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Love and fidelity as seen by Robert Spaemann

Introduction

The presented article will address two questions which are directly interrelated, namely love and fidelity in the interpretation of Robert Spaemann, who is regarded by many as one of the most eminent living German thinkers. The first part of the study will show what Spaemann believes love to be and what its most deepest foundations are; it will also elucidate why this outstanding German philosopher believes in the formula that love for one person is another human being becoming real to the former. The second part of the study will present the issue of fidelity in its three aspects: the promise of fidelity inherent in the marital vows, the role of the marital promise, and the position of civil law on the question of keeping marriage vows.

True love

We fall in love, as Spaemann underscores, because we have become enraptured with some qualities of another person.¹ Her beauty and virtues have moved our heart in a special way. If love penetrates us deeper, we will strive to fully commit our life (and this is what young people want) to the beloved person. Then, an exciting life adventure begins. In this way, two people play in harmony with each other, just like two jazz musicians, improvising in full harmony because they listen to what and how each other play. In a way,

¹ R. Spaemann, *Die Liebe überwindet alles*, „Die Welt“, 14.06.2010, p. 5.

every next sound is already anticipated so that it can be properly reacted to. We can say that the development of one person triggers the maturation of the other. Although we experience our love as a spontaneous reaction to the qualitative profile of others that we find agreeable, ultimately, as the German philosopher emphasises,² love is not only about specific personal qualities which bred this love.³ If this were so, the loss of such attributes on the part of the person once loved would put an end to the bond between this person and me. In fact, a personal connection with a beloved person transcends its discernible attractiveness. Love, if it affects the essential substance of the loved one, by its very nature cannot end. It is so because it affects the very person of the beloved human being, and this person is not a conglomerate of characteristics but rather their subject and possessor. Let us reiterate that love, however, does not concern attributes but a person. Personal identity has no qualitative but a numerical character.⁴ As a result, true love is directed towards another person in her numerical identity, even when this person evolves.⁵ The idea of numerical identity refers to Man as the subject of various personal qualities. The notion of such identity implies one and the same human individual (one and the same human being) and none other.⁶

Love as the real gift of one person to another

Robert Spaemann defines love in various ways. First and foremost, as Spaemann himself confesses, he agrees with Valentin Tomberg in this regard,⁷ thinking that love is another person becoming real⁸ to me.⁹ What

²R. Spaemann, *Osoby. O różnicy między czymś a kimś*, transl. J. Merecki, Oficyna Naukowa, Warszawa 2001, p. 265.

³Ibid.

⁴R. Spaemann, *Die Liebe überwindet alles*, p. 5.

⁵R. Spaemann, *Osoby*, p. 95.

⁶In other words, numerical identity is the individual identity of each human being, or the specific character of a particular person (each of us has our own identity), for collective identity does not exist.

⁷Valentin Tomberg was an Estonian anthroposophist of German origin and a mystic, who died in 1973. The book *Die Grossen Arcana des Tarot — Meditationen* (1967) is regarded to be his most important work; the Polish edition: *Medytacje o 22 arkanach tarota, napisane przez autora, który chciałby zachować anonimowość*, transl. A. Onysymow, Fundacja Aletheia Warszawa 2013.

⁸Love happens as something real also because it is an act of having a liking for another person, with the intention of becoming connected with her.

⁹R. Spaemann, *Die Liebe überwindet alles*, p. 2.

is the meaning of this peculiar and rather ambiguous formula? Spaemann used it intentionally, wishing to emphasise that love is a very real experience. This is so because in light of some philosophical conceptions — both modern (Descartes, Hume) and religious (Buddhism) — which are culturally significant, its realness is called into question (love is an illusion). So, how does Spaemann understand the said formula of love, and why has it become so close to him? Its proper interpretation is closely linked to the character of his philosophical thought (personalistic realism). Spaemann examines love in personal context and in direct reference to the person. His interpretation of the love formula is very original and consistent with the nature of his philosophising.

By way of introduction, this eminent philosopher emphasises the fact that cognition always embraces Man in general terms (something may be identified as something only when it is identified as such). An individual entity as such is something that cannot be expressed with words (*ineffable*). A reference to an individual entity, as Willard Van Orman Quine argued, always remains unspecified and less real to each of us than we are to ourselves. Typically, another person's pain (for example, toothache) is less real to me than my own.¹⁰ And this is what we must perceive as guilt, as long as **we have come to using our reason**. Admitting to our indifference to the reality of another person and having no sense of embarrassment is a manifestation of cynicism. Buddhism teaches that we become unreal to ourselves as much as others are to us.¹¹

Christianity, as a religion of love, underscores that the reverse is the case: others are real in the same measure as we are. It teaches us, in line with its message, to “rejoice with those who rejoice and mourn with those who mourn” (Romans 12:15), so the indeterminacy of our reference vanishes if it is accompanied by the indicative “you”. Love always presupposes our participation in our fellow human being's fate, full of empathy.

As regards the person, we may be wrong. Her identicalness (identity) is not, as we have already mentioned, qualitative but numerical. A person's identity is not determined by her characteristics (attributes). Man never remains unchanged; he changes in his lifetime. Nevertheless, he will remain the same person in terms of his numerical identicalness (identity).¹² The one whom we address “you” can respond and acknowledge that he is the one we

¹⁰ R. Spaemann, *Antinomien der Liebe*, in *Schritte über uns hinaus, Gesammelte Reden und Aufsätze II*, Klett- Cotta, Stuttgart 2011, p. 21.

¹¹ R. Spaemann, *Glück und Wohlfühlen Versuch über Ethik*, Klett- Cotta, Stuttgart 1993, p. 240.

¹² R. Spaemann, *Osoby*, p. 95. Idem, *Über Gott und die Welt*, Klett-Cotta, Stuttgart 2012, p. 286.

have turned to. Yet, if we interact with many people, we formulate certain generalised opinions and ideas about them. Meanwhile, as it has already been underscored, the wealth of a person's unique character makes its full scrutiny impossible. Perhaps we are unable to see this brilliance of beauty in every fellow human being, just as we see this radiance in our beloved person. Nobody but God can properly see the uniqueness of every single person. "Only to God each of us is irreplaceable," N.G. Davila writes.¹³ Only to God no single person will get lost in a large crowd.

Spaemann emphasises that only someone who endures in an exclusive relationship of friendship and love with me can become someone real (as a unique and the only individual entity).¹⁴ No one, however, can give without taking something. Love, which satisfies our personal uniqueness, can be defended only when at the same time we defend its EXCLUSIVENESS. As a result, in Spaemann's view, *amor amicitiae* also entails envy (*invidia*). In his major work entitled *The Pillar and the Ground of the Truth*, Pavel Florensky devoted the last of his 22 letters printed there to the defence of this at times violent emotion. Its complete absence in a situation when there is a reason for its presence is an insult to the beloved person. The person becomes, so to speak, reduced to just anybody. As a consequence, the Old Testament, when presenting the relationship between God and his beloved people, often says that God is a jealous god. The first of the Ten Commandments, telling us not to have other gods before God, manifests the depth of His love, therefore jealousy is not a strange feeling to Him.

The exclusive character of *amor amicitiae* does not compete with the IMPERATIVE TO LOVE ONE'S NEIGHBOUR; instead, it urges us to discern a fellow human being needing our help in everyone. Only then will love achieve its depth. Everyone has the right to be perceived as real and at the same time as this only and unique person. Everyone can experience what they are in a relation with another person only through this exclusive relation of friendship and love. This can be experienced only by the one who enters this kind of relation and commits themselves to another person through thick and thin. *Amor amicitiae* eliminates the contradiction between desire and kindness. Both references are inseparable for this kind of love. Anyone who wholeheartedly wishes well for another person will make them feel needed. Anyone who wants to give only will never give enough — SPAEMANN STRESSES.¹⁵ The Christian teaching appears to be particularly relevant for what God gives us because simultaneously He becomes the gift that He

¹³ After R. Spaemann, *Antinomien der Liebe*, p. 22.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ R. Spaemann, *Die Liebe überwindet alles*, p. 8.

receives. Anyone who assures another person that they can do anything for them but is not willing to reciprocate their love humiliates them. *Amor benevolentiae* is love only if it is *amor concupiscentiae*. And *vice versa*: a person who really desires another can possess him or her but only when the former is ready to give. This certainly applies to sexual desire, which will be satisfied only when the other person reaches the same kind of satisfaction; this also refers to every other field of life. For example, Epicur claimed with full confidence that a happy life can be shared only by those who have a good friend. A good friend is the one who is ready to give up his life for his friend. Whoever, then, wants to live in happiness and satisfaction will need to — in the name of friendship — show readiness to pay the highest price, to make the ultimate sacrifice. It can be said that the wisdom of a hedonist ultimately comes down — as stressed by Spaemann¹⁶ — to the message of the Gospel on condition that the hedonist has grasped the idea of *amor concupiscentiae*.

Another paradox inherent in the notion of love concerns human sexuality. The idea that Man's task is to integrate his sexuality with personal love and that he often finds that hard to achieve constitutes the topos of morality. Apparently, contradictory things are demanded in this situation. Interestingly, personal love is expressed through a thing that is the least personal (the most impersonal), manifested by sexual relations. After all, Man's animal drive sometimes pushes him to satisfy his sexual cravings even with a total stranger in a brothel. In sexual relations, one becomes immersed in the anonymous stream of ever-throbbing life. In such circumstances, Man as a person sheds his social role in its ancient sense. Therefore, as a rule, he avoids being seen by others and, in general, he would like to separate this sphere from public life. What he says and promises here cannot be taken seriously. It is of no consequence to social life. As a rule, women and men who are intimate with each other would not like to expose their emotional expression.

With respect to sexuality, European antiquity was characterised by greater freedom although antique philosophy mainly held sex in contempt. This domain, the sphere of self-oblivion, appeared to be contrary to the ideal of life, which is guided by reason. In the Christian sense, the idea of the person who finds her ultimate realisation in self-transcendence of love did not exist yet. The perversions of sadism and masochism derive pleasure from destroying this idea. Those who yield to them do not sink in oblivion due to sensual lethargy but celebrate objective treatment and depersonalisation as a means of satisfying their selfishness. Immersion in the stream of life can and should become a symbol of self-transcendence whereby people become

¹⁶R. Spaemann, *Antinomien der Liebe*, pp. 22-23.

fulfilled. The temporary abandonment of reason which occurs during a sexual intercourse will not make one lose his or her identity only if the intercourse becomes element of a mutual decision (marital vows) to unconditionally, irreversibly and exclusively give oneself to the other. In this type of sexual relationship, the sexually differentiated nature is inclined to become unity. Very characteristic unity indeed, because the loss of "self" in it becomes a symbolic realisation of personal self-transcendence.¹⁷

How can we ultimately interpret Spaemann's claim that love is the process of someone else becoming real for me? Well, this argument implies that we should perceive (understand) another human being as a unique and only person. This can become reality only in exclusive relationships based on love and friendship. Also, this entails being faithful and explains why relations occurring between people in love are accompanied by jealousy. Love, seen in this way, appears to be an irrevocable gift for someone.

Love and the promise of fidelity

The keeping of a promise made to someone is a special thing, a commendable gift that someone has. By faithfully abiding by a promise we become independent of various conditions we may find ourselves in; also, we become autonomous and sovereign towards our ever-changing feelings.¹⁸ By acting in this way we free ourselves of the randomness of pure natural rules.¹⁹ As stressed by Spaemann, Friedrich Nietzsche concluded that a promise is the most crucial thing in Man.²⁰ Readiness to keep it is a guarantee given to ourselves. It is also assurance we give to others that we can always be relied on. By making a promise, we surrender a part of ourselves.

Love contains a promise of fidelity. This is why the loving God of the Bible, as early as in the Ten Commandments, presents Himself as a faithful and jealous Lover. The question whether love can be a sin keeps recurring but it is essentially wrong. We should harbour no doubts in this regard. Love is absolutely no sin and will never be. In contrast, failure to remain faithful and the breaking of a promise are sins. Betrayal cannot be excused by the fact that it happened as a result of a different kind of love, which typically turns out to be a fleeting passion. This contravention contradicts the idea of

¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 24-25.

¹⁸ R. Spaemann, *Die Liebe überwindet alles*, p. 6.

¹⁹ R. Spaemann, *Osoby*, p. 283.

²⁰ After R. Spaemann, *Die Liebe überwindet alles*, p. 7.

love between a man and a woman. By nature, it implies a relation which is exclusive in character.

The promise of fidelity, so closely tied with love, seems attractive to young people, but fewer and fewer of them are brave enough to keep it. An insect, as it were, gets stuck to their soul. It breeds scepticism which makes them lose trust in each other²¹ and in their own feelings.²² Meanwhile, a promise involves the entire human existence “for good,” and human freedom is elevated to its highest form in it — Spaemann argues.²³

Marital vows are a unique, quite an EXEMPLARY case of a promise of fidelity. In this case, a person promises to do something even if he or she does not feel like it and if the original reasons for making the promise no longer exist. When taking marital vows, in accordance with their intent, two people join their fate irrevocably.²⁴ The keeping of the marital promise entails a person’s capacity to impose on his or her own life — irrespective of any unforeseen events — a structure which once and for all settles the manner of interpreting these events, thus becoming independent of chance. Incidentally, this also applies to religious vows.²⁵ Nonetheless, we need to stress that the most profound sense of love — the inner word uttered by someone in love — consists in the fact that someone wholeheartedly turns towards a beloved person and surrenders themselves to persist in this state, impervious to life events. Someone who says “I love you now, but I don’t know how long this is going to last” may not have loved for real and has no idea of the essence of love. Faithfulness is so essential for love that everyone, at least as long as he or she loves, has to consider a lasting commitment to the beloved person. We can say, then, that love which distances itself from the readiness to abide by the promise of faithful love is in practice a lie.

²¹ According to Pope John Paul II, fidelity, which is a beautiful value inseparably tied with love, is possible only if two people in love, accompanied by Christ, entrust themselves to the care of the Heavenly Father and faithfully throw themselves in His arms. This is so because the Church is convinced about the tremendous capacity of the heart for love and faithfulness. It becomes fully apparent when the heart partakes of the Eucharistic Bread and wants to be reconciled with God, with itself and others in the sacrament of penance as well as trying to hear the Divine Word. Jan Paweł II, *Rodzina w nauczaniu Jana Pawła II*, Wydawnictwo Apostolstwa Modlitwy, Kraków 1990, pp. 105-106.

²² R. Spaemann, *Die Liebe überwindet alles*, p. 7.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ R. Spaemann, *Osoby*, p. 279.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 281.

The significance of the promise of marital fidelity

As Spaemann rightly points out, the promise of marital fidelity is by definition a promise of sexual exclusiveness.²⁶ We should note its significance in the perspective of building harmonious family relations, free from conflict and suffering. The exclusiveness of intimate life ensures a safe family space for the children and the uniqueness of the emotional bond between the father and the mother. This constitutes the foundation of a clear-cut relation between siblings. The exclusiveness of this kind is also meant to prevent the break-up of marriage. True love entails a tendency to endure and join the fates of two people, therefore it envisages sexual intercourse only between spouses. Quite spontaneously, that is the point of the mutual oath of loving people. As a rule, this is the way the relationship of two spouses is lived. For this reason, extra-marital relations are usually kept in secrecy. In German, marriage betrayal is called “the breaking of marriage” (Germ. *Ehebruch*), although such betrayal does not always lead to a break-up. If we do not deal with hidden marriage betrayal and the spouses even consent to mutual sexual freedom, then the matter may look slightly but no better at all. What this is is either a marriage which is not a durable union of life and fate, or we deal with a situation where any other kind of relationship involving formal spouses is asymmetrical and not treated as a union of a personal and ethical character involving more taking than giving. In this way, however, all partners are lied to — Spaemann concludes.²⁷

The position of civil law on the question of the dissolubility of marriage

The indissolubility of marriage is a fruit, a sign and a requirement of the absolutely faithful love.²⁸

Spaemann stresses that an enduring relationship of a man and a woman has its underpinnings and justification in the second inclination of natural

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 282.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Jan Paweł II, “*Familiaris Consortio*”. *Teksty i komentarze*, ed. T. Styczeń, Redakcja Wydawnictw KUL, Lublin 1987, p. 28. According to the Pope, bearing testimony to the immeasurable value of the indissolubility and fidelity inherent in marriage is one of the most valuable and urgent tasks before Christian spouses of modern times (*ibid.*).

law.²⁹ This very inclination reveals the human innate tendency to form such unbreakable relationships.³⁰ As a result, the consequences of giving up the rules of natural law are easy to imagine with respect to settlements concerning marriage. The German thinker observes that the indissolubility of marriage, which conditions the protection of personal dignity is called into question by our legislation. The promise of a love relationship for life can be revoked under civil law. The lasting character stemming from the nature of this relationship is treated as an insignificant value, which can be treated as slavery despite the fact that the indissolubility of marriage lies in the interest of the State because it creates and safeguards the common good. As underscored by Spaemann, the state authority needs relationships between men and women of this character but does nothing to make them resistant to various life crises. Everywhere in the world, civil law provides for divorce and allows citizens to remarry. In the name of freedom it acts against Man. However, freedom justifies only separation of spouses.³¹ Divorce, and hence another marriage, is a deeply unjust decision, which violates the idea of natural law, being a manifestation of instrumentalisation of the dignity of the human person.

Moreover, it should be noted that abandonment of freedom does not reflect an attitude which has no respect for freedom and dignity. Sometimes, the surrender of freedom demonstrates a totally opposite thing: it is the highest expression of freedom. Analogy in this regard can be seen in the decision to take religious vows and live in celibacy. One's freedom becomes subordinate in the name of selfless love. Readiness for sacrifice and devotion

²⁹ R. Spaemann, *Glück und Wohlfühlen Versuch über Ethik*, Klett-Cotta, Stuttgart 1993, p. 161. also on the basis of an interview conducted by the Author with Robert Spaemann in February 2011. The fact that indissolubility of marriage stems from natural law is underscored on numerous occasions by W. Góralski, a well-known lawyer, for example: "The marriage bond is indissoluble by virtue of natural law and its *indissolubilitas* is inherent in the nature of marriage." W. Góralski, *Wykluczenie nierozdzielności małżeństwa w opublikowanych wyrokach Roty Rzymskiej z 2001 roku*, „Prawo Kanoniczne. Kwartalnik prawno-historyczny,” 2010, no. 53/1–2, p. 162. The indissolubility of marriage was “confirmed” by divine positive law expressed by Jesus Christ: “Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate” (Matthew 19:6).

³⁰ M.A. Krąpiec, *Człowiek i prawo naturalne*, Redakcja Wydawnictw KUL, Lublin 1999, p. 147.

³¹ Under no circumstances separation is a normal condition but merely tolerated. It exposes spouses to a serious spiritual danger. This also negatively affects their children, so separation must not be chosen if the reasons are trivial. This evil, however, is not absolute. If there are good reasons, a separation must be regarded as equitable or even beneficial, when it becomes a measure mitigating the consequences of indissolubility of marriage that are often too burdensome (conflicts preventing conjugal living).

causes freedom to gain a broader perspective. Similarly to the irrevocable decision taken by two spouses, this form of existence can be said to be a special manifestation of both freedom and dignity. The Church can treat such choices as irreversible and thus affect the freedom of people who manage their life freely. It is important that the Church does not make use of the national law in the realisation of those choices.³²

Józef Kożuchowski

Love and Fidelity as Seen by Robert Spaemann

Abstract

The fabric of the article is composed of two inseparable issues, love and fidelity, which are analysed here in light of the philosophical thought of Robert Spaemann. In the first part, the Author shows how the German scholar understands true love and its ultimate justification (the very person in its numerical identity). Mainly, the original formula provided by R. Spaemann is described and elucidated, which says that love for one person is another person becoming real to the former. In the second part, the article emphasises how much love, which by definition is connected with a lasting relationship, is tied to fidelity which demonstrates love's deepest sense and safeguards it. Fidelity stands for exclusiveness of sexual relations, entails a promise of giving oneself to the beloved person. This promise is irrevocable and should last despite adverse and unforeseen events and the most dramatic twists of fate. The lack of consequence regarding national legislation regulating marriage is underscored. Although the relationship of a man and woman, founded on natural law, is in the best interest of the State for it serves the common good and protects human dignity, the State authority calls it into question if divorce and remarriage have been elevated to the rank of universal law.

The article presents such aspects of faithful love which the reader of Spaemann may not be quite familiar with because the philosopher does not articulate them directly, failing to address the position of civil law on the indissolubility of marriage at all.³³

Keywords: philosophy, person, love, fidelity, Spaemann.

³² R. Spaemann, *Menschenwürde und menschliche Natur*, „Internationale Katholische Zeitschrift Communio“ 2010 (March, April), issue 39, p. 135.

³³ Spaemann's view regarding this issue was made known to the Author in September 2017, in a private conversation in Stuttgart.