

DOES SEIFERT'S PERSONALISM HOLD WATER?

By Rocco Buttiglione*

Does Seifert's personalism hold water? (1) The question is rather provocative but my answer will be clear: yes, it does. Not only it holds water but can be continued and stands in need of being continued. This paper will put Seifert within the phenomenological tradition and in particular within the tradition of realistic phenomenology. Then we will describe Seifert's discovery and its meaning for contemporary philosophy. In the end, we will defend why we think it can be continued and stands in need of being continued and in which direction it should be continued.

I. Seifert within the phenomenological tradition

Max Scheler has put the experience of values in the centre of the philosophical attention. We perceive the reality around us charged with values and the perception of the object is accompanied by the perception of the value. Kant had considered human emotions as obstacles to the discovery of the truth. Scheler tells us that emotions are an essential component of our perception of reality. We discover reality (and moral reality in particular) in our emotions and through our

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emotions. This discovery introduces us to a world, which is thoroughly different from the moral world of Kant and of Hume. Think for example of the famous "natural fallacy" of Hume: you cannot derive an 'ought judgement' from an 'is judgement. Scheler could answer that moral judgements are not derived from judgement' of fact. They are given together with judgement of fact. They possess an inner intimate relation with judgement of facts but this relation is not that of a logical deduction.

The discovery of value leads us towards the person. In this sense, Scheler is one of the main sources of modern personalism, as John Crosby has recently and so convincingly pointed out. The values are perceived in the person, and they constitute the interiority of the person. The person is the space constituted by the values. So far Scheler.

One point is not, however, in Scheler completely clear. The person is both the stage upon which the values are projected and within which they are perceived. However, is the person a value in them self? Moreover, if the person is a value in them self which kind of value are they?

It seems that in Scheler the person is the condition of all values but is not a value in them self. The values appear in the experience of the person, and in this very experience are consumed and disappear. One could make a comparison between Scheler and Sigieri of Brabant. In Sigieri, the person in the act of knowledge participates of the "intellectus possibilis" and the act of knowledge takes place in the person. The act does not remain in the person and does not enter to constitute the substance of the person. The act takes place in the person but is not an act of the person.

It seems that the situation is similar in Scheler as what regards the knowledge of values. Scheler could be an averroist of values. I use the dubitative form "could be" and not the affirmative "is" because it is not always clear what Scheler really means and it is equally unclear whether he has remained of the same opinion throughout his philosophical career.

Dietrich von Hildebrand and Karol Wojtyla have made one step forward. They have done in relation to Scheler the same operation St. Thomas Aquinas has done with Sigieri. Aquinas says "*hic homo intelligit*," the person is the subject of the act of the intellect. Von Hildebrand and Wojtyla say: "this man is the subject of the experience of the values."

This is possible because the person is a substance and the act remains in the substance and changes the substance. I shall not deal now with the differences

between von Hildebrand and Wojtyła on this point. It suffices to say that Wojtyła relies more directly upon the Aristotelian concept of substance and upon the Aristotelian metaphysics of potency and act. The substance is the precondition of the act, in the sense that it contains the potency of that act. Moreover, the act remains in the substance, meaning through the act the substance is perfected through the fulfillment of its potency or remains unfulfilled and misses its due perfection.

If we consider the person as substance, we make one fundamental step towards a personalistic philosophy. Now the person is no more just the stage on which the experience of values takes place. Now the person is a value in herself and all values experienced by the person remain in the person and qualify the person. The destiny of the person is that to summarize in herself all values through her experience of the world. This changes also the way in which we see values and obliges us to take a certain distance from Scheler on the decisive issue of duty.

Scheler does not love the idea of duty. It seems to him to contain an element of Pharisee morality. Von Hildebrand has stressed the idea of *Gebührenbeziehung*. The *Gebühren* is a duty, yet a particular kind of duty, clearly different from the Solenn of Kantian morality. It is a kind of completely passive duty. Imagine Hamlet watching the performance of Euripides' drama *The Women of Troy*. He clearly perceives that compassion is due to these women who are so disgraced without any fault of their own. Compassion is due in particular to Ecuba. The compassion due to Ecuba exemplifies a *Gebührenbeziehung* in its purity because it does not imply any active involvement of the person. There are values and relations among values that do not concern in any way living, really existing persons. This is the reason why Hamlet asks of the actor: "what is he to Ecuba or Ecuba to him?" Then Hamlet draws a comparison to another tragedy, his own tragedy. Here we find again a *Gebührenbeziehung*: compassion is due to the assassinated father of Hamlet. Compassion but also justice as well as a punishment is objectively due to the unfaithful wife and to the murderous brother. This time, however, we have not just a *Gebührenbeziehung*. We have something more. Hamlet as an acting subject, as the son of the victim and the legal heir of his kingly power, has the responsibility of giving everybody his or her due. The recognition of the person as substance (subject. The two words share the same etymological meaning. *Substare*, *subiacere* in Latin means to lay under) and as value implies that the person as value is consigned to the person as subject as a

responsibility and as a task. Now we discover from the experience of the *Gebührenbeziehung* the experience of duty as responsibility for the value of my own person. In this discovery is contained something that overcomes the traditional understanding of eudemonism that has opposed often Thomists to realist phenomenologists. The interest to myself or to my self-realization is not egoistic. It is rather an assumption of responsibility for the value of my person. This value is entrusted to me in a unique way. To better understand this experience we may look at the example of a man who is in love with a woman. He has married this woman and has children with her. He lives himself and has the experience of himself in the relation to the persons he loves. He takes care of himself, not because of the egoistic relation to himself, but because of his love for his wife and children. There is a non-egoistic relation of man to himself if this is mediated through the relationship to others.

This relation does not imply only the subject but the totality of the world of values. Values appear and manifest themselves in the person and through the person. The responsibility for the value of the person contains in itself the responsibility for the totality of the world of values as far as they are entrusted to the person. All values are entrusted to the person, to each human person. They are not entrusted to each person in the same way. Each one is in one sense the centre of the world of values, and these values are entrusted to each person in a unique way. Let us consider again the case of the loving husband and father. He is sensible to the value of all children of the world, but he is responsible for his own children in a way which is different from that in which he is responsible for all the children of the world. There is an axiological order of values if you consider them in themselves and there is a different order of values if you consider them as objective goods for the person, that is if you consider the way and the order in which they are entrusted to the responsibility of each human person.

At this stage the personalist philosophy encounters the great tradition of Neoplatonism and of the Italian Renaissance philosophy of Giovanni Pico della Mirandola or of Leonardo da Vinci. Man is a microcosm which reproduces in itself the macrocosm. The totality of the values is reflected, and also realized, in a unique way in the life of each human person. Each human person decides through the acts of their life the meaning of the whole universe. Since the acts remain within the person, each person becomes, in one sense, the whole universe in a unique perspective.

II. The Philosophical Discovery of Josef Seifert

Through Wojtyła (and von Hildebrand) we have discovered the person as substance. Josef Seifert draws upon, in one sense, the consequences of this discovery. What is the impact on metaphysics and ontology of the fact that the person is a substance? In one sense we could say that the process of the thought of Seifert is opposite (and complementary) to that of Wojtyła. Wojtyła uses the ontology of Aristoteles and St. Thomas to give a firmer foundation to the phenomenological discovery of the person and to deepen in this way our interpretation of the phenomenological evidence regarding the person. Seifert goes from the person to ontology and asks the question: how must we change and integrate our general ontological concepts in order to formulate at the level of ontology the consequences of the discovery of the person?

The person is not a being like all other beings which possess the quality of being in the same way. This quality is possessed and expressed differently in all other beings. This is a break in the history of ontology. Since Parmenides we have been thinking that things either are or are not, and being is essentially equalitarian: *the same in all* and *always* equal to itself. Plato, especially if you read him according to the new interpretation of the Tübingen School and of Reale, already introduces a difference. You can consider being as it is in itself in its ideal form, and you can consider being as you see it in the things of this world that are a defective reproduction of the real being. The ideal being is the *real* being and the being *of this world* is a faint imitation of the real being. St. Augustine teaches us the centrality of the idea of order. Not only is there a difference between ideal and empirical being, but beings have among themselves a hierarchy of order. Dante has expressed this idea in beautiful verses:

*Le cose tutte quante
Hanno ordine fra loro e questa è forma
Che l'Universo a Dio fa simigliante.*

(All things have order among them and this is the form which makes the Universe similar to God).

There is here a difference between the Being of God and the Being of the Universe. God possesses in Himself the totality of Being, and this totality in the

created world constitutes an analogy to the Being of God. Cornelio Fabro has stressed that in St. Thomas Aquinas the notion of *actus essendi* gives to this distinction further insight: God possesses Being as act and communicates the perfection of being to all things in so far as they are.

One problem remains open: what is the place of the human person in the order of being? Does man participate being in the same way in which all living things participate being? In one sense - yes. Man receives being as well as all other created beings. Man however as person participates in another sense of the creative act of God. Through his actions man creates the order of values that constitutes his own person. He creates the whole of the world in so far as the whole world is reproduced in his interiority through his acts and transformed in the exterior material dimension through his work. The person is creative in man in a way that is analogous to that in which the person of God is creative.

The person gives us then an access to Being, which is different from the access to Being given to us by all other objects of the earth. This is in one sense also the meaning of the vision of man as microcosm. Seifert makes one decisive step forward along this route. He says "Being is Person." Let us try to exfoliate different levels of meaning for this expression.

At the first level "God is Person." In Plato (and in Aristotle) this is not so clear. In Plato the divinity is not of *theos*. It is rather to *theion*. The use of the neutral form implies that God is not a person or should be understood beyond all categories, the category of person included. O *theos* is the lesser God, the Demiurgos, who shape the objects of this world according to the pure forms contained in the divine. For Christians, it may seem natural to think the Demiurgos and the divine are one and the same. St. John tells us that the *Logos* (Word) of God, through Whom all things were done, is one and the same with the Father. But shall we consider this formulation as a pure object of Christian revelation, which as such, stands beyond the realm of philosophical reflection? The phenomenological research on the person allows us to discover a particular richness of content of the person - as the place in which all values are reflected but are also substantiated through the acts of the person. This specific wealth of the person leads Seifert to qualify personhood (the fact of being a person) as pure perfection. Since God is the subject of all pure perfections than God must possess also the perfection of personhood, and then "God is a Person." How could God communicate to man, the perfection of personhood, if he did not possess this perfection Himself? Pure perfection is a quality which is always better to possess

than not to possess. Such pure perfections are beauty, truth and goodness. Such a perfection is also the Person in a particularly eminent way, since beauty, truth and goodness are fully themselves in the person. Another pure Perfection is *oneness*, to which the other pure perfections are inherent. Now the person qualifies the one. God is one as person, is the absolute person or is person in a unique and incomparable way. "Being is Person" means that "God is Person."

The second level is that Man is Person (although in a lesser form) and therefore man is being in a way incomparable to that in which other created objects are beings. Man, for instance, is a subject as a person, and human subjectivity as such has a specific ontological consistency and a peculiar structure. It belongs to personhood - a particular openness. The person is substance, but at the same time relation to other persons. Man is a person in relation to God and is creative in this relation and together with God. This overcomes a difficulty that is proper to many forms of existentialist philosophy and also of German idealism. They thought that either God or man is creative and free. This implies however a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of the person who is creative and free in the relation to others. The reception of the gift of being from God implies a certain passivity but also a certain activity or an act of freedom in the relation to God. "Being is Person" means that man is being in a unique way, incomparable to that of all objects of the earth.

The third level is that human experience gives us an inroad into the intimate structure of being which is incomparably wealthier than that offered by formal ontology. According to a long and established tradition *primo quod cadit in intentione est ens*. The starting point of the ontological reflection is then Being in the sense of 'what is the object.' Seifert now suggests that the person is a better starting point. Being as revealed in the person tells much more about oneself. The experience of value is clearly linked with the experience of the person, is one of the main components of the experience of the person. All this becomes relevant for the inquiry into the essence of Being in a way which could not be imagined within the framework of traditional ontology. The explanation of Being must take into account the experience of the person, and Being must contain in itself the potentiality of what appears in the experience of the person. Traditional ontology begins with the *ontos on*, or the quality of being an object in the most abstract and general form. Seifert suggests that we should put in the centre of our ontological investigation the *on chat'exochèn*, Being in its most elevated form in which it manifests itself with the utmost depth.

The inroad into the realm of Being begins with the person. This has important consequences for the methodology of ontological investigation. The *ontos on* stands in a certain contiguity with the formal object of physics and more broadly with those of natural sciences. A traditional interpretation of Aristotelian metaphysics sees a certain continuity between Aristotelian physics and Aristotelian metaphysics. The crisis of modernity begins, among other things, with the assumption that the crisis of Aristotelian physics involves Aristotelian metaphysics. Now Seifert suggests that the being that stands at the beginning of metaphysics is completely independent upon being in the sense in which it is the formal object of natural sciences. This is an *actio finium regundorum* (procedure determining the borders) between natural sciences and philosophy that eliminates all possibility of contradiction. Natural sciences cannot say anything neither in favor nor against, for example, the existence of God. This approach is absolutely modern, very similar to that of Descartes. In Descartes also being is found in the experience of the human subject and the movement beginning with the finite (human) subject ends with the infinite Subject of God through the ontological argument. Not by chance we find in Seifert also the ontological argument in the centre of metaphysics. There are, of course, many differences between the Cartesian approach and that of Seifert. The most important one is perhaps the fact that in Descartes the subject remains an abstract ego while in Seifert the subject is a person and has all the wealth of determinations that phenomenology (and especially realist phenomenology) detects in the person.

III. In which Directions Should the Personalist Vessel Steer its Course?

Some Suggestions for Young Philosophers.

We come now to the last and most controversial part of this contribution. I do not know if Josef Seifert agrees with this interpretation of his philosophy. Even less sure I am that he will agree with my suggestion of possible paths to continue his philosophical work. I take however this liberty because I have led for thirty years (in presence or at a distance) an intensive dialogue with Seifert.

It appears Seifert's personalism gives us a new foundation of modern philosophy which reconciles it with the classical heritage. For a long while we have been used to opposing classical philosophy to modern philosophy as if they were two opposite forms of thought which cannot in any way be reconciled with one another: classical objectivism vs modern subjectivism. One philosophy

begins with being (*primo quod cadit in intentione ext ens*), the other with the subject (*cogito ergo sum*). Now we find two unexpected moves in Seifert: the first one tells us that Man is Person (not only subject), the second one says that Being is Person.

Does the name of another philosopher come to your mind who may have said something similar to (but at the same time thoroughly different from) this in the past? G.W.F. Hegel, of course. He said that the conscience (the subject) is substance (the object).

You do not find many quotations of Hegel in the works of Seifert, and it is not difficult to understand why. Seifert is an international philosopher but remains 100% Austrian at heart. Hegel was never very popular in Austria. Hegel was a kind of official philosopher of the Kingdom of Prussia. He was a Suabian by birth but ended his career as professor in Berlin. His philosophy can be seen as a prophesy of a Protestant/Prussian/German unification and a new German/Prussian stage in the history of civilization. In the Austrian empire these ideas could not be met with great enthusiasm. They wanted a Catholic/Austrian unification and were the major opponents of Prussian hegemony. Austrian philosophy remains hostile to Hegel and to German idealism in general (with a partial exception for Schelling). It is rather the 'broth culture' from which, in the end, phenomenology will emerge.

It is of course apparent that between Hegel and Seifert there are enormous differences. I believe they all lead back to one fundamental divergence that is the same which opposes Seifert to Descartes. This divergence is the concept of the Person. Hegel sees the human subject as relationship but does not see the person as substance or as substance in relationship. The result is immanentism and totalism.

The relation obtaining between God and man must become indistinct and immanentism must arise in which both the transcendence of God and the autonomy and responsibility of man 'go lost.' Man, on the other hand, is seen just as a member of the social totality and the ontical priority of the person vs the state goes equally lost.

It is undeniable however, that Hegel has developed an enormous wealth of concepts that help us to understand the human world, the world of human action, of history and of politics. Large parts of the human sciences depend (although human scientists do not like to admit this) upon the Hegelian conceptual heritage. A traditional defect of the classical philosophy has been a certain incapacity of

concretely thinking history and of understanding the philosophical meaning of change in history.

Is it possible to use the ontological personalism of Seifert in order, not just to criticize, but also to correct Hegel? A usual confutation limits itself to explaining what is wrong and why and discards the whole work of the author because of its defects. A methodological correction sees the roots of the error and explains how the positive discoveries of a philosopher (of Hegel in this case) can be saved and founded on a more reliable ground.

Can we read Hegel with new eyes? The question is not irrelevant and is not just a problem of philosophical archeology. The Hegelian philosophy was in a certain sense the definitive form of modernity and the crisis of modernity coincides largely with the crisis of Hegelian philosophy. It is not just a theoretical issue. That philosophy has been incarnate within the culture, in the uses and customs, in the institutions of a whole civilization. Some philosophers expected after the crisis of immanentism, philosophy would go back to classical realism and, society would retreat to the past. The contrary happened: philosophy moved forward towards postmodernism and the dominant social ideology became absolute relativism. A revision of Hegel's philosophy could disclose new horizons for a reform and a critical defense of modernity reconciled with classical realism. Perhaps it is worth the while to try it.

Reference

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