New Blackfriars (2026), **107**, 456–468
doi:10.1017/nbf.2026.10165

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

ARTICLE

Personalism, Teaching, and Authority

Joseph Gamache

Philosophy, Marian University - Indianapolis, Indianapolis, IN, USA
Email: jgamache@marian.edu

(Received 8 June 2026 UTC; revised 8 June 2026 UTC; accepted 15 June 2026 UTC)

Abstract

The subject of this paper is the personalist political philosophy of Emmanuel Mounier (1905–1950). In this paper, I ask whether personalists should endorse the teaching of personalism in schools, as part of an official curriculum. I begin by discussing the criticism that doing so would violate the principle of Neutrality. I then present Mounier's arguments against Neutrality, before posing a second objection to the teaching of personalism. By Mounier's own lights, the authority for doing so requires that teachers *know* that personalism is true. Briefly, it seems that whatever personalist claims teachers know are uncontroversial but do not provide determinate ethical guidance, and that whatever personalist claims provide determinate ethical guidance are not known. From here, I take up Mounier's fascination with the cultivation of elites who could implement personalism, and close by considering the difference between authoritarian and liberal variants of personalism.

Keywords: education; Emmanuel Mounier; liberalism; Neutrality; personalism

Personalism, of the sort advanced by the French Catholic thinker Emmanuel Mounier (1905–1950), is a philosophy that affirms the absolute value and irreducible existence of persons, including the human person. It is defined largely by (a) its vision of the person as a free, creative being capable of a rich, interior spiritual life and (b) its rejection of what it regards as the errors of liberal individualism and political collectivism. As such, it is interested in the question of what society must be like in order to honour this metaphysical truth about the person. In this paper, I ask whether a personalist (of the Mounier variety) ought to endorse the teaching of personalism in schools, as part of an official curriculum?[1] Here is one argument for answering in the affirmative. If one is convinced of the truth of personalism, then one ought to desire other people to believe in personalism, so that a personalistic society may come into existence. An

[1]By a 'school', I mean schools, attended prior to attending college/university, with an official curriculum. By an 'official curriculum', I mean a curriculum regulated or instituted by the State. My definitions are meant to include not only traditional public schools, but also private schools, charter schools, parochial schools, etc., that submit at least in part to standardized curricular requirements imposed by the State. I set aside, in this paper, the fine-grained question of what content is appropriate to different grade levels.

© The Author(s), 2026. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of Provincial Council of the English Province of the Order of Preachers.

https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2026.10165 Published online by Cambridge University Press

effective way of bringing it about that others believe in personalism would be to teach personalism in schools. So, a personalist has an instrumental reason to endorse the teaching of personalism in schools.[2]

But compare: many people are convinced of the truth of Christianity. And the same people ought to desire (and in fact desire) other people to believe in Christianity. But it is not necessarily the case that Christians would (or should) endorse the teaching of Christianity in schools, at least not as a matter of official curriculum at non-Christian schools. *Even if it was a particularly effective means of spreading belief in Christianity, there might be good reason not to endorse its being taught in schools across the board.*

Among the reasons not to endorse the teaching of Christianity in schools is the liberal principle of Neutrality.[3] In order to answer the question with which this paper opened, we must ask whether a personalist ought to endorse Neutrality. Fortunately for personalists, Mounier did us the favour of staking out a position on Neutrality in his *Personalist Manifesto.* In this paper, I will present Mounier's position on Neutrality, showing that it is compatible with the teaching of personalism. However, while Neutrality does not forbid the teaching of personalism, Mounier's arguments against Neutrality are not sufficient to justify the teaching of personalism. Personalism must also be true and known to be true by those who teach it. Considering the implications of this last claim will occupy the second half of this paper. In the course of exploring those implications, we shall encounter the authoritarian tendencies of Mounier's personalism. The paper ends by starting to disentangle authoritarian from liberal variants of personalism and distinguishing how each variant would answer the original question, namely whether personalism should be taught in schools.

1. Mounier on the principle of Neutrality in education

1.1. Some historical context

Before turning to Mounier's position on Neutrality, I wish very briefly to present some historical background. The question of Neutrality in Mounier is shaped by the context of French educational reforms in the 19th century, especially the reforms enacted by the Third Republic. These reforms have an ambiguous connection with Neutrality, and this ambiguity is clearly in the background of Mounier's account. Incidentally, I think that there are structural similarities between the French context of Mounier's

[2]I am unaware of any other personalistic literature that addresses this question. The little literature that is explicitly about personalism and education addresses the bearing of personalism on how we understand education, teaching, or the classroom, and not so much *what* should be taught, and certainly not the question whether *personalism itself should be taught*. See, e.g., Richard E. Hart, 'On Personalism and Education', *The Personalist Forum,* 6 (1990), 51–74, Julian Stern, *A Philosophy of Schooling* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), chap. 4, and Thomas O. Buford, 'Personalism and Education: A Philosophical Retrospect/Prospect', *The Paideia Archive: 20th World Congress of Philosophy*, 29 (1998), 60–67. Driers Deweer does mention that Mounier's understanding of a personalist democracy required 'profound political education for all citizens', but does not elaborate on what this means. See 'Mounier and Landsberg on the Person as Citizen: The Political Theory of the Early *Esprit* Movement', *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly,* 88 (2014), 499. The most recent book-length treatment of politics from a personalist perspective (Eamonn Gerard O'Higgins, *Person-Centered Politics: A Personalist Approach to Politics* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2024) does not address the question.

[3]The principle that, to speak loosely, would have the State refrain from endorsing one conception of the good (life) over another.

https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2026.10165 Published online by Cambridge University Press

discussion and features of the contemporary debate in the United States about schooling that are worth calling to the attention of American readers. I shall return to these similarities at the end of this section.

I will focus my attention on French primary schools because the primary school system was (at the time) the part of the school system most subject to state oversight and regulation. First, a terminological point. The distinction between primary and secondary schools in France (at least at the time of interest to this paper, i.e., the Third Republic prior to the composition of the *Personalist Manifesto*) is not a chronological distinction. Secondary schooling did not refer to schooling that *followed* primary schooling chronologically. Rather, they were differentiated by the economic classes that populated them. The primary schools were free (after the passage of the Jules Ferry laws of 1881/2) and populated by the working class. The secondary schools were not free and were populated by the middle class (and above).[4] Moreover, the faculty of these schools were trained differently. The primary school teachers were trained in Normal Schools. The secondary school teachers were trained in secondary schools and universities. I shall return to this difference in training below.

In addition to establishing free primary schooling, the Jules Ferry laws also removed religious education from primary schools. Officially, the primary schools were to be neutral in matters of religion. Religious education would be confined to the home; moral and civic education would be the province of primary schools.[5] It is this distinction between religious and moral/civic instruction that would become so problematic vis-à-vis Neutrality. It was recognized that there could be no such thing as Neutrality when it comes to ethics.[6] To take but one pressing example: are there duties to God? The 1883 syllabus for primary education mentions such duties but (in what Muzzey thinks was an artless effort at smoothing over the difficulties) hardly says anything about them.[7] There was also disagreement about the foundation of ethics – which principles, values, or ideals were necessary in order to organize a heap of moral duties into a rational system of ethics? The Catholics denied that anything other than God could do the job.[8] But the secularizing republican politicians of the Third Republic thought otherwise. In place of God, the organizing and animating principle of moral/civic instruction would be social solidarity and other values of the French Revolution.[9] The

[4]David Saville Muzzey, 'State, Church, and School in France I: The Foundations of the Public School in France', *The School Review,* 19 (1911), 181–2.

[5]For an extract of a circular sent by Ferry to primary schoolteachers on this matter, see Samuel Chester Parker, 'Civic-Moral Teaching in French Secular Schools, Part I', *The Elementary School Journal,* 20 (1920), 528.

[6]David Saville Muzzey, 'State, Church, and School in France III: The Separation of Church and School', *The School Review,* 19 (1911), 321.

[7]Ibid.

[8]Not to mention the necessity of an immortal soul and the existence of a divine system of rewards and punishments. See David Saville Muzzey, 'State, Church, and School in France II: The Campaign for Lay Education', *The School Review,* 19 (1911), 259 and Harrold Johnston, 'The Problem of an Effective Moral Education in Schools with Special Reference to Experiments in France', *International Journal of Ethics,* 22 (1912), 152.

[9]Charles Hughes Johnston, 'The Moral Mission of the Public School', *International Journal of Ethics,* 20 (1910), 460–2, Johnston, 'The Problem of an Effective Moral Education in Schools with Special Reference to Experiments in France', 148, and Muzzey, 'State, Church, and School in France III: The Separation of Church and School', 348. Muzzey elsewhere suggests that the normative ideals of education in the

https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2026.10165 Published online by Cambridge University Press

primary schools were to be allies of the state in its mission to inculcate republicanism in the youth of France.[10]

Hence, the extrusion of priests and religious from the primary schools by the Jules Ferry laws. Prior to the Jules Ferry laws, the regime of the *Loi Falloux* (adopted during the Second Republic in 1850) had restored clerical supervision of all state schools. Ethical instruction supposedly existed but in practice consisted of the catechism and 'sacred history'.[11] Clergy had the right to inspect, surveil and direct public and private primary schools.[12] Although some conservative Catholics, including members of the hierarchy, opposed the *Loi Falloux*, the laws were generally considered supportive of the Church.[13] They allowed the Church to establish its own schools and established a regime of clerical dominance over the schools. Moreover, since the primary schools run by religious orders were free (whereas, prior to the Jules Ferry laws, secular primary education was not free), a familiar pattern took hold, of free religious schools cornering the market in the various *départements* and driving out the secular schools.[14]

But even those who were supportive of secular schools staffed by lay teachers, with a curriculum inclusive of moral/civic instruction animated by the ideals of the Revolution, remained concerned that there was no positive, systematic philosophy to replace the systematic views of the Church that had formerly prevailed.[15] Neutrality with respect to religious doctrine was but a negative ideal.[16] Where was the positive content to come from?

In lieu of something, for lack of a better word, 'official', what was offered was the bourgeois 'moral sense'.[17] It is at this point in our story that we must recall the Normal Schools. The law establishing Normal Schools – 'the most important step in public education ever taken in the country'[18] – placed the highest priority on moral instruction.[19] In time, the Normal Schools became 'hotbeds of true republicanism',[20] whose students

Third Republic were rationalism and republicanism. See 'State, Church, and School in France IV: Moral Education as an Ideal of the French Republic', *The School Review,* 19 (1911), 393.

[10]Ibid., 392. See also Parker, 'Civic-Moral Teaching in French Secular Schools, Part I', 521.

[11]Muzzey, 'State, Church, and School in France II: The Campaign for Lay Education', *The School Review,* 19 (1911), 254–5.

[12]Ibid., 257.

[13]For more on the *Loi Falloux*, their impact on education, and the Catholic reaction to them, see John K. Huckaby, 'Roman Catholic Reaction to the Falloux Law', *French Historical Studies,* 4 (1965), 203–213, Patrick J. Harrigan, 'French Catholic and Classical Education after the Falloux Law', *French Historical Studies,* 8 (1973), 255–278, Patrick J. Harrigan, 'The Church and Pluralistic Education: The Development of and Teaching in French Catholic Secondary Schools, 1850–1870', *The Catholic Historical Review,* 64 (1978), 185–213, and Raymond Grew and Patrick J. Harrigan, 'The Catholic Contribution to Universal Schooling in France, 1850–1906', *The Journal of Modern History,* 57 (1985), 211–247.

[14]For a description of this pattern, see Nicholas Toloudis, *Teaching Marianne and Uncle Sam: Public Education, State Centralization, and Teacher Unionism in France and the United States* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2012), chap. 3.

[15]Muzzey, 'State, Church, and School in France III: The Separation of Church and School', 327.

[16]Ibid., 328.

[17]Johnston, 'The Problem of an Effective Moral Education in Schools with Special Reference to Experiments in France', p. 147.

[18]Muzzey, 'State, Church, and School in France II: The Campaign for Lay Education', *The School Review,* 19 (1911), 251.

[19]Ibid.

[20]Victor H. Friedel, 'Problems of Secondary Education in France', *The School Review,* 15 (1907), 178.

https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2026.10165 Published online by Cambridge University Press

were recruited from the primary schools and then sent back to teach in them. As time went on, the primary schoolteachers became culturally quite different from the teachers at the secondary schools, to the point that later reforms that proposed training primary schoolteachers in the secondary school system were opposed on cultural grounds – lest the bourgeois moral sensibilities of the *professeurs* rub off on them.[21]

In this context, Neutrality increasingly seemed to be a fiction. The more that moral/civics curricula developed a distinctive positive identity, the more it seemed doctrinaire in its own right – especially to those Catholics who were still not reconciled to the reforms of the Third Republic. Things only got worse with the wide-ranging legislation introducing the regime of laicity in 1905.[22] The state was winning the ideological battle, and Neutrality seemed to be a one-way street. It was a guardian of secularism in primary schooling, but rarely did it constrain the ideological content taught in the primary schools and to future teachers in the Normal Schools.

This is the background (or, rather, some of the background) for Mounier's own treatment of Neutrality. Would Neutrality rule out the teaching of personalism? Could personalism be the positive basis for moral and civic instruction in schools? These are just two of the questions we can imagine Mounier asking in light of the debates surrounding educational reforms towards the end of the Third Republic. As I unpack his account of Neutrality, I shall occasionally draw the reader's attention to connections between his ideas and elements of the story I have just told. But first, I would say something about the similarities this story bears to contemporary discourse about education in the United States. There are several. First, here-and-now (as then-and-there) there are concerns that Neutrality is a one-way street,[23] that it keeps out certain things (such as teaching about the role of Christianity in the lives and thought of the Founding Fathers) or practices (such as prayer), but not other things that strike many parents as running afoul of Neutrality (most notoriously, the teaching of content related to critical race theory/popularizations thereof).[24] Second, and relatedly, just as the French Normal Schools had an ideological slant, there is a concern in the United States that higher education has been captured by one side of the political spectrum. Teachers are inculcated with ideology,[25] which they indoctrinate in their students.[26] (I am not endorsing the truth of these claims but merely noticing their

[21]Ibid.

[22]Othon Guerlac, 'The Separation of Church and State in France', *Political Science Quarterly,* 23 (1908), 273. Guerlac's paper is an excellent overview of church/state relations from the Napoleonic Concordat to the laws of 1905 and 1907.

[23]See, e.g., the Brookings Institute's findings that 48% of adults believe that schools skew liberal or conservative. J. Cameron Anglum and Anita Manion, 'Perceptions of US Public Schools' Political Leanings and the Federal Role in Education', *Brookings Institute* <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/perceptions-of-us-public-schools-political-leanings-and-the-federal-role-in-education/> [accessed 17 June 2025].

[24]For analysis of public perceptions surrounding critical race theory, its place in schools, and how exposure to narratives about critical race theory shape these perceptions, see Ariell Bertrand, Melissa Arnold Lyon, and Rebecca Jacobsen, 'Narratives about Critical Race Theory and Americans' Beliefs about Public Schools', *Brookings Institute* <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/narratives-about-critical-race-theory-and-americans-beliefs-about-public-schools/> [accessed 18 April 2024].

[25]See, e.g., Phillip W. Magness and David Waugh, 'The Hyperpoliticization of Higher Ed', *The Independent Review,* 27 (2022/23), 359–370.

[26]See, e.g., a Pew Research survey indicating that 54% of respondents believe that teachers bring their personal political and social views into the classroom. Rachel Minkin, 'About

https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2026.10165 Published online by Cambridge University Press

existence and similarities to the French context.) Thirdly, there is the debate over alternatives to the public school system. Just as religious schools sucked the oxygen from lay schools under the *Loi Falloux*, today voucher programmes suck students and funding away from public schools and into various types of private schooling (religious or otherwise).[27] Finally, there is a growing sense that American schools need to reintroduce more instruction in American civics.[28] Like the French of the Third Republic, some Americans feel the need for an organizing philosophy. While those on the Religious Right prefer, like the French Catholics of yore, to make Christianity that philosophy, some advocate for a secular alternative, namely the philosophy of classical liberalism that influenced the framing of the Constitution.

The point of observing these similarities is to enable the reader to see the applicability of Mounier's discussion of Neutrality to the contemporary American situation. But also, to help orient the discussion of personalists who are Americans (as opposed to 'American Personalists', a branch of the personalist family tree different from the one under investigation), who are wondering whether personalism might not play a role comparable to liberalism as a secular, inclusive philosophical foundation for moral/civic instruction in public schools.

1.2. Two types of Neutrality and Mounier's arguments against them

If Neutrality is endorsed, then we have reason not to accept the soundness of the argument with which this paper began. Mounier is generally against Neutrality, but his position is considerably nuanced; he distinguishes three senses of Neutrality. In this section, I shall discuss the first two.

The first type of Neutrality (call it N1) forbids the teaching of anything that 'entails a positive conception of life'.[29] By a 'positive conception of life', Mounier is referring to anything that falls under the 'mission of education…to rouse up men that are able to live and act as persons'. To simplify matters, I shall call such content 'ethics' or 'ethical'. Personalists, Mounier thinks, ought to reject N1. We can extract four arguments against N1 from the text.

> Argument 1: N1 implies a separation of instruction from education.[30] On such a view, education belongs to the private sphere (the home, the family, one's

half of Americans say public K-12 education is going in the wrong direction', *Pew Research Center* <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2024/04/04/about-half-of-americans-say-public-k-12-education-is-going-in-the-wrong-direction/> [accessed 4 April 2024].

[27]See, e.g., Hilary Wething, 'How vouchers harm public schools: Calculating the cost of voucher programs to public school districts', *Economy Policy Institute* <https://www.epi.org/publication/vouchers-harm-public-schools/> [accessed 19 December 2024].

[28]See, e.g., the recommendations of the report of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences' Commission on the Practice of Democratic Citizenship, *Our Common Purpose: Reinventing American Democracy for the 21st Century* (2020) <https://www.amacad.org/sites/default/files/publication/downloads/2020-Democratic-Citizenship_Our-Common-Purpose.pdf>.

[29]Emmanuel Mounier, *A Personalist Manifesto*, trans. by Monks of St. John's Abbey (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1938), p. 113. Hereafter, I shall refer to this work as *PM*.

[30]This distinction was a common trope in discussion of French educational reforms (especially with respect to morals and civics) in the Third Republic. See, e.g., Johnston, 'The Problem of an Effective Moral Education in Schools with Special Reference to Experiments in France', p. 151.

https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2026.10165 Published online by Cambridge University Press

religion), while instruction belongs to the public sphere.[31] If education is a private matter, then it is not accessible to all. For only those whose families could afford or otherwise provide such an education will receive it. Personalism, however, requires that everybody be furnished with the means needed to exercise and develop their capacities as free persons.[32] So provision must be made in all schools for students to receive an education in addition to receiving instruction. Instruction alone is insufficient to meet the demands of personalism.

The next two arguments are variations on the first.

Argument 2: N1 is only possible for scientific and technical disciplines.[33] But school is for teaching students how to live. Therefore, N1 ought not be endorsed.

Argument 3: An exclusive focus on instruction over education implies a deficient theory of schooling, one that emphasizes rote learning of set truths, rather than 'personal assimilation' of truths.[34] Therefore, N1 ought not be endorsed.

The first three arguments are united in calling for education that includes ethical content (or at least in not forbidding such an education). But they are neutral with respect to the content of that education. The fourth argument is slightly different. It focuses on the prospect that what happens in schools is unavoidably non-neutral, and that, therefore, the proper authorities must intentionally determine what that ethical content should be:

Argument 4: What is taught in schools is unavoidably non-neutral. In the absence of an official curriculum, either the ethics of the *zeitgeist* or those of the teacher are forced upon the students.[35] To endorse N1 is to allow the fashions of the day or the caprice of the teacher to determine what students learn about ethics. What students learn about ethics is too important to be left to current fashions or the whims of individual teachers. Therefore, N1 ought not be endorsed.

Put together, these arguments show that schools that implement N1 fail to educate students and that they fail even on their own terms, i.e., they fail to prevent content related to a 'positive conception of life' being taught to students.

The second sense of Neutrality (N2) allows for the erection of schools that educate members of specific groups (e.g., religions) in the views of those groups.[36] (Recall that this was essentially the regime of the *Loi Falloux*.) But while Mounier endorses N2 as

[31]This was explicitly the case for religious education after the passage of the Jules Ferry laws. See Parker, 'Civic-Moral Teaching in French Secular Schools, Part I', p. 528.

[32]This seems to follow from the 'Principles of a Personalist Civilization' in *PM*.

[33]Though Mounier does not invoke the fact/value distinction, one might use it to roughly capture the spirit of N1. Anything factual may be taught. Anything related to values should not be taught.

[34]*PM*, p. 114.

[35]*PM*, p. 115.

[36]The third sense of Neutrality, which I shall not discuss further, is unproblematic for personalism. It consists in a policy of understanding before judging, of eliminating the polemical quality from education. Mounier thinks personalists should agree with this (*PM*, p. 117).

https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2026.10165 Published online by Cambridge University Press

a claim about the right of members of groups to establish schools, he does not think that this right entitles such schools to complete state non-intervention with respect to what those schools teach. People have a right to erect schools that teach their doctrines to their children, but there is a 'minimum of fundamentals of a personalist society' with respect to which *any* school may *not* be neutral.[37] Mounier is trying to steer a course between a state monopoly in education (something he strongly opposed) and a *laissez-faire* attitude towards what gets taught in private schools:

> In a society that is based on personalism no school could excuse or justify any exploitation of man by man, and advocacy of social regimentation or of state absolutism, of moral or civic inequality of races or classes, of the superiority of deceit over truth, instinct over love or disinterestedness.[38]

I shall refer to these claims as the personalistic *minima*. The public schools are not permitted to avoid these topics on grounds of N1, nor may private schools be excused from them (or, worse, contradict them) on grounds of N2.[39]

2. A condition on the teaching of personalism

If we accept Mounier's arguments against Neutrality, and especially what he says in response to N2, then we lose a key reason not to endorse the teaching of personalism in schools. But while Mounier is against Neutrality, writing that 'the personalist state is not neutral, it is personalist',[40] he does not think that the state has the right to impose personalism by force alone. The state is not a person, hence not a disseminator of truth; 'Truth must penetrate them [institutions] by its own direct force'.[41]

This last claim requires some qualification. Truth is not an agent. Unless Mounier wants to claim that education is inherently a matter of force (and I do not think he does), he must be open to the idea of *persons* disseminating certain truths in their capacity as agents of the State or, more broadly, as agents whose educational activities are regulated by the State. But there is, nevertheless, a constraint implied by Mounier's comments about the State and truth. Agents of the State can only disseminate *truths*. What authorizes teaching is not the State, but the truth of that which is taught.[42] And the truth-condition seems to imply that what authorizes the teaching activity in question is the *knowledge of the truth* possessed by the teacher. This leads to the following dilemma for the teaching of personalism.

1. Mounier would have certain tenets of personalism taught in schools.
2. Either these fundamental tenets are vacuous, or they have substantive content.

[37] *PM*, p. 120.
[38] Ibid.
[39] In a proposed 'Declaration of Rights', for a new post-war French constitution, Mounier defends freedom of education subject to guarantees of competency, morality, and civic formation, which guarantees would be overseen by the State. See 'Faut-il Réviser La Déclaration Des Droits?', *Esprit*, 13 (May 1945), 850–856.
[40] *PM*, p. 235.
[41] *PM*, p. 236.
[42] For the centrality of truth to personalist political thought and to authority in particular, see O'Higgins, *Person-Centered Politics*, chs. 3 and 6.

https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2026.10165 Published online by Cambridge University Press

3. If what is taught is vacuous, then it is useless.
4. But to the extent that what is taught has substantive content, it runs afoul of the requirement that what is taught must be known to be true by the teacher.
5. So: either the teaching of personalism is useless or prohibited.

Mounier is clearly aware of the problem indicated in (3). Personalists agree on the absolute value of the human person and her or his irreducible ontological status. But given that these claims are consistent with any number of ethical views,[43] they are virtually useless when it comes to forming young minds. (Just recall the personalistic *minima* mentioned above; they amount to little more than empty commands, such as 'don't be racist!' or 'prefer love to instinct!'.)

Now look at (4). Take, as an example of a more substantive personalistic claim, the view that capitalism is (in Mounier's words) 'the enemy of the people'. More broadly, if Mounier's more substantive claims are correct, then personalism is strongly anti-capitalistic.[44] But these are claims that it is harder for any teacher to claim to know (even setting aside the metaethical status of claims such as 'capitalism is bad'). At best, they might know that capitalism is antithetical to personalism. But in order for this to justify teaching that capitalism is 'the enemy of the people', the teachers must know far more than the personalistic *minima*.[45] So, unless we can make sense of the teacher's claim to *know* the truth of more substantive personalistic claims, the teaching of such claims will be prohibited, leaving only the useless teaching of the *minima*.[46] Making sense of such claims to knowledge raises the question of how teachers are *trained.*

This leads to a second dilemma. Either the teachers know that the substantive claims of personalism are true, or they do not know that these claims are true. If they do not know that these claims are true, then they have no authority to teach them. Or, if this seems too strong, we would have to say that *some* elite know that personalism is true – so that teachers instructed by the elite acquire personalism via testimony, albeit perhaps under conditions that would not amount to the transmission of knowledge (as opposed to mere belief, or justified belief).[47] In other words, *someone* has to know that personalism is true. But to the extent that those who have the knowledge are

[43]Emmanuel Mounier, 'What Is Personalism?' in *Be Not Afraid: A Denunciation of Despair*, trans. Cynthia Rowland (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1962), pp. 143–5. Hereafter, I shall refer to this work as *WIP.*

[44]See *WIP*, p. 195, *PM*, chaps. XI-XII.

[45]For other examples, see Mounier's opposition to capitalism, Marxism, fascism and 'bourgeois liberalism' in *PM* chaps. II-III, XI.

[46]I do not mean that the *minima* are totally useless – but they are subject to being glossed in the way that Mounier criticizes in Argument 4 against N1. 'Don't be racist', for example, could be given anti-racist content or it could be given colour-blind content. It is the subsequent content that makes a difference to how students are formed and what they advocate when they come of age, not the vague admonition not to be racist.

[47]My thinking about this question is influenced by Jennifer Lackey, 'Testimonial Knowledge and Transmission', *The Philosophical Quarterly,* 49 (1999), 471–490. The critical point for Lackey is that testimony can generate knowledge, *even if the speaker does not know that what she is saying is true.* But for my purposes, what is more important is how Lackey handles cases in which the hearer comes to know something that the speaker does not. What she says is that testimony does not transmit defeaters, so that even if the speaker has defeaters for *p,* the hearer might not have any defeaters. But what I am interested in, and which shall be apparent below, are the implications for *not communicating defeaters*. Assuming defeaters that are not exotic (of the sceptical scenario variety), then what does it mean to say *p,* with an eye to

https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2026.10165 Published online by Cambridge University Press

limited, and those who are trained in it do not really have that knowledge, the structure is increasingly authoritarian. What matters *de facto* is the relationship the current elites bear to some earlier authoritative figure. Regardless, in relation to the question of whether personalism should be taught in schools, we can advance the following condition: it should be taught, but only if known. *Who* must have the knowledge is a question that admits of different answers, from 'each teacher' to 'the [elite] trainers of the teachers' to 'the [elite] trainers of the [elite] trainers'.[48] The further removed from 'each teacher' the knowledge in question is, the more authoritarian (in this respect) personalism is.[49]

getting others to teach *p*, when you know that *p* is contested, not obviously true, and suffers from the problem of pervasive peer disagreement?

[48]In terms of the normal school at Uriage (see next note): who needed to know personalism – each graduate? Each trainer of the elites who would direct the youth movements? Only those who, like Mounier, could train the trainers in personalism?

[49]In Mounier's work, there are frequent calls for the cultivation of a 'spiritual elite capable of authority' (where authority is conceived, minimally, as rooted in the personalist mission or (for the Christian) ultimately in God (*PM*, pp. 247–8). What exactly this cultivation looks like is different at different stages in Mounier's thought. At one stage, the model appears to have been the religious orders that emerged in the early Middle Ages, with the goal of establishing a lay religious community (John Hellman, *Emmanuel Mounier and the New Catholic Left* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981), p. 86). At another stage, just before the outbreak of WWII, Mounier was working on establishing a multi-family residence with a built-in school (ibid., pp. 148–150). Interestingly, this community persisted even after Mounier's death (ibid., p. 253). The high-water mark of Mounier's involvement in efforts to cultivate an elite came early in the regime of Vichy France (1940/1). Mounier had come to believe that only a chastising and humiliating defeat would ready the nation for moral and spiritual renewal. As a result, he 'observed the collapse of his country with relative ease' (ibid; Tony Judt captures the attitude of Mounier and similar Catholic intellectuals, in *Past Imperfect: French Intellectuals, 1944–1956* (New York: NYU Press, 2011), p. 18). When the Vichy government was up and running, one of its initiatives was the creation of youth groups, including the *Chantiers de la Jeunesse* and the *Compagnons de France*. While Mounier was not trusted by all of the officials at Vichy (Hellman, *Emmanuel Mounier and the New Catholic Left*, pp. 171–2), he had enough well-placed friends to secure a semi-official position teaching at the *Ecole Nationale des Cadres d'Uriage*. This institution was to be the normal school for 'the special elites needed to direct youth movements' (ibid., p. 174; see also Judt, *Past Imperfect*, pp. 29–30). Personalism was in the curriculum until Mounier's arrest in 1941 at the hands of pro-nazi elements in the Vichy government. All told, there were about four thousand alumni of Uriage (ibid., pp. 186). For Mounier's own sense of what the youth movements were to accomplish, see Mounier, 'Programme pour le movement de jeunesse francais', *Esprit,* 9 (1941), 152–167. For further discussions of Mounier's involvement with Uriage (from authors who hold divergent views about Mounier's involvement with the Vichy regime), see R. William Rauch, Jr. *Politics and Belief in Contemporary France: Emmanuel Mounier and Christian Democracy, 1932–1950* (The Hague: Martinus-Nijhoff, 1972), pp. 207–226 and Zeev Sternhell, *Neither Right Nor Left: Fascist Ideology in France*, trans. David Maisel (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), pp. 288–91. Though I cannot elaborate further for the sake of space, the reader should also know that a similar effort to train elites was characteristic of the one regime ostensibly organized around personalism: the Republic of (South) Vietnam. See Mitchell Tan, 'Spiritual Fraternities: The Transnational Networks of Ngô Điêm's Personalist Revolution and the Republic of Vietnam, 1955–1963', *Journal of Vietnamese Studies,* 14 (2019), 5, John C. Donnell, 'Personalism in Vietnam', in Wesley R. Fishel, ed., *Problems of Freedom: South Vietnam Since Independence* (New York: Free Press of Glencoe, Inc., 1961), p. 49, Jessica M. Chapman, *Cauldrons of Resistance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and 1950s Southern Vietnam* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013), p. 135, and Geoffrey Stewart, *Vietnam's Lost Revolution: Ngo Dinh Diem's Failure to Build an Independent Nation, 1955–1963* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 89–92.

https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2026.10165 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Now, let us assume that the teachers do have the knowledge in question. It is still an open question whether the full content of personalism could be taught to everyone, i.e., whether an understanding of personalism could be had by everyone who lived under the authority of a personalistic State. If the answer is 'yes', then, unless the teachers fail to do so, there seems to be nothing problematic about the call for elites. They would just be teachers with an aptitude for understanding and communicating the truth of personalism. However, if the answer is 'no', then personalism becomes, to a greater or lesser degree, an esoteric doctrine of the elite. The elites use it to justify their authority *to themselves*, but they would be unable to use it to justify their authority *to others.* This leads to a second condition on whether personalism should be taught in public schools: it should be taught *only if its content (and the fact that it is true) can be intelligible to all.*[50] This distinction between two conditions can be roughly aligned with the difference between how an authoritarian vs. a liberal personalist would answer the question with which this paper began. Whereas an authoritarian personalist needs only to insist on the first condition, and maybe even a weak variant thereof, the liberal personalist must insist on both. The liberal personalist would say that if either personalism is not known by the elites to be true or (regardless of its truth) it is not or cannot be taught to the people, then the elites lack legitimacy in their teaching of personalism.[51]

3. Conclusion: authoritarian and liberal personalism

We started with the question of whether a personalist should endorse the teaching of personalism in schools. After sorting out one consideration *against* (the principle of Neutrality), we then discovered another difficulty. In order for personalism legitimately to be taught in schools, it must be true. Hence, teachers must *know* that personalism is true. If they do not *know* that it is true, then they are abusing their magisterial authority. The best that could be said is that the teachers are passing on content which they received via testimony from their trainers, who themselves possessed the knowledge in question.

I have submitted that the farther removed the possessor of the knowledge is from the teacher, the less it is the case that *knowledge* rather than the *person* of the trainer justifies the authoritative teaching of some doctrine. Another and related problem lies in the fact that the only aspects of personalism – what I called the personalistic *minima* – that are uncontroversially true are too generic to supply determinate ethical content. The more substantive claims of personalism are subject to various epistemic defeaters, specifically serious cases of peer disagreement. While it may be that these defeaters are not transmitted via testimony from the trainers to the teachers, this is hardly reassuring.[52] It means that the disagreements and criticisms of personalism have not been

[50]Of course, we need to fudge this last point a bit, allowing for what is appropriate at different ages and stages of development, as well as for those who (on any political theory) are subject to the state without being able to understand its authority (e.g., the severely incapacitated).

[51]Given that, in addition to calling for elites, Mounier also asserts that the personalist state is 'dictatorial' when it comes to 'threats' to personhood, it does not seem odd to speak of an authoritarian personalism (*PM*, p. 238). Given how fundamental the value of personhood is for Mounier, this leads to a potentially expansive view of State power, despite Mounier otherwise clear desire for a limited state.

[52]See the aforementioned article by Lackey.

https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2026.10165 Published online by Cambridge University Press

taught, which makes personalism start to sound – its protestations notwithstanding – like an ideology.

Authoritarian personalism is comfortable, to various degrees, with this situation, so long as somebody knows that personalism is true. The alternative to authoritarian personalism is liberal personalism. There is, so far as I am aware, no generally accepted account of what liberal personalism is. I suspect that this is due to the fact that (1) personalism has generally been hostile to liberalism,[53] especially to what it regards as liberalism's inadequate account of freedom, and (2) personalism thinks of itself as transcending the dichotomy of liberalism and authoritarianism, as it transcends the similar dichotomy of individualism and collectivism. So, with what little space remains, I would like to suggest two candidate marks of liberal personalism, before closing with how I see liberal personalism bearing on the original question of whether personalism should be taught in schools.

Mark 1: Respect for negative liberty over positive liberty. In his work, Mounier criticizes liberalism's conception of freedom. On Mounier's reckoning, liberalism's conception of freedom is divorced from the *purpose* of freedom and only values the indifferent ability to choose. Liberalism is always disengaged – 'to have convictions, to act in accordance with them – that is for liberalism the supreme folly'.[54] True freedom is freedom of engagement, freedom to discover one's vocation and adopt the means to living it. High-minded rhetoric, to be sure. But when combined with suspicion of representative democracy, it raises the question of *who* determines the vocation of human beings (and of each human being). Negative liberty is content to leave that to each individual; positive liberty consists in the liberation of the 'higher self'.[55] Suspicion of representative government, combined with faith in cadres of elites to lead the nation, the 'dictatorial' power of the personalist state where 'threats' to personhood are concerned: all of this leads a liberal personalist to think that authoritarian personalism is allied with positive liberty. A liberal personalist will be content to embrace negative liberty, even at the risk of courting the scorn of Mounier and other anti-liberals. A liberal personalist will find all she or he needs in Mill's essay *On Liberty*, which, beginning with its epigraph from *The Limits of State Action* by Wilhelm von Humboldt, conceives negative liberty – *freedom from interference* – to be yoked to the good of self-development for each person.

Mark 2: The need for social transparency. Unlike authoritarian personalists, liberal personalists will insist that the bases of political authority must be transparent, and not obscure or esoteric. If people are to be ruled, then they must understand what is being done to them and what justifies it. To adapt an insight of Bernard Williams, the spirit of the justification must match the spirit of what is being justified.[56] What justifies the exercise of authority in a personalist society must itself be personalistic. If the elites cannot transparently declare the bases of their authority in a way that is manifestly

[53]Mounier refers to liberalism as 'bourgeois civilization' in *PM* ranks, and it is alongside fascism and Marxism. Like many French intellectuals, Mounier wrote as if all of these systems were on a par, morally speaking. For examples of his rhetoric, and what makes it ethically problematic, see Judt, *Past Imperfect*, pp. 41–2, 131–2, 175–6. For Mounier's relationship to fascism, see also Sternhell, *Neither Right Nor Left*, pp. xiv-xxi, 214–21, and 272–82.

[54]*PM*, p. 84. I cannot make sense of this objection.

[55]I have in mind the distinction as drawn by Isaiah Berlin in his 'Two Concepts of Liberty'.

[56]See *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), p. 108.

https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2026.10165 Published online by Cambridge University Press

consistent with personalism, then they ought not to rule. Both marks go together. The need for social transparency militates against the temptations of positive liberty. The accommodation of negative liberty makes it easier to meet the condition of social transparency. The fewer substantive restrictions on personal freedom you are prepared to endorse, the easier it is to explain the justification for those restrictions you do impose.

Liberal personalism on the teaching of personalism. Liberal personalism truthfully concedes the contestable epistemic status of personalism's substantive commitments. It neither needs to retreat behind the vague personalistic *minima* nor does it need to obscure the contested epistemic status of the more substantive claims. Because it is fundamentally oriented by liberalism, it can be taught as an internal critique of the liberal foundations of (to return to the discussion of Section 1.1) American government and political life. In fact, I would argue that it is a uniquely helpful internal critique to teach, for unlike communism or fascism, the substantive commitments of personalism can indicate the sorts of reforms that are politically possible in the United States. Even when personalism seems most at odds with the American system, it has something helpful to say. For example, in its suspicion of national representative government, and its preference for intermediate authorities such as the family, religious bodies, and civil society more broadly, it picks up on a current failure of America to live up to its history of robust civil society straddling the division between private life and federal politics. For another example, its criticism of capitalism need not be what one author calls a combination of 'papal encyclicals and kindergarten economics'.[57] There are thoughtful ways in which personalists can criticize the American economy without resorting to corporatism or Marxism. It may be a salutary influence on civics education to cover an adjacent system of thought, one consistent with liberalism, averse to authoritarianism, but which suggests positive directions for the future of the nation – as opposed to covering mere monsters (such as Nazism and communism) that have been triumphantly slain.[58]

Declaration of interest. There are no conflicts of interest to declare.

Funding statement. This manuscript has not been supported by any external funding source.

[57]Quoted in Duy Lap Nguyen, *The Unimagined Community: Imperialism and Culture in South Vietnam* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020), p. 64.

[58]This means that personalism cannot be, for the liberal personalist, the positive philosophy that unites and rationalizes the various obligations instilled by moral/civic training.

Cite this article: Joseph Gamache, 'Personalism, Teaching, and Authority', *New Blackfriars*, 107 (2026), 456–468. https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2026.10165

https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2026.10165 Published online by Cambridge University Press