

Robert Spaemann's Philosophy of the Human Person: Nature, Freedom, and the Critique of Modernity

by Holger Zaborowski

notes by David Alexander

chapter 1

Holger Zaborowski begins by situating Spaemann's philosophical work within a critique of modernity. Friedrich Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger had argued that modernity had failed and that it needed to be surpassed philosophically. Some like Jurgen Habermas reject this and regard modernity as merely an unfinished project. Romano Guardini, however, has argued that the catastrophes of the twentieth century have demonstrated the need for a new "search for orientation." [Gabriel Marcel noted that "...we are living in a world that seems to be founded on the refusal to reflect." We live amidst a crying need for a contemplative "search for orientation," but our very anthropological notions fail to grasp our contemplative natures and our daily rhythms of life are so indisposed to contemplation, that there is a great difficulty in the very world we live in in doing anything about the problem even when we recognize that it exists].

One explanation for the modern crisis of modernity is that abstract reason is inclined to dismiss nature itself and the particular social and historical context in which nature needs to be situated. Another reason is that very often practitioners of natural and social sciences very often fail to see their limits. The natural sciences are based on methodological reductionism and there is an decreasing awareness that this is limiting. As Eric Voegelin had written: the Method becomes the end in itself. [I recently argued with an scientific materialist atheist who thought the action of the thermometer in central air conditioning was the same kind of thing as our making choices]. Modern sciences also have a functionalistic and mechanical outlook that understands reality in such terms. [Both Darwin and his foil William Paley suffered from such an outlook]. Hence, a third element in the crisis is that reality is ultimately reduced to process.

Another aspect of the modern crisis is that philosophy tends to be treated as a practical, applied science, and thus tends to be valued from an instrumentalist point of view.

Given the crisis of modernity, there seems to be a need for philosophers which Robert Spaemann called "specialists in the management of intellectual crisis". The end of philosophy for Spaemann is the end of a free humanity. Today's philosophers need to think about their own times, the crisis of the present time, lest their philosophizing becomes naïve and so fails of its purpose.

There is a multifaceted movement to reconnect to pre-modern knowledge and to bring back into consciousness what has been lost sight of in modernity. Three different counter-modern tendencies are important here. One is the rediscovery of Platonic, Aristotelian, and Thomistic philosophies and the re-appreciation of natural law theories. The philosophers of this group prefer a strictly philosophical and often highly technical style. A second group including the likes of Chesterton, Peguy, C.S. Lewis, and Iris Murdoch has a greater variety of styles and a greater accessibility. There is also the group of theological opponents of modernity comprised of the likes of Karl Barth, George Linbeck, Hans Frei, John Milbank and Hans Urs von Balthasar.

Spaemann criticizes the absolutism and reductionism of modernity because "the categories of modern

consciousness do not seem to be suitable to depict unabbreviated and without profound corrections what Christianity is all about." [This has huge implications for evangelism. When a people do not have the consciousness to comprehend the gospel, this is a dismal state of affairs]. Modern philosophy tends to be "philosophy *sub specie Dei*", as is utilitarianism and nominalism, according to Spaemann. [Note that Michael Hanby in *No God, No Science?* shows how William Paley's very weak and mistaken theology, while being a footnote in theology, was historically very significant in his relation to Darwin and evolutionary thought afterwards. Paley's deficient notions of God were shared by Darwin, who used Paley as a foil and merely inverted his notion of God and creation. Much of the creation/evolution debate has subsisted afterwards on Paley's deficient notion of God, creation, and being. It is significant in that we live in an era in which in a way Paley's deficient notions of God and creation prevail as representative of Christian tradition and are publicly skewered by evolutionists who also hold a deficient notion of God, one which is *sub specie Dei*. As evolution has come to overshadow all the sciences, it seems that it remains rooted in a view of God that does not take seriously enough the separation between God and His creation.)

"Only a Christianity that makes explicit the opposition to the modern world on a level with modernity is capable of filling people with enthusiasm," Spaemann writes.

Zaborowski writes that Spaemann provides an alternative to a deeply flawed cast of mind which does not take seriously the gift of Being as a creation and the reality of human fallenness.

chapter 2

Robert Spaemann writes that philosophy is "thinking for oneself" and in order to understand philosophy, one must philosophize. Philosophy presupposes freedom and this implies the conversion of the individual to philosophizing.

Spaemann's philosophical style is based on a conviction shared by many modern philosophers that "that the 'great narrative' of a comprehensive intellectual system of reality is an arrogant pretension that violates the limits of human rationality." He adopts the discursive style and the "attempts" of the essay style in his two most comprehensive books *Happiness and Benevolence* and *Persons*. (quotation for unintended humor: "...most chapters can easily be read and understood individually because they are relatively self-contained studies.") "Spaemann's style is conversational and lacks any motive to provide an ultimate, systematic answer to philosophical questions because, he asserts, philosophy cannot provide such answers."

Edmund Husserl saw that historicist, naturalist, and psychologist strands of thinking would transform and undermine philosophy and in response he expounded phenomenology which challenges several of the key presuppositions of modern philosophy. He rehabilitated an epistemology and ontology that take seriously how things appear to us. Martin Heidegger developed a criticism of phenomenology while propounding it, rejecting the idea that philosophy must be a rigorous science that Husserl seems to have had. Heidegger contends that philosophy ought to describe factual human life phenomenologically without falling prey to the reality-concealing presuppositions and biases of a scientific view.

Spaemann, despite not belonging in any clear cut way to a school of phenomenology, is clearly influenced by Heidegger, despite his scathing criticisms of him. Spaemann also argues that "philosophical contemplation tries to get the 'things themselves' into sight." This is an allusion to the method of phenomenology; for Heidegger (with Husserl on his side) had argued that the term

"phenomenology" expresses a maxim which can be formulated as "To the things themselves!" Zabrowski traces some evidences of Spaemann's influence from Heidegger and phenomenology on p. 33. Spaemann shares Heidegger's conviction that philosophy is not a science. Spaemann (like Heidegger) sees himself in the tradition of Aristotle and his "orientation toward our everyday talk about nature, along with his unbiased eye for natural phenomena."

Spaemann like Husserl questions the polarization of subject and object. In reality subjects are always related to objects and to other subjects. There is no isolated, solipsistic subject that could serve as the foundation for modern philosophy. Modern epistemology falls into error by idealizing a supposed objectivity and neutrality and dismissing subjective language as anthropomorphic. In contrast, Spaemann emphasizes an epistemology that takes seriously the fundamental and paradigmatic character of human self-understanding. He develops a phenomenology that helps to examine the gift of *Selbstein* (selfhood?).

While modern philosophy tends to oppose history and freedom to nature, freedom, history, and nature are not incommensurable, according to Spaemann, but rather intrinsically related to one another.

Humean modern philosophy has four key principles: first, its systematic and comprehensive character; second, its scientific nature; third, its claim to newness and originality; and fourth, its claim to establish knowledge on a secure basis. Spaemann's philosophy in contrast makes no attempt to be systematic, comprehensive, scientific, or novel, and he eschews any aim to provide a basis for ultimate certainty. *In Spaemann's view, the two-fold character of philosophy is one of recollection and attention to the self-evident.*

Spaemann holds that there are substances that are the very presuppositions for our having human consciousness, freedom, love, and justice. Reality is for him not ultimately "grounded" in an unsubstantial flux of becoming and ceasing to be.

Persons are part of nature without being understandable from a merely naturalistic point of view. Naturalism fails to understand reality adequately because it favors a dualistic understanding of the relation between nature and freedom. Nature and freedom, however, are related to one another in a more complex way. There is neither an unbridgeable gap between nature and freedom, nor is one simply the function of the other.

Life has a sacrificial structure and it is a realist metaphysics which makes self-transcendence conceivable.

Spaemann's works can be viewed as "extended essays in retrieval" of natural and rational presuppositions.

In Spaemann's view, philosophy evades the modern, progressivist logic because it is "essentially retrospective, if it does not want to become an ideology by pretending to show ways into the future." Yet recollection makes progress possible in the first place because progress depends on our not forgetting what we have once already known.

Against notions that speak about some kind of radical break such as we find this in Descartes, Spaemann holds that there is an anthropological constant by which he means the challenge which ethical reflection presents and which remains fundamentally unchanged since the 5th Century BC.

Spaemann's concept of recollection also includes retrieval of a teleological, normative, natural law that is characterized by natural presuppositions of human existence. It is the Tao, "the *nomos* of human beings", which is to be described. (See Gilbert Meilaender's summary on p. 46 (57 in PDF)). This law

cannot be preconceived nor derived in an *a priori* way by means of philosophy of mere consciousness. We cannot get behind it or imagine the world without it. This is a counter-model to the modern understanding of philosophy as a genealogical critique of given norms and as an autonomous invention of new ones. *Spaemann specifies that recollection essentially means to remember nature freely and to perceive it and its teleological structure sympathetically.* Human beings need to remember freely what is not the 'product' of their freedom—the natural conditions of freedom. Otherwise, Spaemann argues, freedom turns into mere nature: “Only if we remember nature as it is will we go beyond nature.”

The idea of history as opposed to nature in a historicism which repudiates teleology and a materialist interpretation of nature as a mere aggregate of directionless, non-teleological matter are related to each other. These two sit at the poles of Cartesian dualism, but history and nature are not incommensurable in Spaemann's view. Spaemann's philosophy has an anti-historicist thrust that is directed against any notion of history as substantial progress toward the perfection of humanity. Historicism ironically tends to eradicate history by failing to grasp the contingency of history. The eclipse of what is self-evident is, in Spaemann's view, the main problem that philosophy has to face in a culture that can well be described as amnesic, or missing some or all of its memory.

Spaemann's alternative to an abstractly universalized and thus inevitably hypothesized notion of responsibility is the model of a firmly rooted, limited, and contextual responsibility that is not concerned with the idealized future of humanity as such nor with the overall maximization of happiness, but which simply explicates a normative and a self-evident order by which human beings have always lived.

Peter Singer and Derek Parfit continue the project of the counterintuitive “derealization” of reality for two main reasons: first, they fail fully to understand that persons are always already there as actual persons because there is no transition from potential to actual persons. Philosophy does not, and cannot, declare human beings to be persons. It has to recognize them because they are already persons.

For Spaemann, dignity manifests itself in the possibility of acts of self-transcendence. However, once becoming has been made the paradigm for our understanding of reality, self-transcendence (and thus the idea that all human beings have the same human dignity) becomes impossible, strictly speaking, for there is only 'self-development' and 'self-change'.

Philosophy is, in Spaemann's view, primarily the free recollection of nature. Freedom and nature, he believes, are related to one another in such a way that freedom acknowledges as its own what is naturally right and self-evident.

Spaemann interprets the modern preoccupation with either an abstract notion of self-preservation, as opposed to self-transcendence, or an abstract notion of self-transcendence, as opposed to self-preservation, as the result of an inversion process during which the unity of teleological drive and the underlying substance of this drive has disintegrated.

It is manifest to Spaemann that the crisis of modernity is the crisis of man's own self-understanding. What seems necessary to Spaemann is to rebind, though not to synthesize dialectically, the disjecta membra of nature and freedom. Human beings do not construct their nature. They “have,” as it were, their nature, and what they already have does not need to be made up nor can it be designed, but rather it needs to be remembered. If they do not freely remember nature, human beings will, in Spaemann's view, inevitably fall back into mere nature.

Spaemann concedes (in a way that should be familiar to us by now) that natural-law theory needs to take seriously the irreversible development of modern philosophy—in particular, its “discovery” of

freedom and subjectivity.

Natural law is not only the Tao; that is, a concrete natural set of basic moral principles or goods that one needs to respect freely. It is also, as John Finnis has put it in a way that captures Spaemann's intention well, "a set of basic methodological requirements of practical reasonableness (itself one of the forms of human flourishing) which distinguish sound from unsound practical thinking and which...provide the criteria for distinguishing between acts that...are reasonable-all-things-considered...and acts that are unreasonable-all-things-considered."

Spaemann credits Christianity in particular with significantly transforming the teleological understanding of nature because nature was no longer understood as the ultimate context of human life, but as a creation.

The crisis of teleology arises as soon as intentions (particularly divine intentions) are interpreted as *causae efficientes* and the result of a movement is no longer understood to be the *causa finalis* of this movement. This happened as early as in 14th Century scholasticism.

A teleological point of view is at odds with the intention to dominate and to manipulate reality.

In Spaemann's view, the effort of modernity to emancipate itself from given traditions, norms, and obligations is strangely constrained and impeded by the tendency of the same culture to rely upon experts and their technical advice. *Modern culture tends to rely upon consequentialist considerations by experts about the entirety of the consequences of our actions, rather than on the simple insights of one's conscience into what is the self-evident natural norm of human action.* In Spaemann's view, the 'simple insight' into fundamental goods and norms is obscured by over sophisticated reflection. According to Spaemann, insight into what is self-evident does not depend upon whether one has achieved the status of an expert in self-evident phenomena, but upon whether one is able to wake up to reality or not. There is, consequently, no strictly "scientific" way of proving the compelling character of the self-evident.

The claim to see the self-evident and thereby to see more than others is controversial and anarchic because "in the moment that I make the self evident which is presupposed in any conversation the object of my conversation, I relocate the horizon. The new object ceases to be self-evident and becomes a possible object of controversies."

Philosophy is part of the everyday life of human beings and their capacity radically to transcend any given context, so it must not develop a totalitarian system that integrates everything into itself by subjecting all of reality to its principles.

According to Spaemann's definition, philosophy is "a continuous conversation about ultimate questions." Ultimate questions are, in Spaemann's view, questions that inevitably remain open and without any ultimate answer even after ordinary everyday or scientific discourses have come to a solution. Ultimate questions, Spaemann argues, concern the fundamental issues of the human relation to reality.

Spaemann's emphasis on the intuitive character of the knowledge of the self-evident, on the inevitability of decisions and on the need to act even without absolute certainty that one's course of action can ultimately be justified, has a specific target in the overemphasis that is given to discourse in modern culture and, especially, in its most philosophically advanced form, in Apel's and Habermas's theories of communicative reason.

As a philosopher, Spaemann appeals to the freedom of the people with whom he engages in

conversation by means of a kind of “indirect communication.” They may be persuaded but they cannot be forced to subscribe to the ideas which Spaemann unfolds. Philosophy is based upon a free initiative. It is *Selbstdenken*, thinking by and for oneself, and concerns knowledge that summons our freedom. Education, for instance, is thus not a manipulation, but a “by-product which happens while one is doing many other things.”

The inversion of natural teleology is the ontological presupposition for the dichotomy of “conservative” and “progressive,” of the right-wing focus upon mere self-preservation often at the expense of the good life, and the left-wing focus upon self-transcendence towards the good life, often without regard for life as such. This inversion, then, as we have already pointed out, shows the modern “lack of the idea of a natural finality of humanity and of society. The notion *telos* has been split, but the *disjecta membra* develop energies like a nuclear fission.”

Spaemann aims to go beyond the distinction of “conservative” and “progressive” and preserves what he considers worth preserving without losing sight of the insufficiency of mere preservation. For he is aware that it may be fatal in our situation “to let things remain as they are.”

The history of philosophy as a continuous conversation is characterized by accidental progress—for there is, in Spaemann's view, no substantial progress—as well as by an arriving at where one already is and has always been. Philosophy is thus open and anarchic endeavor and it challenges any scientific systematization and objectification of reality. “There will be philosophy,” Spaemann consequently argues, “as long as we want a limit to our own objectification.”

chapter 3

Spaemann insists on philosophy as a critique of modernity and its dialectic which restores our primal perceptions and knowledge that is shaken by sophistic reflections. [As Michael Hanby puts it, the authoritative ontology of the age has all but robbed us of our eyesight."] Spaemann's view of philosophy constantly contrasts with modern views of how to do philosophy and further he notes that in modernity, “human personality is apparently turning against human nature” (*Persons*, p. 90).

Spaemann asserts that both philosophy and Christianity recollect, or bring back to remembrance and awareness a knowledge of a measure for absolute reflection and universal judgment that is crucial for a critique of the scientific and functionalistic spirit of modernity. [Hanby, p. 383 similarly writes that recovering creation means restoring the incommunicable interiority and the unity of being (*ens*) which have both been evacuated by the mechanistic turn, by a mechanical and functionalistic ontology].

In Spaemann's view, modernity developed dialectically (and tragically) because, in it, nature and freedom have become two equally abstract notions between which modern philosophy oscillates dialectically. A view of reality, of the cosmos, of creation, must be restored which is not based on the modern inversion of natural teleology. (Hanby traces in his book this process in Newton, Paley, and then Darwin, and shows how Darwin absorbs Paley's weak, heterodox teleology and inverts it.) In particular, we must not understand the natural and rational as opposites, though this is what much of modernity's project tries to do (Freud, Marx, Darwin, modern evolutionary theory, etc.)

We live in a time when universalism threatens the very possibility of the identity of an individual. Humanity has been alienated from its traditional sources and contexts and inevitably from itself. (As Charles Taylor wrote, “Modernity has occulted its moral sources.”)

It is characteristic of modernity to emphasize the role of human rationality. Modernity asserts the full competence of reason to comprehend reality and treats all mystery as temporary. (We as individuals are irreducibly mysterious to one another to some extent, except if we belittle each other with a reductionism which rejects our limitations). In order to make sense of many ethical insights, one needs to recollect specific kinds of fundamental experience that goes beyond the reach of a modernistic misunderstanding of reason. We need to de-occultify our moral sources through reflection (and become as little children). Spaemann: "Rationality becomes irrational by becoming exclusive."

Technological civilization can no longer determine meaningful and normative ends of human action. (See footnote 1 below for an example of this loss of discernment of meaningful ends that is applied to robins). What is meaningful cannot be determined by utility but rather, it determines or it defines possible utility.

Modern tolerance converts to the intolerant because it is incapable of really accepting someone else's substantial persuasions. [You can see this in Lessing, for example]. An entirely hypothetical culture makes true tolerance unattainable and replaces it with a power struggle of competing alternative hypotheses. Spaemann writes that "The conversions of all persuasions into hypotheses leads to the self-abolition of a free society."

Spaemann is of the school of philosophers who see in the 14th Century Nominalists a significant sea change of presuppositions of philosophical reasoning that has led to the current crisis. Zabrowski, however, does not ascribe to Spaemann a spirit of condemnation toward modernity but likens his approach to that of Charles Taylor, who emphasizes that we need to hold in our minds both the grandeur and the misery of modernity. Spaemann defines his task as thinking the presuppositions of the Enlightenment "in a consciousness which preserves the acquisitions of modernity by no longer defining itself through those acquisitions" (pp. 96-107). Spaemann holds that we should think of modernity as a substantial notion in terms of its timeless value. We should also not think of postmodernity, or the end of "modernity", as necessitating the end of the positive achievements of modernity.

Spaemann is ecstatic about the value of C.S. Lewis's slender volume *The Abolition of Man*, holding that it cannot be overestimated in the value and depths of its insights. In the book, Lewis traces a progressive deposition of human nature. Modern strains of humanism seem inclined to turning toward the inhuman by emancipating themselves from any given limits which make life fully human.

Spaemann notes seven main features of modernity:

(1) it understands freedom as emancipation; (2) it develops the myth of a necessary and infinite progress; (3) it seeks a progressive dominion over nature; (4) it exhibits an objectivistic approach to reality; (5) it homogenizes experience; (6) it has lost sight of the limits of hypothetical perspectives; (7) it is characterized by a naturalistic universalism.

Modernity gives up the notion that freedom entails an orientation toward a given measure such as history, tradition, and nature, and the limits these involve. The modern focus upon rights and utility ultimately derives from the conviction that an emancipation from nature is the measure for the exercise of freedom, and from the dismissal of the common good and the good of each human being. Much more important than an education in how to stand up for one's interests in education.

The modern view of progress entails a view of history as a progressive unfolding of autonomous freedom. Metaphysics is converted into a philosophy of history. As Michael Hanby says, history is conflated with ontology. The modern understanding of progress, no longer controlled by teleology, becomes to an illusion of total progress. What is distinctive about modernity is the idea that dominion

over nature will progressively increase.

Modern sciences have thus lost sight of final causes and of the difference between qualitative and quantitative statements, because reality was supposed to be explicable within an entirely mechanistic framework that could fully be understood by means of mathematical calculation. The dominion over nature has only become possible because we are living in a culture of oblivion, in a culture of unrecollected nature. The loss of memory is the transcendental condition of science.

The next four features of modernity are its objectivism, its homogenization of experience, its understanding of reality as hypothesis, and its naturalistic universalism.

Objectivism

“The object of the domination of nature,” Spaemann reasons, “is essentially what is dead; sciences only know passivity, only dependent variables.” [I wonder if this is something analogous here is at least to some Protestant approaches to faith and works. There is an abstraction of faith which is like killing in order to control. “They kill to dissect”, as Wordsworth wrote. If faith is abstracted from all relation to lived life and is merely a focus on legal terms and standing, isn't it dead?] The objectivism of modern scientism renders impossible the experience of the reality of nature and also becomes an instrument of humanity's self-alienation and self-abolition. One of the uncorrected biases of modern thought that something seems to be the more objective the less subjective it is needs to be corrected through *Selbstein* and recollection that accepts that all human knowledge is anthropomorphic.

Modern objectivization is especially perceptible in education. C. S. Lewis argues that education, which in the past had been understood as an initiation, is nowadays understood as a conditioning, as a kind of propaganda. Education must not be viewed as a making but as an education of persons into reality, maieutic in its aim to bring a person's latent ideas into clear consciousness. Education needs to attend to *Selbstein*.

The question about natural teleology leads to the practical question “whether the familiarity in the circle of what is friendly is more desirable than the security through progressive domination over the alien.” [I think that Wendell Berry addresses this concern in many of his musings]. Only a “weak caricature” of teleology has died in modernity and true teleology “as always, offers a rich meal, both to its persecutors and to its adherents.” [Michael Hanby makes a parallel point in his genealogy of Newton, Paley, Darwin, in which Paley's teleology, a weak caricature of traditional teleology, is appropriated by Darwin and inverted].

The scientific talk of system is meaningless unless one presupposes the self-experience of the human person. Without the “unsystematic” experience of *Selbstein* and its identity over time, we cannot speak of systems, but only of random arrangements of matter.

The Homogenization of Experience

Spaemann ascertains that the underlying ontological idea of the modern scientific notion of experience is that there is nothing in particular but, at the very most, a change of the same universal substance. Radically new and unforeseeable developments such as real coming-into existence, real passing away, and miracles can therefore no longer be experienced and thus can no longer be conceptualized. The fact that there are persons (which is at the heart of our self-experience) makes it necessary to question the modern tendency to make change (*alloiosis*) an absolute at the expense of utterly new coming-into-existence (*genesis*) and passing away. For the person comes into existence all at once, as something new.

Understanding of Life as a Hypothesis

A hypothetical way of thinking about a thing is in practice identical with a functionalistic way of thinking about it. To define a thing such as a father by its function means not to ask what a thing is as such but in which functional context it stands (parent) and through which equivalent it can be replaced. While a scientific and hypothesizing view of reality makes universal statements about reality possible, it makes freedom impossible, for “freedom means: to be able to be identical with oneself. But this identity cannot be an abstract identity, stripped of all content; on the contrary, it requires concrete possibilities of identification. And these cannot have the form of hypothesis.”

The Naturalistic Universalism of Modernity

The particularity of history, of the gift of nature, and of human subjectivity and freedom, of *Selbstein* as the dignified representation of the absolute cannot be comprehended from a universalistic and a naturalistic point of view. These phenomena require an altogether different epistemology and ontology, which Spaemann strives to propose in his philosophy. His philosophy is thus a “resistance against this oblivion” of nature and its teleology. In this way, he contributes to the end of modernity, for to speak of the end of the modern consciousness, Spaemann says, refers to a “consciousness which no longer defines itself in the categories of the sciences.” (p.130).

Footnote 1: "To say that robins undertake so great and arduous a labor to perpetuate their genes is hardly an advance upon Aristotle saying that living things pursue their share in the eternal and the divine in the manner allotted to them, not numerically but specifically... In some ways it says less than Aristotle, since at least he could say why immortality was desirable. To say that genes use robins to perpetuate themselves is not to explain or even redescribe the fact of the robins' life, but to do away with it. Our understanding is not furthered by redefining the robin, not as an artifact of its genes, but as an 'autocatalytic dissipative system which is bounded and informed.'"

-Michael Hanby, *No God, No Science? : Theology, Cosmology, Biology*, p. 283