Personalism

Personalism is a philosophy that claims person to be the ontological ultimate. With roots in European philosophy, the American form of personalism began in the late nineteenth and developed in the twentieth century. Other forms of personalism that appeared in Great Britain, Europe, Latin America, and the Orient will not be discussed in this article.

Background of the term – “Person” stems from the Greek “prosopon” face, mask; Etruscan “phersu” mask; Latin “persona” mask, actor, part in a play, the character one sustains in the world. Boethius associated person with “hypostatis” from standing under and “ousia” substance in his definition of person as an individual substance of a rational nature. Boethius’ definition deeply influenced Christian theological understanding of God and human persons.

In America “personalism” is recent, but the concept is rooted in the work of eighteenth and nineteenth century European thinkers, such as Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi (1743-1819), Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762-1814), George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831), and Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling (1775-1854). Schleiermacher (1768-1834) used the term casually. In France Charles-Bernard Renouvier (1815-1903), a teacher of William James, used Personalism in 1903 to designate his philosophic system. In America Personalism was used in 1901 by George Holmes Howison (1847-1910), Mary Whiton Calkins (1863-1930) in 1906, and Borden Parker Bowne (1847-1910) in 1908. Earlier, both Walt Whitman (1819-1892) and Bronson Alcott (1799-1888) used the term in the 1860’s. Howison, and Bowne employed it to distinguish their pluralistic philosophical systems from the absolutism of Josiah Royce (1855-1916).
American personalists have followed either Howison, Bowne, or Royce in their understanding and philosophical use of the term.

**Historical roots** – American Personalism developed under the influence of the western philosophical tradition. Philosophers who decisively influenced personalists ranged from late Roman and early medieval through the nineteenth century. Augustine’s (354-430) analysis of free will contributed significantly to later philosophical understanding of the moral life of persons. Boethius’ (470-525) view of person as substance became the center piece of the metaphysical view of persons. Both free will and substance appeared in Descartes’ (1596-1650) thought, to which he added directness, primacy, and indubitability of first person experience. Leibniz (1646-1716), considered by some the founder of personalism, argued that reality is composed of psychic entities (modads) that are centers of activity. His view influenced both pluralistic and panpsychistic idealistic personalists. Berkeley’s (1685-1753) view that material substance is mental, the “language” of the Divine Person, deeply influenced personalistic idealism.

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) and Hegel were the major influences on the development of American personalism. Kant’s distinction between the phenomenal and noumenal world reinforced Berkeley’s view of “material” substance and emphasized that the only path to the reality is through practical reason of persons. Kant exerted the single most influence on ethical personalists. This occurred largely through the work of Hermann Lotze (1817-1881), under whom Royce and Bowne studied. Hegel’s view of logic as the dialectical movement toward wholeness, the individual as a concrete
universal, and Spirit as ultimate influenced both Royce and Edgar Sheffield Brightman (1884-1953).

_Branches of personalism_ — These historical roots found their way into American philosophy and formed at least four distinctive branches of personalism. They are idealistic, realistic, naturalistic, and ethical.

1] Idealistic personalism is the most distinctive form of personalism in America. Excluding Platonism or Kantianism, this form of idealism is expressed in three different forms: absolutistic, panpsychistic, and personalistic.

Absolutistic idealists contend that reality is quantitatively and qualitatively one absolute mind, spirit, or person. All other beings, including physical and human ones, are ontologically manifestations of the absolute mind. Josiah Royce, William Ernest Hocking (1873-1966), and Calkins represent this view.

Panpsychists are deeply influenced by Leibniz, who held that God, the supreme monad, created all other monads in a preestablished harmony. Rejecting absolutism idealism they hold that reality is composed of psychic entities of varying degrees of consciousness. Both A. N. Whitehead (1861-1947) and Charles Hartshorne (1897-2000) can be called, with qualification, panpsychists.

Finally, for personalistic idealists reality is personal. Quantitatively, reality is pluralistic, a society of persons. Qualitatively, reality is monistic; it is persons. The Infinite Person or God is the ground of all beings and the creator and sustainer of finite persons. In that sense personalistic idealists are theistic. Representatives of this branch of personalism include Bowne, Brightman, Bertocci, and Leroy Loemker (1900-1985).
2] Realistic personalism – These personalists agree with idealistic personalists that Reality is spiritual, mental, personal. They disagree about the ontological status of the natural order. Nature is neither intrinsically mental nor personal. Realistic personalism is most notably expressed by Neo-Scholastics in Europe such as Jacques Maritain (1882-1973), Emmanuel Mounier (1905-1950), and Pope John Paul II (1920-2005), and in America W. Norris Clarke (1915- ), and John F. Crosby (1944 - ). In America some realistic personalists stand outside the scholastic tradition, notably Georgia Harkness (1891-1974).

3] Naturalistic personalism – A recent form of personalism has been developed by Frederick Ferre (1933- ). Rejecting panpsychism and personalistic idealism and influenced by Whitehead’s philosophy of organism, Ferre argues for a personalistic organicism. He claims in Living and Values that persons are “organisms with especially well-developed mental capacities leading to special needs and powers.” By these powers they can perceive and manipulate the world, can vocalize and socialize, can create language, can imagine and plan by use of symbols freed from the immediate environment, and can guide behavior by ideal norms.”

4] Ethical personalism – These personalists stress the crucial role of values in ontology and the moral life. Ontological ethical personalists are well represented by Howison who focuses on the Ideal or God toward which all uncreated persons move and the standard by which they measure the degree of their individual self-definition. Practical ethical personalists concentrate on the dignity and value of persons in moral decision making.
Major figures – Josiah Royce’s thought was motivated by a religious view of life and reality, with an emphasis on the self and community. He sought to realize his philosophical goals through a synthesis of two traditions: the rationalistic system building of philosophers in the West, and the pragmatic emphasis on experience and practice, distinctive of American philosophical activity since the late nineteenth century. Royce also had a long and abiding interest in science and scientific inquiry. These strands were woven together during his long and productive career.

At the root of his system is a concept of the self. Early in his career the self appears as the Absolute, as Being who knows in one synoptic vision. Rejecting realism, mysticism, and critical rationalism, his central thesis is that to be real is to be a determinate, individual fulfillment of a purpose. Later he focused more on mediation and the idea of system. Toward the end of his career, the self appears as social. He developed a social theory of reality, a community of interpretation. He called this community the Beloved Community whose goal is to possess the truth in its totality.

One of the first American philosophers to employ the term personalism was Howison. Early in his career he was one of the St. Louis Hegelians. A thorough discussion of Hegel, however, led Howison to champion the finite individual and reject the absorption of the individual in the Absolute. In this way, Howison opposes Royce’s absolutism.

Howison succinctly stated his position, quoted by Buckman and Stratton in George Holmes Howison, “All existence is either (1) the existence of minds, or (2) the existence of the items and order of their experience; all the existences known as ‘material’ consisting in certain of these experiences, with an order organized by the self-
active forms of consciousness that in their unity constitute the substantial being of a
mind, in distinction from its phenomenal life.” Devoted to empiricism, Howison rejected
creation. “These many minds . . . have no origin at all – no source in time whatever.
There is nothing at all, prior to them, out of which their being arises. . . . They simply are,
and together constitute the eternal order.” Collectively they move toward their own
fulfillment as measured by the eternal standard to God.

Borden Parker Bowne claimed to be the first personalist in any thoroughgoing
sense, having developed a systematic metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics. He taught
at Boston University from 1876 until his death. Metaphysically Bowne was a pluralistic
idealist like Howison. But his theism distinguishes his personalism from Howison’s.
God, the Divine Person, is both creator and world ground. Finite selves are created, and
nature is the energizing of the Cosmic Mind. As world ground, the Divine Mind is the
“self-directing intelligent agency” that accounts for the order and continuity of the
phenomenal world.

Bowne was not only a systematic philosopher but also a caustic critic of Hegel’s
absolutism, the evolutionism of Spencer, and all forms of materialism. These criticisms
were expressed in his famous chapter in Personalism, “The Failure of Impersonalism.”
In addition, any form of dogmatism or fundamentalism was the target of his searing
attacks, especially when held by religious leaders in the Methodist Church.

Bowne’s teaching at Boston University attracted many young talented
philosophers, some of whom formed the second generation of personalists in America.
The most important among them were Albert Knudson (1873-1953), who continued the
personalist tradition in the Divinity School of Boston University; Ralph Tyler Flewelling
(1871-1960), who developed the School of Philosophy at the University of Southern California; and Brightman, who led the Philosophy Department at Boston University from 1919 until his death in 1953.

A creative, brilliant, original philosopher, Brightman, in agreement with other Boston University personalists, sought truth in the most empirically coherent interpretation of experience to guide creative living. Rejecting the skepticism of Descartes, beginning the search for truth within experience, and advancing and testing hypotheses, Brightman developed the distinction between the shining present and the illuminating absent. Pointing beyond itself, the shining present is unintelligible without reference to an illuminating absent. Though the shining present does not prejudice the nature of the illuminating absent, the hypothesis that most coherently illumines the present is Person.

Brightman contended that “everything that exists [or subsists] is in, of, or for a mind on some level.” In Person and Reality he defined personalism as “the hypothesis that all being is either a personal experience (a complex unity of consciousness) or some phase or aspect of one or more such experiences.” Nature is an order generated by the mind of Cosmic Person. Finite persons are created and grounded by the uncreated God, and as such possess free will. Reality is a society of persons.

Brightman’s most impressive work is his Moral Laws, in which he works out along lines heavily indebted to Hegel a thoroughgoing ethical theory. In his thought values occupy a central place, which he believes are grounded in God and provide evidence for God’s existence. Values have a central place in his philosophy of religion.
Central to his philosophy of religion is his well known revision of the traditional view of God. If personality is the basic explanatory model, God must be seen as temporal. As temporal, God is not timeless but omnitemporal. Brightman agrees with the traditional view of God as infinite in goodness, but he disagrees that God is infinite in power. To maintain that God’s power is infinite seriously compromises the goodness of God. If evil is to be taken seriously, the will of God must be understood as limited by the nonrational Given within God’s nature. This nonrational condition in God is neither created nor approved by God, but God maintains constant and growing control of it. This controversial view was debated within personalists circles. For example, L. Harold DeWolf (1905-1906) followed Bowne’s traditional theism rather than Brightman’s, and Peter A. Bertocci (1910-1989) found in Brightman’s revisions a cogent and intelligible theism.

Following Brightman as the leading personalist at Boston University, Bertocci enriched the understanding of person through his work in psychology. In “Why Personalistic Idealism?” Bertocci claims that the person “is a self-identifying, being-becoming agent who maturing and learning as he interacts with the environment, develops a more or less systematic, learned unity of expression and adaptation that we may call his personality.” Bertocci is well known for his view that the essence of person is time. He is best known in the field of philosophy of religion for his wider teleological argument that provided increased evidence for God’s existence.

Among Afrikan personalists the best known was Martin Luther King (1929-1968). Following closely its major themes, King translated personalism into social action by applying it to racism, economic exploitation, and militarism. However, the precedent
for King's social personalism was set by John Wesley Edward Bowen (1855-1923), a student of Bowne's, whom Burrows cites in *Personalism* as the "first Afikan American academic personalist." Rufus Burrow, Jr. (1951-- ) argues for a militant personalism that takes into consideration the Afikan American experience. Holding firmly to central personalist themes, he argues in *Personalism* for the sanctity of the body, the dignity of women, "we-centeredness plus I-centeredness," preference for the poor and oppressed, immediate and radical social change, and respect for non-human life forms.

*Current trends* – Personalists in America carry on a vibrant philosophical discussion. They are developing, modifying, and challenging concepts and themes central to twentieth century personalism. Erazim Kohak (1933-- ), drawing on the early work of Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) and Max Scheler (1874-1928), developed a personalistic view of nature. John Howie (1929-- ) developed an environmental ethics along personalist lines. Randall Auxier's (1961-- ) work on time is a rethinking of a category central to Brightman's thought. And Thomas O. Buford's (1932-- ) work on education, social ontology, and God manifests the influence of Giambattista Vico as well as of Bowne, Brightman, and Bertocci.


*References and Further Reading*


------. *Kant and Spencer, a Critical Exposition.* Boston, Massachusetts: Houghton Mifflin, 1912.


Burrows, Rufus R. *Personalism, a Critical Introduction.* St. Louis, Missouri: The
Chalice Press, 1999


Thomas O. Buford