

**The debate in Bioethics.
The personalism in the thought
of Elio Sgreccia.
Interview with Elio Sgreccia**

**El debate en bioética.
El personalismo en el pensamiento
de Elio Sgreccia.
Entrevista a Elio Sgreccia**

Marcelino Pérez Bermejo

Abstract

Cardinal Elio Sgreccia kindly accepted to answer some questions with which I want to emphasize his extraordinary thought about human dignity through the Ontological Personalism. In this interview, he reveals the philosophical tradition that come before him, the thinkers in which he has supported and the dignitaries who have enlighten his development like Paul VI and John Paul II. He shows us the linearity of his thought and the transparency of his reflection, which has resulted, among others, in his *Manual of Bioethics*, its content, development and application. Primarily in this reflection is the issue of dignity of the person and its ontological foundation.

Keywords: ontology, personalism, human dignity.

Bioethics Observatory, Catholic University of Valencia, Valencia, Spain.

Original title: "*Il personalismo ontologico nel pensiero di Elio Sgreccia. Intervista a Elio Sgreccia*". Published in *Medicina e Morale* 2016/3: pp. 335-348. The author has not reviewed the translation.

Received on January 30, 2018. Completed this article on February 2018.

In the month of June 2014, during the third year of work on my doctoral dissertation, in which I was analyzing the thought of His Eminence Cardinal Elio Sgreccia on the dignity of the person, I had the opportunity, thanks to Dr. Elena Postigo, to meet him in person, during the presentation, in Madrid, of the second volume of his famous *Manual of Bioethics*. After a brief encounter where he showed interest in my work, emphasizing again that he does not consider himself as a “person worthy of being studied”, proof of his extreme humility, I gave him a written interview to which, with extreme gentleness, he answered sending it to me briefly.

Although initially my objective was to support my words using words from the author himself, some conclusions I have reached during my investigation, the richness of the answers, along with the fact that in few occasions an author understands so clearly the origin and evolution of his/her own thought, has given rise to the need of disseminating the complete contents of the interview as follows.

— *M. Perez*: *Professor MacIntyre affirms that we all come from the tradition that unite us and give us our current identity. In which tradition do you feel you participate the most? Which are the main sources that establish your thought?*

— *E. Sgreccia*: I feel I belong to the Aristotelian-Thomistic philosophical tradition within the Christian-Catholic culture. I assimilated such tradition in the period of theological studies and I broaden it during the bachelor's degree in the School of Arts (classical orientation) that I have attended in Bologna where I studied, for the philosophy examinations, the Problematic Nature of U. Spirito and G. Calogero, presented by young followers, but I had followed for my individual studies the Personalism that was transmitted at the same time in Italy, from France, also in relation with the development of the Ecumenical Council Vatican II. Even knowing the philosophy of the “dialogue” (Calogero) and that

about love by U. Spirito, I reinforced my adherence to the current of the Neo-Thomism then personified by J. Maritain, E. Mounier, E. Gilson, S. Vanni Rovighi, G. Bontadini, I. Mancini (my fellow-countryman and personal friend that always has shared with me almost everything he has written), I. Sertillanges (the studies on Christian philosophy).

In the Bologna period, I wrote the thought of G. Dossetti and the action within the Council of Cardinal Lercaro. As every student of philosophy, I had the opportunity to know N. Abbagnano and L. Paryson, but my anchorage and deepening were for *Personalism*. I have dedicated much time in particular to read everything I found translated by J. Maritain, also thanks to the contact with V. Possenti, who, in turn, used to visit the family of Jacques and Raisaa Maritain and has translated many works into Italian; in addition, I tried to clarify some issues of Maritain (the concept of individual) in the light of the thought (according to me, more faithful to St. Thomas) of S. Vanni Rovighi, studying several times her works which I consider as interesting, as well as those about the young Thomas Aquinas, and the three volumes where she summarizes her studies in the Catholic University of Milan.

I took some time in the Bologna period for a confrontation between the doctrines of St. Augustine and St. Thomas on subjects of the sin and grace, because I wrote my degree thesis (subsequently published in part in "Studia Picena") on Cardinal Domenico Passionei (1682-1761) known ecclesiastic erudite and lover of a great diversity of culture, staunch opponent of the Jesuits, a philo-enlightenment man for a while, friend of Jansenists and suspect of Jansenism even in theological sense. I assumed the task in the light of some documents and also unpublished correspondence kept in the "*Biblioteca Passionei*", founded by the Cardinal's nephew in my diocese of Fossombrone, homeland of the Passionei family of clarifying the adherence or not of the Cardinal to Jansenism. Thus, I had to review the Jansen's *Augustinus* and see how much it forced St. Augustine's doctrine on the concupiscence and sin, comparing

everything with the thought of St. Thomas Aquinas and of the Council of Trent. Moral strictness and anti-Jesuitism led many academics of the first half of 18th century to get close to the works of the Jansenist current condemned by Clement XI (Pope Albani, friend of the Passionei family). The conclusion of my work led me to be benevolent toward the doctrinal orthodoxy of the Cardinal, but I was convinced even more of the equilibrium of the Thomist thought, despite the spiritual fascination from the reading of Pascal and the works of the circle of Port-Royal.

Regarding the personalism, when I decided to examine it as a criterion to evaluate the bioethical issues, I realized that the word was used with different meanings by the existentialists, by followers of the hermeneutic philosophy, by the liberal thought in general and frequently indicated the centrality of freedom and moral autonomy, while I comprehended the need and clarity of the *metaphysical foundation of the being*, which comprises the entire existential spectrum of the human individual, for whom I have assumed from the beginning the formula of the “*personalism with ontological foundation*”, to distinguish it from the different possible personalisms. In this point, without pretending to have invented a new conception, I want to make it clear, as in the Thomist and neo-scholastic tradition, the value of the person *for what he is* and not only for what develops in its activities (functionalist conception). I felt in spontaneous accord with the affirmation of Paul VI in the Encyclical *Populorum Progressio* (23-3-1967): the good of “*of every man and of the whole man*” (n. 14). We have to remember that Paul VI had appointed J. Maritain as “secular expert” in the sessions of the Council Vatican II.

— *M. Pérez: It is common that many authors that investigate on ethical and social philosophy and politics matters have at least two traditions and even recognize themselves as participants in two periods of their lives, regarding the tradition. My question would be... Does your way of thinking has been*

always linear and constant, or can you indicate a turning point in your life that determined a significant change in your intellectual biography?

— *E. Sgreccia*: I think I have not change the cultural direction or having done intellectual “turns”. Rather, there has been a double development: especially, a deepening of the philosophical line of the Aristotelian-Thomistic approach initially linked, closely to theology, toward the neo-Thomism and Personalism that has been transmitted by the neo-scholastic movement or other similar in France, and Canada, as well as in Italy. Fr. Cornelio Fabro was a neo-Thomist not integrated into the Neo-Scholasticism, with whom I have had personal exchanges and that I have examined even deeper after his death. Although for me, the indications of the Council and the contemporary personalists, in particular Maritain, Gilson, Vanni Rovighi, and Bontadini were decisive for this deepening.

Another impulse has stimulated my reflection: this was the confrontation with biomedicine and technology, which since some decades demand the philosophical-moral reflection and that, in the case of bioethics, had to suffer not only the problem but also the applicable field. Maritain and Mounier previously considered the political and social problems, Gilson in the “Spirit of Medieval Philosophy”, but for bioethics, it was necessary to become aware of the wide horizon of the biomedical sciences it had invaded, mostly, by means of biotechnology. Some philosophers (R. Dworkin, Peter Singer, T. Engelhardt and others) have found in biology and sociology the components to construct a bioethics without metaphysics. It was necessary to assign a role to the biomedical science, maintaining the person in the center both as value and as responsibility. This has required an expansion of Personalism and a strengthening, and, for the construction of a complete bioethics, it was necessary to give space to an interdisciplinary methodology.

I have tried to pursue this objective keeping the anchorage with the person's metaphysics (ontological personalism) and with the "triangular method", which I will mention answering the next question.

Therefore, there was not an «intellectual and philosophical turn» but a deepening and extension always in the perspective of the primacy of the person and its ontology. Obviously, the ontological horizon leave also open the theological horizon where the reason and the faith are not opposed, but engage in a dialogue and get rich.

— *M. Pérez: Analyzing your works, I am impressed with a constant dialogue with modernity, not ever supporting, but paradoxical at it may seem, bibliographic references that justify such dialogue. The scarce references to Kant would be a good example. To what do you attribute this particular paradox?*

— *E. Sgreccia: The third question leaves me rather confused, because it seems to express the importance of a lacking or insufficient documentation on the authors themselves with which is compared.*

If by "bibliographic references" we understand the quotation of the name and the works we are referring; frankly I do not think I had been disrespectful with those masters of modern thought that directly or indirectly have influenced in the discourse and guidance of Bioethics. For Kant I had reviewed 10 citations in volume I of the *Manual*; for Descartes 4; 21 for Hume, for Bentham 3, for S. Mill 5, for Freud 5 and I can continue not to mention the fact that I not only wrote volume I of Bioethics, but also volume II and many other books and articles. If instead, it means that it would be useful to refer passages of the cited works and not just the thought under discussion, then I have to mention as extenuating circumstances the fact that in order to compose a manual, which already proved to be very voluminous, we cannot afford to include a sort of anthology of the compared texts. In addition,

when I wrote my first edition dated in 1986, although also for the second edition, there was no *Internet* to facilitate the finding of the sources. Bibliography, both in footnotes and in the margin of every chapter has always been abundant.¹

— *M. Perez*: In your long academic career, you are recognized for your contribution from Thomism. How do you like to be remembered by the next generations regarding the intellectual tradition in relation with your last contribution?

— *E. Sgreccia*: I am not sure that the next generations can ask about the “Thomism” configured by me, because, of St. Thomas, I just want to be a good follower. What I must underline was the *ontological personalism*, which does not want to reduce the importance of the *relational skills of the person*, because the relationship in the creature *presumes* the being and it is proportioned to it. On the other hand, I do not consider myself as the only one among the followers of Philosophy that have highlighted the ontological foundation of the person and that every person must be valued for what he/she is and not mainly for what he/she does and knows. Paryson also talks about ontological personalism, even if he reduces the being of the person to freedom, while for St. Thomas there is also the intellect, as well as the embodiment in the being of the person, given the substantial unity between body and spiritual soul that he affirms in the human subject.

The ontological foundation in Personalism is not a minor matter, nor is the distinction between the being and the act in the person itself. However, I repeat, I am not considering myself as the only one who mentioned this. Karol Wojty³a himself had adhered to Thomism overcoming the Phenomenology to offer a thorough definition of the person.

Another factor that I want those working on Bioethics to remember is the *methodology* that is demanded to *construct* the judgment in bioethics: such methodology has been defined as triangular, because it is the result of: a) the descriptive analysis of

biological or biomedical reality based on the biomedical sciences, on which b) it is placed the central interrogative about who is the agent subject and/or who is acted upon (philosophical aspect); lastly c) we have to even ask if the action put into effect (for example, the prenatal diagnosis) whether it is good or not relative to the persons that are the active or receptive subject of the intervention. Bioethics is not the simple ethics, it has a field on which it is exercised, it has a subject or the plurality of subjects that participate in the action and this action is measured according to its source, to the modality and aim, before it can be defined as licit.

The elaboration of this method to be proposed and used in the personalist approach demanded from me a reflection not inferior than the reflection that had imposed to the value of the person.

— *M. Pérez: In your education, you surely had assimilated great contributions to your intellectual experience. Could you help me to find the main authors in your intellectual education?*

— *E. Sgreccia:* I think I have already answered this question in item one, where I cited several authors that have offered me the founding elements for the philosophical introduction to Bioethics.

I must add some dignitaries and some instances that gave me not only intellectual stimuli, but also a bit of daring, which I had needed. I want to remember Paul VI, with whom I have had few personal exchanges, but I have followed his discourses and teaching as guide of the Council, with committed adherence. Likewise, I followed, from his appointment of John Paul II as Supreme Pontiff, from whom his philosophical works were promptly translated into Italian, thanks to the introductions of Prof. G. Reale and Tadeusz Styczen (*Person and Act, Metaphysics of the Person*) works appreciated by Prof. J. Seifert (*Being and Person*, Ed. Vita e Person). Having been ordained bishop by the Pontiff himself and having collaborated in the Pontifical Council for the Family and in

the Pontifical Academy for Life have been moments that gave me an unique opportunity to understand his soul and thought.

I cannot forget two circumstances that have related me to the activities of the Council of Europe where from the years 1981-1984 I was invited on behalf of the Holy See for several times of collaboration. The first time I was designated to be part of a working group that included the Department of Research and Teaching of the Council of Europe for the drafting and publishing of a book with the title: “*Le Medecin face aux droits de l’homme*” (The physician in front of the human rights), with the participation of medical-legal physicians, deontologists, teachers of Medical Law and ethicists even from different faiths. The book was published in French (almost 1,000 pages) with an appendix of documentation and had some translations.

The second time was more complicated: I had to follow as an «extraordinary observer of the Holy See» the works of the CABHI, *Ad Hoc Committee*, constituted by the Secretary General of the Council to prepare the *Recommendations* in the matter of ethical issues of biomedicine, task still performed by the Bioethics Committee of the Council of Europe. Along with its representatives (3 for each of the 12 States present at that time and other guests of international organisms) the aim was to participate during a few weeks in the drafting of some regulatory texts on different arguments such as prenatal diagnosis, genetic tests, artificial insemination in its various implications, etc. Due to the pluralist nature of the discussions among high-level experts (physicians, biologists, philosophers, jurists), for me it was like a school that, not foreseen it, prepared me to pass to university teaching that happened by «entrusting a job» in the academic year 1984-1985 and then, following the Congress of State, as Professor from 1991.

This occasion served to me partially to compensate the void of a university training specific for Bioethics, which at that time did not exist, at least in Europe.

— M. Perez: *Among all your intellectual relationships with bioethics, which one would you identify as the most exceptional, the one that constitutes the core of your intellectual work?*

— E. Sgreccia: I think that the *Manual of Bioethics* (published with the title: *Bioethics: A Manual for Physicians and Biologists* in 1986, afterward with the title *Manual of Bioethics. Vol I. Foundations and Biomedical Ethics* and *Vol. II. Medical-Social Aspects*) has been the work that for me was the most necessary and urgent in the moment in which I was entrusted with the task of teaching and at the same time is the work in which I was able to express more adequately my thought.

The 1986 edition in a single volume was not included in the numbering of the following four editions, which have different titles and a varied distribution of the material.

In this fourth edition, in volume I are placed in the opening some introductory chapters that expose, following a brief history of its origins, the foundation of the new discipline and the fundamental principles of the ontological personalism, as well as the preselected methodology and then followed by the chapters that refer to the main special topics in bioethics in biomedicine, while volume II includes the topics, not less important, of social medicine: psychiatry, drug-addictions, AIDS, etc.

All the editions (five if we count that of 1986, although four official) have been received with a wide dissemination, even in the face of some criticisms mostly from the secular and radical press. Translations of both volumes were done in France, Mexico, Spain, Brazil, Ukraine; of only the first volume in USA, Portugal, Russia; in a single briefer volume in Romanian, Bulgarian and Arabic; Vol. I is in preparation for publication in South Korea and Japan.

Regarding the criticism, in the volume of G. Fornero and M. Mori entitled "*Laici e cattolici in bioetica: storia e teoria di un confronto*" (Law and Catholics in Bioethics: Story and theory of a Confrontation) (Florence, Ed. Le Lettere, 2012), my work has been classified

as “paradigmatic” of the Catholic model, a qualification that I always asked to be specified in order that this attribute should not be understood as the renunciation or absence of the rational basis, that, by being such, does not exclude the opening to faith and the confrontation with the Teaching. G. Fornero had already defined as coherent, and the catholic vision presented in my volumes in two of his works: *Bioetica Cattolica e Bioetica Laica* (Catholic Bioethics and Secular Bioethics) (Mondadori, 2009) and *Laicità debole e laicità forte. Il contributo della Bioethics al dibattito sulla laicità* (Weak Secularism and Strong Secularism. The Contribution of Bioethics to a Debate in Secularism) (Mondadori, 2008). A more celebratory valuation has been offered in the volume edited by the “Associazione Scienza & Vita” entitled: *Vita, Ragione, Dialogo, scritti in onore di Elio Sgreccia* (Life, Reason, Dialogue. Writings in Honor of Elio Sgreccia) (Cantagalli Editore, 2012). The Catholic University of Argentina, where I have worked in the constitution of the Center of Bioethics, and which has conferred me the honorary degree, has dedicated to me a book on the occasion of my 80 years of age, with the title *Bioética y Persona. Escuela de Elio Sgreccia* (Bioethics and Person. School of Elio Sgreccia), edited by Fr. Alberto Bochaty; this includes several contributions of Latin-American and European academics (Ed. Educa, 2008, 447 pp.).

I must also include a book published in Polish as the result of a doctoral dissertation, Ks. Ian Wolski, *Bioetyka w Perspektywie Personalizmie: Studium w s'wietle mys'le naukowej bisjupa Elio Sgreccia* (LO'DZ, 2008, 302 pp.).

I also have received a copy of two degree dissertations: one of F. Bernardo, *Il Personalismo ontologico. Il contributo di Elio Sgreccia* (Ontological Personalism. The Contribution of Elio Sgreccia) (Speaker Prof. A. Pessina, Catholic University of the Sacred Heart, Inter-Faculty of Art-Philosophy. Degree course in Philosophy, Academic Year 2012-2013). Other dissertation was assigned in the University Ca'Foscari of Venice by the Head of Philosophy, Prof. Fabrizio

Turolde to the applicant student Matteo Montagner with the title: *Il contributo di Mons. Elio Sgreccia a la Bioetica* (The Contribution of Mons. Elio Sgreccia to Bioethics).

However, the fact that has gratified me the most was the translation edited by The National Catholic Bioethics Center, directed by Prof. John Haas, in Philadelphia in 2012 entitled: *Personalist Bioethics, Foundation and Applications. Elio Sgreccia, translated by Ion A. DiCamillo and Michael I. Miller, which contains and translates Vol. I of the Manual* (838 pp.). The reception of the work, which due to its content moves away from the American secular production, was positive.

— *M. Perez*: Regarding the aforementioned, which is the purpose of your work? To what thing are you responding? Around which intellectual issue your work rests? In terms of relevance, in what place would you put in your work “the issue of the dignity of the person”? Could this be the core of your work?

— *E. Sgreccia*: The purpose that I have appreciated more and in which I can recognize the aspect of identity of the approach of the entire work in the Manual and in the other publications is constituted as I already have affirmed by the ontological foundation of the concept of Person. This foundation allows the personalism, precisely because it is ontologically based, to embrace all the being of every individual, body and spirit; it allows to avoid the subjectivism of those who recognize the person only in the subject that is able to think, to be autonomous and to distinguish what is licit from what is not. In addition to the distinction between the being of the person, its abilities and its individual acts, it allows the person to get better and improve, to recognize himself as a design (to be a human being) which is the purpose itself of ethics (be a human being!). The ontological foundation implies the search of the Creator and the concept of life as a gift and many other consequences of opening to the Infinite and to the others. Such foundation, above all, covers all the spectrum of the life of the hu-

man subject, from fertilization to death, because the life of the individual and its value is linked to the existence as a human being.

A second connotation characteristic of the approach, linked to the previous refers to the interdisciplinary method of bioethics, its epistemology.

I have summarized this point, which I already have mentioned above in the so-called “triangular method”, according which, to genuinely reach to the declaration of the ethical judgment on a biomedical issue, it is necessary to begin from the description and understanding of the biological fact according to criteria typical of the biomedical disciplines (always open to further verification) then it is necessary to refer the described biomedical fact (for example, human artificial insemination) with the person (its being and its value), maybe with implications in more persons and finally have the reflection on the ethical and applicable aspect. It is necessary to avoid the short circuit, very frequent in the judgment of the occasional opinion, by which passes from the fact to the ethical judgment without the anthropological mediation. A. Pessina also wrote an evaluation on this point, *Personalismo e ricerca in bioetica. Note sulle linee teoriche prospettate dal “Manuale” di Sgreccia* (Personalism and Research in Bioethics. Note of the Theoretical Line Proposed in the “Manual” of Sgreccia) (*Medicina e Morale* 1997; 3: 443-459).

The first objective that I have proposed, when I received the commission to dedicate myself to Bioethics and was presented to me the need to write a manual that carried the teaching on behalf of the university in which I was teaching, was to clarify in the introductory part precisely this: how the judgment in bioethics is founded? Which is the way to get there? Following an outline of various systems or models, which in fact were proposed (Principlism, Utilitarianism, Subjectivism, Sociologism, Contractarianism, etc.). I have concluded that it was necessary to affirm the primacy of the person and the person understood specifically in its “being” (the man in every man). Then I proposed the Ontological Persona-

lism and the consequent method for the construction. This double problem, epistemological and about the grounds, was considered as a priority and qualifying for all the particular problems to be confronted on the research level. Afterwards, I put some applicable principles (the value of the physical life, the therapeutic principle, the principle of freedom/responsibility, the principle of sociability/subsidiarity). However, the most decisive part was for me –and I believe that it still is– the foundation of the judgment on the ontology of the human person.

The problem of the *dignity of the person* is implicit and consequent. Which has lead on the explicit level to this notion, *dignity* has been the Document of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith entitled Instruction *Dignitas Personae* on Certain Bioethical Questions, which preparatory phase I was entrusted –as it is stated in the document itself– to the Pontifical Academy for Life of which I was president at that time. Such Instruction pretended to update, after twenty years, the previous Instruction *Donum Vitae* of the same Congregation; *Dignitas Personae* was published on June 20, 2008. The fourth edition of the Manual has been published in 2007, thus will be the next fifth edition that include the deserved development to the notion of dignity, a more adequate expression, also by the accordance with the documents in preparation by the European Commission.

However, in the comments arising immediately after the publication of the Instruction *Dignitas Personae*, there was a sudden need to explain that the meanings of the word *dignity* can have a varied gradation depending on if we think of the *ontological dignity* or of the *acquired dignity* or of that just *attributed*. Regarding this, we can compare a work on philosophy of the medicine of J. Seifert, *Philosophical Diseases of Medicine and their Cure*, Ed. Springer, AH Dordrecht-The Netherlands 2004, pp. 89-132.

— M. Pérez: *Which problem do you have identified as central in the moral philosophy of our times? What impact do these problems have on the morphology of bioethics?*

— *E. Sgreccia*: The most frequent problem, as result of modernity and of the secularization as well as of the absence of metaphysics is that of the autonomy of the moral act and of the decision on the own and other's life. The radicalism, on one hand, the libertarian options in matters of sexuality, and in the context even medical in the relationship physician-patient, the loss of sense of truth and of the possibilities for men to achieve it, leave an open way for contradictory impulses and undermine the foundations of the ethics and the law. For this reason, I consider of primary importance the reflection in the metaphysical and religious level.

— *M. Perez*: *As we all know, bioethics is composed by different currents, with which current are you identified? If you identify with one, which is the reason of such identification?*

— *E. Sgreccia*: I think it is clear that I am classified in the current of "Ontological Personalism" and the reason I think I have already mentioned: in the realistic vision of the world, the human person results in *quod est perfectissimum in rerum natura* (what is most perfect in the nature of things) (St. Thomas) and in the man the root of his dignity is in his "being", body and spirit in unity.

— *M. Perez*: *Bioethics is mostly influenced by certain political currents, in such a way that sometimes it is noted an ideological path that prevails and directs the course of bioethics. Which political current are you afraid of, considering that, we are in a time in which there is an expansion of ideological radicalism?*

— *E. Sgreccia*: I feel the politics field is the most unstable and changing in Europe, because post-modernity offers space only to strong interests and extreme ideologies.

I think that every academic must dedicate himself/herself to found again both ethics and politics through a philosophical anthropology, ontologically based, also asking the faculties to retake

their humanistic and educational tasks, along with the exhibition of technical-scientific advances.

Bibliography references

¹ I must admit that at the time I drafted the question, my objective was that His Excellency Cardinal Elio Sgreccia recognized what I publicly heard him say during radio interviews, no more than the affirmation that Kant was not one of his favorite sources. The problem is that, due to a clear translation mistake I made, he felt criticized and that is why he wrote his answer justifying (although it was not necessary) his affirmation regarding his sources. Then I personally explained him what was really the aim of my question.