

A REPLY TO ROVIRA: CAN THE “IMPERFECTION” OF MY PHILOSOPHY OF PURE PERFECTIONS BE OVERCOME?

Josef Seifert

In his excellent paper “Perfection and Imperfection of Josef Seifert’s Theory of Pure Perfections,” Rogelio Rovira has formulated with precision Anselm of Canterbury’s philosophical discovery of the *pure perfections* and Duns Scotus’ refinements of this teaching. He has further attributed to me, more than generously, eight improvements of the philosophy of *pure perfections*. In the last part of his essay, he has asked two excellent questions about my philosophy of *pure perfections* which to answer, as well as I am able to, is my present task. Rovira thinks that I have never addressed the first of these two questions, at least not adequately.¹ The other issue arises from distinctions expressly proposed by me but has not been sufficiently treated yet. He kindly describes what he means by “imperfections,” rather than in terms of faults, as parts of my position that stand in need of further investigations and are perfectible. In spite of these imperfections, he even bestows the title *doctor perfectionum* on me, an honor I certainly do not deserve as long as I have no answers for him.

1. The *relationship* between *pure perfection* and *value*.

Rovira notes that I follow “Hildebrand’s axiology, according to which the term value can only be properly applied to ‘the intrinsically important’, to the positive importance of what is intrinsically good and precious.”

He points out that Hildebrand and I both distinguish four types of the intrinsically important and, therefore, four kinds of specifically distinct values. (1) Qualitative values, which include the family of moral values (characterized by the basic and intrinsic importance of moral goodness), the domain of the so-called intellectual values (such as intellectual acuity, wit, intellectual depth and brilliance), and the realm of aesthetic values (centred on the intrinsic importance of beauty). (2) Ontological values, that is, values “rooted” or “embodied” in the specific nature of beings. (3) The values of perfection or technical values, which

¹Perhaps I came close to addressing it in my “The Idea of the Good as the Sum-total of Pure Perfections. A New Personalistic Reading of Republic VI and VII”, in: Giovanni Reale and Samuel Scolnikov (Ed.), *New Images of Plato. Dialogues on the Idea of the Good*, (Sankt Augustin: Academia Verlag, 2002), S. 407-424.

are based on the immanent perfection of a capacity. (4) The formal value of “being something.”²

Now Rovira notes:

On the one hand, the notion of value or intrinsic importance does not seem to be identical to the notion of pure perfection, to ‘being better’ in such an absolute way that it is impossible to surpass it without possessing it. Although all pure perfection entails a value, not all-pure perfection is properly a value. Love is, according to Josef Seifert, a pure perfection, and it definitely has a value. However, love is not properly a value, but an “affective response” to value. Moreover, it is also clear that not all value is a pure perfection. The qualitative value of the “beauty of the visible and the audible”, for instance, is not a pure perfection, and the same is true of intellectual depth, the energy of the will or the ontological value of the corporeal living being.”

I of course agree entirely with both of these assertions (as long as “energy of the will” and “intellectual depth” refer only to finite human or angelic qualities).

To the second one, I might add that most certainly none of the ontological values of particular individual finite beings and of their species and genera, values that are inseparably connected with these natures (of roses, lions, elephants, etc.) in their finitude, is pure perfections. Thus, there are indeed countless values, which are not pure perfections.

Rovira continues: “On the other hand, however: can there conceivably be a

²See Dietrich von Hildebrand, *Ethics* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1972), Part I (English original edition: *Christian Ethics*, New York: David McKay Company, 1953. Definitive German edition: *Ethik*, in D. v. H., *Gesammelte Werke*, hrsg. von der Dietrich von Hildebrand Gesellschaft, (Regensburg-Stuttgart: Josef Habbel-W. Kohlhammer, 1971-1984, 10 vols., vol. II, 1973) and *Ästhetik I* (*Gesammelte Werke*, vol. V, 1977). See Josef Seifert, *Erkenntnis objektiver Wahrheit* (Salzburg-München: Universitätsverlag Anton Pustet, 1972²), 274-290, *Was ist und was motiviert eine sittliche Handlung?* (Salzburg-München: Universitätsverlag Anton Pustet, 1976), “Being and Value. Thoughts on the Reform of the Metaphysics of Good within Value Philosophy,” *Aletheia* I, 2 (1977), 328-336, “Dietrich von Hildebrands philosophische Entdeckung der ‘Wertantwort’ und der Grundlegung der Ethik,” *Aletheia* V (1992), 34-58. See also Rogelio Rovira, “On the Manifold Meaning of Value according to Dietrich von Hildebrand and the Need for a Logic of the Concept of Value,” *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*, 89 (2015), 115-132.

difference between the absolute goodness of the intrinsic importance and the absolute goodness of the “being better” belonging to the pure perfection? How are we to understand a relationship between value and pure perfection, which is different to that of identity? Is there really a difference between the goodness or excellence proper to value and the goodness or excellence in being?

In short, we can clearly see that the notion of value and the notion of pure perfection do not seem to be identical, yet we cannot see a difference between the axiological goodness or positiveness of value and the ontological goodness or positiveness of pure perfection. Here we touch on a new aspect of the mystery in the relationship between value and being which deserves further investigation.”

In order to answer this question, I would first like to refer to my elaboration of three fundamentally different “directions” in which being distinguishes itself from non-being: reality, intelligibility, and value.³ While there are many relations between them, they still are quite different. For example, the crimes committed in Auschwitz are superior in reality to the kindness of Cordelia in Shakespeare’s *King Lear*. However, the more real they are, the greater is their disvalue.⁴ But if the overwhelmingly generous and kind love Cordelia shows to her father in a theatre play were to become real, the superior reality of her love and forgiveness would of course also increase and transform the value of her imaginary good actions into real morally good actions. In a similar way, one might encounter a perfectly intelligible curve in mathematics as compared to a much less intelligible but noble human love. Yet, no doubt, the higher intelligibility does not make the curve more valuable than love. Now, I think that pure perfections are found in all of these three dimensions of being: reality, intelligibility and value. However, two comments are needed:

- i) Intelligibility is a pure perfection but not the intelligibility of a necessarily finite object, such as of the solution of a chess problem or the formula of a curve, just as the ontological value of a giraffe is not a pure perfection.
- ii) The perfections of reality and intelligibility are only perfections if they are also bearers of value; and they are *pure perfections* only inasmuch they are open to infinity.

³Josef Seifert,

⁴See my long critical discussion of the theory that evils are only the conspicuous absence of due good.

Let us read the very precise formulation Rovira gives to the second problem:

“2. The second issue refers to the question of the communicability of pure perfections and the incommunicability of the person.

Josef Seifert accepts Duns Scotus’ thesis that every pure perfection is communicable, i.e. shareable by more than one subject. This thesis, however, poses a difficult problem for Seifert’s conception of to be a person as pure perfection.⁵ Certainly, to be a person always involves incommunicability in terms of the individual being, because only a unique being, incommunicable and profoundly individual, can be a person. How, then, can to be a person be a pure perfection and thus communicable?

In his response to this objection, Seifert begins by distinguishing between to be a person and to be this or that person. The former, but not the latter, is a pure perfection, for the essence of the person involves a personal identity and being an inalienable, irreplaceable individual, but not being this person instead of that one.

Seifert then makes a further distinction between pure perfections and properties, which are neither pure nor mixed perfections. To be this unique person rather than another one, Seifert asserts, is neither pure perfection, which it would be absolutely better to have than not to have, nor mixed perfection. This *haecceitas*, or uniqueness, is a type of perfection, which, in Seifert’s own words, “is beyond the difference between pure and mixed perfection”.⁶

Josef Seifert even grants a theological significance to this philosophical distinction between pure and mixed perfections on the one hand, and perfections, which are beyond this distinction, such as in the above case of specific personal identity, on the other hand. He considers it the “key” to a little better understanding of the Trinitarian mystery, where no divine person lacks any perfection, yet each divine person is distinct from the other.⁷

Rovira renders my two replies to this question very precisely: It is indeed a pure perfection to be a person and to have a unique incommunicable identity. Nevertheless, it is not a pure perfection to be this instead of that person. On purely philosophical grounds, this seems evident in relation to human persons: it can never be absolutely better to be me than to be you. On the level of the divine

⁵See Seifert, “Essere persona come perfezione pura,” 68-75.

⁶Seifert, “Essere persona come perfezione pura,” 71.

⁷See Seifert, “Essere persona come perfezione pura,” 72-3.

person, this does not seem to be evident. Rather, one would have to assume that in the case of the divine person the individual *thisness* and uniqueness of the divine person is inseparable from the divine necessary existence, where one cannot conceive of the possibility that another person would have become God. Therefore, the unique and unrepeatable personal *thisness* of a divine person seems to be a pure perfection and differ essentially from finite persons. However, it is evident that for a Christian it is necessary to apply the intuition that to be this person instead of another one cannot be a pure perfection applies also to God. For the negating, this of God would deny Holy Trinity, the three-personhood of God. For if it were a pure perfection to be the Father instead of being the Son, the Son would lack an infinite pure perfection, and vice versa.

At the same time, from a point of view of Trinitarian theology, to be “this person” instead of another one cannot be an essentially limited (mixed) perfection either because this would again contradict the infinite divine perfection.

Rovira points out that the ontological status of perfections, which are “beyond” the difference between pure and mixed perfections raises some problems. He formulates:

What does it mean to be “beyond” the above distinction? On a logical plane, we can understand the concept of perfection without taking into account the difference between essentially unrestricted perfection and essentially limited perfection, in the same way as we can represent the notion of animal without regard to the difference of “rational” and “irrational”. Nevertheless, all animals, which actually exist, are necessarily either rational or irrational. Can there really be an actual perfection, which is neither capable of infinity nor incapable of infinity? Can a perfection, which is by nature “indifferent”, so to speak, to the distinction between the infinite and the finite be predicated of the divine persons?

In light of Rovira’s penetrating questions, I wish to propose another solution to this mystery, without invoking the thesis that personal identity of *this person* (instead of another one) is neither a pure (and in God actually infinite) perfection, nor mixed and necessarily limited perfection. This other solution is not in contradiction to the previous one but adds an important point missing from the one Rovira criticizes.

From the perspective of a Trinitarian faith, one could reconcile the impossibility that the *haecceitas* of the divine persons falls outside the divine essence and outside the identity and purest perfection of the divine being. Thus with the impossibility that it would be a pure perfection to be the Father or the

Holy Spirit instead of being the Son, etc... We could say that the unique *haecceitas* of each and of all of the three divine persons is of the divine essence. In this sense their identity as three unique persons who are identical with God is a pure perfection, but not the being one of them instead of the other one. In other words, no other person could be God and have the divine nature except uniquely these three persons and no others.

Rovira continues with his excellent critical questions:

Moreover, how can the nature or essence of perfection be characterised, such as the individual identity of each specific person, if this perfection is, according to Seifert, “beyond” the distinction between pure and mixed perfections? Is the essence of this perfection communicable to each and every person? If so, how can this perfection explain the individuality of this particular person? Alternatively, is the essence of this perfection, in fact, radically incommunicable? In this case, how can we understand its nature as a perfection? Why do we call it perfection?

The *aporia* presented by the communicable nature of the pure perfection involved in being a person, and the inherent incommunicability of each individual person therefore requires further thought. Moreover, theologians must explain a further problem: the *aporia* of the difference between finite persons, who exist in individually different natures, and the divine persons, who exist in one numerically indivisible nature.

Rovira puts his finger on a great difficulty, which Rodrigo Guerra López also raised in the discussion. But unlike Guerra López, Rovira does not deny that to be a person is a pure perfection but formulates very precisely the *apory* that appears to us as a contradiction:

The *aporia* presented by the communicable nature of the pure perfection involved in being a person, and the inherent incommunicability of each individual person.

To this mysterious question, I wish to reply in the following way:

In general, we may say that “communicability” to more than one subject cannot mean that some general nature is communicated in the sense that it would enter the individual as the numerically same and as general essence. Rather, in general, not only in persons, the generic and specific essential characteristics of an individual are in the individual as fully individual essence of this individual, and of its unique essence inasmuch as this essence is in the individual. The *aporia*

presented by the communicable nature of the pure perfection involved in being a person, and the inherent incommunicability of each individual person.⁸

1. Certainly, this applies in a very new sense to persons of whom Spaemann therefore said “Person ist kein sortaler Begriff”.⁹ “Person” does not mean a “sort of thing”. Rather only, the individual person is a person. Nevertheless, there exists a general “essence” of personhood, which is communicable only in the sense that it is “the intelligible plan realized in each individual person”. Therefore, it is of the essence of the person to have a unique and incommunicable *thisness*. Moreover, each feature of the general essence of the person: intellect, will, heart, etc. is absolutely unique in each person. Therefore, we must dispel the idea that the communicable essence enters into, and is individualized by, some principle of individuation in the individual. Rather it is a universal “essence” or essential plan of personhood that can solely exist as entirely individual essence in and of each person.

2. If we understand communicability in this sense, there is no more contradiction between being a person being absolutely better than not being a person and than anything incompatible with it, and the absolutely incommunicable individuality of each person.

3. Moreover, when we come to the level of the person, we find an entirely new sense of communicability: not the fact that the universal “essence of personhood” is present in each person and unites him or her in virtue of a universal plan according to which each exists. Rather, the specific personal communicability is entirely grounded in the individual and irreplaceable uniqueness of the person. It is a communicability through knowledge, through love, through community, etc. On this issue and its role in the dialogue between Christian and Jewish religion with Eastern religions in Ismael Quiles.¹⁰

⁸ See Josef Seifert, *Sein und Wesen*. Philosophie und Realistische Phänomenologie/Philosophy and Realist Phenomenology. Studien der Internationalen Akademie für Philosophie im Fürstentum Liechtenstein/Studies of the International Academy of Philosophy in the Principality Liechtenstein, (Hrsg./Ed.), Rocco Buttiglione and Josef Seifert, Band/Vol. 3 (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag C. Winter, 1996), ch. 1, On Essence.

⁹*Personen. Versuche über den Unterschied zwischen ‘etwas’ und ‘jemand’* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1996).

¹⁰Ismael Quiles, “La personalidad e impersonalidad del absoluto segun las filosofias de oriente y occidente,” in: Sociedad Católica Mexicana de Filosofía, ed., *El Humanismo y la*

Understood in this way, then, the two senses of the “communicability,” and neither one of them, stands in contradiction to the truth that “being a person” is a pure perfection, i.e., that being a person is absolutely better to anything incompatible with being a person.

Calling being a person a “pure perfection,” however, does not deny that for accidental reasons, such as the incorrigible evilness of a person, it could be better to be a person but a dog, or not even to be born, than to be a person. This very special modification of the notion of pure perfections in persons could be better clarified by the distinctions between four dimensions and meanings of human dignity.¹¹

Metafisica Cristiana en la Actualidad, Segundo Congreso Mundial de Filosofía Cristiana, IV (Monterrey, N.L., Mexico, 1986), pp. 39-52. See also Josef Seifert, *Essere e persona*, cit., ch. 9; “Essere Persona Come Perfezione Pura. Il Beato Duns Scoto e una nuova metafisica personalistica,” *De Homine, Dialogo di Filosofia* 11 (Rom: Herder/Università Lateranense, 1994), pp. 57-75.

¹¹ Josef Seifert, “Die vierfache Quelle der Menschenwürde als Fundament der Menschenrechte,” in: Burkhardt Ziemke (Hrsg.), *Staatsphilosophie und Rechtspolitik. Festschrift für Martin Kriele zum 65. Geburtstag* (München: Verlag C.H. Beck, 1997), S. 165-185; *The Philosophical Diseases of Medicine and Their Cure. Philosophy and Ethics of Medicine*. Vol. 1: Foundations. Philosophy and Medicine, vol. 82 (New York: Springer, 2004) – *Philosophical Diseases of Medicine and Their Cure. Philosophy and Ethics of Medicine*. Vol. 1: Foundations. Philosophy and Medicine, vol. 82, Kluwer online e-book, 2005, ch. 2.