

Presentation of the Academy of Catholic Theology's John Henry Newman Medal for Distinguished Achievement to Professor Dr. Robert Spaemann

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THE Board of the Academy of Catholic Theology has chosen as the second recipient of our John Henry Newman Medal for Distinguished Achievement Professor Dr. Robert Spaemann. In being so honored, Robert Spaemann follows in the footsteps of the late Avery Cardinal Dulles, whose work we honored in 2008. Like the life-work of Dulles, the opus of Robert Spaemann has served to provide rare and precious clarity on a host of issues vital to the existence and flourishing of theology. Similar to the stature that Cardinal Dulles had attained in the theological discourse of the United States is the presence of Robert Spaemann in the cultural debates of today's society and Church in Germany and Europe as a whole. What is different, of course, is that Robert Spaemann is a philosopher. That a theological academy would express its esteem and gratitude not only for the entire compass of theological disciplines but also for a body of philosophical reflection is perhaps not self-understood; but it expresses the conviction, articulated in our mission statement, that "Members of the Academy . . . value the role of philosophical investigation, especially metaphysics, in the integration of faith and reason." In presenting the Newman Medal to Professor Spaemann, I would like to identify at least some of those philosophical achievements that theology does well to value highly.

The identification of Spaemann's philosophical projects is not an altogether easy task. For one thing, until recently there had not been many

of his works available in translation; although that will soon be changing. A large collection of representative essays in English translation will soon join shorter collections of essays as well as the monographs already accessible in English on the human person, on the complementary nature of eudemonistic and deontological ethics, and on the possibility and necessity of retrieving a teleological understanding of nature. More challenging is Spaemann's relative freedom with regards to his historical sources. That is not uncommon for those who studied in Münster under Joachim Ritter, as is clear from the names of his fellow students such as Odo Marquard and Hermann Lübbe, but the "unity" of the so-called "Ritter School" is less obvious as any commonality of content than as a shared methodology, an ease in engaging ancients and moderns in fairly synchronic dialogue. A Roman Catholic since his conversion in younger years along with his mother and father, Spaemann presupposes a salvation coming from sources beyond philosophy that reinforces the freedom of his philosophical conversations. Spaemann cites frequently Aristotle and Plato, Augustine and Thomas, Kant, Fichte and Hegel, but he is not an Aristotelian, a Platonist, a Thomist, etc. The authors from the past whom he cites most frequently belong to the early modern period, often from the French Enlightenment period. Spaemann has written monographs on de Bonald, Rousseau, Fénelon and Bossuet. He shows appreciation for Leibniz and Arnauld. His intentions in portraying their paradigmatic modernity are, however, in good part critical, looking for the genealogy of some of the limitations that still restrict us today. Spaemann is not interested in showing such limitations of modernity in order to suggest, say with radical orthodoxy, a purely faith-based answer to the contemporary quandaries, nor to claim a consistent and viable alternative in premodern thought. Limitations of thought are not the exclusive prerogative of modernity. Spaemann thus criticizes Aristotle for appreciating alterity only from a narrowly eudemonistic context and Thomas Aquinas for a re-interpretation of finality in terms too dominated by the image of the efficient cause.

So how does one describe the positive intention of Robert Spaemann's philosophy? If, as Walker Percy once suggested, the differences among writers of fiction can be described largely as differences about their takes on original sin, so, too, might this same delineation well apply to philosophers. A first determination of Spaemann's philosophy would then group him with those who suspect that human nature is neither largely innocent nor wholly corrupt, but somehow bent. Among Spaemann's many interests is his attempt to trace the pre- or post-theological transformations of the doctrine of original sin in philosophers since

Kant. Spaemann's sense of the limited but perceptible curvatio of every age, including the somewhat twisted sense of things in our own world view, leads him to a largely Socratic method, trusting that human reason and human goodness are healthy enough to allow us, if we question ourselves, to see what is unhealthy in contemporary thought and practice. Parallel to the common language school, Spaemann's is a philosophy of the common ontology of the person and the common moral intuition, which can be summoned from memory by questioning to help us identify the many inconsistencies and violations of experiential and ethical norms that characterize contemporary science, praxis, and politics.

This sense of a nature bent but not fully corrupt begins to take shape early on in Spaemann's development. Born in 1927—a couple weeks younger than Benedict XVI, with whom he would become good friends—Spaemann was a teen during the final years of the Third Reich. His rejection of the violently eugenic policies of the National-Socialist government moved him to volunteer to assist in disseminating the critical writings of Münster's Bishop Clemens August von Galen, who had also ordained his widowed father to the Roman Catholic priesthood. The memory of this dissent to a powerful, established position would later strengthen Spaemann's conviction that moral insight is more than the expression of cultural biases, even those that become like a second nature of democratic majorities or their elites (cf. the Habermas-Spaemann debate on education and politics). Spaemann would take up a task identified in *The Dialectic of the Enlightenment* by M. Horkheimer and Th. W. Adorno, that of retracing how the initially emancipatory forces of the technological development often become forces of new injustices, even under the rule of democratic processes. Spaemann would contribute the strength of philosophical argument to public debates on concrete topics as diverse as nuclear armament and nuclear power, abortion and euthanasia, the treatment of animals, the stewardship of natural resources, the protection of Sunday customs, and resentment against the Church ("The Hatred of Sarastro"). In these and many other public debates, Spaemann demonstrates an uncommon ability to argue with clarity from often overlooked, common convictions and shared ethical intuitions for the superiority of what often are minority positions. Spaemann has also made lasting contributions to the philosophical discussion of more basic but less tangible questions, including the tensions between ethical claims based on pragmatic advantage and those stemming from general convictions of conscience, or on the relation between claims to be natural and claims to be rational.

One of the most important and most consistent themes of Spaemann's philosophy is the human person. In numerous essays as well as in the monograph *Persons: On the Difference Between Something and Someone*, Spaemann argues characteristically less from the philological roots and theological development of the concept of person (though he touches on these concerns in the first two chapters) than from our common ways of talking about ourselves and others. He is, however, especially attentive to the corrosion of the notion of person that follows from John Locke's equation of person and consciousness, a fatal identification that flows into the writings of D. Parfit and P. Singer. Spaemann argues convincingly that every human being is a person, despite attempts, not just in the previous century, to deny personal status to certain categories of human beings. What is remarkable is Spaemann's ability to highlight the conscious phenomena around the awareness of personhood that make sense only if personhood transcends consciousness.¹

Another central theme of Spaemann's philosophy is nature. Some of his essays on nature are gathered in a Reclam volume of his *Philosophical Essays*. The volume with Reinhard Löw on *The Question Whither? (Die Frage Wozu?/Natural Goals)* retraces the ongoing process by which teleology is excluded first from non-human nature by a reductive form of science and then from humans as well, considered as the manipulable product of such sciences. This loss of nature exemplifies the dynamics of functionalism, which, as Rolf Schönberger has shown, Spaemann identifies as one of the characteristic features of modern consciousness, close to what Horkheimer had called instrumental reason.² Functionalism is shown to be one of the recurring motifs of the modern period, from de Bonald's defense of religion as a stabilizing cultural force to the "inversion of teleology" in the mechanistic understanding of nature. It is one of our inherited paradoxes that functionalism of this sort does not function all that well. Spaemann shares with Hans Jonas a preference for the principle of ecological responsibility over the principle of a technologically reckless hope, including most recently the proposals by the Habermas-critic, Peter Sloterdijk, for adventurous experimentation in the realm of human genetics.

The explication of common ontological insights has led Spaemann not only to a richer sense of human nature and nature in general, but,

¹ Cf. Anselm Tilman Ramelow's review of the English translation of *Persons: The Difference between 'Someone' and 'Something'* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) in *The Thomist* 72 (2008): 317–21.

² Rolf Schönberger, "Robert Spaemann," in *Philosophie der Gegenwart in Einzeldarstellungen. Von Adorno bis v. Wright*, ed. Julian Nida-Rümelin, 2nd ed. (Stuttgart: A. Kröner Verlag, 1999), 706–11.

reflecting on these, to the sense of God which they imply. *Immortal Rumor* and *The Last Proof of God* reflect on the philosophical possibility and necessity of affirming the existence of God. But it would be wrong to suggest that Spaemann's philosophy is always taken as a welcome partner by theologians. On basic questions of proportionalist ethics or a "Global Ethic," on issues of the entanglement of Catholic Charities in pregnancy and abortion counseling, or on the justification of organ harvesting solely on the basis of brain death and on the attempted separation of personhood and human life, Spaemann's reflections have also served as a sobering admonition to the sometimes infelicitous suggestions of prominent theologians. If philosophy is still to be called the *ancilla theologiae*, its service here is like that of Kent to Lear.

In a well-known presentation to the U.S. bishops gathered at Dallas in 1991, the then Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger explored the relation of "Conscience and Truth," exemplified by two figures shown here to be closely related: John Henry Newman and Socrates.³ To show Newman and Socrates as "Guides to Conscience," the talk turns first to "Cardinal Newman, whose life and work could be designated a single great commentary on the question of conscience." This talk contrasts Newman with a common understanding that "presupposes the opposition of authority to subjectivity" and then associates the conscience only with the latter.

For Newman, the middle term which establishes the connection between authority and subjectivity is truth. I do not hesitate to say that truth is the central thought of Newman's intellectual grappling. Conscience is central for him because truth stands in the middle. To put it differently, the centrality of the concept conscience for Newman is linked to the prior centrality of the concept truth and can only be understood from this vantage point.⁴

The talk goes on to say that

conscience signifies the perceptible and demanding presence of the voice of truth in the subject himself. . . . Thus two standards become apparent for ascertaining the presence of a real voice or conscience.

³ For Newman's sense of the interrelations of faith and reason in the context of the university, see especially Newman's ninth and tenth Oxford University sermons, as well as Don Briel, "The Idea of a University," in *Wisdom and Holiness, Science and Scholarship: Essays in Honor of Matthew L. Lamb*, ed. Michael Dauphinais and Matthew Levering (Naples, FL: Sapientia Press, 2007), 1–16. I want to thank Professor Briel for the following references to J. H. Newman and J. Ratzinger.

⁴ Joseph Ratzinger, "Conscience and Truth," *Crisis of Conscience* edited by John M. Haas (New York: Crossroad, 1996), 1–20, here 8.

First, conscience is not identical to personal wishes and taste. Secondly, conscience cannot be reduced to social advantage, to group consensus or to the demands of political and social power.⁵

It is here that this talk sees the link between Newman and Socrates:

At this point, the whole radicality of today's dispute over ethics and conscience, its center, becomes plain. It seems to me that the parallel in the history of thought is the quarrel between Socrates-Plato and the sophists in which the fateful decision between two fundamental positions has been rehearsed. There is, on the one hand, the position of confidence in man's capacity for truth. On the other, there is a world-view in which man alone sets standards for himself. The fact that Socrates, the pagan, could become in a certain respect the prophet of Jesus Christ has its roots in this fundamental question.⁶

In awarding the John Henry Newman Medal to the largely Socratic philosopher Spaemann, it seems to me that we, too, are suggesting a point where Newman and Socrates meet. Listen one last time to that talk from 1991:

What characterizes man as man is not that he asks about the "can" but about the "should" and that he opens himself to the voice and demands of truth. It seems to me that this was the final meaning of the Socratic search and it is the profoundest element in the witness of all martyrs. They attest to the fact that man's capacity for truth is a limit on all power and a guarantee of man's likeness to God. . . .⁷

In honoring Spaemann with the John Henry Newman Medal, we are also thanking him for his witness to the human capacity for truth, which is the condition of the possibility of philosophy, theology, and any flourishing life. N V

⁵ *Ibid.*, 9f.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 11f.