

Conference Proposal — Robert Spaemann’s Interpretation of Modernity

Robert Spaemann (1927-) is perhaps the best-known philosopher and historian of ideas writing in the Roman Catholic tradition in Germany today. While his earliest books — *Der Ursprung der Soziologie aus dem Geist der Restauration* (1959) and *Reflexion und Spontaneität* (1963) — were historical studies, and while his most recent books — *Glück und Wohlwollen: Versuch über Ethik* (1989), *Personen: Versuche über den Unterschied zwischen >etwas< und >jemand<* (1996), and *Grenzen: Zur ethischen Dimension des Handelns* (2001) — are pervasively informed by a reading of the history of philosophy, Spaemann has never presented his reading of modernity in a single connected narrative. The conference, *Modernity: Yearning for the Infinite*, provides an occasion to articulate Spaemann’s understanding of modernity in a concise and systematic way.

The aim of this paper, then, is to present Spaemann’s interpretations of the phenomena that are commonly reckoned to fall under the heading of “modernity.” I propose to organize these interpretations under five main headings: the modern rejection of a teleological understanding of nature; the views of the human person that result from this rejection; the consequences for ethics; the consequences for politics; and the consequences for religion. The goal is to make Spaemann’s interpretation of modernity available to an audience that is trying to understand modernity. While Spaemann’s interpretation does not refute or supersede the interpretations of Alasdair MacIntyre, Charles Taylor, and others, his interpretation is comparable to theirs in scope and insight. An examination of his interpretation, which has not been readily accessible thus far, should shed new and welcome light on the phenomena of modernity.

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