

found as a three-year old in the monastery of Gerleve (his mother could not make him leave), and which he later rediscovered in the abbey of Le Barroux.¹⁵¹ He was willing to fight for this space, against Nazis, liturgical reformers, Marxists, and moral theologians. But in the end, it was up to God. In conversation he said that, ultimately, he had only one wish: *that God is God*—even if he felt that, with the psalmist, we can also occasionally remind God that he ought to be God.¹⁵²

Robert Spaemann's funeral card does not presume anything with regard to the whole of his life. His picture is juxtaposed with the verse "Auch dieser da war mit Jesus von Nazareth" ("this one, too, was with Jesus of Nazareth"): it is the perspective of the other on himself. But the one who says this is the maidservant at the charcoal fire, pointing to Peter shortly before his denial. The ambivalence is intentional.¹⁵³ Many pointed to Robert Spaemann in this way and he probably knew the temptation of denial (he had a horror of torture). As he noted, death can even save us from betrayal under torture: "if the days would not be shortened, nobody would be saved." His life was long, and he resisted the entropy that would lead us to betrayal. The maidservant turned out right: he was with Jesus of Nazareth, whose face (painted by G. Rouault) is on the reverse of his own picture. In Christian resignation (and occasional humor) he faced the entropy of old age and the disintegration of the Church and the world around him, but he was also glad that he did not have to face the things that he saw coming. Now he will be glad to see that God is God. □

ANSELM RAMELOW, OP, is chair of the Philosophy Department at the Dominican School of Philosophy and Theology in Berkeley.

151. *Gott und Welt*, 14–17.

152. *Kernschmelze*, 100. He might have in mind *ST I*, q. 60, a. 5, c, which he quotes against both Fénelon and Bossuet. He also quotes Jaspers, *Daß Gott ist, ist genug*. The psalms accompanied him throughout his life, though he published his commentary only at the end. Since he did not want to make any theological or exegetical claims, he called it at my suggestion "Meditationen eines Christen"—meditations of *one* Christian.

153. Spaemann was always a very good and perceptive reader of Scripture; there is some thought behind this choice.

Retrieving the Tradition

WHAT MAKES PERSONS PERSONS?

ROBERT SPAEMANN

"[E]ach human being stands in the center of his world. But as person he comes out of this center and sees himself so to speak from the outside."

1. PERSONALITY AND INDIVIDUALITY

Two years ago I delivered some lectures on cultural-philosophical and ethical themes before the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing. In one of the discussions a Chinese colleague distanced himself from European individualism. Man should be first and foremost a member of society. Therefore, society has unconditional precedence over the interests and rights of individuals. I answered my colleague that I shared his critique of the individualism of the liberal society of the West. As John F. Kennedy proclaimed to his hearers during the campaign: "Ask not what America can do for you, ask what you can do for America."¹ It was above all young people who followed this appeal and elected Kennedy. Whether today a politician could still get the vote of young people with this slogan is questionable. But it is certain

1. Professor Spaemann is referring to the line from Kennedy's inaugural address (January 20, 1961): "And so, my fellow Americans: ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country."—Trans.

that a society composed of nothing but individualists, in which the idea of sacrifice has become a foreign word, cannot stand. I could not altogether agree with the conclusion of my colleague. "You are nothing, your people is everything": I encountered this saying to satiety in my youth in Nazi Germany, and at that time I already asked what I should imagine a people composed of nothing but nothings to be. Zero plus zero remains zero each time, as I learned in arithmetic. I asked the colleague why I then found in Beijing memorials and plaques for men who had offered their lives for China or for socialism. Should one not say: they have done their duty, as each ant does its duty, and their death makes room for another. Happily, I said, you do not actually think so. Because these men have offered themselves, they are themselves great. And I would go further and say: they are greater than that for which they have offered themselves. This notion is as true as it is difficult to think. And really to think it probably requires that concept of which Marxism, as the nationalistic collectivism, knows so little, the concept of the person.

"Person" does not mean simply the individual. The individual is a part of the community to which he belongs and that makes it possible for him to live. But insofar as the individual freely subordinates himself as a part to the whole, he is far more than a part. He is himself the whole. He becomes incommensurable. Two individuals are more than one individual. They are worth more. To save their lives is, if one is faced with the alternative, more important than to save the life of one man. And with regard to the allotment of scarce organ donations we have no other choice but to evaluate the life of the possible recipient. Thus Maximilian Kolbe, the Polish priest, found that the life of the father of a family, condemned to death by starvation, was more important than his own life, and thus he died in exchange for the life of this man. But through this act Maximilian Kolbe removed himself from that same evaluation, which lay at the foundation of his act. This act makes it all the more clear what it means to say that persons do not have value but dignity.

Yet dignity differs from value insofar as it has no price. And we name the bearer of such dignity "person." We ascribe to him a status, which compels us to be ready to justify before him all acts whose consequences concern him. It is also true that acts whose consequences concern animals need justification.

But not to the animals, rather to ourselves. For animals cannot distinguish between injuries to their interests that stand in need of justification and those that do not. We cannot expect them to consent to some injuries to their desires and needs on account of considerations of justice. Human beings can do this. That makes them identifiable as persons.

2. ON THE HISTORY OF THE CONCEPT OF PERSONS

What makes a person a person? What gives him the status of an end-in-itself, whom it is forbidden simply to subordinate to purposes that could not in principle be his own? My first answer, which I will only justify later, is: membership in a species, whose normally-developed individuals have at their disposal those qualities on account of which we speak of persons.

But what are these qualities? To answer this question it is almost indispensable to consult the history of the concept.² The classical Latin term *persona*, namely, does not mean what we today understand by "person." It means the role of the actor and, in metaphorical extension of the range of this term, the role that someone plays in human society. One can still find this meaning in our playbills that read: *Die Personen und ihre Darsteller [Dramatis Personae]*. We on the other hand would call the actors persons. And when the apostle Paul writes that God does not look at the person,³ then that is again the classical use of the term, for he wants to say that God does not look at the social status of a human being. But at what does God look then? On just that which we today call "person," on "the human being himself."

The postclassical and modern use of the term person has its root in Christian theology. There it twice served to resolve an apparently insoluble theological problem; that is, the trinitarian and the christological problem. I can only review this here very briefly. The Fathers of the early Christian councils saw the task posed to them through the sayings of the New Testament, to think about the divinity of Jesus, on the one hand not simply

2. See also Robert Spaemann, *Personen, Versuche über den Unterschied zwischen 'etwas' und 'jemand'* (Stuttgart: 2006), 26ff.

3. See Romans 2:11.

identifying him with God, whom Jesus himself calls his Father, but on the other hand not to introduce three gods, but to hold fast to a strong monotheism. The concept of person, over which the Church in the West labored, following Tertullian, came not from the theater but from grammar. The Latin grammarians, namely, speak as we do of the first, second, and third person. Tertullian also did this by saying that God possesses one single essence, one single *essentia* and *substantia*, but that he is not this essence, but just possesses it, and possesses it threefold. Yet this is not to be taken in the sense in which we speak of a threefold instantiation of a concept, of three instances of a species. It is rather the singular divine Being, which God knows as his own, and knows so adequately that the image of the Father equals the Father in all respects, thus also in possessing his own life. And the same goes for the love of the Father for the Son, which again contains the whole divine Being, but now as Gift. In this form too the one divine Being subsists a third time, this time as the *hagion pneuma*, as the Holy Spirit. These three ways of subsistence of one divine Being, which in the East were called hypostases, were called persons in the West, the three divine Persons, all three of which *are* not immediately their essence, but *have* it in a threefold manner.

The same term "person" then served in the christological discussions of the first Christian centuries to allow one to understand Jesus at the same time as true God and true man, therefore not as a mixture, as demigod. The formula on which orthodox Christianity agreed was: Jesus is one Person, namely, the second⁴ divine Person, who besides his divine nature has also assumed a human nature, and in this nature he is capable of something that as God he is not: suffering. Thus he is one person possessing two natures. Here again the point is that the person is not simply identical with his nature; the person *has* his nature and gives subsistence to the nature he possesses.

This concept of person developed in the theological context first unfolded its anthropological potential in the Middle Ages and in modernity. Persons are beings whose manner of being is a self-relation, beings that are not simply what they are, but

4. The text says *dritte*, but from the context *zweite* must have been intended.—Trans.

that are in relation to what they are. Their being is the having of a nature, the having of a body, and even the having of an inner life. Human beings are owners. Animals can possess something, but in the civil realm we distinguish between possession and property. Property is that which belongs to me, even if I do not yet know it and it comes only from an entry in a land register. Property also differs from possession by the fact that I can sell, buy, or give it away. *Habeas corpus* is an early formula for the respect that is owed to persons.

3. IDENTITY OF THE PERSON

The self-relation that makes up personhood will be clear in what Harry Frankfurt describes as "secondary volitions," in which we desire and want something in a second stage with respect to what we wanted in the first stage.⁵ We can wish not to have a certain desire that we have. The case of the drug addict is only one extreme example of this. And the "secondary volitions" refer not only to primary desires and acts of will, but also to our whole essence. We can get annoyed with ourselves over our appearance and over certain qualities of character. And if someone would answer us in the spirit of Leibniz that "If you had other qualities of character, you would no longer be you," then we would not be impressed. The identity of a person is a numerical and not a qualitative one. Hence there are dreams and their literary construction in which someone changes and for example becomes an animal. But not in the sense that there, where earlier there was a man, there is now an animal, but in the sense that the animal is I. Or there are dreams in which we meet someone whom we know, but whose appearance has wholly changed. We do not see, but we *know*, that it is this or that man.

Personal identity, as I have said, is numerical identity. This identity is at the same time most deep and most banal. We speak also of so and so many "persons" whom we expect today for supper or we speak of *Personenzügen* [passenger trains] rather than freight trains, and it would come across as improper, pomp-

5. See Harry Frankfurt, "Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person," *The Journal of Philosophy* 68 (1971): 6ff.

ous, and solemn if instead of this we were to speak of human beings. Persons stand in the *Personenstandsregister* [vital records] and, in spite of all the changes in what one today calls personal identity, there they remain, not identical, it is true, but always the same person. Personal identity is not something psychological. Contrary to what John Locke thought, the person is not only accountable for the good and the bad that he remembers.⁶ That which another remembers with reference to oneself belongs to one as well. In general, personality exists only in the plural, as a community of persons, in which subjects will be objectively for each other. A non-trinitarian monotheism cannot really think of God as Person, since there is no person without another person, as there is no number without other numbers. Spinozism is therefore the logical consequence of a non-trinitarian monotheism.

In order to clarify what has been said, since I have already spoken of “secondary volitions,” I would like to mention three kinds of human acts that are of a specifically personal nature, namely promising, repenting, and forgiving. Promising then is possible because it is not the case that we simply are our nature, but we have this nature and we have it in a certain measure at our disposal. If I have announced to someone that the day after tomorrow I will pay him a visit in order to help him solve a technical problem, then this does not just mean that I am now willing to visit him the day after tomorrow. For that could even mean that the day after tomorrow I am not willing to go anymore because I prefer to do something else. The peculiarity of the person is that he can already decide today what he will want the day after tomorrow. Of course he could simply revise this decision tomorrow. Yet insofar as he promises the other to come, he concedes to him a right to his coming and thus makes a human being [himself, the one promising] independent of momentary whims. He gives over the determination of his will to the community of persons and thus relieves himself of the contingencies of subjectivity. That is the highest expression of personal freedom. For Nietzsche, promising may be the privilege of really

6. See John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. P. H. Niddich (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), bk. 2, ch. 27, §16.

free men.⁷ Naturally that holds in the highest measure for a life-long binding promise such as the marriage vow, in which each partner binds his own development for better or for worse with that of the other, becoming like two jazz players, each of whose improvisation only develops in functional connection with that of the other. To be able to decide today what I will want tomorrow and to change this self-transcending decision into a right of another—that is a specific expression of personality.

Repentance applies to the past. I am sorry to have done something or failed to do something, and not really in the sense of a hangover, because of the undesired and perhaps unforeseen consequences of the action, not because something I wanted to keep secret comes out, etc. Rather it worries me that I was such that I could do or omit that. That is, repentance is again a form of self-relation. In it I change my essence. And we should place no trust in the future in a man who has done something quite awful, if he were merely to declare in a believable way that he would not do the same again in the future, while at the same time he refuses to turn and face the past once again, and to feel pain over the fact that he was someone who could do that. Max Scheler in his famous work “Reue und Wiedergeburt” [“Repentance and Rebirth”] has written something enlightening about this.⁸

What we mean when we speak of persons will finally be clear in the act of forgiving. One does not forgive animals, nor does one need to forgive them, because they cannot become guilty through their behavior. They are as they are, and what they do necessarily follows from what they are. Forgiving allows and makes it possible for me to be different, not to have to define myself through the sum of my acts. The one forgiving does not say to his offender: “That’s just who you are. You are and remain for me the one who did or failed to do that.” Instead he says: “You are not forever the one who did that. For me you are different.” And by virtue of forgiveness it is actually possible for me to begin anew and to bury the past. Forgiving is an eminently creative act, if it is something other than indifference and

7. See Friedrich Nietzsche, *Zur Genealogie der Moral*, in *Kritische Studienausgabe*, vol. 5, ed. G. Colli and M. Montinari (Munich: 1999), 293.

8. See Max Scheler, “Reue und Wiedergeburt,” in *Vom Ewigen im Menschen* (= *Gesammelte Werke* 4) (Bonn: 2000), 27–59.

convenience. Incidentally, the unmerciful "That's just who you are" corresponds on the other side to the defiant and unashamed "That's just who I am," if someone has hurt another. "That's just who I am, whether you like it or not. You must take me just as I am." One also calls that "standing up for oneself," but that is a misuse of this expression. To stand up for oneself means to ascribe the past deed to oneself and to allow it to be so ascribed. But that shamelessness with which someone refuses to revise his essence and allow himself to be forgiven should not be idealized.

4. THE NATURE OF THE PERSON

Persons form no species, indifferent to the number of specimens that belong to it. Persons form an a priori community of persons. Human beings are a species, and like each living being, each human being stands in the center of his world. But as person he comes out of this center and sees himself so to speak from the outside. With a ship on the ocean we always travel in the center of a round horizon, but as thinking beings we see ourselves with a "view from nowhere." The flag on the navigation chart shows us each day the position of our ship, and as persons we know that the human beings in the ship, which looks very small on the horizon, are also in the center of their world and we appear very small to them. That is, persons are beings capable of truth. Since they *have* (not *are*) their nature, they can step out of the middle of that to which they refer everything. They can understand themselves as part of the world of another.

A long time ago I saw on a bumper sticker the sentence: "Think of your wife. Drive carefully." That illustrates what I wish to say. To care for and about a being that belongs to one is common to all higher creatures. But to take care of oneself because one is part of the world of another and one wishes to spare him the loss, that marks the human being as person. It marks his "eccentric position," as Helmuth Plessner has called it.⁹ That is probably also the meaning of the saying, "doing the truth," with which John's gospel characterizes personal love.

9. See Helmuth Plessner, *Die Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch* (Berlin/New York: 1975), 288ff.

The self-relation that characterizes persons is the ground of their being capable of truth. The mere fact that they *know* that their perception of reality is from a certain perspective raises them above this perspective. It does not abolish the perspective. Finite persons are not God, and least of all when they believe themselves to be so. That applies for example to the Utilitarian, like Peter Singer, for whom the fundamental ethical duty consists in the optimization of the world.¹⁰ If two children fall into the water and I can only save one, then according to Singer it is not my right to save my own child. I must save the more valuable child, thus the more talented one and the one equipped with greater possibilities of pleasure in life. Proximity and distance are for him ethically-irrelevant concepts.¹¹ What the tradition since Augustine calls the *ordo amoris* does not exist for the Utilitarian. If the being of the person is a self-relation, therefore the *having* of a nature, then the person does not realize himself by ignoring nature. The interior inclinations of nature, hunger, thirst, sexual desire, the need for warmth and a roof over one's head are the ground of *prima facie* duties, as our primary worldview grounds suppositions of truth. And the satisfaction of the above-named elementary needs is not something animal-like, but occurs in personal actions such as eating, drinking, sexual intercourse, etc. The concept of the person is precisely what forbids us to split the human being into two parts, the lower one animal and above that a pure reason. The human being is neither an animal nor an angel, nor is he both together. His biological nature is already a human one, and his reason is a biologically-conditioned reason, which knows of this conditioning and strives to free itself from it. Our freedom is the longing of natural beings for freedom.

If we think of what has been said so far, then the following conclusion might suggest itself: the recognition of the human being as person depends on the actual existence of those attributes through which personality is defined. What has been said so far seems to suggest that one ought to view as persons only the beings who actually have at their disposal such a thing as self-consciousness and therefore a conscious relation to themselves

10. See Peter Singer, *Praktische Ethik* (Stuttgart: 1994), 30ff.

11. See *ibid.*, 220.

and to their life. In the debates of the last decades this claim has arisen again and again. In other words, we have denied personhood to embryos, small children, the severely mentally disabled and the elderly with dementia, and, in the constitutions of European countries as in the UN, we want to replace the concept of human dignity with that of personal dignity. This line of thought is not without some roots in the European tradition. True, it has the great revolutionary Immanuel Kant clearly against it. But it has a sure support in Thomas Aquinas, who believed that all men besides Jesus Christ at first had an animal soul in the first weeks of their embryonic existence, which God then replaced through an act of creation with a human, and thus a personal, soul. This conception has no more adherents today, on scientific grounds. John Locke's understanding of person, on the other hand, has become increasingly dominant. Locke wants to limit his "ontological commitment" strictly to the contents of inner or outer empirical sense perception, and he thereby excludes both any possibility of ontological transcendence and any possibility of transcendental reflection. Personality is for him therefore not a way of *being*, which will be perceptible through certain states of consciousness, but personality *is* nothing other than such a state of consciousness. It is the state of a man with regard to himself as a unified, living subjectivity above the flow of time.¹² For empiricism there is only the outer or the inner objects of experience. There is no such thing as a bearer of experience, and so there are no unconscious or sleeping persons. Then David Hume went a step further and denied personality altogether.¹³ For he thought that, taken precisely, there is no temporally-extended experience. There is still memory, but he thinks of each memory as a present experience here and now. Memory is not the presence of the past but the presence of a current picture of that which we now hold up for the past. Hence memory can deceive. There is always only the actual instantaneous experience, but not an identity extended in time, to which one might apply the personal pronoun "I." Today Derek Parfit, in his book *Reasons and Persons*,

stands in the line of Locke.¹⁴ For Parfit, there is no continuity of the person over and above sleep. Those who are asleep are not persons, and the one who awakes is not the same person who earlier fell asleep. Each sleep ends the existence of a person. The one awaking inherits from the sleeper the contents of memory on the basis of the physiological identity of the living man and of his brain.¹⁵ It is interesting that in this way Parfit gives a new foundation for man's duties toward himself, duties that otherwise could only be grounded religiously. The duties of care for my health are, according to this understanding, duties toward one who is a different being from me, therefore for a kind of descendant.

Here then personhood and being human are clearly separated. There are on the one hand human beings as living beings, and on the other hand there are personal states, which belong to many, but not all, of these human beings. Thus the being of the person does not begin with his existence as a living organism, but first with the gradual awakening of a particular state of consciousness. How much this view has imperceptibly spread is seen in the fact that none other than the chairman of the German Bishops' Conference years ago in connection with the debate about so-called brain death explained that while it could be that brain death is not the death of the human being, in any case it would be the death of the person.

I would like to argue against this conception and to defend the thesis that personhood is not a quality but is the *being* of a human being and therefore begins no later than the existence of a new human life not identical with the parental organism.

Persons are not a natural species that we can identify through description. No one can stipulate to us when we should use the word "person" and when not. Here we are dealing after all not with a theoretical but with a practical, an ethical question. To call someone "someone" and not "something" is an act of recognition to which no one can be compelled. Yet this decision

12. See Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 335.

13. See David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), bk. 1, pt. 6, sect. 6.

14. See Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: 1984).

15. See *ibid.*, 275: "The existence of a person, during any period, just consists in the existence of his brain and body, and the thinking of his thoughts, and the doing of his deeds, and the occurrence of many other physical and mental states," and *ibid.*, 279: "[I]dentity is not what matters. What matters is Relation R: psychological connectedness and/or psychological continuity, with the right kind of cause."

is not arbitrary. The act of recognition of someone as "someone" and not "something," with which our use of the word "person" is bound up, has an immanent logic. An unjustified restriction of the circle of those to whom this recognition is granted also alters the nature of this act with respect to those who are recognized as persons. An unjustified dating of the beginning of this recognition at the beginning of life licenses an unjustified ending in the last phase of life.

A person is "someone" and not "something." There is no continuous transition from something to someone. It would not be correct to say: "'Someone' is something with such and such qualities." Someone is not something. Therefore, in order to say what we mean by "someone," we must say tautologically: "We call someone 'someone' who has such and such qualities." But that also is not correct. For we also view as someone many beings, and indeed in particular many human beings, even when as a matter of fact they do not at all possess these qualities. Our attitude is perhaps best characterized by the saying of David Wiggins: "[A] person is any animal the physical make-up of whose species constitutes the species' typical members thinking intelligent beings, with reason and reflection, and typically enables them to consider themselves as themselves, the same thinking things, in different times and places."¹⁶ In this definition I only object to the term "thinking things." None of us will call a thinking being a thing.

5. PERSONALITY AND INTERSUBJECTIVITY

That the actual presence of the typical signs of persons is not the condition of personality, we can easily make clear from the use of the personal pronouns "I" and "you." Each of us says "I was born at such and such a time" or "I was conceived in such and such a city," although the being that was then conceived and born could not say "I." The personal pronoun "I" does not refer to an "I"—the "I" is an invention of philosophers—but to a living being that some time later once began to say "I." And the identity of this living being is independent of what it actually remem-

bers. Someone can be the addressee of thanks and of reproach for deeds that he himself has forgotten. And naturally a mother says to her child: "When I was pregnant with you" or "When I gave birth to you," etc., and not: "When I carried an organism in me, from which you later came to be." All attempts to detach personhood from vitality, from the existence of a human organism, are counterintuitive. They are incompatible with the ordinary usage of all normal human beings.

This normalcy is by the way the condition by which human beings develop those qualities that are characteristic of persons. No mother has the feeling of conditioning through speech a thing, so long as it is something, until it begins to speak for itself. Also for this reason a child does not learn to speak through a computer. No, when a mother deals with a baby, she goes back to the level of a child and treats the baby as one human being treats another human being. She says "you" to the child, she treats it as a small person, and only because she will treat the child already as a person will it become what it was from the beginning and what she regards it as from the beginning. One who separates the personhood of a human being from his being alive cuts through the bond of interpersonality, within which persons first can become that which they are. For there are persons only in the plural. To use the word "person" for God only has meaning in the context of the doctrine of the Trinity.

A further argument against linking personhood to the actual presence of certain qualities is this: this condition changes the act of recognition of a person into an act of coopting. It subjects the newcomers to the arbitrary judgment of those who already recognize one another as persons. For these are the very qualities to define the grounds on which someone will be coopted into the community of persons. We see the arbitrariness of this decision from the fact that the opinions of scholars about the beginning of personal rights are utterly opposed to one another. One wants protection of life to begin in the third month of pregnancy, another with the moment of birth, another with the sixth week after birth, and Peter Singer—as a consequentialist—denies newborns any such thing as a right to life.¹⁷ If we give up the belonging to the species *homo sapiens* and the descent from

16. David Wiggins, *Sameness and Substance* (Oxford: 1980), 188.

17. See Singer, *Praktische Ethik*, 219.

other members of this species as the sole criterion of personhood, then it becomes a pure question of power as to which human beings are owed personal rights and which are not. It belongs to the dignity of the person that he occupies his place within the universal community of persons, not as something coopted, but as a born member.

Each human being belongs to this society through the fact that he belongs to the human family, that he is therefore kin to men. Evolutionary biology, represented for example through Ernst Mayr, no longer attempts to define species as classes, to which specimens belong on the basis of resemblance, as is the case in the classification of inanimate things. The concept of population takes the place of the concept of class. But an animal belongs to a population through genealogical relation, thus through common descent and through sexual interaction. But relations of kinship between human beings are never something merely biological. They are always at the same time personal relations. Father and mother, son and daughter, brother and sister, grandfather and grandmother, grandson and granddaughter, cousin, uncle and aunt, brother-in-law and sister-in-law are particular places in an interpersonal structure. And each one who occupies such a place possesses it from the beginning of his biological existence and in addition keeps it for the span of his life. This is completely different from almost all animals. An embryo is the child of his parents from the first moment of his existence. But as a member of a human family he is a member of a society of persons, and as member of a society of persons, he is a person, wholly independent of any qualities. It is related of Peter Singer that he looks after his mother, who suffers from Alzheimer's, in a beautiful way. Asked in an interview how this behavior fits with his conviction that this illness takes personhood away, he replied, she would still be his mother.¹⁸ That is it: the mother remains the mother and the son remains the son. But this relation is a personal one, wholly independent of

18. See Michael Specter, "The Dangerous Philosopher," *The New Yorker* (September 6, 1999): 46–55, at 55: "I think this has made me to see how the issues of someone with these kinds of problems are really very difficult. Perhaps it is more difficult than I thought before, because it is different when it's your mother."

whether it is realized subjectively by both persons,¹⁹ and therefore the mother remains a person so long as she lives, even as the son is son, so long as he lives. If the biological kinship were not at the same time personal, how would it be explained that illegitimate and adopted children later in adolescence develop the wish to meet their biological father or their birth parents? They view the relation to kin whom they do not at all know as a part of their personal identity. Incidentally the same applies to the sexual relationship between husband and wife. It also is never something merely biological. Where it is reduced to this, it is an instance of depravity.

6. SOURCE OF THE PERSON

The question of the temporal beginning of human personhood really asks about something unanswerable. For personhood is something supra-temporal. Through it the human being partakes in a *mundus intelligibilis*. It means that the human being is a being capable of truth. But truth is supra-temporal. That we are together today, was always and will remain true for all eternity. Because personhood is a participation in the supra-temporal, each attempt to give a temporal moment of its beginning is futile. Even as we cannot ascertain the moment of death, but can only say in retrospect: "now this man is no longer alive," so also we can always only say, as soon as we are dealing with a human being: "this is a person." Incidentally, Immanuel Kant saw exactly this when he wrote: "For the offspring is a person, and it is impossible to form a concept of the production of a being endowed with freedom through a physical operation. So, from a *practical* point of view it is a quite correct and even necessary idea to regard the act of procreation as one by which we have brought a person into the world."²⁰ Identifying the coming into existence of a person as conception is, one could say, the consequence of the impossibility of ever fixing a beginning of the person in time. Everyone who suggests a later point of time

19. That is, whether both persons are aware of the fact.—Trans.

20. Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. and ed. Mary J. Gregor, in *Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 64.

claims actually to know more than he can know.^{21*}—Translated by Elinor Gardner, OP. □

ROBERT SPAEMANN (1927–2018) was professor of philosophy at the University of Munich.

Retrieving the Tradition

A KEYHOLE FOR UNBELIEVERS?
THE PUBLIC CHARACTER OF *CULTUS*
AND THE BROADCASTING OF THE
MASS ON TV

ROBERT SPAEMANN

“The strictly public character of the Mass is concealed if it is lumped together with the other elements in the pseudo-public sphere of sensationalism.”



The broadcasting of Mass on television, which is already taking place regularly in several countries,¹ has—by contrast with those countries—led to a lively and fundamental discussion in West Germany. Here, the weight of arguments and Catholic public opinion has been in favor of a categorical refusal of such TV broadcasts of the Mass; this is in part because it constitutes, as a matter of principle, a profanation and is contrary to the public character of the Christian *cultus*, and in part because the alleged spiritual usefulness of this practice is questioned and it is instead feared that it will do greater damage in the long run. “The desire

21. Thanks are due to Arthur Madigan, SJ, for comments on a previous draft of this translation.—Trans.

* Originally published as “Was macht Personen zu Personen?,” *Phil. Jahrbuch* 119 (2012): 3–14. Translated and printed with permission.

1. I.e., in 1954—Trans.