

Freedom, Responsibility, and the Self-Ideal*

Arnold and Gasson's Alternative Image of the Human Person

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Riassunto

This study examines Magda Arnold's and John Gasson's attempt to formulate an alternative image of the human person in *The Human Person* (1954). Focusing on Chapters 1 and 6, it reconstructs the movement from Arnold's critique of the philosophical presuppositions underlying mechanistic and deterministic psychology to Gasson's personalistic theory of personality. The study argues that Gasson's doctrine of the self-ideal is not an isolated moral or religious addition to this framework, but its teleological culmination. Arnold and Gasson seek to preserve the empirical character of psychology while accounting for the unity, purposiveness, freedom, and responsibility of human action. Within this perspective, personality integration cannot arise automatically from biological or psychological tendencies, but requires an apprehended end capable of organising them. The self-ideal fulfils this function by linking subjective aspiration with an objective model of human perfection. The article also identifies several philosophical and psychological questions that deserve further independent investigation.

Keywords: Magda Arnold, John Gasson, Personality theory, Self-ideal, Philosophy of psychology

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1 INTRODUCTION: RECOVERING THE PERSON IN PSYCHOLOGY

The Human Person arose from a conference held at Barat College in Lake Forest, Illinois, in 1951 and was published in 1954 as a collaborative attempt to formulate an integrated theory of personality. The volume sought to address the difficulties encountered by Christian psychologists working within the emerging scientific disciplines of psychology and psychotherapy. Its editors, John Gasson and Magda Arnold, revised the nineteen contributions in order to strengthen their internal coherence while preserving the distinctive perspective of each author.

The importance of the project extends beyond its original confessional and historical setting. Its contributors addressed a problem that remains central to psychology: whether the discipline can explain human behaviour adequately while excluding questions concerning the nature, unity, purpose, freedom, and responsibility of the human person. Their proposal brought experimental psychology into dialogue with a classical philosophical understanding of human nature. Rather than merely defending an inherited metaphysical system, Arnold and Gasson attempted to recover a method capable of integrating empirical discoveries with enduring insights into knowledge, action, character, and human fulfilment.

Three recurrent principles give unity to this project. First, human behaviour is intrinsically dynamic and directed towards growth or fulfilment. Secondly, this dynamism is mediated by knowledge and freedom: human action cannot be explained adequately as the mere outcome of physical forces, biological drives, or environmental conditioning. Thirdly, psychological health requires the integration of the person's various powers and tendencies into a coherent pattern of life. These principles prepare the ground for one of the volume's most important concepts: the self-ideal.

The present study examines the relationship between that concept and the philosophical anthropology on which it rests. It offers a reconstructive analysis of two central and extensive chapters of the volume: Magda Arnold's account of the philosophical presuppositions of psychology in Chapter 1 and John Gasson's formulation of the general principles of personality theory in Chapter 6. Its primary aim is to present their arguments faithfully, clarify their conceptual sequence, and identify questions deserving further investigation. Some of these questions are indicated in the footnotes rather than developed in the main text, since each could become the subject of an independent study.

The central thesis is that Gasson's doctrine of the self-ideal is not an isolated moral or religious addition to the psychological theory presented in the volume. It is the teleological culmination of an alternative image of the human person developed by Arnold and Gasson in response to mechanistic and deterministic psychology. On classical philosophical foundations, they construct a framework capable of accounting for the unity, purposiveness, freedom, and responsibility

of human action. The self-ideal gives this framework its practical direction: it is the end according to which the person can organise and integrate the different dimensions of personality.

2 THE PHILOSOPHICAL IMAGE BEHIND PSYCHOLOGICAL SCIENCE

This Section summarises the core elements of Magda Arnold's account of the foundational framework of psychology and psychotherapy, as articulated in Chapter 1 of *The Human Person*. As in the remainder of the text, it also draws connections with other chapters of the volume and with additional sources.

2.1 *No Psychology without Philosophical Presuppositions*

In the first lines of the chapter, Arnold observes that every scientific theory rests upon a set of often unacknowledged assumptions concerning reality, human nature, and the nature of knowledge itself. In psychology, these foundational assumptions are frequently adopted uncritically from the physical sciences, yet they profoundly influence the ways in which problems are defined, investigated, and interpreted. Because such assumptions precede empirical inquiry, they properly belong not to science but to philosophy. As she asserts in a later work, “every psychologist has an image of man in his mind that determines his approach, either to a patient or a research problem.”¹

Nevertheless, psychologists have historically sought to distance themselves from philosophy, aspiring instead to establish psychology as an “objective” science. According to Arnold, this ambition has led to a fundamental confusion, for the central questions of psychology—what it means to be human, whether human beings are free, purposeful, and responsible—are inescapably philosophical. To ignore them is to construct a discipline upon unexamined metaphysical foundations.²

Her reference to the dismissive way in which scientists characterise so-called ‘armchair’ theories, together with her approach to ordinary experience as the foundation of science, recalls reflections by Edmund Husserl in *Philosophie als strenge Wissenschaft* (*Philosophy as a Rigorous Science*).³

¹M. B. ARNOLD, *Psychology and the Image of Man*, «Religious Education», 54 (1959), pp. 30-36: 30. Allers assessed that no research on human nature, or any side of it, can avoid elaborating on a philosophical platform, “though some authors may not be aware of their starting from a definite and general philosophy” (R. ALLERS, *The Improvement of the Self*, Cluny Media, Providence [RI], 2019, pp. 1-2 [originally *Self Improvement*, Benzinger Brothers, 1939]).

²Cf. M. B. ARNOLD, *Basic Assumptions in Psychology*, in *The Human Person: An Approach to an Integral Theory of Personality*, ed. by M. B. Arnold, J. A. Gasson, The Ronald Press Company, New York 1954, pp. 3-36: 3-4.

³E. HUSSERL, *Philosophie als strenge Wissenschaft*, «Logos. Internationale Zeitschrift für Philosophie der Kultur», (1911), pp. 289-341, *passim*. He refers to this derogatory attitude as

2.2 *When Physics Becomes a Model for Psychology*

Arnold develops this criticism by showing how psychology imported into its own field assumptions and explanatory models derived from the physical sciences. In physics, certain assumptions are taken as given: that the external world is real, that it operates according to causal laws, and that it can be comprehended through logical reasoning.

At the same time, physicists commonly adopt a ‘working principle’ of agnosticism—an agreement to study phenomena without reference to ultimate origins or purposes. This principle serves a legitimate and pragmatic function within experimental physics. Yet, when extended beyond its proper domain—to the realms of life and mind—it becomes problematic, for here questions of purpose and meaning cannot be excluded without distorting the subject matter itself.

The limitations of scientific agnosticism become more apparent in biology. Whether life is regarded merely as a complex arrangement of matter or as a distinct order of organisation determines the entire direction of research. The materialist biologist seeks to trace life to its chemical origins, whereas the vitalist explores the distinctive laws governing living processes. Even within medicine, such assumptions exert a decisive influence: conceiving the body as a machine leads to therapeutic strategies aimed primarily at eliminating pathogens, rather than at strengthening the organism’s inherent defences.⁴ For Arnold, the inadequacy of mechanistic models in explaining and treating complex diseases such as cancer exemplifies the sterility of this approach.⁵

In psychology, the consequences of importing the assumptions of physics are even more far-reaching. The working principle of physics—studying phenomena without reference to purpose or destiny—renders human experience unintelligible. When psychologists model their discipline upon the physical sciences, thought becomes reduced to ‘problem-solving,’ desire to ‘drives,’ and will to mere

“Schreibtisch-Psychologie” (p. 302). Arnold’s account of the origin of scientific knowledge, and of the need for a science consonant with it—namely, a developed form of knowledge that does not contradict our perception of reality—reveals profound affinities with a formal phenomenological approach.

⁴During one of her earliest teaching appointments, in the early 1940s, Magda Arnold was already developing a recognisably phenomenological approach to psychology. As she recalled in an extended oral-history interview conducted in 1976, the more she came to understand psychology, the more convinced she became “that there has to be in the human being something like a soul.” M. B. ARNOLD, *Interview with Magda Arnold*, interview conducted by M. Northway, 2 April 1976, C. Roger Myers Oral History Collection, Canadian Psychological Association Archives, National Archives of Canada, MG 29 I 161, p. 35, transcript available through *Psychology’s Feminist Voices Digital Archive*. Cf. also P. VALENZUELA, *The Value of Emotions based on Magda B. Arnold and Barbara L. Fredrickson Theories*, EDUSC, Rome 2024, p. 28.

⁵Cf. M. B. ARNOLD, *Basic Assumptions*, cit., pp. 4-6.

‘striving.’⁶ Such reductions deny the qualitative distinctiveness of human existence, eliminating freedom, responsibility, and purpose from psychological theory⁷. Inevitably, experiments designed within this framework confirm its presuppositions: when human reasoning is examined through maze experiments, people appear to behave like animals.⁸

Arnold argues that psychology cannot evade the fundamental questions of human nature and value. Any attempt to guide education, therapy, or social policy inevitably presupposes implicit beliefs about what constitutes a ‘good’ or ‘mature’ person. To present such convictions as ‘scientific’ is to obscure their essentially philosophical and moral origins. A genuinely reflective psychology must therefore acknowledge and scrutinise the assumptions upon which it rests.

If, however, science cannot offer definitive answers regarding what it means to be well-adjusted or responsible, each educator or therapist will be compelled to supply such a norm from his or her own convictions—convictions that often go unexamined precisely because they are mistakenly assumed to carry the authority of science.⁹

2.3 *The Hidden Metaphysics of Personality Theory*

In the following pages of the chapter, Arnold argues that virtually all theories of personality are grounded in hidden metaphysical premises. Deterministic frameworks, for instance, presuppose an unbroken continuity between matter, life, and mind, interpreting human conduct as the inevitable outcome of mechanical forces. Even those theories that speak of ‘energy,’ ‘motivation,’ or ‘dynamic processes’ remain, at their core, mechanistic, merely substituting one form of causality for another. When human creativity, art, or moral striving are reduced to secondary effects of biological drives, the psychologist implicitly denies the legitimacy of first-person experience—the subject’s own awareness of purpose, deliberation, and choice.

⁶Among the many philosophical assumptions involved in psychological research, Rudolf Allers singled out determinism as a particularly revealing example. In 1939, while already teaching at the Catholic University of America, he argued that the idea of the immutability of character based on the presumed universality of physical laws, “is not, therefore, derived from the facts of psychology collected by its experiments and its work done in laboratories. This conviction is more the result of a general idea of human nature, an idea born of certain philosophies” (R. ALLERS, *The Improvement of the Self*, cit., p. 17.)

⁷For a systematic presentation of these terms, cf. M. B. ARNOLD, *Emotion and Personality. Vol. 1: Psychological Aspects*, Columbia University Press, New York 1960, pp. 216–225.

⁸On the reductionism characteristic of certain strands of psychoanalysis and behaviourism, cf. EADEM, *Psychology and the Image of Man*, cit., p. 36. On Maslow’s consideration concerning the limits of research based on animal experimentation, cf. A. H. MASLOW, *Motivation and Personality*, Harper & Row, New York 1954, pp. xii, xviii.

⁹M. B. ARNOLD, *Basic Assumptions*, cit., pp. 6–8.

Such an attitude, Arnold contends, is ultimately self-defeating. If every belief, including the psychologist's own theoretical commitments, is determined by impersonal forces, then no conviction—scientific or otherwise—can claim genuine validity. The very claim to objectivity collapses under the weight of its own assumptions. Furthermore, by excluding human self-awareness as 'unscientific,' psychology effectively rejects its most direct source of evidence: the conscious testimony of individuals regarding their intentions, reflections, and moral reasoning.¹⁰

The deterministic position, when pursued to its logical conclusion, leads to absurdities. If human freedom and choice are dismissed as illusions, then moral responsibility, rational agency, and even sanity itself must also be illusory. To judge a belief in God, for example, as pathological would presuppose a prior determination that God does not exist—a conclusion that belongs not to empirical science but to metaphysics. Psychology, therefore, cannot pronounce upon the sanity or delusion of belief or disbelief without first, and often unwittingly, committing itself to a philosophical view of ultimate reality.

Arnold's analysis exposes the paradox at the heart of modern personality theory: in striving to emulate the neutrality of the physical sciences, psychology conceals the very philosophical commitments that give its inquiries meaning. A reflective discipline, she implies, must bring these presuppositions to light, recognising that the study of persons cannot be divorced from questions of purpose, value, and truth.¹¹

2.4 *Three Inadequate Philosophical Alternatives*

Arnold distinguishes three principal philosophical orientations underlying scientific psychology—*physical naturalism*, *critical idealism*, and *psychophysical parallelism*—each of which, she argues, fails to provide an adequate foundation for understanding the person.

Physical naturalism, the prevailing view, reduces human life to the final stage of material evolution, interpreting behaviour entirely in terms of physical and chemical causation and thereby denying freedom, purpose, and moral agency.¹²

¹⁰Even if introspection and self-reporting are not easy to handle and incorporate into scientific research, they cannot be excluded from it. Cf. again E. HUSSERL, *Philosophie als strenge Wissenschaft*, cit., *passim*.

¹¹Cf. M. B. ARNOLD, *Basic Assumptions*, cit., pp. 8-11.

¹²Cf. EADEM, *Motives as Causes*, «Journal of Phenomenological Psychology», 1/2 (1971) [Periodicals Archive Online, Brill 2005], pp. 185-192. Cf. also E. HUSSERL, *Philosophie als strenge Wissenschaft*, cit, pp. 294-295 on the consequences of applying categories of physical inquiry in psychology and philosophy. For Husserl, 'the essence' of mental phenomena and activity cannot be reduced to physical movement.

Critical idealism, derived from Kant, preserves intellectual coherence but at the cost of divorcing scientific knowledge from reality, rendering psychology a study of its own mental constructions rather than of the world.

Cartesian inherited psychophysical parallelism, attempting to reconcile the other two views, posits mind and body as distinct yet non-interacting realms, thereby dividing human nature beyond repair. Collectively, these positions fragment the unity of the human being and, in Arnold's view, render psychology incapable of achieving a coherent or meaningful conception of personhood.¹³

2.5 A Personalistic and Hierarchical Alternative

Arnold drafts in the fourth place her own position,¹⁴ which she terms *personalistic* and *hierarchical*, as an explicit alternative to the mechanistic models dominant in psychology. In a footnote, she explains the use of “‘personalistic’ as an antonym of ‘mechanistic’ or ‘robotic’”, and asserts that the Editors “agree with the Personalist philosophy or psychology in this usage.”¹⁵

She conceives reality as an ordered hierarchy of levels—inorganic, organic, animal, and human—each governed by its own principles yet forming an integrated whole. The human being, as the highest known level, is characterised by reason, freedom, and self-awareness, whose organising principle “informs” the lower levels rather than opposing them.

The Aristotelian-Thomistic account of the unity of the human being lies at the heart of Arnold's proposal. She and other contributors to the volume explicitly reject Cartesian dualism, maintaining that mind and body “are the integral parts of the single compound unit. Parts are never antecedent to the whole but are the product of breaking up the whole.”¹⁶ Thus, the human being is a unified person

¹³For a developed critique of Descartes' positions cf. M. B. ARNOLD, *Emotion and Personality*, vol. 1, cit., pp. 97-100.

¹⁴Cf. M. B. ARNOLD, *Basic Assumptions*, cit., pp. 13-16.

¹⁵Cf. *ibidem*, p. 14. It is not easy to trace the precise connections between the various interpretations of Personalistic philosophy advanced by Arnold, Gasson, and the other contributors to the volume. Probably they were acquainted with Allers, who was familiar with Brentano's thought and exerted a significant influence on Viktor Frankl. In *Emotion and Personality*, Arnold engages with a range of philosophical sources, particularly those within the phenomenological tradition. Cf. P. VALENZUELA, *The Value of Emotions*, cit., pp. 107-116. García-Alandete associates Arnold's proposal with the so called “personalistic Thomism” in J. GARCÍA-ALANDETE, *Arnold's Understanding of the Human Person*, cit. On the conceptual coincidences with Allers, apart from the study of García-Alandete, cf. F. RUIZ-FUSTER, *Teoría de la personalidad de Magda B. Arnold: estudio de su propuesta y análisis de su contribución al marco de la psicología actual*, PhD dissertation, University of Navarra, 2022, pp. 101, 106-107.

¹⁶M. B. ARNOLD, *Basic Assumptions*, cit., p. 13. In M. B. ARNOLD, J. A. GASSON, *Comment to Chapter 4*, in *The Human Person*, cit., pp. 115-126: 119 the Authors assert that “the human being is not a simple spiritual substance but a composite. In the physical order he is made up of matter

whose biological, psychological, and moral dimensions are not separate layers, but interrelated expressions of a single nature.¹⁷

This view enables psychology to investigate human conduct on its own level, acknowledging freedom and responsibility as genuine and empirically accessible through reflection and experience. Arnold concedes that such presuppositions, like those of naturalism, are philosophical rather than scientific; yet, because the psychologist and the subject of study share the same human nature, empirical findings must remain consistent with self-experience. In this light, psychology's task is to develop a coherent image of man that elaborates—but never contradicts—what we directly know of ourselves.¹⁸ Arnold later extends this personalistic framework in Chapter 17, *The Theory of Psychotherapy*,¹⁹ where she outlines a unified vision of therapeutic practice grounded in these foundational principles.

2.6 Psychological Evidence for Agency

Arnold reviews a range of empirical findings to demonstrate that evidence favours a personalistic rather than a mechanistic understanding of human behaviour. Studies of *choice and decision-making* reveal that choosing and acting are distinct processes, with decision emerging as a rational, self-initiated act²⁰ rather than as an automatic reaction.²¹ Research on *learning* further shows that *intention*—the will to learn—precedes and directs acquisition, something impossible to

and spirit, which are substantial principles essentially related to each other. Thus man, who is a compound of material and spiritual elements, which we call body and soul, finds himself related not only to God, his creator, but also to his component parts, that is to his body and to his soul, and to himself as a whole.”

¹⁷In J. A. GASSON, *Personality Theory: A Formulation of General Principles*, in *The Human Person*, cit., pp. 165–220: 165–168, Gasson develops the same notions in his four basic principles, as the *unity of the person* and the *principle of virtuality*.

¹⁸Cf. M. B. ARNOLD, *Basic Assumptions*, cit., pp. 15–16; E. HUSSERL, *Philosophie als strenge Wissenschaft*, cit., p. 295.

¹⁹M. B. ARNOLD, *The Theory of Psychotherapy*, in *The Human Person*, cit., pp. 493–536.

²⁰Cf. M. B. ARNOLD, *Basic Assumptions*, cit., p. 16. Arnold's account reflects the Aristotelian distinction between *choice* and *action*, their differentiation from *desire*, and an analysis of *voluntary action* that prepared the way for the later Thomistic elaboration of *voluntas*, as well as the broader doctrine that specifically human activity cannot be reduced to physical or automatic processes. Choice is a rational and self-initiated principle of action, rather than a merely reactive movement. Cf. ARISTOTLE, *Nicomachean Ethics*, III, 1111b10 ff. (*The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*, ed. by J. Barnes, Princeton University Press, Princeton [NJ] 2014); *Eudemian Ethics*, II, 1223a26 ff.; *De anima*, II, 414b2 ff.

²¹In the concluding pages of her account of motivation, Arnold offers a straightforward explanation of self-determination. Here, she integrates the physiological dimensions with rational motives and personal development. Cf. M. B. ARNOLD, *Emotion and Personality*, vol. 1, cit., pp. 245–248.

explain through mere conditioning.²² Even classical experiments on reflexes indicate that human conditioning depends on conscious attitude and choice, confirming that individuals can accept or resist associations deliberately. Investigations into personality development and psychotherapy likewise affirm the centrality of freedom and responsibility: recovery depends on the patient's willingness to change, and genuine growth, as observed by Rogers (1902-1987) through his non-directive therapy, involves increasing self-awareness and autonomy—features irreducible to mechanistic causation.²³

Freud's theory of unconscious determinants, however, offers a contrasting picture. His doctrine of psychic determinism holds that all mental acts arise from unconscious motives, yet Arnold finds this claim both inconsistent and philosophically rather than scientifically grounded. Freud (1856-1939) admits that deliberate decisions feel compelled by motives while freedom is felt only in trivial acts—an inversion of ordinary experience. Arnold distinguishes between *psychic compulsion*, in which action contradicts reason (as in neurosis), and *logical necessity*, which involves assent to truth; the first negates freedom, while the second presupposes it. Evidence for unconscious motives, she argues, comes mainly from involuntary or pathological phenomena, not from normal acts of choice. Everyday decisions may occur without explicit motives yet are still experienced as free. Thus, unconscious determinants cannot account for human action in its entirety. Freud's determinism rests on the metaphysical assumption that every event must have an efficient cause, but his inability to predict behaviour empirically undermines this claim. The overdetermination found in dreams and neuroses reveals associative rather than causal links. A more adequate psychology must recognise the rational ego as a true causal agent, capable of initiating purposeful action.²⁴ In the following pages, Arnold draws on observations and conclusions by Carl Rogers, Gordon Allport (1897-1967), and Anne Roe (1904-1991), which expose the deficiencies of determinism within psychoanalysis. These will later prove helpful when examining the relationship between freedom and responsibility.²⁵

²²Cf. M. B. ARNOLD, *Basic Assumptions*, cit., pp. 17-18. Aquinas developed the Aristotelian account in at least two important respects. First, he assigned a precise technical role to *imperium*, thereby distinguishing choice from the command through which what has been chosen is put into execution. Cf. THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q. 17, trans. & ed. by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province, Benzinger Brothers, New York 1948. Secondly, his analysis of *intentio* clarifies the different levels at which an agent may be said to will something while performing a single action, particularly through the ordering of means to ends. The most influential modern reformulation of this line of analysis is G. E. M. ANSCOMBE, *Intention*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford 1957. More generally, the opening section of Aquinas's treatment of human acts in the *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, qq. 6-21, systematically develops and transforms its Aristotelian foundations.

²³Cf. M. B. ARNOLD, *Basic Assumptions*, cit., pp. 25-26.

²⁴Cf. *ibidem*, pp. 19-24.

²⁵Cf. *ibidem*, pp. 24-27. N. MAILLOUX, *Psychic Determinism, Freedom, and Personality Develo-*

2.7 *Determinism, Finality, and Scientific Explanation*

Why, then, do psychologists cling to determinism? Arnold attributes it to the prestige of physical science since the nineteenth century, particularly the positivism of Comte, which excluded final causes (purposes) from scientific explanation. Determinism appears ‘more scientific’ because it mimics physics, which explains phenomena through efficient causes alone. Yet even physics, she notes, cannot entirely dispense with teleology: natural laws presuppose order and direction. The very uniformity of nature implies purpose or design.

When psychologists import the physicist’s antipathy to purpose into the study of human beings—where purposive action is central—they distort their subject matter. Reducing goals to effects of prior causes violates the scientific principle that no effect can exceed its cause. To explain conscious purpose as the outcome of blind forces is therefore not scientific but irrational.

Arnold argues that modern biology has already begun to reintroduce purposive explanations—*homeostasis*, *adaptation*, and *evolution* are described in goal-directed terms. Attempts to mechanise these processes, such as Reichenbach’s (1891-1953) account of natural selection as mere chance plus selection, fail to explain the directional, cumulative order of evolution. Chance cannot systematically produce progress; purpose is implicit in nature’s organisation. Arnold quotes Étienne Gilson’s (1884-1978) assertion that scientists often prefer ‘unintelligible’ mechanical notions to the admission of non-mechanical intelligibility.

Thus, the persistence of mechanistic determinism in psychology represents a cultural lag: the uncritical application of outdated physical models to living and conscious beings.²⁶

pment, in *The Human Person*, cit., pp. 264-282: 269-275 advances a moderated form of Freudian determinism, which the Editors take as a sign that analytic psychotherapy is moving towards a less deterministic and more personalistic conception of the human being. Cf. M. B. ARNOLD, J. A. GASSON, *Comment to Chapter 8*, in *The Human Person*, cit. pp. 276-279.

²⁶Cf. M. B. ARNOLD, *Basic Assumptions*, cit., pp. 35-36. Strict determinism has largely been abandoned in contemporary psychology, particularly in accounts of self-regulation, delayed gratification, agency, and future-oriented behaviour. Such approaches acknowledge the influence of dispositions, environmental conditions, and automatic processes without reducing human action to their necessary effects. Cf. W. MISCHEL, *The Marshmallow Test: Understanding Self-Control and How to Master It*, Bantam Press, London 2014; C. SRIPADA, *Free Will and the Construction of Options*, in M. E. P. SELIGMAN *et al.*, *Homo Prospectus*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2016, pp. 191-204. The volume as a whole assumes that free will and self-control provide a more adequate framework for explaining both individual and social action. A similar assumption underlies Paul Ekman’s discussion of the regulation of emotion in P. EKMAN, *Emotions Revealed: Recognizing Faces and Feelings to Improve Communication and Emotional Life*, Henry Holt, New York 2007.

2.8 Freedom as Personal Causation

Arnold and Gasson make it clear that rejecting mechanism does not entail embracing randomness or ‘uncaused’ behaviour. Freedom, in their view, is not the absence of causation but rather a form of self-causation—action that arises from within the agent rather than being imposed from without. They then specify the meaning of freedom in the following terms: freedom in a more restricted sense is the immunity of an agent from some impediment. This is usually understood to be of two kinds, often referred to in contemporary discussions as *freedom from* and *freedom to*. More technically, they are called *freedom of spontaneous action* and *freedom of independence*.²⁷

On this basis, they develop a tripartite distinction:

1. *Freedom of spontaneity*: immunity from external compulsion, a capacity even animals possess.
2. *Freedom of independence*: immunity from superior authority, corresponding to political or social liberty.
3. *Freedom of choice*, or self-determination: the power of the ego to decide between alternatives. This is freedom “in the strictest sense.”²⁸

The significance of this third form becomes especially evident in cases of motivational conflict. The human ego can intervene actively, strengthening one motive while diminishing another. The act of choosing itself determines which motive becomes dominant: choice produces the preference, rather than merely expressing a preference already determined in advance. Freedom therefore does not abolish causality but introduces a new order of causation—the personal or formal cause—distinct from mechanical efficient causation.²⁹ Choices remain motivated and, to some extent, predictable; nevertheless, they are determined by the self as agent rather than by antecedent stimuli.³⁰

In their conclusions concerning the examination of presuppositions in psychology, Arnold and Gasson argue that to depict the human being mechanistically is to deny the evidence of lived experience and to deprive moral life of meaning. The alternative—the personalistic and hierarchical conception of nature explai-

²⁷Cf. M. B. ARNOLD, J. A. GASSON, *Comment to Chapter 1*, in *The Human Person*, cit., pp. 36-47: 38.

²⁸Cf. *ibidem*.

²⁹Cf. *ibidem*, pp. 38-39. This constitutes a further significant interpretative convergence with Anscombe’s account of self-determination. Cf. G. E. M. ANSCOMBE, *Causality and Determination. An Inaugural Lecture*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1971; *Intention, Freedom, and Predictability*, in *Logic, Cause and Action: Essays in Honour of Elizabeth Anscombe*, ed. by R. Teichmann, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2000, pp. 73-81; *The Causation of Action, in Knowledge and Mind: Philosophical Essays*, ed. by C. Ginet, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1983, pp. 89-108.

³⁰Cf. M. B. ARNOLD, J. A. GASSON, *Comment to Chapter 1*, cit., pp. 39-40.

ned previously—restores coherence to both science and common sense. It acknowledges that human beings act with purpose, responsibility, and freedom; that these capacities are genuine features of our nature; and that psychology, as the study of persons, must account for them rather than explain them away.

By integrating empirical observation with sound philosophical reflection, psychology may thus reclaim its proper subject: the whole person. Only then can it truly serve both scientific truth and the dignity of persons.³¹

3 FROM PHILOSOPHICAL ANTHROPOLOGY TO PERSONALITY THEORY

3.1 *The Anthropological Foundations of Personality*

In chapter 6, *Personality Theory: A Formulation of General Principles*, John Gasson presents a philosophically grounded and comprehensive account of personality. Drawing extensively on Thomistic metaphysics and epistemological realism, he aims to articulate the fundamental assumptions and dynamic principles that must underpin an adequate psychology of the person. His objective can be summarised as an attempt to construct *a systematic framework that conceives the human being as a unified, self-directing, and purposive agent whose psychological life cannot be reduced to mechanistic or behaviouristic terms*. Engaging critically with the most advanced theories of his time, Gasson situates the notion of *self-actuation*—or self-actualisation, as derived from the biological model of the person—within a renewed understanding of freedom, consonant with the principles articulated by Arnold in chapter 1, including the key concept of the *self-ideal*.³²

3.2 *Four Postulates of a Personalistic Psychology*

Gasson begins by outlining the philosophical postulates that underpin his theory of personality.

1. He first affirms a position of *moderate epistemological realism*, maintaining that reality exists independently of the perceiver and that knowledge is valid insofar as it conforms to that reality³³. The human mind, he argues, does not construct its world but discovers it—an outlook that rejects both

³¹*Ibidem*, pp. 46-47.

³²In § 4 I examine Gasson's account of the self-ideal directly, drawing connections with several chapters of the volume. On the role of the self-ideal as a guiding principle in life, cf. M. B. ARNOLD, *Emotion and Personality. Vol. 2: Neurological and Physiological Aspects*, Columbia University Press, New York 1960, pp. 276-308. Cf. also P. VALENZUELA, *The Value of Emotions*, cit., pp. 79-88, and R. R. CORNELIUS, *Magda Arnold's Thomistic Theory of Emotion, the Self-Ideal, and the Moral Dimension of Appraisal*, «Cognition and Emotion», 20 (2006), pp. 976-1000: 987-995.

³³Cf. Arnold's conception of *critical idealism* in § 2.4 above.

idealist subjectivism and *positivist empiricism*, and insists that psychology concerns itself with objectively knowable realities.

2. Secondly, he upholds the *unity of the person* as a real and indivisible substance, whose various attributes and functions belong to but do not constitute the self; personal identity endures through all change.
3. Thirdly, he asserts *human distinctiveness*, contending that humanity differs from other living beings not merely in degree but in kind, operating at a higher ontological level characterised by freedom and self-determination.
4. Finally, invoking the *principle of virtuality*, Gasson explains that lower forms of life exist within higher ones *virtually* rather than *actually*: human beings encompass vegetative and animal functions within a rational unity. This principle, he concludes, secures both the continuity of nature and the unique dignity of the human person,³⁴ and reflects Arnold's idea regarding the hierarchy of human powers explained below.³⁵

3.3 *Knowing and Wanting: The Proper Domain of Psychology*

Building on the critique of scientific reductionisms in the first chapter, Gasson establishes a framework through five key points that define his conception of personality.

1. Significantly, Gasson favours the term *personality* rather than the classical *character*, emphasising the dynamic and psychological dimensions of the person. He defines personality as *the distinctive configuration or pattern of activities that reveals the individual's unity and uniqueness*. It is not a mere aggregation of traits, but an organised pattern of *functioning* that expresses the whole person in action—indeed, as Gasson writes, “personality is the work of a person.”³⁶
2. To delimit the proper field of psychology, Gasson distinguishes it from physiology and physics: *psychology concerns those activities experienced from within, involving the person's conscious relation to objects distinct from the self*.
3. Historically associated with the functions of the *psyche* or soul—the very principle of life—the psychological domain came to denote higher activities such as perception, emotion, and volition, which surpass the merely

³⁴Cf. J. A. GASSON, *Personality Theory*, cit., pp. 165–168.

³⁵Cf. § 2.5 above. All these elements of Gasson's account reflect central themes of Aristotle's *De anima* and Aquinas's commentary on it, even though Gasson does not explicitly refer to either work. The same applies to the remarks that follow concerning the role of imagination.

³⁶Cf. *ibidem*, p. 168.

biological. Within this domain, Gasson identifies two fundamental activities: *knowing* and *wanting*, corresponding respectively to the cognitive and affective poles of the psyche. Outward behaviour acquires psychological meaning only insofar as it arises from these inner acts—for example, a man who knows about twenty pounds but does not yet possess them may be moved by desire to act in order to obtain them, illustrating how behaviour results from the interplay of cognition and appetite.

4. *Knowledge itself operates on several levels*, from sensory awareness to abstract thought. Rejecting empiricist assumptions, Gasson insists that perception is integrative rather than fragmentary: we apprehend objects as unified wholes, not as disconnected sensations. He refers to empirical studies that supported this view by showing that both humans and animals perceive organised patterns prior to associative learning. The faculty responsible for this organisation is imagination, an internal sense that in humans functions alongside intellect and meaning. While in animals imagination remains confined to associative recall, in humans it becomes the very medium of creativity and thought.
5. Finally, Gasson argues that human cognition uniquely encompasses the *apprehension of non-material values*—beauty, truth, justice, friendship—through which we transcend mere biological adaptation and inhabit a world of meanings. This capacity to perceive and pursue spiritual values marks the highest and most distinctively human level of personality.³⁷

3.4 *The Dynamic Integration of Personality*

Writing contemporaneously with Abraham Maslow (1908-1970), Gasson offers a parallel yet distinct vision of the active character of human behaviour. Even if the two of them devote special attention to personal activity, Gasson emphasises the role of the intrinsic powers of the individual and their natural direction towards meaningful ends. The rational powers of intellect and will stand at the summit of the hierarchy, guiding and coordinating the sensory and vegetative functions so as to integrate them into a unified pattern that preserves the coherence and wholeness of the person's life.

To describe the inner dynamism of these powers, Gasson introduces the concepts of *impulse*—the natural incitement to act when the appropriate object is present—and *urge*, an intensified form of impulse experienced when activity is frustrated or the desired object is absent.³⁸ These tendencies are not mechani-

³⁷Cf. *ibidem*, pp. 168-174.

³⁸The only explicit reference to Aristotle in the whole chapter concerns desire (p. 174, note 2), where Gasson explains that his theory of personality dynamics derives not from Freud or the

cal drives, but innate inclinations grounded in the very nature of our faculties, echoing Arnold's earlier assertion that human tendencies constitute the vital energy of life.³⁹

3.5 *Self-Actuation, Creativity, and Fulfilment*

Gasson adopts and elaborates upon various aspects of *self-actuation* or *self-actualisation*, originating in Goldstein's ideas, as explained by Gasson himself in Chapter 5⁴⁰ and subsequently developed by humanistic psychologists in the following years.⁴¹ From this perspective, the entire impulsive drive of the human being is understood as directed towards the perfection or fulfilment of the person. This is not a merely biological process but a rational and purposive one, expressing the human orientation towards perfection, growth, and harmony. In contrast to Rogers and Goldstein (1878-1965), who conceive self-actualisation as a natural unfolding akin to organic development, Gasson regards it as a deliberate actualisation of potential through reason and will.⁴² This self-directed understanding of behaviour stands in sharp contrast to the Freudian view discussed throughout the volume.⁴³

Self-actuation, for Gasson, unfolds through complementary modes that reflect both outward engagement with the world and inward integration of the self. Outwardly, the person seeks to appropriate and possess what is valuable in the environment; inwardly, these acquisitions must be assimilated into the unified self. True stability arises only when what is gained externally takes root internally—much like a graft that must bind with the living core of the tree rather than with dead wood. When new experiences fail to be integrated, the person regresses to earlier, less adequate forms of functioning.⁴⁴

Yet human beings do not merely receive; they also create. In *homo faber*—the human being as maker—Gasson sees the distinctive mark of humanity. Through creative work, the individual externalises inner powers, giving existence to what did not previously exist. This act of making enriches the self by expressing it concretely in the world. Against reductionist interpretations that attribute human invention and progress to mechanical adaptation, Gasson maintains that creativity

neo-Freudians, but from Aristotle's theory of powers, the principle of finality, and the notion of *unconscious orexis*, later rendered by the Scholastics as *appetitus naturalis* in contrast to *appetitus elicitus*.

³⁹Cf. J. A. GASSON, *Personality Theory*, cit., pp. 175-178.

⁴⁰IDEM, *Personality Theories based on Physical and Biological Models*, in *The Human Person*, cit., pp. 127-164: 147-149.

⁴¹Cf. R. R. CORNELIUS, *Magda Arnold's Thomistic Theory of Emotion*, cit., pp. 977, 987-989.

⁴²Cf. J. A. GASSON, *Personality Theory*, cit., pp. 178-179.

⁴³Cf. *ibidem*, p. 174, note 2.

⁴⁴Cf. *ibidem*, pp. 179-181.

originates in an intrinsic urge to realise and possess being through purposeful action, very much in line with Maslow's proposal.⁴⁵ Whatever one makes—a tool, a poem, or a theory—embodies intellect and will, expanding and enriching the self. Creation, however, also engenders humility. As Maslow observed, genuinely self-actualising individuals are conscious of their worth yet humble before those whose mastery exceeds their own. For Gasson, making is not motivated by self-gratification but by participation in truth, beauty, and usefulness.⁴⁶

At its highest level, self-actuation culminates in sharing. Knowledge and love, by their very nature, are self-diffusive—they reach fulfilment only when communicated. In sharing knowledge or love, the self is not diminished or divided but becomes more fully itself. The perfection of knowing is teaching; the perfection of loving is self-giving. Human society, beginning with the family, is thus founded not upon conflict or competition but upon the principle of mutual self-gift. Love, rationally ordered, becomes both the foundation of social harmony and the summit of personal fulfilment.⁴⁷

4 THE SELF-IDEAL AS THE ORGANISING END OF PERSONALITY

4.1 *Why Self-Actualisation Requires an Ideal*

After this thorough review of the leading accounts of self-actualisation in such well-known authors, John Gasson turns directly to one of the most significant concepts in the entire volume: the self-ideal. This notion proves central to understanding the need for the rational organisation of human life, echoing the role of right reason (*recta ratio*) in classical ethics.

Gasson, along with the other authors of the book, maintains that self-actualisation is not automatic. The human person must organise his powers through deliberate choices during his life.⁴⁸ The natural tendencies towards acquisition and stabilisation may be either constructive or destructive, depending on the direction they are given, and only a rationally chosen goal can integrate the multiplicity of impulses into a coherent pattern of life.⁴⁹

⁴⁵Cf. A. MASLOW, *A Theory of Human Motivation*, «Psychological Review», 50/4 (1943), pp. 370-396, and *Motivation and Personality*, cit., pp. 35-58; J. A. MERCADO, *Abraham Maslow y Carl Rogers. Psicólogos de la libertad*, EDUSC, Rome 2022, pp. 3, 68.

⁴⁶Cf. J. A. GASSON, *Personality Theory*, cit., pp. 181-188.

⁴⁷Cf. *ibidem*, pp. 190-192. Cf. also M. B. ARNOLD, *Emotion and Personality*, vol. 1, cit., pp. 312-330. Arnold devotes special attention to different dimensions of love.

⁴⁸Cf. J. A. GASSON, *Personality Theory*, cit., pp. 193-194.

⁴⁹Alejandro Vigo offers a philosophical account of the voluntary constitution of a way of life, elaborating on the framework of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. He argues that, in the incontinent person, there is a dissociation between desire and reason, such that one “has not achieved the transformation of an ideal life into an *ethos* or way of life.” (A. VIGO, *Action, Reason and Truth: Studies*

The self-ideal is the rational purpose—a life-goal—implicit in the active integration and organisation of personality.⁵⁰ It represents the individual's conception of the perfect person: human nature at its best, embodied in a concrete figure. We strive towards a model of perfection whose qualities we gradually make our own.

4.2 *The Self-Ideal as a Concrete Model of Perfection*

Throughout human history there is, Gasson argues, only one figure whose perfection is so widely acknowledged that even opponents concede it: Jesus Christ. Even within non-Christian cultures, the ideal human being is one who lives and acts in a Christlike manner. For those without knowledge of such a historical figure, the same qualities nonetheless exert their appeal as ideals.⁵¹

This projection is dynamic, producing a pattern that shapes the fundamental impulse towards self-actualisation in the realms of acquisition, stabilisation, creation, and sharing. From this powerful concept Gasson develops his account of *psychological integration*: integration occurs when the activities of the person, driven by impulse and urge, are first brought into being and then ordered into a pattern guided by the self-ideal.

The striking claim that Christ's manner of living serves as the model for all humanity positions Gasson in bold opposition to the absence of clear ends in several psychological theories.⁵² The volume therefore enters into explicit debate not only with the relativism implicit in Rogers' non-directive approach, but also with Frankl's (1905-1997) existential analysis.⁵³

in Aristotle's Conception of Practical Rationality, Peeters, Leuven 2016, p. 142.)

⁵⁰The most comprehensive explanation of the term—occurring more than 150 times throughout *The Human Person*—is found on pages 192-197. The chapter's remaining sections develop its most significant implications for understanding the organisation of personality and, consequently, the integrated behaviour and coherent functioning of the person.

⁵¹Cf. J. A. GASSON, *Personality Theory*, cit., pp. 193-194.

⁵²There are significant affinities between Gasson's account of the self-ideal and Aristotle's conception of the *spoudaios* or *phronimos*. In both cases, the moral exemplar embodies an exacting integration of right judgement, well-ordered desire, appropriate feeling, and consistent action. A comparison between the two models could therefore prove fruitful, especially since the status and function of the moral exemplar remain central to debates in philosophical anthropology and moral psychology because of their importance for understanding moral development and human agency. On the virtuous man, cf. ARISTOTLE, *Nicomachean Ethics*, I, 1098a7-15; 1099a21-24; 1100b18-22; II, 1106b16-23; 1106b36-1107a3. Cf. also the long discussion on knowledge and self-control in VII, 1145b7-1147b17. It would be worthwhile to examine more closely the different ways of understanding human perfection and the Christian model proposed by Gasson, especially in order to avoid excluding it from the outset as a potentially adequate account of human finality. Allport was well acquainted with the book and maintained an illuminating correspondence with Arnold on this point. Cf. F. RUIZ-FUSTER, *Teoría de la personalidad de Magda B. Arnold*, cit., pp. 36-37, 107-113.

⁵³Cf. M. B. ARNOLD, *The Theory of Psychotherapy*, cit., pp. 505, 513, 537.

4.3 *Actual Self, Self-Concept, and Self-Ideal*

To clarify the concept within the volume's broader terminology, Gasson distinguishes among four elements on p. 194:

- *The actual self*: what the person really is at present.
- *The self-concept*: what the person believes himself or herself to be, even when this belief has not been explicitly formulated.
- *The self-ideal as conceived*: what the person actually wants or aspires to become.
- *The objective self-ideal*: what the person ought to become—the proper perfection of human personality insofar as that perfection is attainable by this particular individual.

These standpoints may coincide in exceptional cases, but they are ordinarily separated by significant discrepancies: between what one is and what one thinks oneself to be, between what one is and what one wants to become, and, finally, between what one wants to become and what one ought to become.⁵⁴

4.4 *Psychological Integration and the Objective Ideal*

Psychological harmony depends upon the convergence of the different dimensions of personal awareness. Discrepancies among them generate disturbance: ignorance of one's true nature, misguided aspiration, or moral misdirection. The closer the actual self and the ideal self coincide, the more integrated and serene the personality becomes.⁵⁵

Perhaps unexpectedly, the most succinct general definition of the self-ideal appears in the closing lines of a footnote:

Let us say, then, that the self-ideal as it ought to be in the abstract is a transcendent, objective, absolute standard. In the concrete individual, it is that approximation to Christlikeness which the individual judges to be proper and possible for himself.⁵⁶

⁵⁴Cf. J. A. GASSON, *Personality Theory*, cit., pp. 194-195.

⁵⁵Cf. *ibidem*, pp. 195-198. Gasson's notion of psychological harmony is not far from Plato's almost poetic account of the well-ordered soul. For Plato, the ideal configuration of the soul consists in a constructive synthesis of its different drives, a harmony cultivated through education. Cf. PLATO, *Republic*, IV, 443d-443e (*Plato in Twelve Volumes*, vols. 5 & 6, trans. by P. Shorey, Harvard University Press, Cambridge [MA] 1969). Yet this harmony involves more than order or self-mastery: in achieving it, the person 'becomes a friend to himself.' For a discussion of this passage and its connections with the *Nicomachean Ethics*, cf. J. A. MERCADO, *Desire, Purpose, and the Meaningful Life*, «Forum. Supplement to Acta Philosophica», 7 (2021), pp. 49-84: 57, 70-72.

⁵⁶J. A. GASSON, *Personality Theory*, cit., p. 194. In the same footnote, before defining the concept, Gasson points to the role of the self-ideal in Chapters 4, 13 and 19 of *The Human Person*, i.e. A. WALTERS, *Contemporary Personality Theories*, A. A. SCHNEIDERS, *Psychology as a Normative Science*, and J. A. GASSON, *Religion and Personality Integration*. Beyond the pages of Chapter 6, which are

5 CONCLUSION: THE SELF-IDEAL WITHIN AN ALTERNATIVE PSYCHOLOGY OF THE PERSON

The analysis of Chapters 1 and 6 of *The Human Person* reveals a coherent movement from philosophical anthropology to personality theory. Arnold begins by challenging the supposed neutrality of psychological science. Every theory of behaviour, she argues, rests upon assumptions concerning reality, knowledge, causality, and human nature. When psychology borrows its fundamental explanatory models from the physical sciences, these assumptions tend to become mechanistic and deterministic. Human thought, desire, and action are then interpreted as effects of antecedent forces, while purpose, freedom, responsibility, and first-person experience are either marginalised or explained away.

Arnold's personalistic and hierarchical alternative seeks to preserve the empirical character of psychology without reducing the person to a physical mechanism. Human beings constitute a unified order of life in which biological, sensory, rational, and volitional activities belong to a single acting subject. Freedom is therefore not understood as the absence of causation but as a distinctive form of causation: the capacity of the person to initiate and direct action through knowledge and choice. Responsibility is not subsequently added to this account from outside; it follows from the recognition that the human person can act as an agent rather than merely as the location at which impersonal forces produce their effects.

Gasson's theory of personality develops the psychological consequences of this anthropology. Personality is the dynamic expression of the person as a unified and self-directing subject. Its integration cannot result automatically from the spontaneous unfolding of impulses, since human tendencies may be organised in different and even conflicting directions. Their coordination requires an apprehended end capable of giving unity to the person's activities. The self-ideal fulfils this function. It represents the model of perfection according to which the person judges present conduct, orders competing motives, and directs the process of self-actuation.

The doctrine of the self-ideal should therefore be interpreted as the teleological culmination of Arnold and Gasson's alternative image of the human person. It connects philosophical claims about human nature with psychological claims about motivation, personality development, and integration. The distinction among the actual self, the self-concept, the self-ideal as conceived, and the

the focus of this analysis, the self-ideal is central in V. HERR, *Integration and the Self-Ideal* (Chapter 9), although the term appears literally only in the chapter title. In Chapter 12, M. B. ARNOLD, *A Theory of Human and Animal Learning*, it becomes essential for distinguishing human from animal learning, while in Chapter 17, M. B. ARNOLD, *The Theory of Psychotherapy*, cit., pp. 496-499 it underpins Gasson's exploration of the roots of internal conflict and psychological disturbance, amplifying the conclusions drawn in Chapter 6.

objective self-ideal also allows Gasson to explain psychological conflict as a discrepancy not only between present reality and aspiration, but also between subjective aspiration and genuine human perfection.

This reconstruction does not resolve all the questions raised by the proposal. Gasson's identification of the objective self-ideal with an attainable approximation to Christlikeness requires further philosophical, theological, and psychological analysis. Its relationship to Aristotelian accounts of the *spoudaios* and *phronimos*, to Allport's conception of mature personality, to humanistic accounts of self-actualisation, and to contemporary models of agency and flourishing likewise deserves separate treatment. The footnotes to this study have indicated several of these lines of inquiry without attempting to exhaust them.

The historical importance of *The Human Person* lies, however, precisely in the breadth of the intellectual programme it opened. Arnold and Gasson did not merely add spiritual or moral themes to an otherwise conventional psychology. They questioned the image of the human being presupposed by psychological theory and proposed an alternative framework within which freedom, responsibility, finality, and personal integration could once again become legitimate objects of scientific and philosophical inquiry. Whatever judgement is ultimately made regarding their substantive account of human perfection, their fundamental challenge remains pertinent: psychology cannot explain the development of persons without also examining the conception of the person and of human fulfilment that guides its explanations.

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