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## Neuroscientific Free Will: Insights from the Thought of Juan Manuel Burgos and John Macmurray

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James Beauregard

## Abstract

Neuroscience has moved to the forefront of the free will debate, introducing new ideas, new questions and new problems regarding Free Will. This paper examines our neuroscientific and philosophical notions of free will and suggests that the principal problem in the debate is that the free will question has been inadequately formulated. The neuroscience debate has come to be grounded in an empirical neuroscientific position with its materialist/deterministic presuppositions, and in the outmoded position of substance dualism that has bequeathed us the mind/body problem. A reformulation of the question is presented drawing on the thought of Juan Manuel Burgos and John Macmurray in the tradition of philosophical personalism. Free will, when examined from the field of the personal, and in categories specific to human persons, becomes a human activity, rather than a merely physical capacity or faculty. From this perspective, it becomes possible to address free will in the context of normal development, and to ask questions regarding limitations on free will, including contemporary understandings of the impact of neurologic and psychiatric illness.

## Keywords

Free will, personalism, Juan Manuel Burgos, John Macmurray, neuroscience, neuroethics

## I. Neuroscience and Free Will

Neuroscience has made its presence felt in the Free Will debate in two ways. First, and most pervasively, through the methodology and general worldview of science present in the wider culture, as science investigates brain function and shapes our views of self. Secondly, and most dramatically, neuroscience entered the Free Will debate through the work of neuroscientist Benjamin Libet in his empirical studies of conscious intention to act, studies that have generated widespread discussion and conflicting interpretation.

The purpose of this essay is to address the question of free will at the structural level and to question of whether our current conceptual approaches are adequate to the task. I will suggest that the “problem” of free will is one that is largely of our own making and is the result of a process of abstraction that limits our ability to address the question. I will also suggest that a broadening of this currently over-limited conceptual architecture

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would be helpful in seeing the larger problem, and moving toward a broader and deeper discussion of free will that takes into account the full complexity of the human person.

### Neuroscience

Neuroscience has deepened our understanding of brain function as a complement to discussions of Free Will. It has also been problematic in terms of the underlying assumptions of its worldview. The methods of neuroscience are those of the wider scientific enterprise, grounded in the experimental method and the examination of observable phenomena.<sup>1</sup> Science in the modern era limits itself to the observable, physical world, and thus on the physical/material and organic aspects of the person, a focus that has brought about great advances in science and medicine, but at the same time continues to operate within a dualistic and at times monolithic world view that creates difficulties when attempting to think about Free Will, forcing us to ask the question, “How our mind and body connected?”

### The Necessary Consequence of Dualism

This dualism arose as philosophy shifted from a theocentric to an anthropocentric enterprise. Cartesian notions of mental substance and physical substance as discrete and fundamentally different aspects of reality have left us with the struggle of trying to describe how the two interact. Neuroscience has, in practice, embraced and reduced this dualism in its discussions of mind and body, and attempted to describe these two conceptually distinct entities in terms of neurobiology.<sup>2</sup> I would like to suggest that the problem of Free Will, within this context, is a problem largely of our own making.

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1. See, for example, Gazzaniga et al (2009) *Cognitive Neuroscience: The Biology of the Mind*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., especially Chapter 4, “Methods of Cognitive Neuroscience.”
  2. Neurologist Hal Blumenfeld captures this debate: “Where is the mind and what is the mind? These questions have haunted scientists and philosophers throughout human history. Although we cannot yet answer these questions with certainty, investigation for the nervous system allows at least tentative conjectures in this realm. Although some would argue otherwise, the burden of evidence currently available suggests that the mind is manifested through ordinary physical processes located within the body. Note that these first two fundamental conjectures about where the mind is (in the body) and what the mind is (normal physical processes) remain hypotheses, perhaps with growing evidence in their favor, yet remaining unproven nonetheless. See his *Neuroanatomy Through Clinical Cases*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., “A Simple Working Model of the Mind,” 973 ff.

Free Will in the Field of the Personal

For Free Will there is a way through the problem of dualism that can be found in the philosophy of Personalism. In examining this path, I will look to the work of the Personalist tradition in general, and specifically to the work of two Personalist philosophers, John Macmurray, writing in Scotland and England through much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and Juan Manuel Burgos writing in Spain today. Both philosophers offer a diagnosis of the problem of how we think about Free Will, and both offer some solutions.

If we follow the work of these two philosophers, it becomes possible to see the conceptual difficulties in many of the current formulations of the problem of Free Will to reformulate them in a more comprehensive way. These philosophers address some problematic philosophical ideas that have endured in the Free Will discussion, and seek to reformulate a number of questions in a more comprehensive manner.

## **II. Personalism**

The Personalist philosophical tradition has deep roots in the history of philosophy, but took its contemporary form during and after the two World Wars. Personalism steps outside of the Cartesian thought world and offers an opportunity to consider the question of Free Will in a manner that is grounded in persons adequately envisioned. For these philosophers, the question of Free Will is first and fundamentally a question of Persons. Personalism originates in a shift in perspective, moving from questions of being to questions of doing, from questions of substance to questions of action-in-relation.

Personalism is not a single philosophical school, but rather a “worldview” defined by some central ideas held in common by many philosophers working in the tradition. It is grounded in “the general affirmation of the centrality of the person for philosophical thought” (Williams and Bengtsson 2014, 2). Personalism asserts “the person is the key in the search for self – knowledge, for correct insight into reality, and for the place of persons in it” (Buford 2011, 1). In practice, this means that “Personalists believe that the human person should be the ontological and epistemological starting point of philosophical reflection. Their concern is to investigate the experience, the status and the dignity of the human being as person, and regard this as the starting – point for all subsequent philosophical analysis” (Williams and Bengtsson 2014, 3). British philosopher Richard Allen has given us a succinct description of the Personalist tradition:

‘Personalism’ is a distinctive way of thinking, and not only in philosophy but also in theology, history, sociology and psychology, which stresses the distinctiveness, unique value, freedom and responsibility of

personal existence, and seeks to articulate and apply the categories and conceptions uniquely appropriate to persons, and not just those applicable to animals, organisms and merely physical entities, nor the barren and abstract ones of formal logic. (Allen 2013, 2)<sup>3</sup>

Personalism encompasses a broad range of philosophical ideas and methods; historically, it has never associated itself with one specific or dominant methodology. At the same time, with Person as its central *topos* (Buford 2009), Williams and Bengtsson (2014) have identified five common characteristics of Personalist thought:

1. The Person/Non-person distinction: Personalism holds that there is radical difference between persons and nonpersons and that there is a character of irreducibility to the human person. For Personalists, the difference between human beings on the one hand, and animals and inanimate objects on the other is one of kind, not of degree.
2. The dignity of the human person: The ontological distinction between persons and nonpersons yields ethical consequences that include affirming the dignity and inherent value of persons, recognizing a difference between “someone” and “something” which touches on issues of justice, political decision-making, and life in community.
3. Interiority and subjectivity: Personalism acknowledges the interior/subjective nature of person in the unity of self-awareness and consciousness, in the human experience of self as both subject and object of activity, not reducible to the material world. In the Personalist tradition, this subjectivity encompasses “interiority, freedom, and personal autonomy” (Williams and Bengtsson 2014, 31). “The human being must be treated as a subject, must be understood in terms of the modern view of specifically human subjectivity as determined by consciousness” (Williams and Bengtsson 2014, 33).
4. Self-determination: For Personalism, this is the domain of Free Will in action, where persons interact with the world not in a causally predetermined manner, but rather act out of an inner subjectivity capable of action and self-determination. For the Personalist, human action is creative, causal, and determines both the external world and the actor. Action and self-determination occurs in the domain of the moral life where good or bad actions are sought and

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3. Allen’s brief, focused essay is in the introduction to *Three British Personalist Philosophers*, which gives overviews of the work of Michael Polanyi, John Macmurray and Austin Farrer. It is available through the British Personalist forum, [www.britishpersonalistforum.org.uk](http://www.britishpersonalistforum.org.uk).

performed and where persons form themselves into morally good or bad human beings.

5. **Relationality:** The various Personalist traditions emphasize the human person's nature as a social/relational being. Persons never exist in isolation, and becoming a person is an integrally social activity that happens across the lifespan. For the Personalist, human beings flourish most fully only in relation with others. This aspect of personhood was strongly influenced by mid-20th century Personalist philosophy seeking a middle way through the extreme visions of Totalitarianisms of the right and the left that saw the individual as subsumed by and subordinate to the state on the one hand, and an extreme individualism which viewed the human person without need for relation to others. For the Personalist, humans are naturally social, naturally form societies and maintain them intentionally in the service of human flourishing.

### **III. Diagnosing the Problem**

Juan Manuel Burgos and John Macmurray, both operate within this broadly Personalist tradition. Both writers illustrate that much of the "problem" of free will is one of our own making, deeply rooted in our habits of thought formulated at the beginning of the scientific revolution in the 17th century and in the concurrent rise of the modern philosophical period. Both authors see much of the difficulty in contemporary thought as grounded in a misconception of persons, and both propose a transformation in our thinking to a more holistic vision of person that adequately addresses the problem of Free Will.

#### Juan Manuel Burgos and the Classical Philosophical Heritage

Juan Manuel Burgos, currently Professor at the University San Pablo CEU (Madrid) has written extensively in the Personalist tradition.<sup>4</sup> He asserts that in order to adequately describe persons, an integration of the best of classical and contemporary philosophical concepts are necessary. At the same time, this process necessitates eschewing philosophies of person that attempt to describe what a person is indirectly.

He refers to this problem of indirect description as our "Greek ballast." In classical Greek philosophical tradition, the *Cosmos* encompassed all things, the natural world,

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4. His works include *Introducción al personalismo* (2012, currently being translated into English), *Antropología: una guía para la existencia* (2009), *Reconstruir la persona. Ensayos personalistas* (2009) and *Repenser la naturaleza humana* (2007).

human beings, the gods. Within this conception of the universe, stood the great biologist of the ancient world, Aristotle. In his classification scheme, he placed persons under the broad category of animals, and sought to distinguish human beings by describing them as rational animals. While capturing an aspect of what it means to be a person, the term created conceptual difficulties:

By the Greek ballast I mean the tendency, born in Greek philosophy, describing man by applying slight modifications to philosophical notions designed for objects or animals, with the result that what is specifically human, what constitutes man as a person is obscured or may even disappear. (Burgos 2013)<sup>5</sup>

### The Problem of Categories

A large part of our difficulty in understanding the nature of personhood, for Burgos, is the conceptual error of trying to understand human beings primarily through animal categories that are modified in some way to reflect specific aspects of human beings (e.g., “rational animal”).

To be able to understand and talk about persons, he argues, it is necessary to put aside this conceptual baggage and to develop an anthropology that begins with considering what is specifically and uniquely human. If we begin with persons, rather than animals, it becomes possible to construct an anthropology that reflects what is uniquely human, rather than trying to shoehorn persons into categories the do not fully capture who we are.

Burgos describes this process in the history of philosophy from the early 20th century forward as “the personalist turn” (Burgos 2013, 8) reflected in all of the philosophers outlined above, the process by which human beings are approached not from extrinsic categories, but from categories exclusive to persons (Burgos 2013, 5). “The indiscriminate application of general concepts, such as the four causes, accidents, substance, to any kind of being, is a simplification that is not justified given the complexity of reality, and leads to confusion and a poor understanding of the issues involved” (Burgos 2013, 7). The most fundamental conceptual shift is moving from asking “what” is a person to asking “who” a person is.

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5. Burgos expands on these ideas in *Repensar la naturaleza humana* (2007), 59–63, “The Greek ballast and the problem of enlargement” (El lastre griego y el problema de la amplicación).

Another consequence of this conceptual ballast is the mind-body problem, with roots that can be traced back into ancient Greek philosophical tradition of soul and body, adopted in the Middle Ages, where e.g. Thomas Aquinas described the soul as the substantial form of the body, linked in some way to the body as its animating principle. The problem was immeasurably deepened by Descartes' radical doubt that resulted in focusing on thought and the theoretical to the detriment of the physical and the practical.

In attempting to reformulate our understanding of persons anew, Burgos attempts to articulate a notion of person in categories specific to persons. He posits a tri-dimensional structure of person, described in three integrated "levels" of body, psyche and spirit, a structure which stands against dualism allows for a more sophisticated philosophical anthropology (Burgos 2013, 9). An important aspect of this process involves a rehabilitation of emotion, seeing it not as something interfering with rationality, not an expression of the irrational in us, but as a unique and integral dimension of persons:

To overcome this vision, something necessary to achieve an integral and apology, we have to hold two points. The first one is the originality of emotions, i.e., it's radical difference from human knowledge and from human dynamisms. And, to do so, we might understand them as the way the person is present to himself in his subjectivity (*vivencia de sí*). To feel is different from to know and from will. To feel is to feel, the same way to see is nothing more or less than to see. It's a *primary* anthropological dimension. In second place, we have to be conscious that this anthropological trait is present in all the tri-dimensional anthropological structure of the person: body, psyche and spirit. There are bodily feelings, that is to say, the way we feel the body; there are emotions in the psychic level; and there are also spiritual feelings, which give reason of some of our deepest personal experiences like the relations with our beloved ones. (2013, 10)

Feelings, then are intimately connected with our subjectivity and our consciousness, our experience of ourselves as persons: "to live himself (*vivirse al sí mismo*); to possess a unique personal world is an essential trait of human being, the trait in fact, which transforms him into a 'who'" (Burgos 2013, 10).



Persons in Relation

A capacity for interpersonal relationships is also central to Burgos' philosophical anthropology, in keeping with the wider Personalist tradition of viewing persons in relation rather than as isolated selves. We are born into a web of relationships necessary for our development as persons; absent this relational world persons cannot develop, or even survive. We are social by nature and live in a world that begins with relationships with parents, in the context of immediate and extended family, and broadens into a larger world of "I and Thou."<sup>6</sup>

At the same time, persons do not exist in a world of relational abstraction. For Burgos, body is a dimension of person, removed from dualistic notions of mind-body that create the need to try to explain how the two interact. Our bodies are not something we *have* or something we *inhabit*, but rather a *dimension of who we are*, the somatic dimension of personhood. In this vision, for example, human sexuality is a personal, normal and integral dimension of personhood. While our sexuality is rooted in our biology, biological processes alone cannot fully apprehend or express the richness of sexuality touching on all dimensions of the person (Burgos 2013, 12). Continuing this relational notion of person, Burgos describes persons as naturally social, and human society not as a necessary evil, but a natural expression of personal activity. Persons are seen as the center of society, the standard by which society ought to be organized.

Lastly, these aspects of personhood raise the questions of how persons relate to one another. In the Personalist vision, this means moving beyond a static philosophy of being to a dynamic philosophy of action and interaction that is integrated and respectful of persons in all their dimensions. This means moving beyond ancient and medieval philosophical traditions focusing on intellect that led to the modern philosophical focus on epistemology, logic and language to a philosophy grounded in action:

Now, Praxis, understood as the medium in which man expresses and transforms himself became central; and people also realized that man will be understood really only fully if all the dimensions of its [man's] activity are also fully understood. This new orientation allowed personalism to deal with many areas that scholastic tradition had neglected like work, aesthetics, economy, social and political philosophy, and so on." (Burgos 2013, 11)

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6. Burgos is drawing here on the tradition of dialogical personalism, most famously and enduringly expressed by Martin Buber in his *I and Thou (Ich und Du)*.

For Burgos, as for many other personalist philosophers, the only proper relation between persons individually and in society, is love. “Personalism emphasizes the priority of love as a guiding element of human activity in so far as it gives meaning to life and to interpersonal relationships. A life without love, in which someone had not been loved or could not have love, would certainly be a life radically inhuman and incomplete” (Burgos 2013, 11).

#### J.M. Burgos on Free Will

It is in the context of philosophy of action-in-relation that Burgos specifically addresses the question of Free Will, as an integral dimension and activity of persons. Within a philosophy of action, we do not *have* Free Will; rather the *do* Free Will as an integral aspect of who we are. Freedom, for Burgos is a “deep feature” of human dynamism that can be obscured if one approaches persons in categories other than those specific to person, including the physical and the biological, grounded as they are in theories of cause and effect. To approach persons in categories specific to persons allows us to observe human dynamism and free will and action. It is only when we prescind from categories specific to persons and focus our attention on physical and biological analogies that free will become a problem. Operating, rather, in a conceptual world that focuses on categories specific to person, freedom is specific to persons, and Free Will is seen “specifically as self-determination.”

Personalism, then, has a fundamentally ethical nature touching on our relationships with ourselves and with others directly and at increasingly complex levels of family, community and society. In order to articulate a moral vision in this context, it is necessary to begin with persons fully conceived in categories specific to persons, a necessary process without which persons cannot be fully apprehended and understood.

#### John Macmurray and the Field of the Personal

Scottish born John Macmurray (1891–1976) wrote and taught for many years in the Personalist tradition; his work touches on such topics as the social nature of the person and the need to move from a philosophy of being to a philosophy of action.<sup>7</sup>

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7. His works include *The Self as Agent* (1991), *Persons in Relation* (1991) and *Reason and Emotion* (1992).

The Concept of "Field"

Macmurray's basic philosophical enterprise emerged in his analysis of the modern philosophical period, as he attempted to articulate the nature of the human person individually, in action, and in relation, distinct from the physical and biological analogies of person that developed from the 17th through the 19th centuries. To do this, Macmurray uses the concept of "Form" or "Field," by which he meant a conceptual architecture used to understand the human person.

For Macmurray, every age has its own central philosophical questions, and as transformations in society occur, old questions and problems diminish in importance or fall away and new questions arise. He located modern philosophy's origins in the period of the early scientific revolution, and in the turn to a focus on the individual. For Macmurray, Descartes effected a disruption in a unified vision of person that existed prior to the modern philosophical period:

Modern philosophy is characteristically egocentric. I mean no more than this: that firstly, it takes the Self as its starting point, and not God, or the world of the community; and that, secondly, there is an individual in isolation, and ego or 'I', never a 'thou'. This is shown by the fact that there can arise the question, 'How does this Self know that other selves exist?' Further, the Self so premised is a thinker in search of knowledge. It is conceived as the Subject; the correlate in experience of the object presented for cognition. Philosophy, then, as distinct from Science, is concerned with the formal characters of the processes, activities or constructions in and through which the object is theoretically determined. And since the Self is an element, in some sense, of the world presented for knowing, it must be determined through the same form as every other object." (Macmurray 1957, 31)

Stage 1: The Field of the Material

Macmurray characterized the philosophical era that runs from 1600 to the present as falling into three broad stages. The first of these stages ran from the beginnings of the scientific revolution through the mid-1800s. In the sciences it was typified in the discipline of physics and the work of Isaac Newton. The development of the science of physics was grounded in a physical/material vision of the world, described in mathematical methodology, deterministic in nature, that saw the fundamental mode of activity in the universe as that of cause and effect. The overarching philosopher of the age

was René Descartes, in a philosophical process running from Descartes to David Hume, leaving us with a seemingly inescapable dualism of mind and matter, a world in which there were two types of “substances,” one mental and one physical. This initial dualism devolved to numerous positions in the philosophical tradition ranging from absolute idealism to absolute materialism, the universe reduced either to matter or to mind. This left philosophy with the unenviable task of trying to derive a vision of person from one or the other of these polarities. Science set up camp in the materialist vision with its paradigm of cause and effect, which Murray termed this “Field of the Mechanical” (Macmurray 1957, 13), a view of the world is composed of matter, describable through mathematics, deterministic in nature, that sees human beings as purely material and explainable in these terms. It is a field that is fundamentally impersonal, in which it is impossible to conceive of Free Will.

### Stage 2: The Field of the Organic

The next stage Murray characterizes involves a reaction to the world view of physics, an era that saw the development of the science of biology, and in a series of reactions, both philosophical and artistic, to purely mechanistic notions of the workings of the universe. If the central figure in the Field of the physical/material/mechanistic was Isaac Newton, the central figure of the field of the organic was Charles Darwin. Out of his theory of evolution developed the field of evolutionary biology, and the attempt to understand persons through biological/organic categories and analogies. This involved a return to ancient Greek notions of person, viewed in animal categories. This developed, in the late 19th century, to a view of society as a developing and evolving organism, one of whose consequences was the development of Social Darwinism, in which not only individuals but also ethnic groups were engaged in a struggle for survival. In its most negative aspects it was seen in the eugenics movement of the late 1800s, and taken over into the political realm in National Socialist racial policy of the 1930’s and 40’s.

It is here, in the Field of the Organic, that consciousness arises in the animal world. The Field of the Organic continues to operate in an essentially deterministic mode, now conceptualized as the stimulus – response of biological organisms engaged in the process of adaptation to environment. It is still a world that Murray would characterize as “impersonal”:

Greek tradition has been strongly reinforced by the organic philosophies of the 19th century in the development of evolutionary biology. This in turn led to the attempt to create evolutionary sciences

in the human field, particularly in its social aspect. The general result of these converging cultural activities – the romantic movement, the organic philosophies idealist, realist and evolutionary science, – was that contemporary thought about human behavior, individual and social, became saturated with biological metaphors, and molded itself to the requirements of an organic analogy. It became the common idiom to talk of ourselves as organisms and of our societies as organic structure; to refer to the history of society as an evolutionary process and to account for all human actions as an adaptation to environment. (Macmurray 1991a, 45)

In the end, the attempt to understand human nature through the organic analogy is, for Macmurray, a structural error: “a categorical misconception is a misconception of one’s own nature... If, however, the error lies in our conception of our own nature, it must affect all our action, for we shall misconceive our own reality by appearing to ourselves to be what we are not, or not to be what we are (Macmurray 1961, 149).

### Stage 3: The Field of the Personal

As noted earlier, Macmurray was convinced that previous philosophical traditions had run their course and ended in bankruptcy. Attempts to understand persons foundered in models and analyses that were materialist or biological in nature. Macmurray’s response to the situation was the development of his own Personalist philosophy. The Field of the Material and the Field of the Organic had failed us, in his view; what was needed was a turn to the Field of the Personal.

In making this turn, Macmurray realized that he was entering into uncharted territory. In 1929, he wrote to a friend,

it seems to me that we have not yet begun the effort to understand the Personal at all, and that we don’t yet have the logical apparatus to do it. We know persons and personal activities – nothing better: but when we try to understand them or express them we do so always by him personal analogies – drawn from the physical or the organic world. Now the logical structure of the personal is radically different from either of these. (cited in Macmurray 1992, xi)

Macmurray wrote that for a solution to the problem it was necessary to step outside of the Cartesian system altogether, to move from thought to action:

And since the effect of transferring our point of view from the 'I think' to the 'I do' is to overcome the dualism which is inseparable from the theoretical standpoint, the dualism of a rational and empirical self disappears. There is no longer any need to isolate the two aspects of unity and difference in an antinomy of shared identity and sheer difference. A personal being is at once subject and object; but he is both because he is primarily agent. As subject he is 'I', as object he is 'You', since the 'You' as always 'the Other'. The unity the personal is, then, to be sought in the community of the 'You and I', and since persons are agents, this community is not merely a matter-of-fact, but also matter of intention. (Macmurray 1991a, 27)

For Macmurray, to move from the Fields of the Material and Organic to the Field of the Personal is to move into a conceptual architecture that takes Person as Agent, as relational, as the starting point of philosophical thinking, to develop a philosophy of action and intention, and to include the Material in the Organic conceptions within the broader concept of Person for a comprehensive reintegration of the unity of persons. To conceive of persons, particularly persons as agents, is to move beyond the limitations of determinism and into the realm of freedom. For Macmurray, freedom is "the capacity to act" (Macmurray 1991a, 98). Persons, then, are subjects, objects and agents simultaneously. The Personalist vision is inclusive rather than exclusive, encompassing the specifically human in a world in which consciousness and action are integrated in "a unity of movement and knowledge."

To enter into the Field of the Personal is to adopt a way of seeing and a mode of activity that is inclusive; this is a crucial notion in that it allows us the place the previous movements of the modern period in context, to see the necessity of their inclusion in the concept of person, but also to realize that we are not limited to those concepts: "That the concept of 'a person' is inclusive of the concept of 'an organism, as the concept of 'an organism' is inclusive of the concept of 'material body'" (Macmurray 1957, 118).<sup>8</sup>

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8. It should be noted that there is debate within the personalist philosophical community about the extent to which interpersonal *relations* create and define persons, either completely or partially. While a purely relational/functional understanding of persons runs the risk of assuming "no relation = no person" a purely individualist notion of person centered in the body and its operations runs the risk of materialism and dualism; a balance is needed between the person and the person in relation. Also, in a critique of Macmurray's philosophy, Robin Downie wrote, "Like Macmurray I hold that the ideal of community' is important, but unlike Macmurray I wish to avoid the tyranny of the personal. Macmurray says that our identity is constituted by our personal relationships. I wish to hold the more modest thesis that our

Attaining the Field of the Personal, it becomes possible to examine the strengths and limitations of the two earlier stages of the modern philosophical period, and to come to see them as necessary but not sufficient for understanding human beings. Macmurray argues that our very understanding of these previous stages, the material world and the organic world, stems from the vision that takes place within the Personal world by a process of abstraction and limitation of attention. He argues it only *as persons* can we conceive of concepts of materialism and organicity. In terms of our conceptualizations of a material and biological world,

It was assumed, and still is assumed in many quarters, that this way of conceiving human life is scientific and empirical and therefore the truth about us. It is in fact not empirical; it is a priori and analogical. Consequently it is not, in the strict sense, even scientific. For this concept, in the categories of understanding which go with it, were not discovered by a patient unbiased examination of the facts of human activity. They were discovered, at best, through an empirical and scientific study of the effects of plant and animal life. They were applied by analogy to the human field on the a priori assumption that human life must exhibit the same structure. (Macmurray 1991a, 45–46)

The Field of the Personal, provides us the key to unlocking the Problem of Free Will and the way out of its insolubility. Throughout much of the Western philosophical tradition in general, and in the philosophy of the modern period in particular, we have attempted to think about Free Will from the Fields of the Material and the Organic, and thus have made it an insoluble problem. It is a problem of our own making because we have been looking in the wrong place: *Free Will resides not in the Material or Organic domains, but in the Field of the Personal.*

When we begin to look to the Field of the Personal our problem of Free Will dissolves, the material and organic aspects of human nature fall into place, and we can recognize free will as an integrated human activity, an activity of the whole Person.

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identity is partly constituted by our personal relationships, but is also influenced by such factors as the environment, the arts, animals and so on. Human beings are complicated and the relationships which constitute our identity and make us flourish are correspondingly diverse." See Downie, Robin. "Personal and Impersonal Relationships," in, D. Ferguson and N. Dower, eds., *John Macmurray: Critical Perspectives*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2002, 131.

#### **IV. Free Will in the Field of the Personal**

Macmurray's philosophy gives us a way of understanding the nature of Free Will and to come to see it not as a problem but as a dimension of persons. When we think about the world, we think about it *as Persons*. In fact and in practice we operate in a unified way. The personal includes the Material and the Organic, but can only be understood, as, Burgos also noted, by examining categories specific and unique to persons, categories that do not exist in the material and biological worlds. These categories involve our existence as persons in a personal world of interrelation, in which emotion, reason and knowledge exist in the context of human subjectivity expressed through our bodies, not bodies that we *have*, but bodies that we *are*. These dimensions of our personhood exist in interpersonal relation, and are formed and developed through relationships with other persons from the very beginnings of life; to think of Persons outside of relationships with others is a virtual contradiction in terms; we are born into relations, develop within them, and live out our lives in relations with others. Our bodies are "the somatic dimension of the person" separable only theoretically and in abstraction. There are no persons without bodies and "There is no real body without a person" (Burgos 2013, 12). Our sexuality, for example, is not something that we do, not a merely biological activity, but touches "the very constitution of the subject. The person, in fact, not only possesses a male or female biology, but is a man or woman, a male or female person, because sexuality touches all human structures giving them a peculiar character" that does not exist in the animal kingdom (Burgos 2013, 12). Persons are both subjects and agents, who come to know each other not in thought, but in integrated action, as doers, as agents in personal relation.

##### The Problem of Abstraction

In this sense, the problem of free will reveals, itself as a problem of abstraction. Persons are integrated wholes, separable in theory, but not in practice. "In practice we understand any form of behavior better the closer it is to our room. All human knowledge is necessarily anthropomorphic, for the simple reason that we are human beings" (Macmurray 1957, 116). As Macmurray describes it, we understand the material and biological words by beginning with our personal knowledge of ourselves and abstracting from them. The Organic and biological worlds exist when we abstract, when we remove, the Personal. The Material world exists when we begin with the Personal and abstract both the Personal and the Organic, leaving the world of matter in motion, following deterministic laws. In removing the Personal, we remove the domain of the



specifically human; rationality, freedom, self-determination and self-transcendence. What is left is a deterministic world, either living or inorganic, toward which we direct our attention in a limited way, attending not to the personal, but to what remains when the Field of the Personal, or the Field of the Personal and Organic are removed. It is important to remember that these states exist in theory, in abstraction, but not in reality. The danger arises when the parts are reified or inflated to become a whole, when the material or the organic are enlarged and equated with the whole of reality. When this happens, all we have left are cause-and-effect, stimulus and response, causal determinism that makes it impossible even to conceive of Free Will. This process of abstraction is one in which materialist philosophies and conceptions of evolutionary biology understood exclusively in notions of genetics operate. They share a common, and a fundamental error, the mistaking of the part for the whole. In these domains there is no possibility of adequately conceiving the concept of Free Will and one is left with the necessity of stating that there is no such thing. The great irony in this process is that it is ultimately self-defeating. In a world of matter only, all that can exist is matter in motion, with all activity predetermined by previous activity in an infinite regress, the physical world in which meaning and freedom cannot exist. However, order to assert a materialist philosophy in any form, it is necessary for the materialist to step outside of materialism and speak from the Field of the Personal, the world in which he or she was formed by others, taught to speak, nurtured and developed, in order to deny that the Field of the Personal exists. To be a materialist who denies the possibility of free will is to do so as a Person exercising their Free Will in the act of denial.

Free Will exists, it operates in us robustly, it is easily recognized from person to person, recognized in others and within ourselves; What we need to do is to look in the right place, the Field of the Personal, and avoid the well-worn habits of mind that would abstract us from this, leaving us trapped in a materialist or dualist world.

## **V. Neuroethics and the Field of the Personal**

What would Neuroethics look like if conceived from the Field of the Personal? We would recognize free will as an integral aspect of the human person exercised across the lifespan, in a more limited, developing way in childhood, reaching full expression in adulthood and continuing robustly (barring illness or injury) into old age. Free will in this context would necessarily be seen as an ethical, as a moral activity since it involves interactions between persons, human flourishing, and the right use of the natural world.

The construction of a Neuroethics in this vision would begin not with brains, but with Persons adequately understood, persons for whom a somatic dimension is a part of that personhood, a somatic dimension that includes body and brain, and from which some common moral norms can be derived. A neuroethical vision so derived would attend to human persons in all aspects, material (a descriptive project), the organic (a descriptive project), and the Personal (a descriptive and prescriptive project).

### **Neuroethics, Free Will and Persons Adequately Considered**

A neuroethics of Free Will thus conceived would begin by examining the normal development of our rational and affective capacities, recognizing the originality of both, and their deep interconnection in the process of decision-making. It would examine the exercise of free will across the lifespan as exercised by normal, healthy individuals and apply that knowledge to the various domains with which Neuroethics is concerned, some of these being personal autonomy, consent to participation in research and medical care, and personal responsibility for our actions freely conceived and carried out, in this context including considerations of personal responsibility and our justice system. While the Material and Organic visions of person could easily do away with the need for legal system, such a system remains essential when viewed from the perspective of freely acting, responsible Persons.

### **Limitations of Free Will**

With these conceptions in mind, and only after this has been attained, can one adequately consider limitations of Free Will. Reason and freedom were the classical complements of human action and moral responsibility. Classically there are several things thought to be impediments to freedom, to free action and thus limitations on moral responsibility including ignorance, fear, coercion and passion.

The contribution of neuroscience to this picture is the deepening understanding of the structure and functioning of the human brain, including normal development and function, and conditions that can place limitations on that function including neurologic injury (e.g., traumatic brain injury) in neurologic and psychiatric illness (e.g., dementing illnesses, schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, anxiety and depression, hallucinations, delusions, etc.).

A Neuroethics moving from the Field of the Personal would not limit itself to the individual, or to the brain function of individual, but would consider the whole person in the context of our relational world. Issues of both individual and common good would

be considered, impacting on the choices made with new technologies, the allocation of resources in distributive justice, in the manner in which our scientific knowledge is put to use in a variety of circumstances.

The guiding value in this vision would be the good of the human person fully and adequately conceived, including categories specific to person such as reason, freedom, transcendence, and the human capacities for rationality, relationality and sexuality, the person as subject and as agent.

I would like to conclude with a brief mention of several of the major domains of Neuroethical research as they might be impacted by the philosophical positions of Macmurray and Burgos presented here.

### Cognitive Enhancement

A Neuroethics grounded in personhood which encompasses the physical and the organic but does not limit itself to these might examine issues of cognitive enhancement empirically at the individual level, providing a realistic appraisal of its effectiveness (or lack thereof), but also see it in the broader context of societal issues including distributive justice and our understandings of health and illness; it would make recommendations based on a comprehensive review of the data, not just neurologically, but as it would impact our education system, healthcare, the workplace. It would not begin with cognitive enhancement as a given or as inevitable, but would examine these questions from the notions of both personal and common good.

### Free Will, Responsibility and the Justice System

A Personalist Neuroethics would recognize the existence and activity of Free Will, and with that the reality and necessity of personal responsibility. It would not limit itself to the organic or the material, and thus would not become trapped in concepts of determinism that raise basic questions about whether personal responsibility can even exist, or whether there is a need for a justice system. It would also recognize legitimate limitations on freedom and responsibility in terms of neurologic injury or dysfunction impacting on a higher-level cognition to processes. It would work to educate judges, attorneys, and juries about the accurate and proper use of neuroimaging data, seeing it in the context of personhood and not falling into the trap of equating discrete neurologic lesions with personal responsibility or the lack thereof. It would promote the sustained and serious consideration of ethical uses of neuroimaging technologies in the courtroom, in the medical field, and in national security.

Neuroethics and Capacity/Competency

A Personalist Neuroethics would address issues of capacity and competency by beginning with an adequate, comprehensive vision of Person and seek to articulate those conditions under which personal autonomy is diminished or should be limited for an individual's safety. It would do so through consideration of the categories unique to persons, the nature of limitations on those categories through injury or illness, in the threshold below which a person would not be considered able to make decisions for themselves.

Neuroethics and Medicine

This has been, and likely will continue to be the most contentious arena in which Neuroethics has input, an area which generates the strongest of feelings across political and religious spectrums, touching on issues of when human life begins, stem cell research, abortion, assisted suicide and euthanasia, and in decisions about medical care in cases of persistent vegetative state and brain death, and treatment decisions at the end of life.

*The Beginning of Life*

Within the domain of neuroscience, various ideas have been put forth as determinants of when personhood begins. Each of these conclusions is built on an assumption of dis-integration. By this I mean that inherent in each of these attempts a false assumption that the different dimensions a person can be separated out not only abstractly for understanding, but in reality. Such assertions typically limit their attention to the material or organic aspects of personhood, and give no attention to the personal in interpersonal nature of human being. The fundamental flaw of this line of reasoning is to mistake the part for the whole and to reason to one's conclusions from a fragmented beginning. No such process can adequately capture the fullness of person, nor can it adequately answer the question of when life begins.

*The End of Life*

As with the beginning of life, attempts to define the moment when life ends, and when a person is no longer present are typically built on abstractions from the Personal, limitations of attention to the organic dimension of persons (which contains within it the material aspect but not the Personal). Historically, organic criteria of death have been used in medicine, previously the cessation of heartbeat and respiration currently, and, since the adoption of the Harvard criteria in 1968, the irreversible cessation of brain function. All of these definitions share of the common flaw of have attending to only one aspect of Persons, the biological, rather than Person as a whole and persons in

relation. Again, the part is mistaken for the whole and decisions are made based upon a fragmented vision of person.

*Injured Lives: Neuropsychiatric and Neurological Illness*

Finally, Neuroethics must continue to address issues about the care and treatment of individuals with neuropsychiatric illnesses, some of which present in a predominantly psychiatric arena (schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, psychotic disorders), as well as with various types of addiction, and some which present in predominantly neurologic ways, such as neurodegenerative diseases like Alzheimer's disease, Parkinson's disease, or in combined presentations such as those commonly seen in Huntington's disease and frontotemporal dementia.

For Neuroethics, the ethical demands of treatment of these individuals must move from a full accounting of personhood, to consider both personal and interpersonal factors, issues of capacity/competency, rationales for state intervention in psychiatric illness, and limitations of autonomy in individuals who pose a danger to society, as well as the use of medical resources, and the allocation of public funds for research.

**VI. Conclusion: Neuroscience and Free Will in the Field of the Personal**

In summary, Free Will exists, is an integral dimension of Personhood and can be recognized in persons fully conceived and adequately understood. In light of contemporary Personalist philosophy, the "problem" of Free Will is in the end one of our own making, brought about by efforts to abstract, that is, to limit attention about persons to one or more aspects that fail to adequately describe who a person is.

The "problem" of Free Will ceases to be a problem when persons are consistently and adequately apprehended in all their dimensions, the Material, the Organic, and the Personal, an apprehension that can occur when we move from a philosophy of thought to a philosophy of action. It also entails an examination of persons not in material or animal categories, but - following Burgos' lead - rather through categories unique to persons, including reason, freedom, and the capacity for self transcendence. When Neuroethics approaches persons in this manner, Free Will can be both recognized and preserved, Persons can be recognized as complex, integral and active, formed by and living in relation to others.

One implication of this process is that an adequate notion of person can only be attained through a multidisciplinary process in which science has an essential place but cannot be the only methodology; if it were, we would fall into the trap of abstraction from the Personal and approach decision-making in the domain of Neuroethics in a

fragmented fashion. By adopting a multidisciplinary approach that includes the physical sciences, biological sciences and the human sciences we guard against the trap of dualism, and against conceiving the world and ourselves in a fragmented fashion. Instead, we can develop an ethical vision in a Personal world in which freedom and determinism are not antinomies but instead dimensions of personhood. To do this is to fulfill Macmurray's criteria for an adequate philosophy, a vision of person that is logically coherent and adequate to the full range of human experience which is neither material nor organic, but a personal unity encompassing these dimensions.

A potential criticism of the position I have presented here is that locating the problem of free will in the Field of the Personal is simply transferring the same problem to a new place, leaving us with the same difficulties. While it is true that the question is here moved to a new context, that move does not mean asking the question in the same manner. By raising the question of Free Will in the Field of the Personal, and in a vision of person more complex than can be accounted for by a materialist worldview, it becomes possible to employ multiple methodologies (including but not limited to scientific reductionism, e.g. the social sciences, the humanities, legal studies) to provide a more complex, more nuanced vision of the activity of free will in human persons that more closely approximates the richness of that activity.

The purpose of this essay has been to consider the structural level of the free will debate, to examine the conceptual frameworks that have been employed to address free will and to ask if these structures (e.g., materialism, idealism, determinism, compatibilism, indeterminism) have been adequate to the task. My answer to that our conceptual architecture has been inadequate, leading to a situation of sustained conflict, because much of the contemporary debate has moved from a framework of physical and biological determinism that precludes a comprehensive discussion of the human capacity for free will. This framework has created a blind spot and a self-defeating conundrum; in order to argue for causal determinism, it is necessary to step outside material and biological determinism in order to argue that determinism is the whole story, thus creating a sustained logical contradiction. All proponents of determinism are persons, and can only make their arguments from the Field of the Personal, where free will resides, arguing in their activity as persons that such activity can not exist. At minimum, a broadening of our perspective can only serve to deepen the conversation and allow us to address substantive questions with greater depth and clarity.

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## APPENDIX

### Major Trends in Contemporary Personalism

Personalism looks back to a broad range of thinkers in the history of philosophy, both in the West and in the East.<sup>9</sup> Focusing primarily on the Western tradition in this essay, Personalism in its contemporary sense has developed into number of distinct but related currents:

*Communitarian personalism*, grounded in the work of Emanuel Mounier, attends strongly to social action and social transformation.

*Dialogical personalism*, which gives emphasis to interpersonal relation as a ground for a philosophical anthropology, typified in the work of Martin Buber and Emmanuel Levinás.

*American personalism*, moving from an idealist philosophy and central European sources, building on the work of American philosophers Borden Parker Bowne, Edgar Sheffield Brightman, Peter Bertocci, and contemporary thinkers including Thomas O. Buford, Rufus Burrows, Randall Auxier, and European philosophers such as Jan Olof Bengtsson.

*Hindu Personalism*, emerging from Hindu philosophy and its search for freedom from suffering and addressing such questions as the nature of the self, touching on human agency, intention, free will and identity.<sup>10</sup>

*British Personalism*, focusing on philosophies of action typified in the works of Austin Farrer, John Macmurray and Michael Polanyi, and contemporary proponents such as Richard Allen and Charles Conti.

*Islamic personalism*, which shares some common roots with classical Greek philosophy, and examines both nature of the person and of God exemplified in the work of Muhammad Iqbal, Mohammad Aziz Lahbsabi and Allhagi Manta Drammeh.

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9. Thomas O. Buford reviews the major philosophical strands in Personalism's background in his entry, "Personalism" in the Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, including its roots in the Greco-Roman period of the West, Hindu philosophy in the East, and has contemporary proponents writing in both of these traditions as well as Confucianism and Islamic philosophy. See, e.g. Gueye, C.M. Ed. 2011, *Ethical Personalism*. Frankfurt: Ontos Verlag.

10. See Buford, 2011, Section 1, "South and East Asian Personalism" for a description of Hindu and Buddhist tradition in India, China and Japan. Ferdinando Sardella has made a significant contribution to understandings of contemporary Hindu personalism in his recent *Modern Hindu Personalism: the History, Life and Thought of Bhakissiddhānta Sarasvatī* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 2013.



## Beauregard

*Classical personalism* looks to the Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition in the work of Jacques Maritain, Etienne Gilson, and contemporary philosophers such as Robert Spaemann and Thomas D. Williams.

*Neopersonalism*, which seeks and integration of classical and modern concepts of person in a new synthesis, found in the work of Czeslaw Bartnik, Luigi Stefanini, Maurice Nedoncelle, Edith Stein, Karol Wojtyla and Juan Manuel Burgos.<sup>11</sup>

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11. The majority of these traditions are described by Juan Manuel Burgos in his recent summation of the (predominantly European) Personalist tradition in *Introducion al personalismo*.