Robert Spaemann


It is well-known that much theology—especially in the ancient and medieval periods—attempts to describe God apophatically: careful consideration of what God is not is said to produce important conclusions about what and who God is. This _via negationis_ has its strengths as well as its flaws, but is still a handy method. Robert Spaemann applies this method in his latest offering, _Persons: The Difference between “Someone” and “Something.”_ In this relatively short but dense book, Spaemann provides substantive analysis about what persons are by distinguishing what persons do from what nonpersons do. But this is no mere case of positing—in good Sartrean fashion—that human existence precedes essence. No, this is a sophisticated investigation into what makes persons unique among all other existing entities through a focus on those activities, primarily of the mind, that enable one to understand human beings as persons.

Spaemann begins with extended reflections—contained within the first three introductory chapters—on the origin of the concept “person” noting that without Christian tradition, the West would not have such a concept at all (17). The ancient Greeks prior to the dawning of Christian faith had no focused theory of person, though there were elements of their work that contributed to such a theory. For example, Aristotle’s three means of persuasion provide insight into what persons are (or may be), for they presuppose things that later became ascriptions of personhood. But whatever Aristotle said about the quality of character of the speaker (_ethos_), the emotional condition of the listeners (_pathos_), or the intellectual merit of the argument (_logos_) was only of tangential concern in the constitution of the human being—what mattered primarily was the art and techniques necessary to persuade, to induce a response of agreement. It took the Christological debates of the earliest Christian centuries and the Trinitarian debates that followed, to provide the cognitive apparatus necessary to begin to ask and answer the question: what is a person? The earliest Christian theologians borrowed language from Roman jurisprudence and Greek ontology to develop notions that became the basis of the idea. Spaemann’s recognition of the origin of the concept necessarily and rightly shows its Christian pedigree without suggesting that the theological context remains compulsory for later development.

With the etymological question satisfied, Spaemann moves to his main purpose: establishing the concept, that is, filling it with substance by saying that a person is a subject known by its acts without being reducible to them—a person is greater than the sum of its actions. The acts of a person happen
within contexts or result from dispositions that are now variously understood
to be inherent to human life: intentionality, religion, freedom, promise and for-
giveness, and others. These are the arenas within which we observe persons
in action or the observable effects of what persons do. The chapters on these
topics—fourteen in all, preceded by three introductory chapters and one con-
cluding one—are shorter than expected, pithy, and reveal extensive research
without too much technical footnoting (references to original source mate-
rial from Aristotle, Locke, et. al., is a plus). Spaemann, at times, writes with an
aphoristic flair yielding abbreviated wisdom surpassing the boundaries of the
subject proper.

One of more fascinating chapters in Spaemann’s book is the one on “the
negative.” Only persons, says Spaemann, can chase the negative as something
desirable, as a means of achieving some other end that cannot be accomplished
through less demanding means. Other creatures in the animal world go through
arduous moments toward some positive goal, such as salmon in the Pacific
Northwest swimming against the great river currents to spawn. This move-
ment is, to be sure, difficult—and pursued vigorously—but this can be clas-
sified as an evolutionary or genetic necessity and we will never know whether
the salmon would engage in this laborious pursuit if they had the freedom to
choose otherwise. Examples like this (and there are many of them) do not show
that other creatures also pursue the negative and in their own ways turn it
into something positive. No, only human persons can actively pursue what is
negative and categorize it as positive. Only human persons can bracket their
experiences and place before them either a positive or a negative symbol as if
in a mathematical equation (45).

One great strength of Spaemann’s approach is the provision of example after
example of what can only be ascribed to human behavior taken to be exclu-
sive evidence that humans—and only humans—can be described as persons.
Again, features of human behavior such as religious (or spiritual) devotion,
freedom of choice, and transcendence of one’s own subjectivity are all hall-
marks of personhood. About this Spaemann is surely correct. But, since we
have no sufficient way of understanding whatever forms of communication
emanate from other creatures—if, indeed, such sufficiently intelligible com-
munication is even possible—we can never know if these are genuinely unique
to human experience. And this leads to the major weakness of the book: there is
no separate and focused treatment of language, that singular feature of human
existence that truly divides the human from all other species.

Language is difficult to discuss because to do so presupposes it. Spaemann
alludes to this early, saying: “it is natural for the human race to communicate
linguistically, but there is no language given us in nature” (17). So the act of