeguard the framework for our development as human persons. The only way to make politics live up to its task is for citizens to assume their own role.

### 3. Personalist Republicanism

Now let me explain why this personalist political theory is in fact a kind of republicanism. The core ideas of republicanism –as mentioned: freedom as non-domination, mixed constitution, and active citizenship– match those of the personalist political philosophy.

First, it is important to see that personalist political theory is about freedom. The important question in this regard is of course: What conception of freedom? Paul-Ludwig Landsberg defines the personalist conception as freedom as follows: “For the human person that we are, being free is to be able to live in the direction of our own formation, it is to be able to fight against all resistances that are opposed to a really personal

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<sup>21</sup> P.L. LANDSBERG, *Le sens de l'action*, in *Problèmes du personalisme*, Paris, Seuil, “Esprit” (1952), pp. 99-124; P. L. LANDSBERG, *Réflexions sur l'engagement personnel*, in *Problèmes du personalisme*, cit., pp. 28-48.

<sup>22</sup> J. MARITAIN, *Humanisme integral*, cit.; *Man and the State*, cit.

<sup>23</sup> E. MOUNIER, *Le personalisme*, cit.

<sup>24</sup> P. RICOEUR, *Soi-même comme un autre*, Seuil, Paris 1990; P. RICOEUR, *Approches de la personne*, in *Lectures 2. La contrée des philosophes*, Seuil, Paris 1992, pp. 203-21.



life”<sup>25</sup>. Hence, freedom is the situation where nothing and nobody blocks anyone’s ability to develop herself as a human person, and, above all, it is the ability to realize this situation. Paul Ricoeur explains this further in a commentary entitled *Le paradoxe de la liberté politique*. There he talks about the paradoxical relation between political power and freedom. Politics is essentially about the realization of freedom. The constitution realizes –through the horizontal relation of power-in-common– equal liberty and fundamental rights, but at the same time it establishes the vertical relation of power-over, which tends towards illegitimate violence to our autonomy. Ricoeur concludes that real political freedom consists of the elimination of the alienation at the dark side of political power; freedom is the absence of illegitimate, arbitrary power-over. In others words, in fact in republican words, we can say that the personalist conception of freedom is freedom as non-domination: “This is in my view the meaning of the idea of political liberty, the end of political alienation, and it is the meaning of the idea of democracy as well. When Lincoln says ‘democracy is government of the people by the people for the people’, he defines in institutional terms what we have come to define in subjective terms of liberty. His formula in fact represents the ideal solution of the divorce of the power and the people. This divorce would in fact be resolved if the government was not only government of the people, not only government for the people, but government by the people. Within such an institution the individual would be politically free”<sup>26</sup>. The personalist ambition is to come as close as possible to non-domination, by means of both checks on political power, namely the freedom of contestation, and participation in the exercise of political power itself, i.e. the freedom of participation<sup>27</sup>.

<sup>25</sup> “Pour la personne humaine que nous sommes, être libre c’est pouvoir vivre dans la direction de la formation propre; c’est pouvoir lutter sans cesse contre toutes les résistances qui s’opposent à la vie proprement personnelle. [...] Étant donné que la personne, en tant qu’unité qui devient, vit dans chacun de ses actes comme dans leur totalité successive, la fidélité à une direction choisie est la forme d’existence essentielle à la constitution de cette vie personnelle, pourvu qu’il s’agisse de la fidélité à un acte de décision qui était lui-même authentiquement libre et personnel”. (Own translation.) P. L. LANDSBERG, *Réflexions sur l’engagement personnel*, cit., p. 33.

<sup>26</sup> “Tel est à mon sens le contenu de l’idée politique de liberté, la fin de l’aliénation politique; et c’est aussi le sens de l’idée de démocratie; quand Lincoln dit : ‘la démocratie est le gouvernement du peuple par le peuple et pour le peuple’ il définit en termes d’institution ce que nous venons de définir en termes subjectifs de liberté ; sa formule en effet représente la solution idéale du divorce du pouvoir et du peuple; ce divorce serait résolu en effet si le gouvernement n’était pas seulement gouvernement du peuple, ni même gouvernement pour le peuple, mais gouvernement par le peuple ; dans une telle institution l’individu serait politiquement libre”. (Own translation.) P. RICOEUR, *Le paradoxe de la liberté politique*, in *La Liberté: Rapport de la sixième conférence annuelle Canadien des Affaires Publiques*, Institut Canadien des Affaires Publiques, Montréal 1959, p. 52.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 51-55.

This conception of freedom brings us to the other two elements. The question is how to realize freedom of non-domination. Given the fact that political power confronts man with opportunity as well as risk, the conclusion is that every citizen has a duty to enact political vigilance and the willingness to move from critical reflection to action. In other words, the republican emphasis on civic virtue is implied. This, in turn, brings us to the third core idea of republicanism. The institutional framework of democracy has to be such that a vigilant citizenry is capable of having an adequate influence, and it should also guarantee the necessary automatic checks and balances within the system itself, not leaving the power in single hands. That is in fact the whole idea behind the personalist plea for federalism and subsidiarity.

What we re-encounter here are the core ideas of the personalist political theory presented just before: its guiding conception of freedom and the implied ethical and institutional conditions. Therefore it should be clear that the three core elements of republicanism are prominent in the personalist political thought.

#### **4. Avoiding the pitfall of civic republicanism**

Although the personalist political philosophy answers the essential requirements to be able to talk about a kind of republicanism, it goes almost without saying that the personalists, nevertheless, preserve a distinct identity in comparison with the authors commonly perceived as representatives of contemporary republicanism. They actually provide an alternative to the division between civic republicanism and civic humanism. As I have shown, the personalists joined both kinds of republicanism with regard to the shared core elements, but it is a kind of republicanism that avoids important pitfalls in the common kinds of republicanism.

As we have seen, civic republicanism is based on an interpretation of freedom as absence of domination, either as an enlarged negative conception of freedom or as a third conception, neither negative nor positive. The personalists share the perspective on civic duties as a consequence of the idea of freedom as non-domination, in which active citizenship is a necessary countermeasure against the inclination towards domination that political power entails. However, whereas civic republicans explicitly reject any positive conception of freedom, personalism embraced such a conception. The resulting theoretical view of citizenship is that civic duties should primarily be conceived from an ethical perspective. The task of the citizen is not fundamentally different from the ethical

task of the person. The political task of the person as a citizen is a particular aspect of the realization of the ethical aspiration. It concerns our reach beyond the interpersonal level, to the third person, the person we will probably never meet in person, but with whom we nevertheless have an institutional relationship<sup>28</sup>. Maritain, for instance, emphasizes that “the civic sense is made up of sense of devotion and mutual love as well as of the sense of justice and law”<sup>29</sup>.

What the personalists essentially rejected, was the liberal-individualist starting point of civic republicanism, given the fact that civic republicans actually remain within the boundaries of liberal individualism. The idea of freedom as non-domination lays a particular stress on the liberal conception of freedom as non-interference. In fact it concerns an interpretation of what must be counted as interference, an interpretation that is sometimes broader and sometimes more narrow than what a liberal usually argues for. That is, then, the basis for their emphasis on the duties of active citizenship. But this remains within the boundaries of the central liberal idea of the priority of the just over the good. Active citizenship is not necessary because it is part of the good; it is necessary in light of the protection of individual rights. Alan Patten talks about “instrumental republicanism”, in reference to this merely instrumental nature of the plea for active and virtuous citizenship: “Its distinctive feature [...] is the claim that citizenship and public service are goods because they contribute to the realization of negative liberty”. As such, the difference with regard to liberalism becomes very small or even non-existent. “Nothing in liberalism [...] prevents it from endorsing the instrumental republican understanding of the importance of public service and citizenship. To the contrary, liberals like Rawls explicitly assume –with republicans– that we must have a sense of justice, that we have duties to support just political institutions and that legal arrangements may help ensure that we do not throw away our own liberty”<sup>30</sup>.

Civic republicans are, therefore, confronted with a serious problem. In essence they endorse liberalism, but they add emphasis on the need for civic virtue. This leaves them all the more vulnerable to the communitarian criticism of liberalism, which argues that liberal principles provide no or insufficient basis to support necessary civic virtue. There is much discussion of the possibility to provide adequate support for civic

<sup>28</sup> P. RICOEUR, *Soi-même comme un autre*, cit., pp. 199-344.

<sup>29</sup> J. MARITAIN, *Man and the State*, cit., p. 10.

<sup>30</sup> A. PATTEN, *The Republican Critique of Liberalism*, cit., pp. 26, 36.

virtue on the basis of liberal-individualist principles<sup>31</sup>. The fact that civic republicanism relies even more strongly on civic virtue makes it all the more disputable. The personalist positive conception of liberty makes it possible to circumvent this difficulty.

## 5. Avoiding the pitfall of civic humanism

Given the personalist positive conception of freedom, we might be tempted to think that personalism is closer to civic humanism. However, the core idea of civic humanism is that active participation in the self-government of the political community is intrinsically valuable. For example, Michael Sandel, the most prominent contemporary proponent of civic humanism, states the following: “Instead of defining rights according to principles that are neutral among conceptions of the good, republican theory interprets rights in the light of a particular conception of the good society –the self-governing republic. In contrast to the liberal claim that the right is prior to the good, republicanism thus affirms a politics of the common good”<sup>32</sup>. The personalist positive conception of freedom, by contrast, is not based on the intrinsic value of self-government. The personalists did not think of self-government as an intrinsic good, but as a necessary condition for what Ricoeur described as “the pursuit of the good life with and for others in just institutions”, because of politics’ susceptibility to oppression<sup>33</sup>.

French personalism denounces any vision that exalts politics to the supreme rank in human existence. This is obvious if we look at the historical context of its development. In early twentieth-century France, the reactionary nationalism of the so-called *Action Française* exerted a great attraction on the Catholic elite. Charles Maurras, the atheist leader of the movement, tried to approach Catholicism after the First World War, in order to realize a nationalist and monarchist alliance of believers and nonbelievers. The Neo-Thomist political philosophy that was fashionable at the time was supposed to provide the theoretical justification for Catholics to put politics first<sup>34</sup>. In 1926, Pope Pius XI put an end to this alliance by means of a doctrinal condemnation of Maurras and the *Ac-*

<sup>31</sup> Cf. M. SANDEL, *The Procedural Republic and the Unencumbered Self*, cit., pp. 81-96; M. SANDEL, *Democracy’s Discontent*, cit.; C. TAYLOR, *Cross-Purposes: The Liberal-Communitarian Debate*, cit., pp. 159-82.

<sup>32</sup> M. SANDEL, *Democracy’s Discontent*, cit., p. 25.

<sup>33</sup> P. RICOEUR, *Soi-même comme un autre*, cit., p. 202.

<sup>34</sup> P. CHENAUX, *Entre Maurras et Maritain: une génération intellectuelle catholique (1920-1930)*, Cerf, Paris 1999, pp. 17-47; É. PERREAU-SAUSSINE, *Catholicisme et démocratie. Une histoire de la pensée politique*, Cerf, Paris 2011, pp. 191-206.

*tion Française*, because of the implied separation of politics on the one hand and faith and ethics on the other<sup>35</sup>. This condemnation came as a bombshell to French Catholic intellectuals, of whom the greater part sympathized with the *Action Française*. The condemnation compelled them to rethink their Christian vision of man and society and their position and task as Christians in the modern era. This was the actual setting for the development of French personalism in the 1930's<sup>36</sup>. Jacques Maritain was in fact initially one of the Neo-Thomists that sympathized with the reactionary *Action Française* but the papal condemnation provoked a revolution in his thinking. Maritain based his dissociation from Maurras on the so-called 'primacy of the spiritual'<sup>37</sup>. From the 1920's onwards he rejected the separation between Faith and world that was characteristic of the ideology of Maurras: The socio-political domain and the spiritual domain are distinct but should not be separated. Politics is autonomous and has its own order, but only God is sovereign and the Christian also has a worldly task to fulfil. That was Maritain's message. In other words, the importance of political action was put into perspective<sup>38</sup>.

The idea of the primacy of the spiritual, established by Maritain, would also become a distinguishing feature of Mounier's personalist manifesto and remained at the heart of the further development of French personalism<sup>39</sup>. In that sense, it is clear that the personalist plea for vigilant and active citizenship was not based on the direct contribution of political action to a fulfilled human life, but on the paradoxical nature of politics. Being an active citizen is necessary to limit the violence that politics necessarily entails, violence that stands in the way of the actualization of the ethical ideal of everyone fully developing their own personhood. That is the reason why freedom and self-government are connected. Hence, it is a negative argument that dominates, which keeps personalism far away from the positive conception of politics that characterizes civic humanism.

<sup>35</sup> Mgr. N. CANALI (par ordre du Saint-Père Pie XI), *Décret du Suprême Congrégation du Saint-Office condamnant certaines oeuvres de Charles Maurras et le journal L'Action Française*, le 29 décembre 1926. Rome, Saint-Office.

<sup>36</sup> J.-Y. CALVEZ, *The French Catholic Contribution to Social and Political Thinking in the 1930's*, in "Ethical Perspectives", 7 (2000) 4, pp. 312-15.

<sup>37</sup> J. MARITAIN, *Primauté du spirituel*, Plon, Paris 1927.

<sup>38</sup> J. MARITAIN, *Humanisme Intégral*, cit., 102-33. Cf. H. OPDEBEECK, *Het religieus humanisme van Jacques Maritain (1882-1973)*, in "Ethische Perspectieven", 10 (2000) 4, pp. 243-49; J.V. SCHALL, *Jacques Maritain: the philosopher in society*, Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham 1998.

<sup>39</sup> E. MOUNIER, *Manifeste au service du personalisme*, cit., pp. 545-549.

Obviously, the personalist perspective also relies on a particular conception of the good, but one's own development as a unique, relational and spiritual human person is a more open and far less controversial conception than the civic humanist conception. It is guided by the aforementioned desire for the good life with and for others in just institutions, which includes the firm conviction that a good human life is lived together and is guided by commitment, but it does not automatically impose a specific interpretation of the good and the just, unlike the civic humanist absolutization of the self-governing republic.

## Conclusion

We can identify the particularity and pertinence of the political theory of French personalism as "personalist republicanism" for the theory matches the defining characteristics of republicanism while it is exactly the personalist dimension that marks its distinction from the two common currents of contemporary republicanism. In comparison with civic republicanism it is striking that personalism also uses a kind of instrumental republicanism, in which participation in self-government is not pursued because of itself. However, civic republicanism was unable to support the necessary civic virtue by a solidary bond among the members of the community, as it remained stuck to a liberal individualist view of mankind. The philosophical anthropology of personhood made the difference. Personalists argue that it is impossible to talk about a self without a relationship with others. Self-esteem is intrinsically connected to solicitude for one's neighbor and for the other members of the community. The reliance on this personalist anthropology, makes clear that an alternative for liberalism not only needs to complement the focus on rights with a focus on duties, but more fundamentally, it also needs to abandon the theoretical starting point of the self-sufficient individual.

But there is also the difference with civic humanism. Personalists reject self-government as an intrinsic good. The personalist conception of the good is, in the words of Paul Ricoeur, the ethical pursuit of the good life with and for others in just institutions. In principle this does not mention self-government, were it not for the fact that the political realization of just institutions is in practice confronted with the ambiguity of political power. That is why the fragile equilibria of the political domain must be safeguarded by a conscientious citizenry, vigilant and willing to take action. Just like civic humanism, personalists stress the priority of the good over the just. But the conception of the good is in their case not the controversial assumption of the intrinsic value of self-government, but rather a broadly formulated ethical pursuit.

Admittedly, more needs to be done to reveal the full meaning of personalist republicanism and, more importantly, we need to try to develop personalist republicanism within a contemporary framework. The duty of vigilant and active citizenship remains an important corrective to the hegemony of a liberal concept of man and society that dissociates liberty from responsibility. For now, I conclude in that regard that personalist philosophers such as Maritain, Mounier, Landsberg and Ricoeur show us a valuable way forward.