

## ‘AN ANIMAL THAT CAN PROMISE AND FORGIVE’

• **Robert Spaemann** and **Holger Zaborowski** •

“In forgiveness, I allow the other to distance himself from his nature, from the way he is.

In the moment of forgiveness, the other ceases to be a liar, so to speak. But it takes permission from outside of himself.”



**Holger Zaborowski:** Professor Spaemann, thank you very much for taking time to speak about promising and forgiving. We encounter promises in contexts that are actually quite varied: we speak of campaign promises or of marriage vows, but there are also promises of a more minor character, such as a promise, for example, to water the flowers this afternoon, or my promise to be here at a particular time. The question for you—for the philosopher—is thus: what is common to all of these varied phenomena, these various forms of promising? And what does promising actually entail?

**Robert Spaemann:** As a rule, a promise is made with respect to another person. Promising gives the other person the possibility to expect certain things of me, and actually not only the possibility but the right—a claim on me. In making a promise, I grant to another the right to expect something, for instance that the flowers will be watered. He is entitled to expect this. If I have not promised this, then he is not entitled to expect it. If I perhaps do it, I can surprise him. In that case, he will be pleased, but if I did not first promise to do it, he cannot complain and say: “But you did not water my flowers.” What specifically characterizes a promise is that, in a

certain way, I make myself independent of my current mood. I may not feel like watering the flowers this afternoon, for example, but I have promised to do it, and that is a reason to do it. This capacity is an astonishing attribute of the human person: a person can make himself independent of the way he happens to feel at present, and in this way he realizes a higher degree of freedom.

**H.Z.:** So when one speaks of promising, one presupposes that the person is free. We see that the human person can relate freely to his own nature.

**R.S.:** Yes. In this way he is also more independent of outside influences, for my present mood is, on the one hand, determined endogenically by whatever processes are taking place in my body and, on the other hand, from outside myself. Both of these conditions, nature as well as outside influences, are repressed—are actually eliminated—when I say that tomorrow I will in fact do what today I resolved to do tomorrow.

**H.Z.:** Here we find a very interesting relationship between freedom and nature: man is a thing of nature, dependent on quite varied influences—and at the same time, in making a promise, there is an act of freedom in which one freely promises to do something in the future, and in this way binds oneself to the other.

**R.S.:** Yes, but it is of course only a relative independence, or shall we say: an independence within certain parameters. I cannot promise things when I know that I cannot do them. Likewise, with respect to someone else's promise to me, I can rely with particular confidence on this promise if I know that what he has promised is within the realm of what his nature is actually disposed to accomplish. If he promises me something that I immediately know to be extremely difficult for him to fulfill, then in the first place I probably will not want to accept his promise, and in any case I would probably have a certain understanding later, if he does not keep his promise, because he promised more than he was capable of. Incidentally, this is an important matter to consider here: it is possible to refuse another person's promise. Someone can say, "I want to promise you this," and I say, "Please do not promise me this—I will be happy if you do it, but I do not want you to bind yourself in this way." On the one hand, I can do this out of consideration for him, because I

don't want to put him in the uncomfortable position of needing to do something in the future that he is actually very reluctant to do; and I can also refuse the promise because I do not really believe that he will do it and thus prefer that he not promise in the first place.

**H.Z.:** Does this mean that promises must always be explicit?

**R.S.:** Are there promises that are implicit? I think that promising [*versprechen*] has something to do with speaking [*sprechen*]. It is true that another person may have a justified expectation that I will do something that I often have done in the past. And here is a problem. Rousseau, for example, said that he had never helped a person in need (this is typical of Rousseau!) because to do so would establish a certain attitude of expectation—that is, that a person could expect that one who had helped him before would help him in the future as well; and Rousseau did not want to elicit this attitude of expectation. He wanted always to remain free, so to speak, to do whatever he was inclined to do at a given moment. It was for that reason that he did not generate this expectation. And of course we all recognize this. It really is the case that a person whom I have frequently and regularly helped in some particular way comes to expect that I will continue to do this, and that a particular displeasure arises in many people if I stop. Actually, it is only very mature and reflective persons who are not put out, because they say to themselves that they should really be grateful that someone has helped them so much and that they cannot expect that he should always do this. It is indeed the case that this repeated help has an effect almost like a promise—but it is not a promise. A promise must be explicit.

**H.Z.:** You have just cited Rousseau. If one looks at Rousseau's position, one might think that, in a certain way, this is also the position of a "hypothetical civilization," that is, our civilization. Are we undergoing a crisis of promising today?

**R.S.:** Quite emphatically: yes. We live in a functionalistic civilization, which I have also called a hypothetical civilization. Marx, by the way, was already describing it as a "society of commodities" [*Warengesellschaft*]. We experience this quite intensely today: everything is transformed into a product, and this means that everything can be substituted with a functional equivalent—and it also means that the idea of unconditionality, such as that established

by a promise, is accepted most reluctantly. Of course, there are still contracts now as before, contracts that are sanctioned juridically. This, by the way, is a kind of implicit promise. When I go to the doctor, and he sends me a bill later, he can expect that I will pay this bill. I have not promised this in advance, because it is self-evident, but it is sanctioned by the state, which sees to it that contracts are honored. Beyond such contractual relations, however, the promise has, in a certain respect, become alien to our civilization. This is also related to the fact that people's estimation of themselves, of their own freedom, has diminished. People do not consider themselves to be free. They are no longer, in their own opinion, animals who can promise, as Nietzsche put it; rather, they would like to be animals who cannot promise at all. And when they do make a promise, they are already thinking that they are really not sure how they will be disposed the day after tomorrow. But the essence of a promise is precisely to say that one is making oneself independent of tomorrow's mood. Of course, we are never wholly independent, because it could happen that tomorrow I don't in fact feel like doing what I promised—and yet I do it anyway, because I promised. But it can also be the case that I have changed my tune and now think that one does not need to keep promises—or at least that I don't want to keep this particular promise. There is nothing anyone can do about that. In this case, the only thing that helps is a penalty, either that imposed by the state in the case of contracts, or that imposed by religion. It always used to be the habit of Christians to pray for the gift of perseverance, because if I lose perseverance, it makes no difference whether I've promised something or not.

**H.Z.:** You said that people today no longer want to see themselves as free. But isn't it also a factor that the perception of many people is that they are so free that they are not bound by anything, not even their own promises?

**R.S.:** Yes, that is one understanding of freedom. Freedom in the sense that in each moment I can do whatever happens to suit me. But any animal does that. That is the animal form of freedom: independence from external compulsion. But what is specifically human is something different, and this animal freedom is of course at the mercy of every influence, as I said earlier. Both my own dispositions and external influences can impose themselves limitlessly if I am no longer bound by what I have promised. Of course, in

human beings there is the phenomenon of making oneself independent of one's dispositions without making a promise. For example, someone who has taken on a great task—a scholarly work, perhaps—or an artist, a musician, who practices, who must get through long periods of aridity and who does things that really are not fun for him, that he often does not feel like doing. But he has resolved to do this and does it. This is of course freedom in the sense that one is not simply dependent on one's nature alone. But what is specific to promising is that I give another person a claim on me and in so doing—you might say—I take away my freedom, that is, rob myself of the freedom to do whatever it is that pleases me at this moment.

**H.Z.:** This leads us to a theme that is perhaps somewhat wider or more fundamental, that is, to the question of whether and how it is possible to understand the person, being human, being a person, as a promise—since we are reflecting here once again on the claim of another, a claim made on me when I bind myself to him by means of a promise. You have frequently explained that the person himself is actually already a promise.

**R.S.:** Yes, we are natural beings like other living things that have wishes and desires and pleasure and fear and dread, and at the same time, we are beings that can relate themselves to this nature. Within this relation lies the promise that the person *is*, that a being, which can also feel a duty toward another, then also fulfills this duty—for that we have no guarantee; but rather, this is a promise. We can understand this as follows: say someone has promised another person something, and the other reminds him of it; and the first man says that he will not keep his word, because he hadn't promised to keep the promise. And here the nonsense begins. For you could say that it is not just a promise but a promise that I will keep my promise. One could perhaps pose the question: "yes, but this promise to keep your promise—will you keep that?" Then one would have to go on into infinity and would continually have to promise to keep the promise, and so on. No, this is the essence of the person: a person is the promise to keep promises. And, for this reason, we have to rely on others [*sich verlassen*, literally, to abandon oneself to the other], as we say so beautifully in German. Of course, there is also the expression: "I can rely on myself in certain things." This is actually what we call virtue. Virtue, which through long practice establishes

the habit of acting rightly in a particular area, and which thereby establishes a certainty, as with a pianist who has practiced a long time and gives a concert and can say, “I can rely on myself, I know that this will work, because I have domesticated my nature in this way.” And so it is with a promise as well. There are people of whom we say, “He promised to do it, and he will keep his promise—I know him.” There are also people of whom we say, “He is careless, he makes a promise at the drop of a hat, but that doesn’t necessarily mean he will keep it.” But in this way he degrades himself, degrades the promise that he, as a person, is. This promise is a promise to keep promises.

**H.Z.:** That would then mean that the crisis of promising is more than a crisis of a single phenomenon or a single act. Rather, it can ultimately be traced to a forgetfulness of the person, to man’s inadequate understanding of himself as a person and also of the other as a person.

**R.S.:** Yes, we are experiencing this too. We are experiencing a destruction of the notion of person. In philosophy, Derek Parfit, for example, represents this theoretical position; for him, being a person is merely a matter of discrete, transient states of consciousness. For instance, if I am sleeping, my consciousness is extinguished. The one who wakes up is a new person—that is, according to Parfit, it would actually be impossible for a person to make a promise; rather, it would be a different person who would have to fulfill the promise that his “predecessor” had made. But why should this later one fulfill the promise, since he did not make it? According to Parfit’s view, this means that there is no duty to keep promises. Parfit is only an extreme, but behind this position there is nonetheless a widely held view today that is evident particularly in the case of marriage vows. Young people swear eternal love, to be sure, but they already have in the back of their minds that this just happens to be what one swears in such situations—swearing eternal devotion is, so to speak, part and parcel of the whole affair of marriage, but, they think, that does not mean that in the end this promise will also be fulfilled. And the marriage vow also has an additional distinctiveness with respect to other forms of promises: this promise creates a duty, an obligation that does not merely entail certain acts or omissions; rather, by this vow I bind my whole existence and biography to that of the other. And people change. The other changes, and I change. So how can

such a promise possibly work, when I don't know at all what I will be like in twenty years, or what the other will be like. Such a thing is only possible if people are resolved to forge a close consonance between the development and further growth and changes of their own nature to the development and further growth and changes of the other person's biography. It is not the case that my biography develops independently—while the other person's develops independently—and then in twenty years, we'll see whether there is still a fit. Rather, the development was one in which each person developed as a function of the development of the other. This means that they are really a unity, the married couple, and for this reason marriage is an institution that can be observed from the outside, an institution that can view the two as a unity, and no longer as two separate biographies.

**H.Z.:** While we are speaking of a crisis of the promise, and of the fact that promises are often made but not kept, do you see a possibility of teaching something like the art of promising once again? Are you skeptical or optimistic about the future development of our situation, since one could say that precisely among the younger generation promises or acts of promising are taking on a decidedly more important role?

**R.S.:** It is not possible yet to see exactly where this is going. Faithfulness in itself is a virtue that is highly valued also by young people, but, at the same time, a kind of mildew penetrates all these dispositions, because it is part of promising that another person takes the promise seriously. If I make a promise knowing that the other person is not taking my promise seriously, then there is not very much motivation actually to keep the promise. The promise has to be accepted. Only then does a certain mutuality come into being, because of which it is then no longer so easy simply to separate the development of the one from the other. Of course they each remain persons in their own right; each one remains himself. But in reality it is a particularly unique adventure to have a biography whose horizon is so clearly set in advance. This is exactly the way it is in art. Oftentimes, the stricter the rules of the art form, the greater the artist's genius truly to express himself within the bounds of these rules.

**H.Z.:** We have seen that promising leads to the realm of the experience of the absolute. Does this mean that promises can really only be fully understood with recourse to the notion of God—that is, can a society in which we can observe the notion of God to be rejected or in crisis make promises at all?

**R.S.:** There are of course elemental promptings that belong to the human being, and we can say that they lead to God in the final analysis. And when the notion of God is destroyed, then such promptings are also destroyed, but this is true for morality in general. We cannot say that a person must believe in God to be moral, but a moral person whose faith in God is destroyed will be deprived of the foundation of his morality, which is then in a precarious position. And thus it is with promising. Thank God there is a natural trust that men have for one another—it is not limitless, but it can sometimes be very great. A while ago I was in Rome. I was robbed; I had no wallet, no passport, everything was gone. I sat at the airport—I had also missed my plane—and negotiated with the ladies at the counter to see whether I could perhaps have a ticket for another flight with the same airline, and they said that I would have to buy a new ticket. Then a pilot, who could not fly just then because Mount Etna had erupted, happened to come along. He spoke to me because I was standing there looking like I hadn't a clue what to do. I explained to him what had happened to me, and he said that I should sit down and he would be right back. He returned, having purchased a ticket for me for several hundred euros. He gave it to me and said I could send him the money when I got home. I said, "But you don't know me, and I don't have any identification." "You'll send it to me," he said. Of course I sent it to him immediately. It is a wonderful story. Thank God for such a thing. I don't know whether this person believes in God or not, but what I do know is that he behaved very meaningfully. One can only say that if one believes in God.

**H.Z.:** It is our experience that promises are often broken—we have already spoken about this briefly. How are we to make sense of broken promises from the perspective of moral philosophy, and what are some of the possible reactions to the breaking of a promise?

**R.S.:** There are different cases here. It might happen that something so urgent and important comes up that I do not keep a promise of



lesser importance—in the expectation that the other person would immediately relinquish me from my promise if he knew what had happened. And I will tell him about it, and he will naturally say, “But of course, you had to do that.”

**H.Z.:** So one anticipates a dispensation, so to speak?

**R.S.:** Yes, this occurs, and it must occur. But then there is the breaking of more serious promises, which one cannot simply excuse because there is something more important—for example, the promise that I give to a dying person that I will do something after his death. I *could* say of this promise that, when the person is dead, I really do not need to keep it, I do not think it is all that important; it was important to him, but he is not alive anymore. In this case—when a person treats such a thing so carelessly—I would say that he has given up an essential part of his humanity. Precisely promises made to the dying seem to me to get to the heart of what a promise is. Beyond this example, there is the breaking of a promise out of weakness, perhaps forgetfulness; and then the many breaches of faith in marriage. Adultery [*Ehebruch*] is a breach [*Bruch*]*—*we must be very clear about this—and it also enables the other person to separate him- or herself from the one who committed adultery. But adultery does not force this separation, thank God; and thus there is a great difference, I think, whether a person breaks his marriage vows in the throes of passion, so to say, but then tries to return to marital fidelity—or whether the marriage really is destroyed, in the sense that he marries another woman. That is no act of passion but rather a fully conscious act, in which I ratify, after the fact, the state to which nature has brought me. This seems to me to be a very weighty matter, which one must distinguish from a momentary breach of the marriage vows.

**H.Z.:** But it could be said that the point here is that the promise could be dissolved by mutual consent . . .

**R.S.:** One could say that if the one to whom I gave the promise dispenses me from keeping it. And if we dispense one another mutually, then the marriage no longer exists. But this is not what people who marry and truly love one another intend—rather they intend truly to sanction this promise by virtue of the fact that they give it to a third. First of all, it is interesting that, at a wedding,

witnesses are required. The witnesses are very important. A promise that two people make “just between us” is of course also a valid promise, but it is not a marriage—it is only when the promise is made before witnesses that it becomes an external reality. In the Christian understanding, marriage is a promise that is given to God. *Entre les étoiles, le seigneur a écrit ton nom*—this was the name of a French pop song: it is written in the stars. We can’t pull it down again from the heavens.

**H.Z.:** So as a rule it is not possible for us to dispose over our own promises again once they are made, because, in promising, we bind ourselves to the other person. But when a promise is broken, the disposition or act of forgiveness is of course also possible. You once characterized the act of forgiving as a creative act in a very particular way. Perhaps, in closing, you would say something briefly about this act, which is a complement of the act of promising.

**R.S.:** Forgiveness is complementary in the sense that in forgiving, I permit the other to be a person again, to be once again the promise that, as a person, he is. I do not, then, bind him to what he once did. Thus, I do not say, “So that’s the kind of person you are—that’s it, we’re finished!” This is a correlate to the shamelessness that consists in doing something horrible and then saying to the other, “Well, that’s just how I am. You just have to take me as I am.”

**H.Z.:** As a pure matter of fact . . .

**R.S.:** In religion, it is often said that God accepts us just as we are. This can be understood in a way that is true, but it is often misinterpreted. The message of Jesus does not begin with Jesus saying that God takes us just as we are; rather, it begins with his admonition to be different. In forgiveness, I allow the other to distance himself from his nature, from the way he is. In the moment of forgiveness, the other ceases to be a liar, so to speak. But it takes permission from outside of himself. This, I think, is the essence of forgiveness. When people say they can’t forgive themselves for something, that is nonsense. A person cannot forgive himself at all, for anything. That is arrogance. To be dependent on forgiveness—that is what is decisive. And in Christianity it is the alpha and omega. Forgiveness is at the very beginning. Much is forgiven because Jesus has loved

much. The Gospel of John effects a reversal of sorts and places forgiveness at the beginning.

**H.Z.:** So we could also say that, in the first place, the person is the being that is able to forgive, is permitted to forgive . . .

**R.S.:** Yes, that is even greater than being permitted to promise, because in a certain way it is a creative act and allows the other to be a new person.

**H.Z.:** Or to be the old person again?

**R.S.:** Yes. Or it gives the other the ability not to be defined simply by what he has done.

**H.Z.:** And in this way there is also the possibility of a new beginning?

**R.S.:** Yes. Freedom for the human being is something that is essentially bound up with interpersonalitv. Our freedom is not as isolated individuals. We would not be free as such individuals, but rather we are free insofar as we continuously allow one another to be free.

**H.Z.:** A good closing word. Professor Spaemann, thank you very much for this conversation.—*Translated by Lesley Rice.* □

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