

Jonas Norgaard Mortensen

The Common Good

An Introduction to Personalism



"... the first book to present personalism to a general audience.

Jonas Norgaard Mortensen shows that personalism is contemporary, up-to-date, a living philosophy for people."

– Thomas O. Buford, professor, Furman University, USA

"*The Common Good* captures personalism's core insight, interpersonal relations as the key to understanding God, Persons, and the world. This presentation of personalism is the first, as far as I know, to present personalism to a general audience. From that perspective, *The Common Good*, accomplishes an important goal: Personalism is central to daily grappling with our common lives together. Pulled to something greater than ourselves, we must embrace personalism with unrelenting passion."

THOMAS O. BUFORD, professor, Furman University, North Carolina, USA

"I very much enjoyed reading *The Common Good*. The book does an excellent job of conveying what personalism is about that certainly will be understandable to a general reader, as well as of interest to personalist academics."

JAMES BEAUREGARD, Rivier University, Nashua, New Hampshire, USA

"Jonas Norgaard has done a great job by exposing the personalist thought brilliantly adapted to the mentality and interests of the 21st century. Combining his skills as a communicator with precision in presenting the authors, he has been able to present the main anthropological and social keys of personalism in a format close to all readers."

JUAN MANUEL BURGOS, professor, San Pablo University, Spain

"I found it a very enjoyable and interesting read – a grand piece of work that does the job of presenting what is, in many ways, quite a straightforward and pragmatic philosophy to a wider audience which definitely deserves to know much more about the subject."

By bringing this vital and exciting tradition to public attention, this book presents a crucial challenge to the philosophical, political, and cultural status quo. It does so, moreover, in a remarkably engaging and readable way. It may also prove to be a great contribution to the development of a popular public philosophical discourse."

SIMON SMITH, Independent Scholar, Haslemere, Surrey, UK

"In his book Norgaard Mortensen gives a convincing introduction to this current of thought, and takes a step forward in revealing its importance in the public sector."

Prof. Mortensen's current work is an accurate and non-technical account of the main characteristics present in the life and work of many important authors that have put the human person in the forefront of their intellectual reflection and praxis."

JORGE OLAECHEA CATTER, director, Vida Y Espiritualidad, Lima, Peru

"Jonas Norgaard Mortensen's work will undoubtedly satisfy the expectations of a number of readers who were left disappointed by specialist theses, available to a narrow range of experts. The publication is attractive because it can serve as a reference book, enabling people to acquaint themselves with the basic assumptions of the personalistic philosophy and its application in the creation of common good."

KRZYSZTOF GUZOWSKI, professor, John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin (KUL), Lublin, Poland

"This is a very good book and Jonas have done us all a great service in writing it."

RANDALL AUXIER, professor, Southern Illinois University, editor of the journal *The Personalist Forum* (renamed *The Pluralist* in 2005), USA

"I am both shocked and moved to find that personalism, the existence of which I was unaware of until now, seems to be the common thread that runs through all of my passionate commitments, present and past, as far back as I can remember. The book hits the exact spot where my heart beats, my tears flow, and my courage to work for change is rekindled."

KAREN LUMHOLT, journalist, author and director of think tank Cura, Denmark

Jonas Norgaard Mortensen

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Boedal

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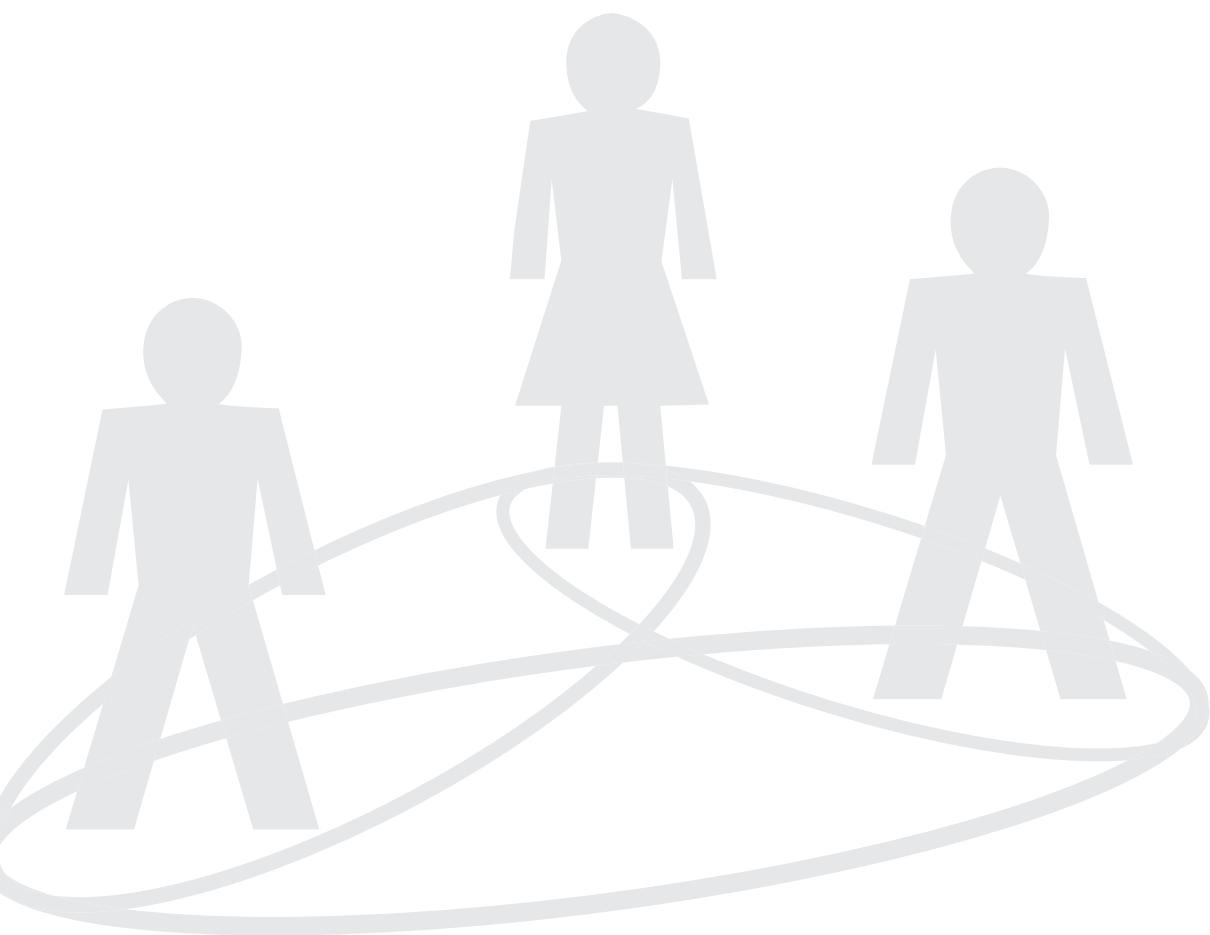
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Foreword

In *The Common Good* Jonas Norgaard Mortensen shows that personalism is contemporary, up-to-date, a living philosophy for people. It is not an esoteric, narrow activity practiced by a few intellectuals protected by the walls of academia. To make his point, Mortensen calls our attention to a current crisis that penetrates to the core of Western societies and shows that personalism offers a penetrating analysis, and a compelling vision for our societies, a direction we should walk to find meaning in our lives.

Consider the meaning of "crisis." It is a situation in which we cannot go back to what we have been doing; yet we do not know in what direction we should proceed. For example, the American Congress is stymied by unbending ideologies that lead economically to a situation in which the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. To what can we appeal to lead us beyond this malaise? Examine the crisis from the viewpoint of personalism.

Jonas lays bare personalism, its anthropology, and three core principles: humans are relational, they engage, and they have inherent dignity. Persons live best in close interpersonal relations with dignified humans. When examined through the lenses of personalism, we find the crisis has a structure, learn how those structures permeate our lives and the societies in which we live, and discover a way of overcoming the crisis.

In the Western World we live in a period of economic and political crisis, a crisis that affects every dimension of our society. How deep and pervasive is it? Since the economies of most of the Western World are capitalistic or influenced by capitalism, it is plausible that capitalism influences (possibly overlaying and controlling) all other institutions, from education, religion, politics, family, and communication, to law. This pervasive influence, however, raises questions not only about our institutions and their relationships but also about economic well-being itself.

While it is important to have a job that provides money to care for our families and ourselves, we wonder if economic power, jobs, and money provide the meaning we deeply seek. Our politicians work to create jobs and tell us to work hard. In doing so they point in one of two directions: individualism and individual responsibility or the group, collectivism, socialism, caring for the poor, the helpless, the sick. Both alternatives are economic solutions to our problems; they are also deeply ideological. Politicians claim that moving in the direction they propose will give us the way of life we all want. But does it? Is the life good to live found there or somewhere else?

In light of personalism's core principles, individualism and socialism are recognized as abstractions uprooted from their life giving soil. Instead of "us" and "we" together, inter-related, we treat ourselves as individuals or members of a group. Overemphasizing the importance of the individual, we objectify other people and find ourselves alienated from them and ourselves. Focusing on groups, we attempt to understand them through structures such as ideologies, systems, and institutions. Ignoring our interpersonal lives and looking to individualism or socialism, we find only depersonalization, narcissism, loneliness, alienation, systemic objectification, and mistrust.

In *The Common Good*, Mortensen focuses on the lives of persons-in-relation that enhance rather than depersonalize, that in twenty-first century points the way beyond the present crisis brought on by indivi-

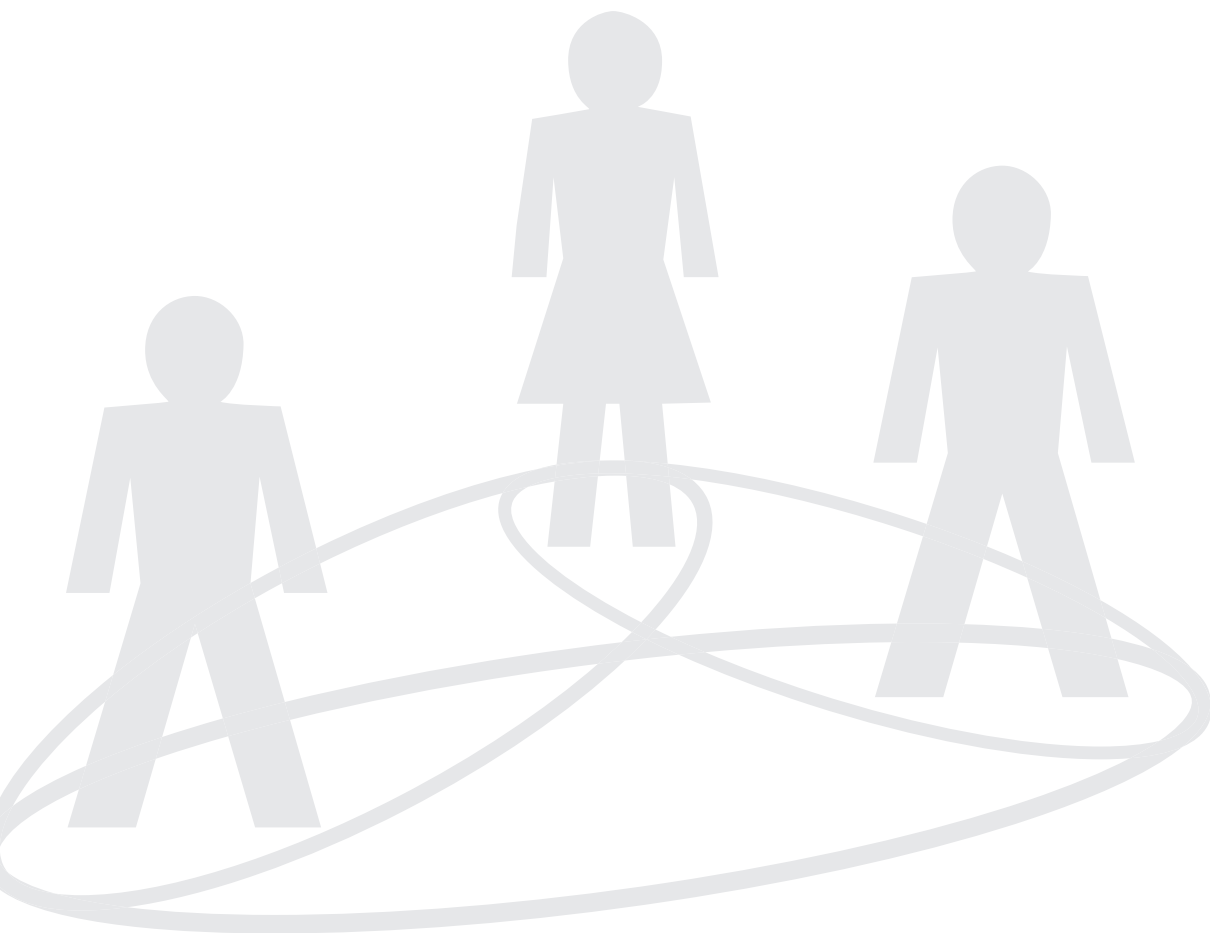
dualism and socialism to relations of mutual trust and understanding and to lives good to live.

Personalism has a long, honored history with roots in Athens, Rome, Jerusalem, and India. In placing before you the core principles of personalism, Jonas honors that history and cites important modern and contemporary personalists, from Martin Luther King, Jr., Mounier, Berdyaev, to Karol Wojtyla. They call us to a philosophy that focuses on our relationships with each other, where meaningful life is found.

The Common Good opens the windows of personalism to help us see a way of thinking that expands our imaginations to set us on the way to the good common to us all. In these pages, personalism comes alive.

THOMAS O. BUFORD

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Introduction

We live in what we in the Western World call a time of crisis. A period of economic progress has given way to pessimism and bewilderment. It seems to be broadly agreed that the economic crisis has taken hold and may last several years, and yet there are no clear guidelines as to how we might move on. Simultaneously, the consequences of global climate change have begun to show, especially in the Third World. As far as we can tell, this set of problems seems likely to remain the great challenge for world leaders throughout the present century.

Crises are not something purely negative, though they may be grave enough for those suffering the consequences. One good thing about crises is that they provide an opportunity for us to reconsider our priorities as to what is most important in life. To ponder what we might call the big questions: What is the purpose of our lives and how does one attain a good life? Upon which values should our societies be built, and in what direction are we as a community moving? In a word: What's the point of it all?

The interesting – and depressing – thing is that, with very few exceptions, these big questions are neither asked nor answered by politicians. In the political world, attention has been directed almost exclusively towards the economy, and for several years *growth* has been the mantra of nearly every political party. It is symptomatic that not even those most critical of capitalism have abandoned the concept of growth, speaking instead of “green growth” or the like.

This puts us in a grotesque situation where politicians greet us in near unison with the message that “citizens must work more hours” because this is what “the economic system” demands, a necessity for our “welfare.” But at the same time, many of us have found by experience that more work – and more material wealth – does not make us more happy. Quite the contrary. High on the list of things that people regret on their deathbed is having spent too much time working.¹

It does not take a very extensive or thorough analysis to establish that wealth does not guarantee happiness in life, not by a long shot. To be sure, this insight is by no means new. Wealth does not by necessity equal welfare. Regardless, we have managed to create societies defined to a great extent by economic thought, and it seems that human values have been forced into the background.

In a quiet moment, we might ask ourselves: Are there really no alternatives to working our way out of the crisis? Or to buying more flat screen TV sets? Is this ultimately what will bring about a better life for us? Or might we imagine an approach different from the one offered by the political left and right alike, with slight variation?

Individual or society

The European nation states can, to a varying degree, be seen as a number of attempts to combine the best of what is traditionally called the political “left” and “right” – care for the weak on the one hand and personal freedom on the other. The same may reasonably be said of the more liberal trends in American politics. The terms “left” and “right” usually stand for some variety of the ideological and historical heritage of *socialism* and *liberalism*, respectively.

This is not to say that the political left in general is associated with the totalitarian horrors of the 20th century state communism. The point is, rather, that socialism as an intellectual current may take, and

indeed has taken, many other, more moderate forms. These forms of moderate socialism have mainly influenced the political left. Conversely, the intellectual heritage from Adam Smith and his economic liberalism is manifested mainly in the political right.

One internationally well-known variety of such left-right synthesis is the so-called “Scandinavian model” which attempts to mold a society in which all citizens share a part, and where “few people have too much, and still fewer have too little,” as priest and popular educator N. F. S. Grundtvig put it.²

For many years the struggle between right and left – between individualism and collectivism – has been the natural point of orientation in any political debate. These have been the models that were ready at hand, and our political solutions have been informed by this opposition – in the sense that one is either in favor of more freedom or of more community. Take, for instance, the sentiment of Democrat liberals in the U.S. that the government should have enough power to actively care for its citizens subject to it, as opposed to the extreme focus on individual autonomy found in the Tea Party movement.

The question is whether this dichotomy is not close to becoming obsolete. In Europe at least, one is bound to wonder sometimes: Have we turned things upside down, and are we moving towards societies that have taken the *worst* from the left: centralism and bureaucracy – coupled with the *worst* of the right: selfishness and greed?

It is important that we be aware of the values and the anthropology (philosophy of what a human being is) upon which we wish to build our societies. To be sure, over time *ideology* as a concept has picked up some very negative connotations – perhaps because many know from experience how rigid systems may prevent flexibility and compromise. But values and anthropology may also make a positive contribution, providing us with a sense of direction; an inner compass for the individual and a compass to guide society in setting priorities and engaging in the struggles of our time. Such a compass is significant not

least when crisis comes knocking and politicians must make choices with a high human cost.

If we as citizens fail to actively choose the values we want influencing our lives and societies, then they will be pushed on us from outside. They may be values such as higher efficiency, more competition, willingness to adapt, all of which stem from an underlying ideology of increased productivity. It may be a growing tendency to account for everything, including human life, in terms of dollars or euros. It may be the management culture of public sectors, where everything is monitored, tested, and evaluated in order to secure the rights of citizens.

There is an alternative

What if there were a school of thought that *does not* attempt to take the best from different ideologies, but which is *in itself* a coherent philosophical whole? An anthropology which acknowledges the individual's search for the good life and which simultaneously holds that it is in relation to other people that this search bears fruit? An anthropology which always puts humans at the center, so that ideology, economics, and systems are all secondary? An anthropology in which life is not measured by productivity or by what is of use to society? An anthropology that has driven and still drives social change all over the world?

The first item of good news is that such an anthropology exists. To be sure, it dates back quite a few years and could use a bit of dusting off – at least in some parts of the world, where it has been neglected for many years. But it is still relevant – perhaps now more than ever – and it holds potential for guiding us through the challenges we face concerning matters both national (such as the renewal of public social security) and international (such as peace, reconciliation, and accountable cooperation).

This is why the anthropology in question is called *personalism*. It was developed during a time when the young nation states had to decide how to treat their citizens. Unlike many other ideologies, personalism does not claim to have an answer ready at hand to all the challenges and problems that we as societies and individuals face. There is no answer book, but rather a collection of principles and guidelines that we may follow when attempting to say how we should treat one another and which role the state and other institutions should play in our societies.

This is why personalism is well suited as a compass in these times, marked as they are by great change in our societies and in the world at large. Globalization, financial crisis, climate change, scarce resources, and new technologies and forms of communication all demand that we make decisions with far-reaching consequences.

Personalism offers some points of departure from which to make these decisions, points that are ambitious, but have also shown their applicability in practice.

The next piece of good news is that this anthropology is not so strange to us. Most of us would recognize practical examples of personalism, only perhaps not being aware of the underlying thoughts and values. For instance, personalism forms the backdrop of some of the greatest events of social change the world has seen over the past fifty years. Martin Luther King in the U.S. and the influential archbishop Desmond Tutu in South Africa were both influenced by a personalist anthropology, as were those who formulated the Declaration of Human Rights after the Second World War.

Likewise, many of the solutions that we intuitively consider sensible are often in tune with a personalist anthropology. One powerful example is found in the legal sphere, where good results have been achieved through so-called victim-offender conferences, which arrange for the perpetrator and the victim of a crime to meet face to face. This is a distinctly personalist way of thinking. Another exam-

le, but a negative one, is the nursing sectors of certain countries, where it is broadly agreed that surveillance and documentation have excessively become the order of the day – at the cost of actual care, contact, and conversation.

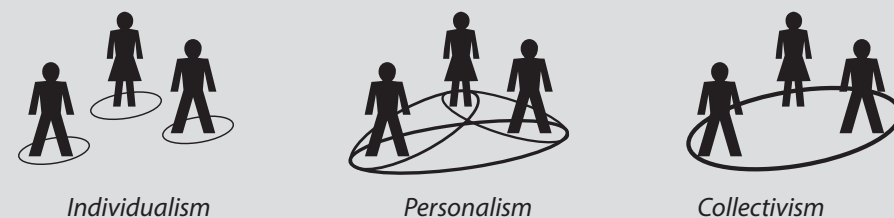
As we can see, personalism is not merely a philosophy or an ideology that looks interesting on paper. It has proved its worth both as inspiration and as a model for solving problems. In these times when politicians as well as regular citizens lack proper reference points, personalism may serve as a compass to show us the direction in which to move – as societies and individuals alike.

The fundamental values of personalism

Personalism holds a number of fundamental values that are here gathered together into three basic statements.

- *Humans are relational* and in need of a close and engaged interplay with other humans in larger or smaller communities, in order to thrive and develop our potential.
- *Humans are beings that engage*, i.e. beings that freely take responsibility for our own lives, but also for our fellow humans and for the community at large.
- *Humans have inherent dignity* that can never be relativized or diminished, and which our fellow humans and society have no right to suppress or violate.

Personalism thus stands in opposition to both individualism and collectivism (and thus also to the political ideologies of socialism and liberalism alike). Personalism emphasizes the individual person's freedom and responsibility for his or her own life, while simultaneously stressing that humans can realize this responsibility *only* in relation to our fellow humans. Some personalists go as far as to say that humans exist only in relationship with others. Personalism can thus never end up in liberalism, since the relationship to other humans



PLACING PERSONALISM

According to personalism humans are relational, dignified, and engaged beings. The dignified and engaged human person comes into existence through relationship with others.

Personalism is thus on the one hand opposed to *individualism*, which sees persons as independent from fellow humans – and on the other hand to *collectivism* which sees persons as subjected to society or community. Personalism emphasizes the individual's freedom and responsibility for his or her own life while simultaneously stressing how humans can practice this responsibility only in relation to others. Conversely, community may never take precedence over the individual.

Personalism is also opposed to a materialist anthropology, which claims that humans are reducible to something biological. Personalism holds that humans are *spirit* as well – not necessarily spirit in a religious sense, but as that which elevates humanity above nature (in the same sense that there used to be in some European languages a distinction between the natural sciences and the sciences of “spirit,” which were concerned with “higher things” or with “high culture,” conveying the notion that there is a *something more* to human existence, something accessible to the human intellect.)

and their needs will always have a say in how I am to live my own life.

On the other hand, personalism also stands in opposition to left-wing collectivism by maintaining that community or society may never have priority over the individual. According to personalism, institutions and systems, including states and civil authorities, are only of

use in as far as they serve to help individuals unfold their lives. It is therefore not the primary concern of personalists whether the state is large or small, but rather that power be put to the service of humans and that it be decentralized, in order for the individual to have the greatest possible say in the decisions that concern her or him.

Personalism, then, is critical of all systems that incapacitate, alienate, and violate the individual, no matter in whose name these things are done. Systems and institutions should here be taken in the broadest possible sense, including intellectual systems, management systems, and the systems of society at large.

The capacity of humans to engage means that we are able to form and shape our lives through the opportunities and challenges given to us. Human creativity and initiative are resources that are expressed through our personality and can lead to the greatest achievements. According to personalism human potential is inexhaustible since each individual will always have the opportunity to influence the community with his or her ideas and creative responses to life's challenges and dilemmas.

THE PERSONALIST ANTHROPOLOGY

- *Humans are relational beings* in need of a close and engaged interplay with other humans in larger or smaller communities, in order to thrive and develop our potential.
- *Humans have the capacity to engage*, a capacity that we realize in freely taking responsibility for our own lives, but also for our fellow humans in local communities and in society at large.
- *Humans have inherent dignity* that can never be relativized or diminished, and which other humans and society have no right to suppress or violate.

WHY IT IS CALLED PERSONALISM

Personalism is a strand of philosophical and political thought which attempts to capture what a human being is – and to then articulate the social and structural consequences. The fact that this anthropology was given the label “personalism” has its historical causes, but primarily it denotes that the human person, and in particular the dignity and engagement and the relationship among persons, is everywhere the point of departure: Humans have inherent dignity, and the good relationship between humans and the engagement of humans in a life of community is essential to the good life and to good societies.³

Personalism neglected

In most political contexts, personalism is largely unknown. Among personalists, several models have emerged to explain this lack of a breakthrough. In some cases one might say that personalism faded into the background because a suitable blend of collectivist and individualist trends was found – one which was easily mistaken for personalism. Another reason, no doubt, was the competing worldview of *existentialism* which, in Jean-Paul Sartre's version, became so popular as to force personalism off the stage.

But has the content of personalism not been carried over into other strands of thought under a different heading, e.g. social liberalism in some countries? There are several points of similarity, but the peculiar – and decisive – aspects of personalism were not carried over into its replacements, among which is also the so-called “third way” of British New Labour, inspired by sociologist Anthony Giddens.⁴ Most importantly, these strands of thought lack an anthropology that would serve as a safeguard against the depersonalization and alienation that continue to show their face time and again.

There are thus many contexts for which the time has come to re-introduce personalism; this is not to claim that this way of thinking will solve all our problems, but rather to suggest that a renewal of our imagination is sorely needed: Is there a different road that we might take? In Europe in particular, a reintroduction of personalism might pertain to the question of the welfare state. It may come as a crucial source of inspiration, given the widespread suggestion that the welfare state, as it was constructed after the Second World War, is nearing the end of its life, and that a replacement must be found.

The thesis of this book

This book's thesis is that we have created a *depersonalized* society – a society which is increasingly moving away from the very basics, from the close relations between dignified humans engaged in their communities, replacing such things with ideology, economics, systems, institutions. The result is an ever greater mistrust of our fellow citizens and of society itself. This mistrust causes a meltdown of society and leaves us unable to handle the serious challenges we face.

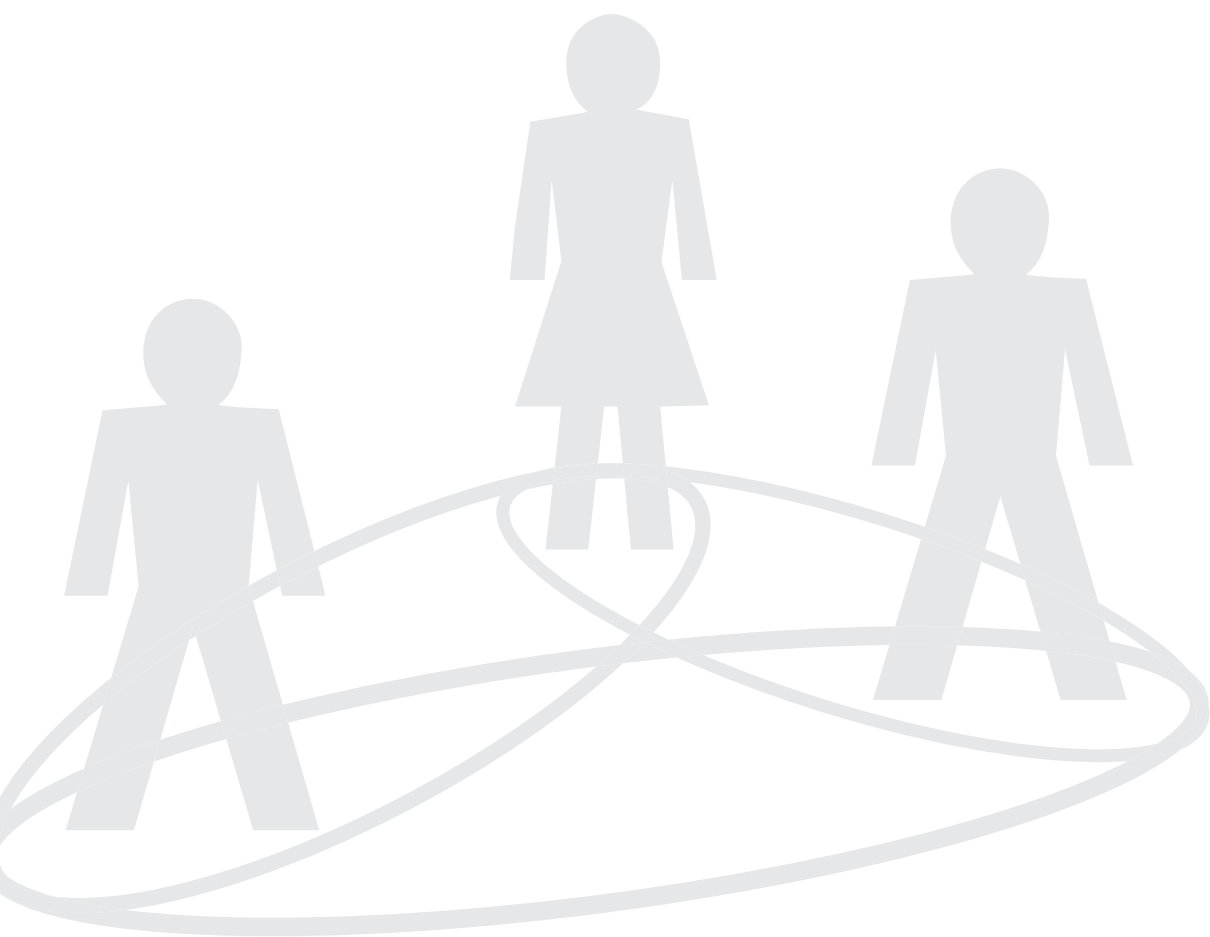
This tendency is amplified in a globalized world, where challenges from all over the globe quickly become concrete and present to us all. Our manner of organizing society as separate countries, and as the western world in general, has immediate consequences in remote areas of the world – and vice versa. It is today an inescapable truth that human lives are all interwoven, more so than at any other point in all of history.

The depersonalization that has taken place in society is not part of a malicious conspiracy for which somebody is to blame. It has arisen through the choices – in many cases sensible choices – we as societies have made over the past decades, and in many cases it has crept in quite unnoticed. The mechanisms behind such an almost inevitable development will also be subjected to further enquiry.

Against this backdrop, the book will outline the potential contributions of personalism in this situation into which we have brought ourselves. We will not remain at a theoretical level – a number of examples will be provided as to how a personalist anthropology might influence solutions in a number of political areas. These descriptions should not be understood as complete answers or ready-made solutions, since life is not so easily captured in universal or eternal boxes and categories. Rather, they are windows into a way of thinking that may expand our imagination, and they are examples of how our societies might turn out if together we take steps in this direction.

Throughout history personalist thought has sometimes been described as admirable, but nonetheless written off as too naïve when held up against the harsh realities. This is not a valid objection. It is precisely “naïve” persons that have changed the world – people with the courage in an apparently hopeless situation to imagine another possible path, people like Martin Luther King, Desmond Tutu, and Václav Havel. With such proponents and role models, personalism deserves to be taken seriously and considered afresh.

This book makes no pretense of treating its themes and problems exhaustively. An effort has been made to outline the main points in personalist thought and the direction in which personalist influence might move our societies. I have chosen to a large extent to use the term personalism as if only one, authorized version existed. This is obviously not the case, but in this book the ambition is to introduce the reader to the main current.



The Relational Human

You and I, Alfred

Swedish author Astrid Lindgren's cheeky child protagonist *Emil from Lönneberg* has a thing or two to teach us. Walking back to the farm on a summer's night after swimming in the lake, Emil looks up at his friend, the family's farmhand Alfred, and says: "You and I, Alfred." They walk in silence for a while, and Alfred then replies: "Yes, you and I, Emil – yes, I'd say so too."

This scene, in all its simplicity, illustrates the absolutely central starting point for personalism: the essential belonging together and the relationship between human persons.

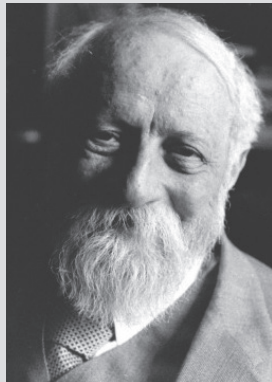
As human beings, we do not float freely in the air, independent of one another. We take part in numerous networks and relationships all the time, every single day. From conception to birth, through childhood and youth, over into adult life, parenthood, and into old age, our lives are characterized by relationships. It is quite telling how we designate each other using relational terms: mother, father, brother, sister, grandparents, colleague, neighbor, spouse, buddy, partner, enemy, and friend.

It is through these relationships that our personality is formed, and it is within these relationships that we live our lives. In emphasizing relationships so strongly, personalism acknowledges that although we certainly are unique individuals, we are at the same time – in a positive sense – bound to one another. Humans are relationally connected. We are mutually dependent; we interact and we influence one another.

Not a compromise, but a radicalization

Strictly speaking, all of the above amounts to a truism with which it is hard to disagree. But the mere fact that a personalist anthropology is intuitively sensible to many of us does not entail a notable presence in the western world – either in theory or in practice.

Over the past few decades, the debate about values has mainly involved the two great “isms,” individualism and collectivism. Whereas the former emphasizes the freedom of the individual, the latter stresses the communal character of the collective. Naturally, there are perpetual attempts to launch a compromise, a third way, taking the best from left and right. Most of these attempts have been characteristically limited by the very things they were defined against, thus failing to become sufficiently comprehensive.



MARTIN BUBER – I AND THOU

Martin Buber (1878-1965) is an Austrian-born Jewish philosopher who has had great influence upon modern Western thought in philosophy, theology, religion, and pedagogy. He is the best-known representative of dialogical personalism. His main work is the book *Ich und Du* (I and Thou), written in 1923.

In 1930, Buber was appointed professor at the University of Frankfurt am Main, but he resigned in protest immediately after Hitler's rise to power in 1933. He then founded a center for the education of Jews, which became of great importance once the German government banned Jews from public education. In 1938, he left Germany and settled in Jerusalem where he became a professor at the Hebrew University.

Whenever personalists have attempted to pitch their way of thinking, they have often been tempted to formulate it as “a third way.” However, it is more relevant to place personalist thought outside – and prior to – the political fields and positions that we know, since personalism has its own intellectual baggage, dating far back in time. It is in no sense a pale compromise – a domesticated version of liberalism combined with a watered-down, liberal-democratic variety of socialism. On the contrary, personalism's claim is that neither the traditional right nor the traditional left is radical enough in the proper sense of the word.

To put it differently: Personalism does not stop at the somewhat trivial observation that at the end of the day, it is our most intimate relationships that matter the most. No, the relationship between human persons is the very set of spectacles through which all of human life should be viewed – and a good relationship to one's fellow humans

Buber's anthropology builds upon the premise that humans are always faced with other beings that they can approach in an I-It mode or an I-Thou mode.

For Buber, the relational constellation of I-Thou is a foundational word, which can only be said with one's entire being, unlike I-It/She/He, which can never be said with one's entire being. What is fundamentally at issue here is not an I and a Thou as separate beings, but rather the foundational relationship: I-Thou. I and Thou are integrated into one another, and they are each other's precondition. It is in the founding encounter that the I enters into its immediate relationship with the Thou.

The individual bears within it an inherent Thou, and through this Thou the individual becomes human. By this Buber means to say that it is within a relationship that the identity and self-understanding of an individual are founded and that it is within relationships that life may be lived. The concept of “the inherent Thou” describes the longing, always present in a human person, for other humans. Without the Thou the I would be crippled. Or better yet: There is no I in itself; there is only the I that is relationized with a Thou.

must be our perpetual objective, for such relationship is where a life of value is to be found. Personalists believe so strongly in the value of relationships, in the encounter of one human being with another, that they give precedence to it over all other values. All of the above is true not only at a personal level, but also in personalist views about how we should organize our societies.

Relationships in personalism

Personalism's emphasis upon relationships is probably best known as formulated by Jewish-German philosopher *Martin Buber*.

According to Buber, it is the *relationship* with other persons that defines who a person is. The entire life-world of a human being consists of relationships, because humans always take part in relation-

ships. Even in solitude our thoughts proceed from the context and setting of relationships.

Buber distinguishes between human "I-Thou" relationships and the "I-It" relationship with things. If our relationships are not true, if they are a mere means to achieve an end, what we get is a reified "I-It" relationship to others. And when we regard humans as something else, something less than persons (e.g. clients, customers, or competitors), it becomes easier for us to make decisions and choices that have negative consequences in the lives of those concerned.⁵

Another personalist thinker, philosopher *Gabriel Marcel*, puts it in terms of humans being *available* (disponible) to one another. We are creatures that are disposed towards wanting, seeking, and forming relationships with others. For Marcel, proper human existence is even characterized by the positive ties that connect us to



GABRIEL MARCEL – THE BEING-TOGETHER

Gabriel Marcel (1889-1973) was a French philosopher, theater critic, playwright, and musician. He converted to Catholicism in 1929, and his philosophy was later described as a Christian existentialism (e.g. in Jean-Paul Sartre's *Existentialism is a Humanism*) – a label which he first accepted, but from which he subsequently distanced himself.

For Gabriel Marcel, humans are, in his words, *available* to one another. We are beings sensitive to and disposed towards seeking and taking part in relationships.

According to Marcel, the human person is not secured, nor is it even close to being liberated, in a society shaped by liberalism. Instead it is decidedly narrowed down and restricted. As persons, humans are not opposed to any "we," but to

the anonymous "one" (as in "one wonders why"). According to Marcel, the person can grow only by the perpetual *relationalizing* of one's inherent individuality. One does not become relational by directing one's attention towards oneself, but rather by making oneself available and thereby more transparent, more open, to oneself and to others. Only when humans are no longer "concerned with ourselves," "full of ourselves," are we enabled to receive and embrace another person.

"I become a presence to the Thou, and you become a presence to me. We become irreplaceable to each other," as B.L. Knox puts it in his book about Marcel.⁶ In the same spirit, Marcel's book *Homo Viator*, about the metaphysics of hope, declares: "I hope in Thee for us."⁷

In major works such as *The Mystery of Being* and *Man Against Mass Society*, Marcel is also interested in how to preserve the human person's true being and fullness of life in a modern society governed by materialism and technology. In modern societies, the human opportunity "to be," for instance, is threatened by mechanisms of control that focus upon "producing" and "having."

others (love, faithfulness, admiration, good will, helpfulness etc.) – as opposed to the loneliness and hostility toward others of inauthentic existence. For Marcel, authentic being is therefore a being-with, a *being-together*.⁸

Another French thinker, *Emmanuel Mounier*, puts it even more strongly, claiming that the person exists only in relation to another person, in that we become conscious of ourselves only through our fellow humans, and we find ourselves only in others: “In its inner experience the person is a presence directed towards the world and other persons, mingled among them in universal space... The *thou*, which implies the *we*, is prior to the *I* – or at least accompanies it... Other persons do not limit it, they enable it to be and to grow.”⁹

Against individualism

With its relational anthropology, personalism has distanced itself from individualism, in which relating to one’s fellow humans becomes – at best – an optional item in life.

According to personalism, individualism – and its political manifestation, liberalism – commits the error of conceiving of freedom within a relational void. If we think of freedom as merely an individual privilege, we risk limiting the freedom of others through our personal choices. Only when acting out our freedom in a manner respectful of others and in relation to them can we achieve true freedom for all humans. Liberalism supposes that many of our actions do not affect the possibility for others to live out their freedom.

” The *thou*, which implies the *we*, is prior to the *I* – or at least accompanies it... Other persons do not limit it, they enable it to be and to grow.

EMMANUEL MOUNIER

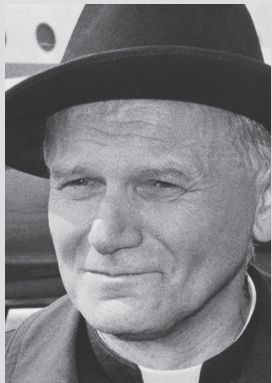
PERSONALISM AS OPPOSED TO INDIVIDUALISM

- Individualism and personalism agree on the inviolability of the human person. However, individualism, according to personalism, underestimates the relational character of humans. In personalist terms, human freedom does not consist in being free from others, but rather in freedom through others. Humans are set free in our obligation and service towards others.
- According to personalism, individualism becomes tyrannical as its premises are those of the strongest.
- Individualism, in organizing itself and society, proceeds from an attitude of isolation and defense, whereas society should, according to personalism, be organized from an open perspective, proceeding from free communities.

An example might be the liberal notion that I am free to accumulate wealth as long as I do not directly harm anyone in my attempts to do so. A personalist objection would then hold that a human person ultimately stands in relationship to all of mankind. Any act of injustice committed in this world is thus a violation of someone’s freedom, and therefore also a violation of the freedom of mankind as such, including my own freedom. We should therefore not assert our own freedom without thinking also of the freedom of the Pakistani seamstress or the African coffee farmer.

Even though we do not *directly* stand in relation to the entire world population, we are still bound together by our common humanity. We are all persons, and thus our relationships cannot be reduced to race, ethnicity, religion, citizenship, or any of the labels by which we categorize humans. Globalization has made this somewhat abstract principle quite concrete. Personalism’s talk of humans as relational thus requires us to consider carefully the consequences of our local, national, and global politics for our fellow humans regardless of whether the person in question is our neighbor or someone somewhere across the globe.

Personalist *Karol Wojtyla* has carried out extensive studies concerning the connection between individual and relationship. In 1994, he described how individualism is blind to the fact that we as humans experience a richness and a joy when giving ourselves as a gift in charitable love for others: “Individualism thus remains ego-centric and selfish. The real antithesis between individualism and personalism emerges not only on the level of theory, but even more *on that of ‘ethos.’* The ‘ethos’ of personalism is altruistic: it moves the person to become a gift for others and to discover joy in giving himself.”¹⁰



KAROL WOJTYLA – ENGAGED UNITY

During his time as a priest and teacher at the University of Lublin, Karol Wojtyla (1920-2005, later to become Pope John Paul II) developed his own personalism, strongly influenced by, among other sources, phenomenology and Max Scheler, as well as by French personalist Mounier. In 1954 he wrote his doctoral dissertation on Scheler.

The fact that Wojtyla developed an ethical personalism was to be of great consequence, as it became fundamental to his work as Pope, thereby also forming the philosophical basis for several decades of the Catholic Church’s influence on the world and on millions of people.

The fundamental question that Wojtyla attempts to answer in his work is: What is a human being? A basic theme for Wojtyla is the unity of the human person. He rejects Descartes’ dichotomy of soul and body: “In fact, *body and soul are inseparable*: in the person, in the willing agent and in the deliberate act, *they stand or fall together.*”¹¹

The alienation of relationships

The personalist anthropology with its strong emphasis upon relationships entails that should a human person lose his or her fellow humans – should others become alien or irrelevant – the human person will become alienated from him- or herself. Such alienation occurs because the person’s identity and possible ways of self-expression all exist within the relationship, engagement, and interaction with these others. In other words, existential alienation is strictly bound to relational alienation.

It is in intentional acts that the person transcends him- or herself; this theme is of paramount concern to Wojtyla, and with him all personalists. Wojtyla explores the theme in terms of humans coming into being through action and thereby entering an ethical life. This dynamic flourishes under freedom and becomes impossible if the human person is employed as a means by impersonal forces.

Wojtyla is deeply indebted to Scheler, however he does not follow him all the way. He finds that Scheler stresses too much the emotional side of life at the cost of the active, will-governed subject. Wojtyla believes that the intellect precedes the emotions. Humans are for Wojtyla an integrated whole that includes both soul and body and comes into existence within community and through intentional action. Humans therefore become alienated if they lose their relationship to, and engagement with, others.

In the Spanish-speaking world, Wojtyla’s work has significantly influenced contemporary systematic personalist Juan Manuel Burgos. Based in Madrid, Burgos has developed what he terms a *modern ontological personalism* in which he rigorously unfolds the primacy of the category *person* for any and all philosophical thought about *being*. Burgos, like Wojtyla, seeks to avoid the symptomatic body-mind dualism of modern rationalist philosophy by conceiving of the person as an irreducible triplicity: body, mind, and spirit.¹²

The personalist view thus underlines the correlation between alienation in relationships and the alienation of the individual. This emphasis makes the personalist struggle against alienation a struggle against the distancing, dissolution, and perversion of communities. If the other human in relation to whom I developed my identity should disappear, a part of me will inevitably disappear as well. We are alienated from ourselves if our neighbor becomes alien to us, or if our fellow human has become an unwelcome threat, an *alien*. It is quite telling that the French word *aliéné* means insane: Our mind is so closely connected to others that it becomes sick if the other becomes a stranger. Buber uses the term “mis-encounter” to describe the failure of a real encounter between human beings.

When relationships weaken or are perverted, I lose myself in a profound sense, and I then become a stranger to myself, alienated. Bringing matters to a head, one might say that as far as personalism is concerned, humans exist only in as far as we exist to other humans, or even: “*Amo, ergo sum*” (I love, therefore I am). We find this sentence in the work of personalists Mounier and Wojtyla.

The ultimate aim for society is therefore the creation of good conditions for relationships, participation, and community. This is the criterion of success for human conditions in modern civilization. Wojtyla radicalizes this notion: “The central problem for mankind in our time, perhaps for all times, is this: *participation or alienation?*”¹³

The precedence of relationships

Personalism, then, claims that humans are by nature disposed towards intimate relationship with others. And furthermore, it is relationship that brings humans the highest degree of happiness – happiness is not to be found in material goods or experiences, but first and foremost in togetherness and community with others.

Most of us may verify this claim by our own experience. The value

” The central problem for mankind in our time, perhaps for all times, is this: participation or alienation?”

KAROL WOJTYLA

of relationships surpasses that of material goods, experiences, pleasure, or anything else – all of this is common human experience, and when asked what he or she regrets most in life, many a seventy-year-old will reply something along the lines of: I should have focused more on friendship and close relationships.¹⁴

Such deliberations about the value of intimate relationship often date back to our childhood. Quite a few parents have been asked by their children: “How much would you sell me for?” or something similar. And fathers and mothers then assure their child that there is nothing in the whole world as precious as him or her in particular.

Northern Irish philosopher Peter Rollins points out that our relationships with those closest to us unfold at a level fundamentally different from everything else that we strive for:

“Imagine that most painful of experiences, the loss of our beloved. If we take a moment to reflect upon such a loss in our own life, we find that we do not simply lose something we desire; we begin to lose *the very ability to desire*. The other things that once tempted us lose their seductive power. Thoughts of promotions, vacations, and new homes lose all of their glittering appeal.”¹⁵

Peter Rollins concludes that the ones we love are not mere objects of our desire, but rather the very source of our desire. In this sense, it is *the other* who imparts meaning and significance to our deeds and possessions. The ones we love are more than objects we strive for; they give birth to and sustain our capacity for desire, for engaging the world, for wanting to live.