

# A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO JOSEF SEIFERT'S PHILOSOPHY

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## I. Realist Phenomenology

In this text, I will sketch a brief outline of Josef Seifert's philosophy as an introduction to the excellent volume that *Journal of East-West Thought* has so timely dedicated to his figure. The Austrian professor Josef Seifert (Seekirchen am Wallersee, Salzburg, 1945) is one of the most important and influential thinkers of the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st. His style and vision represent, without doubt, one of the most important philosophical paradigms in recent history.

His formative years from adolescence and throughout university were marked by the key influence of Dietrich von Hildebrand, eminent philosopher of the **Göttingen Circle**, whose deployment of phenomenology from a realist standpoint would always remain a source of inspiration. Alongside von Hildebrand, Seifert's friend Baldwin Schwartz was also a great influence. Schwarz attempted to reintroduce phenomenology in Austria from the same perspective of going "back to things themselves", through an Academy of Philosophy for which there was little appreciation at a time when the country's cultural climate showed more interest in absorbing Wittgenstein's legacy.

Largely Professor Seifert's life has been devoted to perpetuating the work of these two great masters. This is apparent from very early on with the publication of his doctoral dissertation, where he argues to demonstrate the possibility of attaining objective truths (1972). In it, he points out that there exist necessary states of things in reality, and the human person can ascertain these states as they themselves are, that is, in their own essence. However, in order to reach this knowledge, it is necessary to grasp the specific character of human understanding as a capacity, which cannot be reduced to a chain of material facts.

These ideas are the core of his work, articulating the innumerable issues he has dealt with in his many books, articles and talks: the possibility of synthetic

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knowledge about necessary states of things, wherein Philosophy as a rigorous science grounds itself.<sup>1</sup>

In order to understand how this is possible we must engage in discussion with the philosopher that discovered the possibility of *a priori* synthetic knowledge not limited to mathematics, geography, or the so-called “exact sciences”, but as something that also applies to other realms of reality: Immanuel Kant. At the same time, one must understand the philosophical work of Husserl, Adolf Reinach, and Dietrich von Hildebrand.

After confronting these authors, Seifert highlights four main points that together make realist phenomenology possible. He understood it as the most appropriate instance of a type of philosophy that seeks to know “the things themselves”, or as stated by the motto of the International Academy of Philosophy “the love of truth, every truth and in everything”.

The first point is that the characteristic necessity found in necessary states of things (one might think of Pythagoras’ theorem, or of the proposition pointed out by von Hildebrand “justice cannot be ascribed to impersonal beings”) is not the correlate of a linguistic sign or the product of a subjective state. Nor does it entail that it is beyond our power to think of such things in a different way (perhaps due to the structure of our brain, as psicologism would hold). It is the necessity that attends the thing itself as its own trait, that is, it is completely objective. “In fact” —Seifert states— “philosophy can be an authentically philosophical science only if it attains knowledge of the intelligible objective essence of things, which is its object”.<sup>2</sup>

The second point is that this necessity found in the essence of things makes itself manifest in a demonstrable and doubtless way —that is, it is supremely intelligible.

The third point held by Seifert is that this necessity can be known directly through intuition of the essence, or indirectly through deduction or logical proof. Seifert here is not speaking about an instance immanent to the subject, or about

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<sup>1</sup>See Josef Seifert, “La Filosofia come Scienza Rigorosa. La fondazione di un método fenomenológico realista in dialogo critico con le *Idee sulla filosofia come scienza rigorosa* de Edmund Husserl”, Interpretative essay included in the bilingual italian edition of Dietrich von Hildebrand’s capital work *Che cos’è la filosofia?*, Bompiani, Milano, 2001, pp. 537-568. (Original title: *What is Philosophy?* Bruce Publishing, Milwaukee, 1960).

<sup>2</sup>Op. cit., p. 551.

innate ideas, but rather —and this is a crucial element for any phenomenology that wishes to consider itself *realist*— about proof of the transcendence of knowledge, of the fact that it is capable of grasping, knowing, and comprehending reality in its own essence.

Lastly, the necessary states of things, about which one can have *a priori* knowledge, do not confine themselves to the ones pointed out by Kant —categories or *a priori* forms of sensibility. Rather philosophy also discovers many other objects whose necessary essence can be accessed *a priori*: “there are *a priori* objective essences of color, and of [musical] tones, as well as of odors and the quality of taste. There are essential, necessary laws of beauty, of its modes and channels, of the literary artwork, of art, of moral virtues and actions, of doubting and asking, of freedom, love, life and death. In all these fields, we find an inexhaustible world of such necessary essences with their corresponding essential relations. Therefore, not just in mathematics, but in philosophy as well an investigation must be carried out in order to discover all of them”.<sup>3</sup>

The whole of Josef Seifert's philosophical research, with its great range and depth, finds its basis in these points, which he has developed and clarified throughout time.

Proof of this is the fact that some of the fine books he later produced —where we find the maturity of a great philosopher— evolve from texts done during his early years as professional philosopher. For example, *Sein und Wesen*<sup>4</sup>—perhaps with *Essere e Persona*<sup>5</sup> and *Back to Things in Themselves*,<sup>6</sup> his most important book about metaphysics and theory of knowledge— is based on two articles originally published in English in *Aletheia*,<sup>7</sup> periodical which he himself founded.

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<sup>3</sup>Op. cit., p. 556.

<sup>4</sup>Heidelberg Universitätsverlag, 1996.

<sup>5</sup>*Essere e Persona, verso una fondazione fenomenologica di una metafisica classica e personalistica*. Vita e Pensiero, Milano, 1989. (There is no English translation, although the title could be translated as “Being and Person. Towards a Phenomenological Foundation of a Classical and Personalistic Metaphysics.”)

<sup>6</sup>*Back to the “Things in Themselves”. A Phenomenological Foundation for Classical Realism*. Routledge, New York, 1987.

<sup>7</sup>“Essence and Existence: A New Foundation of Classical Metaphysics on the Basis of Phenomenological Realism”, en *Aletheia* 1,1 (1997), pp. 17-157 y “A Critical Investigation of Existential Thomism”, en *Aletheia* 1,2 (1997), pp. 371-459. The latter is a

Another of his important books, *Gott als Gottesbeweis*<sup>8</sup> —in this case concerning the ontological argument— is the outcome of long reflection about this important philosophical issue addressed previously in earlier texts.<sup>9</sup>

## II. Moral Philosophy

The lines of work we have sketched evidence the influence of von Hildebrand, but also, without a doubt, Kant, Husserl, and, as Rocco Buttiglione has pointed out<sup>10</sup>, Max Scheler as well.

The turn given to phenomenology by Scheler is correlated with his particular outlook: his take on phenomenology does not include a priority of logical-mathematical essences, but a stress on moral experience.

Values, a reality not confined to the realm of ethics, take their place in a reality as something different from us, and not as projections of the subject. According to Seifert, they enforce themselves upon us through their own meaning and essence, being in themselves sufficient motivation for moral action:

*When the object of the act 'demands' our moral action, by giving through it the corresponding answer to a being, we are in fact motivated by the importance of our action's object, by the state of things that is to be realized in moral acts. It does not motivate us because of subjective pleasure nor primarily because of the true gratification that it supplies, but rather because of the valuable character and the fullness of the value that resides in it. Our volition as agent corresponds*

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re-elaboration of a text he had worked on for a debate or Common Seminar at the University of Dallas in 1974.

<sup>8</sup> *Gott als Gottesbeweis: Eine phänomenologische Neubegründung des ontologischen Arguments*. Heidelberg Universitätsverlag, 1996.

<sup>9</sup>For instance: “Kant und Brentano gegen Anselm und Descartes. Reflexionen über das ontologische Argument”, en *Theologia* (1985), pp. 878-905. (There is an English translation by the Seifert himself in his page on the web *academia.edu*: “Kant and Brentano against Anselm and Descartes. A Phenomenological Defense of the Ontological Argument”)

<sup>10</sup>See, “*Ser y Persona* de Josef Seifert. Fondo teórico y significa de esta obra” in Carlos A. Casanova (ed.), *El amor a la verdead, toda la verdad y en todas las cosas. Ensayos en honor a Josef Seifert (The love of truth, every truth and in every thing. Essays in honor of Josef Seifert)*. Ediciones Universidad Católica de Chile, Santiago de Chile, 2009, pp. 19 y ss.

*to this aspect. At the same time, it is clear that, with it, our will, inasmuch as it is an answer that corresponds to the object of the action, as a 'stance taken' objectively, is certainly motivated by the object, but its value is completely independent of the success and the utility of our action. The value of a taken stance that corresponds to a Good remains completely untouched, even when there is no result whatsoever for that will.*<sup>11</sup>

The end of an action, for Seifert, cannot be neither the moral perfection of the subject, nor the good we expect from the realization of the value —regardless of the particular value at hand, whether spiritual happiness or economic benefit. This does not mean that values are not connected with goods, but rather it means values lie in a superior sphere, which prevents ethics from being “teleological” or consequentialist. A teleological ethic demands judgment of the foreseeable consequences of the action within the specific historical circumstance. Therefore it would not allow for moral norms with absolute, unconditional, and hence, universal validity.

When it comes to moral philosophy, we cannot overlook the influence Karol Wojtyla, today Pope St. John Paul II had on a philosophically mature Seifert. Wojtyla pointed to him an important limit of Scheler's material ethics of values: its emotionalist nature. Seifert shared this criticism and labored to overcome this problem trying to find the adequate place of duty within ethics. This way, he sought to avoid an interpretation of Christian ethics as a “supernatural utilitarianism,” that is to say, as a group of recommendations about what is needed to ensure the salvation of the soul.

It must be taken into account that the experience of value takes place within the subject's conscience, and in this sense, is accompanied with emotion. However, although emotion can aid in endowing relevance to values, it cannot explain their importance. It therefore becomes necessary to reflect upon one's own experience so that the subject may be capable to formulate the type of moral judgments sought by Seifert.

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<sup>11</sup>“¿Qué es y qué motiva una acción moral?”, pp. 44-45. (“What is and What Motivates a Moral Action?”). Paper written by Professor Seifert in 1975, during his first year at the University of Dallas. It can be found in German and Spanish on his academic webpage.

### III. Personalism

For Seifert it would be more proper to speak of a “Metaphysics of the Person”, but in any case, it is of interest to show that, with his premises, not all philosophies that call themselves personalist are really personalist, or at least not in the appropriate degree. A true personalism would have at least the following foundations.<sup>12</sup> An irreducible difference between persons (rational subjects) and irrational beings. The recognition of the rationality of knowledge and of the person’s transcendence in attaining truth. The acknowledgment of the freedom of the person, understood therefore as the proprietor of his own acts.

***The discovery of the human heart as ‘locus’ of affections.*** Personalism is not possible if rationality is reduced to intellect and free will. The relation of the person with “the world”, with the totality of being, and with God. An understanding of person as rational substance: a person is a being in itself, not the function of some other instance or entity —not even of God. The unique value (dignity) of the person. *Persona est affirmanda propter seipsam*: “person” refers a characteristically intrinsic objective value, an “of itself”. Absolute primacy of moral and religious values, since the fundamental values of the person not only reside in the intellect. Conscious intellectual life reaches its fulfillment in religious and moral values. The person is essentially ordered towards community (and relation). It cannot be reduced to a relation, but without this essential trait, the distinction between man and woman, and realities like family, community, the Church, etc... would be unaccountable.

***The moral drama of the fundamental choice between good and evil.*** Philosophies, which reduce this choice to an intellectual issue (Socrates) or to a choice concerning the means to a final end (Aristotle), are not true personalisms.

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<sup>12</sup>See “El concepto de persona en la renovación de la teología moral. Persona y personalismos” (“The concept of person in the renewal of moral theology. Person and personalisms”), which can be found at the Digital Academic Deposit of the University of Navarre ([dadun.unav.edu](http://dadun.unav.edu)), or in the personal page of the autor in the web [academia.edu](http://academia.edu). See also “A propósito del libro *Introducción al Personalismo* de Juan Manuel Burgos” (“On the book *Introducción al Personalismo* by Juan Manuel Burgos”), which can be consulted at the digital repository of the University of La Rioja ([dialnet.unirioja.es](http://dialnet.unirioja.es)).

Personal being as pure perfection and divine attribute: “Being person is a pure and absolute perfection,<sup>13</sup> and therefore personality and personal perfections must be attributed clearly and without reservations to God, and only to him in a perfect, non-restricted way”.

#### IV. Decisive Contributions to Public Life

With these few strokes, we have barely sketched the main aspects of the thought of a man as prolific as Professor Josef Seifert (currently head of the John Paul II chair at the Institute of Philosophy “Edith Stein” in Granada, Spain.) However, I would like to finish by pointing out the important contribution played out by his thought in certain practical issues during the last few decades.

Seifert has given a lot of thought to the life of the Church, and to the relations between faith and reason, as attested by such relevant works as “Conocimiento contemporáneo y fe. Significado, evidencia, certeza y creencia.”<sup>14</sup> *San Pablo y Santo Tomás sobre Fides et Ratio*<sup>15</sup>, *Erkenntnis del Vollkommenen. Wege der Vernunft zu Gott*,<sup>16</sup> or *Filosofía Cristiana e libertad*,<sup>17</sup> which will soon be translated into English as *Christian Philosophy and Free Will* with an introduction by John Finnis.

One of his most memorable contributions took place at the Vatican, where he was summoned to participate in the debate concerning whether the so-called “Harvard protocol” about brain death should be accepted. According to this protocol, brain death is equivalent to complete death of the subject, a circumstance that would make organ extractions for transplants permissible. Leaving aside the complications entailed by this difficult issue, the fact is that Seifert’s forceful reflections made many scientists, the Vatican, and other countries accept that in extreme instances it may amount to murdering a subject in order to use his organs.

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<sup>13</sup>See Rogelio Rovira’s article in this same number of *Journal of East-West Thought*.

<sup>14</sup>The translation of the title would be “Contemporary knowledge and faith: meaning, evidence, certainty and belief”, in *Revista Española de Teología* 60 (2000), pp. 203-238.

<sup>15</sup>Publicaciones “San Dámaso”, 2009.

<sup>16</sup>Lepanto Verlag, Bonn, 2010. In English: *Knowledge of the Perfect One: Ways of Reason to God*.

<sup>17</sup>Morcelliana, Brescia, 2013.

Therefore, it is not a minor issue.<sup>18</sup>

He also had great influence in the position taken by the Conference of Bishops of Chile concerning the “morning after pill”, arguing strongly about its abortive nature. Besides these two decisive contributions, his active participation as member of the Pontifical Academy for Life, and his interest in ecclesial problems have led him to engage in numerous problems, many of them with a great public impact<sup>19</sup>.

In conclusion, Josef Seifert is the most eminent representative alive of realist phenomenology —a way to conceive philosophy in the understanding that it represents the most adequate interpretation of Husserl’s *Logical Investigations* before his idealist turn. From this point of view, he is doubtless one of the peaks of modern thought.

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<sup>18</sup>See “Is ‘Brain Death’ Actually Death” in *The Monist* 76.2 (1993), pp. 175-202; “Brain Death and Euthanasia”, in M. Poots, P. A. Byrne & R. G. Nilges (eds.), *Beyond Brain Death*. Kluwer Academic, Netherlands, 2000, pp. 201-227; “Consciousness, mind, brain, and death”, in C. Machado & D. Shewmon (eds.), *Brain Death and Disorders of Consciousness*. Kluwer Academic, New York, 2004, pp. 61-78; *The Philosophical Diseases of Medicine and Their Cure*. Springer, New York, 2004; etc.

<sup>19</sup>This is not the place to discuss whether his contributions were always correct or not, especially in recent times.