

Personalism—The Philosophical Movement for Human Development

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Abstract—Freedom manifests itself in the creative activity of man. Through a creative act, the person expresses itself and thus fulfils its freedom. Life of man can be ruled neither by fear, nor by authoritative pressure. If there is something valuable in life and world, then it may happen only thanks to freedom. The greater freedom is in the process of creating some act, the deeper is penetration of the life of the person. Freedom draws our attention to connection with values which we can accept or refuse. When man chooses good, human freedom grows and becomes a liberating freedom which thanks to its inner power heads to God and improves the person. It depends on man, whether he chooses good or evil, and he is responsible for his choice.

Key words—personalism; personalist schools; freedom; *communio personarum*

I. INTRODUCTION

From the very beginning, philosophical thinking is rooted in basic needs of a man who is not numbly bound to natural happening, but he himself must come to terms with reality and create his own life through his own activities. A man is the essence who on the basis of his own knowledge can make free decisions and thus live better or worse life. Human life is a dynamic process and man is an infinite being, thus he is opened as he is addressed by existence, he is invited to communicate on the background of the horizon of a sense which is historically present, but at the same time created by the communication itself [1; P. 99]. A thing cannot raise questions, not to mention that it cannot ask about its own nature. Only a man can ask about his own nature and in doing so he can cross the naturalness of the given facts and head towards the very essence. Man asks about the meaning of the world and happening; he raises questions because of himself in order to explore every reality where he can live his own self and thus find his own status and task in the entire reality. Because of its origin and aim, philosophical thinking is always defined anthropologically, but historically the anthropological scope is not always expressively formulated as well as the reflection of a man as a person is not always obvious, too.

Personalism emerged as a response to a crisis of Western society which acquired its economical shape in 1920s and 1930s. This crisis, a symptom of deeper causes, had giant consequences. As the later development demonstrated, the crisis was predominately a crisis of values. An arrogant penetration of dehumanized tendencies into human thinking as well as practical life demanded fusion of all the powers acknowledging the fact that the greatest aim of all endeavours is a man. Therefore, personalists disagreed with the exclusion of Christianity from a dialogue with distant even if many times opposite schools of thought. The personalist idea started to develop as early as in the 19th century as a response to depersonalization in the rationalism, the positivism, the Enlightenment, the pantheism, Hegel's absolute idealistic panlogism, individualism, the political collectivism, but also in the materialism, the psychological and evolutionary determinism. In the first half of the 19th century, the term "personalism" referred to various philosophical schools and systems which shared the common feature of emphasizing the fact that the person presents a source as well as an aim for philosophical, theological researches or the researches of humanities and science. Even nowadays, the term "personalism" is considered to be an ambiguous term used in philosophy, theology, psychology, ethics and other branches of science. It focuses on the person and his relations towards society and world. The person is becoming a unifying ontological and epistemological principle in various approaches of different sciences. Personalism presents one of philosophical attempts to solve the problem of man by understanding him as the person [2; P. 11].

An individual being which is realized through conscious ownership and independent disposal of an own self is called person. The concept of the person, which was unknown to the Greek philosophy, developed under the influence of Jewish-Christian thinking as late as in the patristic era and then it gradually found its place in philosophy. Surely, there had been a natural experience of uniqueness, freedom and responsibility of man even before, but it was not yet an object of a philosophical reflexion. Thinking focused on what was universal and necessary. Seeing "a man" as "a person" stresses difference and uniqueness of man, his

dignity and role. Such concept of man appeared in the 4th – 5th century AD. The biblical concept of the person was so influential for philosophical thinking that personalism is even nowadays understood as theist and Christianity-inspired philosophical movement [3; P. 116].

The term “personalism” in its modern sense was for the first time used in Germany in 1799. F. D. Schleiermacher in his work *Gespräche* (Dialogues) defended the idea of personal God against the pantheistic notion of God of J. G. Herder. In the United States the term “personalism” was for the first time published in 1867 by *The Galaxy* journal as the article of W. Whitman was titled “Personalism”. In 1865, English philosopher J. Grote in his book “*Exploratio Philosophica*” presented personalism as a basic principle of one’s own idealistic metaphysics [4; P. 71-92].

II. PERSONALISM AND ITS MAJOR THEMES

However, the ambiguous character of the term “personalism” demands a closer definition. The starting-point of personalistic thinking is the protest against any “materialization” of a man on the theoretical level which is done through preaching the philosophical monism or totalitarian forms in social-political life. According to personalists, the top position in the hierarchy of beings belongs to the person who in contrast with things possesses spirituality, autonomy, ability to make free decisions and express himself through acts as well as creativity (moral behaviour, art, religion, philosophy, science, technology). They emphasize that man as the person can never be regarded as an instrument, because in his very nature he is the goal of activity. Development of the person should be superior to all particular values realized in the life of an individual as well as society. The environment where the person should fully develop is the environment of relations with other persons and also (or predominately) with the person – God [5; P. 422].

Borden Parker Bowne defines personalism as follows: “Now when we consider life at all reflectively, we come upon two facts. First, we have thoughts and feelings and volitions; and these are our own. We also have a measure of self-control or the power of self-direction. Here, then, we find in our experience a certain self-hood and a relative independence. This fact constitutes our personality. The second fact is that we cannot regard ourselves as self-sufficient and independent in any absolute sense. And a further fact is that we cannot interpret our life without admitting both of these facts” [6].

The list of personalists and predecessors of personalism includes also thinkers who dealt with man and the person, but also philosophers who refused the positivism, the materialism and the naturalism [7; P. 333]. There are thinkers who tried to systematize individual forms of personalism and defined various criteria for their identification. Consequently, numerous divisions of personalism suggest not only difficulty, but also multiplicity and openness of various approaches addressing the issue of man. Moreover, manifold divisions show also vitality of personalistic thinking and significance of the object of study.

There are personalists as well as idealists who claim that reality is constituted of consciousness, but the other ones present themselves as realist philosophers and claim that the natural order is created by God independently of human consciousness. In order to make taxonomic convenience, many forms of personalism can be divided into two basic groups:

- personalism in a strict sense,
- personalism in a broader sense [8].

According to personalism in a strict sense of the term, the person is in the centre of the philosophical system that originates from an “intuition” of the person himself. Then, this system goes on to analyse the personal reality and experience which are objects of this intuition. In the 20th century the method of European version of personalism draws extensively from phenomenology and existentialism, taking steps from traditional metaphysics and constituting a separate philosophical system. In the idealistic version of personalism, it becomes obvious that the deepest roots of personalism in its strict sense are to be found in early critical reception of German idealism and in some aspects of moral sense philosophy.

The origin of intuition lies in the self-awareness by which one grasps values and essential meanings via unmediated experience. The knowledge produced by reflecting on this experience is nothing else than an explication of the original intuition which leads to self-awareness limited by moral conduct. The intuition of the person as the centre of values and meanings is not exhausted in phenomenological and existential analyses, because these analyses refer beyond themselves and suggest essential transcendence of the person himself, irreducible to its own specific manifestations or to the sum of the manifestations. Despite the differences, both the American personalist school of G. P. Bowne and his first followers and the European personalism of E. Mounier belong to personalism in this strict sense.

On the other hand, personalism in a broader sense regards the person neither as the object of an intuition, nor as a result of philosophical research based on the analysis of immediate experience and its context. It reflects manifestation of the person and his own singular value in the scope of a general metaphysics. As a result, the person occupies the central place in philosophical discourse which is not reduced to an explication or development of an original intuition of the person. The person does not justify metaphysics, but it is rather metaphysics which justifies the person and his various activities. Personalism in a broader sense of the term does not constitute an autonomous metaphysics, but it offers an anthropological-ontological shift within existing metaphysics and draws out ethical consequences of the shift. Perhaps the best known personalism in the broader sense is Thomistic personalism represented by Jacques Maritain, Étienne Gilson, Robert Spaemann, and Karol Wojtyła. Thomistic personalism draws on philosophical and theological principles of Thomas Aquinas’s anthropology in what it sees a coherent development of Aquinas’s thought.

Based on the place of emergence or operation, personalism is often divided into French, American, German, Russian, Polish, etc., while certain specific national features and issues are taken into account. The significant representative of the French personalism Jean Lacroix in the letter titled *Personalism and the dialogue* presents an opinion that: "Considering personalism, it is not a philosophy in itself. [...] In the first sense, personalism is less philosophy, it is rather an intention of people to build a person in themselves and in their neighbour in order to reach build humanity. ... In the second sense, in order to become philosophy, this radical intention has to become aware of itself in thinking and operation and create technical means in rational way which will explain, work and prove. If we try to make a general definition of personalism, we will always get to eclecticism." According to the French Marxist philosopher Garaudy, "Personalism is rather a movement than a philosophical system. His general thoughts can be found in various philosophies" [9; P. 178].

It is obvious that "personalisms" can be differentiated on the basis of various criteria emphasizing the primacy of the person [10; P. 47], however, in order to secure as clear orientation in the considerably complicated situation as possible, I. Dec suggests division of personalist schools into three following groups:

- 1) horizontal personalism (atheistic)
- 2) vertical personalism (theistic) – un-Thomistic
- 3) classical personalism – Thomistic with metaphysical orientation [11; P. 123].

1. Horizontal personalism was formed on the basis of purely materialistic vision of man who in the natural environment differs from other things in consciousness, work, freedom and social relations. Paradoxically, despite the fact that this humanistic personalism preached freeing man from the hands of ideology and religion, it contributed to formation of the theoretical basis for the totalitarian approach to the person, as it happened in the case of Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche or Jean-Paul Sartre.

2. Vertical personalism takes many forms. The most significant is moral-social personalism which was preached by E. Mounier as well as M. Blondel. Phenomenological-axiological personalism is connected with the names of M. Scheler and R. Ingarden. In the early stage of his work, Scheler perceives the person as "a centre of acts". On the other hand, famous phenomenologist Ingarden from Krakow is regarded as a follower of personalist movement thanks to the posthumous compilation of his late texts titled "Książeczka o człowieku". In this work, man is understood as a personal "I" in the stream of consciousness which is responsible for his acts. Existential-dialogic personalism is represented by existentialists K. Jaspers and G. Marcel. The starting point is a phenomenological analysis of personal "I" which radically differs from things around man. The essence of "I" surrounded by what is "mine" or what belongs to others lies in free will through which man develops himself as well as all the others who enter a relationship with him. Interpersonal communication which

defines abilities of the person forms the basis of this type of personalism. In the dialogue with others man reveals his own limits, that leads him to transcendence. According to the French existentialist, man is *homo viator* – seeker of a man as well as God. The evolutionary-cosmic personalism of P. Teilhard de Chardin places Jesus Christ into the centre of the evolutionary vision of the world in which man presents the central and connecting link between the world of nature and God. From the moment of the emergence of human consciousness, the evolution of man changed from the process of hominization to the process of personification and then socialization with the final goal being unification of everything in God.

3. Classical personalism (Thomistic) refers to Greek classic philosophers, predominately to Aristotle, but also to his followers Boethius and Thomas of Aquinas, who regarded man as the highest form of being with the most characteristic features of subsistence, rationality, free will and individuality ("[...] *persona significat id quod est perfectissimum in tota natura, scilicet subsistens in rationali natura*") [12].

Among the major themes of personalist thinking one can find the issue of the human being, dignity of a person, subjectivity, freedom, self-direction, relationship, community, and society. The fundamental personalist classification of all beings is the distinction between personal and impersonal being. J. Maritain said: "Whenever we say that man is a person, we mean that he is *more* than a mere parcel of matter, more than an individual element in nature, such as is an atom, a blade of grass, a fly or an elephant" [8]. Personalism refused not only the main forms of idealism, the materialism, and the determinism of the 19th century, but even the objectivism of Aristotle which for centuries formed the ideological basis of Thomism. According to Aristotelian methodology for defining a species in terms of its genus and specific difference, man was defined as a rational animal (*ho anthropos zoon noetikon*) [13]. However, personalists, while accepting this definition, see such a construction as an unacceptable reduction of the human person to the mere part of the objective world. This objective, cosmological view of man as an animal with the distinguishing feature of reason regards man primarily as any other object in the world and forgets the subjectivity as an exceptional feature of person. Therefore, personalism postulates the belief in the non-material dimension and the primordial uniqueness of the human being, and thus also the belief in irreducibility of the human being to a mere object of the natural world [14; P. 371-414].

The main themes of personalism were drafted by the most distinctive representative of the French personalism Emmanuel Mounier:

- Psychological structure of the human person which Mounier calls incarnate existence, incarnate spirit, soul and body are unified and represent a source of one and the same experience.
- The person transcends nature. Man has an ability to separate himself from nature. He is the only one who

knows the whole world and transforms it, even if he is the most powerless from all creatures.

- Openness to others and to the world - communication: The first move made by a human being at the beginning of his childhood is the move towards the others. The first experience of a person is the experience of the second person: the YOU and therefore the WE come before the I.
- Dynamism: Life of the person is the search for unity which is never fulfilled; therefore, this search lasts until death.
- Vocation: Everyone has some distinctive feature which makes him irreplaceable in the world; no one can replace him in his role.
- Freedom: It is such a control over own self and over things that man is a really sovereign ruler. This control is not tied to personal being, as in the case of conviction, but it is a gift for man who can accept or deny it [15; P. 6].

III. TOWARD THE PERSONALIST HUMANISM

Personalists emphasize that man is being which creates intentional relationships with other beings as with objects which just proves the substantial difference between human being and being of objects. "Personality exists only towards the other man, it realises and finds its self only in the other one. The first experience of a person is the experience of the second person" [16; P. 37]. Firstly, the person is perceived as "someone" and only then it is perceived as "something" and this separates him from any other entity in the visible world. Subjectivity becomes a synonym to what is irreducible in the human being. According to Mounier, the character of the definition of the person may be only approximate, because the person is too complex and too rich to be precisely defined. It is possible to offer partial definitions of the person and come closer to its understanding, but there will always remain something unsaid and undiscovered which will challenge people to continue and deepen the understanding of the person even more. While explaining the unknowableness of the person, Mounier presents the example of a neighbour who can be described by various expressions, stating his profession, education, origin, psychical features etc., but such a description is never exact and cannot fully capture the real personality of this concrete man [17; P. 8].

The effort to define the person is useless, because it is impossible to reveal the reality of the person as it always contains something which is irreducible to an object of knowledge [14; P. 371-414], which means that there is no way to reach its core with the help of reason. For Christian thinking, the issue of unknowableness and non-definability the person is not a new theme, because Christian thinking claims that people can know God in His existence, but not in His essence. The Christian personalism postulates that God is the Person which creates all individual persons to His image. So if it is impossible to express who is God, then it is also impossible to define what creates man to the image of

God. Mounier claims that: "a person is a spiritual being constituted as such by a manner of subsistence and of independence of being; it maintains this existence by its adhesion to a hierarchy of values that it has freely adopted, assimilated, and lived by its own responsible activity and by a constant interior development; thus it unifies all its activity in freedom and by means of creative acts develops the individuality of its vocation" [18; P. 65].

The person is an experienced activity of autocracy, communication and attachment, which is perceptible and cognizable in its act as a movement towards personalisation. "Person alone finds his vocation and realizes his destiny. Nobody else, neither man nor the society, may deprive him of this task" [18; P. 72]. However, personal life of man is not a one-way progress, but it spreads between absolute personalization and absolute depersonalization as the person is not only a source of love and good deeds, but also of bad acts. Every man is on some stage of personality development, higher or lower, but no one can reach the top of full personalisation as well as fall to absolute depersonalisation. "I am a person from my elementary existence" [16; P. 28].

The key words of the personalist philosophy include the issue of freedom which is often introduced on the background of the criticism of its understanding in the existentialism, Marxism, Thomism or in various forms of the liberalism. The person is *sui iuris esse* as well as *alteri incommunicabilis*, so it is unchangeable, unreachable which is closely connected with decision making itself and free will [19; P. 21].

Based on the belief that man is created on the image of God and his freedom is similar to the freedom of God, in personalism one can find affirmation of the abstractly absolute freedom, but freedom of the existentially situated person. In fact, freedom is a part of the existence of the person, but it is not autonomous existence. Man does not create himself in absolutely free way, but he develops in a given situation, independent of his own will. He has certain objective character and he has to take this character into account. According to Tischner, man is expressed in the following metaphor: "Man is like a song passing through time. Who plays this song? Man himself is the instrument and the artist here" [20; P. 53]. In fact, freedom is dependent and limited by our concrete situation. To be free is, in the first place, to accept this position and base oneself upon it. Not everything is possible, or not everything at any moment [16; P. 69].

Reflection of the freedom of the person who together with other persons forms *communio personarum* belongs to main features of personalism as the person who is not free is unable to acknowledge the freedom of others. The society of persons is the society of free people. Traditionally, the society was based on authoritative institutions and drew its power from the bidding tradition. The modern society is based on freedom of every individual, on the freedom following the rules, thus excluding the freedom of certain individuals that leads to totality on private as well as state level.

Personalism refuses the totalitarianism of any kind; it appears in the concrete historical situation and draws the

attention to deviations in the understanding of freedom and their impact on economy. In his effort to gain economic wellbeing and political power, man becomes withdrawn and stranger to his neighbours as well as environment where he lives. "In a contemporary society, the very notion and role of the "Other" (of the other Human being, first of all) are mostly forced out from the real social communication. The fundamental place of the "Other" is occupied by technology, computers, and social networks. A virtual world became equivalent to the "Other". With the invasion of simulative, illusive and unreal features into the objective human relations, the very possibility of compassion, sympathy, love, mercy and other existential feelings are dislodged from the spiritual and cultural lives" [21; P. 660]. According to Mounier, the main threat to human person is the capitalist economy. "The greatest evil of the capitalist and bourgeois systems does not lie in letting people die, but through poverty or bourgeois idol it kills the possibility as well as want to be the person" [18; P. 72]. Profit has become the last aim of business; therefore, there appear tendencies to accept impersonal or rather counterpersonal decisions and everything conform to the needs of production. However, Marxism also could not help the modern man to overcome the crisis, even if it wanted to replace "mystique of individual" which was brought by the Renaissance by the "mystique of the collective". Mounier offers a solution. Instead of bourgeois humanism based on egoism and individualism and Marxist humanism based on violence and collectivism, he offers the personalist humanism which enables people to develop, shape and live in accordance with the accepted hierarchy of values and aims within the society created to reach the social good where the ally – enemy principle retreats in favour of the principle of civilized, peaceful coexistence without variance in the sphere where the personal freedom is manifestation of respect, dignity and diversity. The freedom preached by Mounier demands peculiar tolerance and openness education, as well as education of the culture of the social life [22; P. 21].

IV. CONCLUSION

It is not easy to answer one's own vocation and fulfil one's own personal goal, because there always remains certain dialectic tension between spiritual life of man and material conditions in which he lives. There appear certain worries about one's own material existence which absorb whole man and sooner or later kill his spirit. According to Mounier, there can be two reasons for these worries. Firstly, the social structure itself forces man to focus whole his interest only on this material existence. In such a case it is necessary to change the society. Secondly, it is possible that man spends all his energy on the material gain not because of the pressure to acquire necessities for his life, but he pursues after redundant economic or personal power. The restoration of the society alone cannot change this tendency of human will; however, it may point out the danger of it and prevent luxury and power to get to the hands of the few [23; P. 268-273].

Personalism endeavours to use various doctrines which respect the person, his dignity and exclusivity. From its birth,

personalism has connected various doctrines as well as representatives of various philosophical movements. The *Esprit* journal published works of not only Catholic intellectuals, but also of existential and Marxist authors who focused on understanding of man and humanistic values. Personalism is not a closed philosophical system and its representatives do not try to close it to this category [18; P. 8]. In *A Personalist Manifesto* in the chapter titled *The Scope of the Term Personalism* Mounier claims: "Personalism includes every teaching or culture which explain the supremacy of the human person above material necessities and collective systems which keep the development" [18; P. 11].

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