

Can Personalism be First Philosophy?

Review of Juan Manuel Burgos's Book

“Personalism and Metaphysics”

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The series entitled *Philosophy of Personalism*, published by Vernon Press, was enriched last year by a new book, this being J.M. Burgos's *Personalism and Metaphysics. Is Personalism a First Philosophy?* (Malaga 2023, pp. 112).

There is no need for an extensive introduction of the author. He is a famous Spanish philosopher, a personalist, whose views have international reach. In particular, he is known to readers of *Forum Philosophicum* thanks to his presence at the conference “Christian Philosophy and its Challenges” organized at the Ignatianum University in Cracow in 2022, which resulted in his text “Christian Philosophy, Christian Philosophers or Christians Making Philosophy?” that was subsequently published in this journal (*Forum Philosophicum* 28 (1): 27–46).

In the introduction to the text under review here, the author notes that personalism was born in the 20th century with the mission of understanding persons in all their complexity and unity. Belonging to the broader trend of philosophical anthropology emerging at that time, it is characterized by a specific approach to persons: they are unique and unrepeatable, embodied, free and capable of self-determination, and lead an affectively and socially engaged life that is not only temporal but also biographical in character, while also open to transcendence. The work of supporters of this approach has focused on defining these and other characteristics of persons, and subsequently on answering questions about methodology, methods, and the relationship of personalism to other modes of inquiry. The author of the book also participated in these philosophical activities,

proposing the method of integral experience and attempting to systematize personalistic anthropology.

Nevertheless, in his opinion, the question of “the philosophical scope of personalism or, in other words, its position and status in the framework of the whole of philosophy” (p. vi) remains open. In particular, this question concerns the relation of personalism to metaphysics, and as such has two mutually exclusive answers. Either personalism, like anthropology, depends on metaphysics, or anthropology, and with it personalism, given a diagnosis asserting the inadequacy and/or impossibility of metaphysics, itself becomes first philosophy. The author devotes his publication to an attempt to answer the above question, specifying in the introduction that he adopts the position of Integral Personalism: i.e. his own proposal based on the anthropology of Karol Wojtyła. Integral Personalism is a stance that “claims to be explicitly ontological and to maintain a connection with the classical tradition” (p. vii).

This work, in addition to the introduction, consists of five chapters: “What should we Understand as Metaphysics?,” “Essential Features of the Metaphysics of Being,” “From Universalistic Metaphysics to Personalism as a First Philosophy in Anthropology,” “On What There Is: Being and/or Person,” and “Integral Experience as First Epistemology.” The whole study is complemented by a conclusion and bibliography.

In the first chapter, the author attempts to explain the concept of metaphysics. He gives four basic meanings of the concept, noting that this classification seems sufficient, although it naturally does not exhaust the entire wealth of content. Thus, metaphysics can be understood as: Overall Knowledge about Reality, or Worldview; First Philosophy or a Radical Area of Knowledge; the Guardian of Meaning or a Philosophy Capable of Proportioning Stable Truths; and, finally, the Metaphysics of Being. For Burgos, the fourth meaning is the most well-known, fundamental and basic for the realist tradition. As such, it should be a key reference point for addressing the question of the relationship between Integral Personalism and Metaphysics.

The second chapter is devoted to the analysis of the basic features of Metaphysics of Being. In the ensuing sections, the author considers the elements of the structure of Aristotle’s metaphysics and the original contribution of St. Thomas, with the concept of the act of existence at the forefront, ending the chapter with the following conclusion:

since metaphysics proportions the final (or first) structures of all reality, all other sciences (philosophical and non-philosophical) depend on it All the

sciences, therefore, (and particularly the philosophical ones) should pass through metaphysics, since metaphysics supplies them with the basic principles of reality (p. 36).

Hence, from the point of view of the metaphysics of being, metaphysics is the first philosophy, and all other areas of philosophy are second. In particular, anthropology depends on metaphysics. The next step is therefore to seek an answer to the question of whether personalism depends on metaphysics in this sense. The author notes that metaphysics has serious shortcomings as a basis for anthropology, as it is difficult within its framework to move from categories to determining what is Specifically Human. Similarly, the concept of action used by St. Thomas, which Burgos considers in a teleological context, does not strictly correspond to the concept of free human action, in that it is not a strictly anthropological concept. The reason for these difficulties diagnosed by the author is the impossibility of moving from universal categories to concrete human beings, caused by the overly formal nature of the concept of being. According to the author, the solution to the problem lies in using personalistic categories where mankind is concerned: i.e. “categories elaborated exclusively for the human being, who is a person” (p. 48). The concept of category here will be similar to Aristotle’s, but will have sectorial value, since it will refer only to persons. In particular, the concept of substance should be replaced by the concept of a self understood in its entire ontological scope: not only as a phenomenon of consciousness, but also as “the last root of the person, ultimately responsible, not only for identity but for ontological stability” (p. 50). Further analyses lead the author to the statement that “anthropology (and not metaphysics) is the first science when it comes to the person” (p. 56), and consequently “anthropology and, therefore, personalism, is a first sectorial philosophy or a first philosophy in its own sphere, that is, it has the decisive (although not exclusive) word on what pertains to the human” (p. 58).

In the fourth chapter, which begins with analyses of the importance of the composition of essence and act of being as a constitutive element of reality for personalist anthropology, the author seeks an answer to the following questions: “What is more radical, being or the person? And, does the person arise from being or does being arise from the person?” (p. 63). Confronting his position with the views of Josef Seifert, Jean-Luc Marion and Xavier Zubiri, he demonstrates the priority of anthropology, and consequently personalism, over metaphysics.

The fifth chapter is a kind of supplementation of these considerations with epistemological reflections aimed at strengthening, as the author

puts it, the personalist proposal. Burgos presents synthetically here the view, formulated earlier, of integral experience as a new proposal for the beginning of knowledge.

The book ends with the following conclusion: “anthropology or, more specifically, every anthropology that wants to begin radically from experience, and therefore integral personalism, is a first philosophy” (p. 99). As such, personalism is not the only first philosophy, but “a first sectorial philosophy capable of establishing ultimate and radical truths about its subject matter” (p. 98).

The above summary of the book under review presents the overarching course of Burgos’s argument. It can certainly be acknowledged that the author realizes the goal of taking up the subject matter established in the introduction and does so methodically by leading the reader through the successive steps of his reasoning. The very clear language, precise formulations and transparent argumentation are all noteworthy. Recapitulatory fragments, which are to be found not only at the end of subsequent parts of the text but also at other key points, help the reader follow the reasoning. All of this results in a text that can be read right through with undiminished interest.

It is worth paying careful attention to the first two chapters. They are only a kind of outline of the philosophical terrain, but as such constitute a well-executed summary of the key theses of classical metaphysics. In the central part, covering the next two chapters, the author justifies the thesis of personalism as first philosophy. Naturally, this need not necessarily be endorsed by supporters of classical metaphysics or Thomism, or probably even by all personalists. Nevertheless, it is well argued, and as such deserves attention and discussion.

Concise and precise formulations result in the publication not being extensive. The main text is less than 100 pages. Paradoxically, this advantage is simultaneously a disadvantage: the reader ends the book with a sense of dissatisfaction. However, there is a solution: reaching for the bibliography will help you find the works of the authors to whom Burgos refers, and which are worth getting to know (or returning to for those who have already encountered them). Equally, of course, the reader will also find listed there texts by the author himself, in which he presents his views in more detail.

In this publication, readers with only a somewhat limited philosophical background will encounter a wonderful and clear introduction to the metaphysics of Aristotle and St. Thomas, while supporters of personalism will become familiar with Burgos’s interesting and original proposal (which

is nevertheless deeply rooted in the tradition associated with this current of thought). At the same time, critically minded readers will be able to familiarize themselves with the author's lucidly presented arguments and reflect on their strength and plausibility. To sum up, it can be said that this is a book worth recommending to a wide audience.

