practical wisdom” (12). Interestingly, the late, eminent Catholic bioethicist, Edmund D. Pellegrino, MD, provides the foreword and extols the author’s attempt to recast the role of the profession, rooting it in both the technical competence and moral commitment of physicians. As a physician, I appreciate his efforts to restore the respect and, in some ways, the beneficent authority that the profession has lost over time. The doctor–patient relationship, for one, would benefit from a more open, shared-decision-making style that avoids the earlier paternalistic approach or the more recent corrective (or perhaps reactive) information-overload model.

The author goes beyond this, however, and attempts to reclaim a grander role for the profession, as a type of centralized moral gatekeeper informed by an ill-defined traditional ethic, a reinterpretation of ancient codes that guide physicians as they, in turn, guide their patients and the culture. He champions the restoration of a modern medical professionalism because he believes the physician is a kind of super public servant and, as such, is best suited and trained to mediate both individual health care and those attendant bioethical problems posed by such issues as abortion and euthanasia.

Dr. Sessions bestows far too much authority on the medical profession to set the “standards by which all these questions are answered”—the same “medical profession that understands and advocates what is right as opposed to what is wrong” (13). In this, the problem resounds, as no single secular professional code of medical ethics appeals to all physicians and patients, least of all to those whose faith is in Jesus Christ, who is the truth and the objective foundation of Catholic ethics.

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Love and the Dignity of Human Life: On Nature and Natural Law
by Robert Spaemann

William B. Eerdmans, 2012, paperback, $12

German philosopher Robert Spaemann’s thought has received increasing attention as his major works have made their way to an English-speaking readership. His books include Basic Moral Concepts (1989), Happiness and Benevolence (2000), and Persons: The Difference between “Someone” and “Something” (2006). More recently, two shorter works have become available: his Essays in Anthropology: Variations on a Theme (2010) and Love and the Dignity of Human Life: On Nature and Natural Law (2012). This last work provides readers with an excellent and approachable introduction to several themes that have characterized Spaemann’s work over several decades.

Born in 1927, Spaemann completed his doctorate in philosophy in 1952 at the University of Münster. From 1969 to 1973, he taught at the University of Heidelberg and then, until his retirement in 1992, as a member of the Faculty of Philosophy at the University of Munich. His writings cover a broad range of topics, from the thought of Restoration France and reflections on Fénélon and Bossuet, to Rousseau, politics, ethics, and the nature of personhood. Broadly speaking, his work can be viewed as an extended reflection on the nature of modernity and its consequences for the human person.

In 2010, Spaemann gave the McGivney Lectures of the Pontifical John Paul II Institute.
for Studies on Marriage and Family at the Catholic University of America, placing him in the company of such scholars as John Finnis, Elizabeth Anscombe, Ralph McInerny, and Benedict Ashley, OP. This short book, with an introduction by David L. Schindler, brings those lectures to publication. While distinct in content, the three essays share a unifying theme: love in the context of personal relations, and its ethical implications. We see this worked out in Spaemann’s discussion of love and knowledge, human dignity, human nature, and the increasingly contentious ethical issue of brain death.

A good starting point for considering this short work is its subtitle, “On Nature and Natural Law.” Spaemann stands firmly ensconced in the wider Roman Catholic tradition in his position that we do possess a stable and enduring nature and that it is knowable through our capacity for reason. Reason alone, however, Spaemann insists, is not enough to capture who we are as persons; our personhood, our nature, includes both reason and freedom and also our corporeal reality, all of which serve as avenues for the manifestation of our personhood. It is precisely in the context of our embodied nature that Spaemann addresses some of his main themes, as this embodiment is essential to love, to our dignity as persons (and violations of that dignity), and to the multitude of questions that have arisen in bioethics.

There are two ways to say “I love you” in Italian: ti amo (spoken romantically) and ti voglio bene (literally, “I wish you well,” spoken within the family). But can love really be divided up this way? No, says Spaemann in his first essay, “The Paradoxes of Love.” He begins in an unlikely place by taking on one of the major figures of modernity: David Hume, the long-revered “patron saint” of science and its aberrations, who wrote famously that “we never really advance a step beyond ourselves” (Treatise of Human Nature 1.2.6). For Spaemann, this statement signals the beginnings of modernity, an age that brought genuine advances as well as tenacious problems in how we view society and ourselves. Contemporary materialists and reductionists, a group including writers as diverse as Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, and science popularizers like Sam Harris, have yet to realize how far Hume transcended himself in writing those words, which have echoed down the centuries.

“On Transcendence” would be a fitting subtitle to “The Paradoxes of Love,” which examines the interweaving of love and knowledge as we reach beyond ourselves to engage the other. One paradox Spaemann examines is in the end a superficial one, that between amor concupiscientiae (love of concupiscence, including eros and desire) and amor benevolentiae (love of benevolence or, for Aristotle, friendship that wills the other’s good, encompassing in the Christian tradition agape and caritas), which he sees as having an inner, constitutive unity. For Spaemann, love as a feeling is necessary but far from sufficient to understand love’s reality. To capture this more fully, he turns to the notion of habitus in the classical sense of a virtue, a cultivated, habitual, and sustained way of engaging with another person that is the route to self-transcendence and true knowledge of the other. Love that embraces truth, fidelity, commitment, and unconditionality through time conforms to Spaemann’s multiple citations of Richard of St. Victor’s statement Ubi amor, ibi oculus, “Where love is, there is the eye” (6), which means, in more contemporary terms, that it is only in the context of love that one can truly know the other. In Spaemann’s words, “Truly personal love transcends all images, all qualities of the beloved, and aims at the person beyond all these qualities. The qualities are that through which love is enkindled. But once it is enkindled it leaves these qualities behind. The one who can answer the question why he loves this person does not yet love truly” (6). Persons, for Spaemann, are not described in terms of observable qualities, not defined, but recognized. To love truly is to delight in the other, to wish the other’s good beyond any selfish desires. It is to transcend ourselves in relation.

Spaemann harkens back to the ancient Greek and Christian tradition in a discussion of amor amicitiae, the love of friendship, which stands against “objectification and depersonalization as a means of self-
enjoyment for the Ego” (23). *Amor amicitiae* is instantiated in many ways, in the love between friends, for example, and in the love shared by spouses. Spaemann does not cite this himself, although I think he would agree with the beautiful expression of this friendship that we hear each year during the Christmas season, when in the Office of Readings on January 2, the feast of Saints Basil and Gregory, we hear Gregory say of his friend, “We seemed to be two bodies with a single spirit. . . . Each of us was in the other and with the other.”

In the second essay, “Human Dignity and Human Nature,” Spaemann addresses scientific modernity’s tendency to objectify persons and to relativize moral norms. He begins with an explicit statement about human nature in the context of describing dignity:

> Dignity is not a property among other empirical data. Nor should we say that it is a human right to have one’s own dignity respected. Dignity is rather the transcendental ground for the fact that human beings have rights and duties. They have rights because they have duties, i.e., because the normal, adult members of the human family are neither animals who are instinctively integrated into their communities, nor merely instinctually indeterminate subjects of drives, who in the interest of their communities need to be kept under social or police control. Human beings can act based on insight, rationality and ethically, and they have a duty to do so. (27)

In this essay, Spaemann begins to address the attempt of some bioethicists to separate the notions of *human being* and *human person*, shrinking the boundaries of the latter to sometime after conception and sometime before natural death. (Peter Singer’s work will be subjected to sustained criticism in the third essay.) Spaemann insists that this is a serious flaw that leads to grave ethical problems: “Human dignity has no biological ‘reason,’ but having dignity does come with biological membership in the family of free beings” (28). Dignity is inherent in us from beginning to end. Human activity does not define dignity and is not its source; rather it is one of “those properties which bring dignity phenomenally to appearance” (28).

It is in the context of his discussion of dignity and nature that Spaemann draws on one of his great philosophical influences, Kant, who proposed that the human race is a Kingdom of Ends, that each person is an absolute end in him- or herself and cannot be treated merely or solely instrumentally, as an object or as a means for someone else’s ends.

Human dignity can be violated but not taken from us. It is not something that can be “subject to compromises” (42). Human rights can bump up against each other and limit each other in ways that human dignity cannot. For Spaemann, human dignity is absolute and “signals something sacred” (41). He notes the ways in which rights language has been co-opted in discussions of, for example, assisted suicide and euthanasia (“dignified dying”) and abortion. In his view, however, the person who dies “with true human dignity . . . is the one who is accompanied by human presence, sheltered and saved from great pain. It is just as much against human dignity to prolong human life beyond any reasonable measure . . . as it is against human dignity to bring about death intentionally” (42).

The final essay takes the earlier themes of love and knowledge, human nature, rights, and dignity and moves them explicitly into a concrete bioethical context. In “Is Brain Death the Death of a Human Person?,” Spaemann addresses the controversy surrounding the criteria for brain death, first proposed in 1968 by the Harvard Ad Hoc Committee on brain death and updated in 2010 by the American Academy of Neurology. Spaemann briefly traces the history of how we think about death, traditionally recognizing it in the permanent cessation of heartbeat and respiration. The Harvard report moved the definition of death from cardiopulmonary criteria to the brain, so that “the death of a human being and the loss of all brain functions are by definition equated” (49).

At the foundation of Spaemann’s discussion is a vital distinction between scientific fact and scientific hypothesis. Spaemann insists that human persons are recognized rather
than defined, maintaining the notion that there is an open-ended character to our being, grounded in our freedom, which can never fully be captured by a closed definition. The equating of brain death with personal death is, he asserts, a hypothesis that has erroneously come to be treated as a fact. He also notes that the Harvard Committee shifted attention from the best interests of the person who is dying to third-party interests in legal protection for the withdrawal of life support and for the earliest possible harvesting of organs.

In his address to the Transplantation Society on August 29, 2000, Pope St. John Paul II accepts the neurologic criteria for brain death “if rigorously applied” (n. 5) and also accepts the notion of the brain as the source of integration for the body, but the criteria remain controversial. Spaemann asks a fundamental personalist question: is someone who has suffered brain death a dead person or a dying person? He comes down squarely for the latter. Bioethically then, our duty is to care for the dying, to care for individuals for whom the process of dying has become irreversible.

Spaemann is not alone among Catholic scholars in questioning the use of the neurological criteria for death. He recalls the notion of metaphysical death as separation of the soul from the body, which is recognized in physical signs that occur after death and which brings moral (rather than absolute) certitude that death has occurred. He takes issue specifically with the position put forward in 2002 by Edward Furton in support of the neurological criteria, in which Furton distinguishes between “the life of the person and the life of the body”—a distinction Spaemann finds untenable and troubling. The Harvard criteria opened a can of worms, and debate over the definition of death using neurological criteria has become more contentious rather than less since 1968.

This brief collection of essays serves as an excellent introduction to Spaemann’s thought, and deserves a wide readership among those in the fields of bioethics, moral theology, and philosophical anthropology as well as among general readers. It could also serve as a higher education text in bioethics and philosophy classes. It is more than enough to pique the reader’s curiosity and create a desire to learn more. For those who wish to do so, a natural progression from Love and the Dignity of Human Life would be to Spaemann’s Persons: The Difference between “Someone” and “Something.” Those who do so will be rewarded with philosophical rigor, deepening reflection, and thought-provoking ideas.

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