

# Person, Truth, and Freedom

## Study Questions

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Prof. STEPHAN KAMPOWSKI  
tel.: 06 698 95 538  
kampowski@istitutogp2.it

*The questions asked during the oral exam will be taken from the following list:*

### I. The Required Reading

*You can choose between two books. You are asked to read the book you choose in its entirety. The exam questions about the book will be taken from the following list.*

Option 1: Hans Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility*, Chicago 1984.

1. What does Jonas mean by a “heuristics of fear”? What are some of the practical principles Jonas proposes to avoid the collective suicide of humankind?
2. Which arguments does Jonas advance to show the immanence of ends/goals in being?
3. Of what kind is, for Jonas, the relation between is and ought, i.e., between being and obligation?
4. Jonas is convinced to have shown humanity’s *duty* to exist. What is his argument?
5. Which are the two senses of responsibility Jonas distinguishes? Under which conditions do we feel responsible?
6. Which are the paradigmatic cases of responsibility of which Jonas speaks? How are they different from each other?
7. Where are, for Jonas, the limits of technological progress? Which are, for him, the dangers of technological utopianism?
8. What is to be said, according to the author, about the extension of life span by means of biotechnology? What are some of his reflections on the meaning of our mortality? For him, is our mortality only a burden?

Option 2: Robert Spaemann, *Persons. The Difference between “Someone” and “Something”*, Oxford 2006.

1. David Hume proposes that “is” and “ought” – being and obligation – belong to two incommensurable spheres. According to Spaemann, the experience of pain is a strong argument to the contrary. How so?
2. What does Spaemann mean by “transcendence”?
3. The German poet Hölderlin says: “Poetically man dwells”. How to interpret this saying in the light of Spaemann’s reflections?
4. What does Spaemann mean by “soul”? What is the history of the concept? What is the difference / relation between “soul” and “spirit”? According to him, is the idea of immortality philosophically plausible? If yes, how so?
5. What does Spaemann intend when he speaks of freedom? What is meant by “primary willing” or “secondary volitions”? Which arguments does he advance against determinism?
6. How come death exists for us human beings, despite the saying of Epicurus?
7. How is it possible that death does not necessarily abolish the meaning of life? How can one say that death is the condition of the possibility of meaning and self-possession?
8. Why or why not are all human beings persons?

## II. Questions from the lectures

1. Which are the five steps in the history of the word “person” which we discussed?
2. We said that the word “person” refers to a particular mode of existing, that is, existing in the mode of self-transcendence and self-possession. The person is never completely what he or she is. Which are at least four of the evidences Spaemann advances to show the person’s capacity for transcendence?
3. How does Boethius define the person?
4. What is meant by “nature”? Where does the word come from etymologically? Is the idea of nature in any way related to that of teleology, that is to the discourse on ends and goals?
5. What is meant by “substance”? Why did the idea of substance get a bad reputation in modernity (=how did for instance John Locke [mis-]understand the concept)? What would be a more adequate understanding of “substance”? What is the difference between primary and secondary substance?
6. What is Richard of Saint Victor’s definition of the person? Why does he criticize Boethius? Do Richard and Boethius really contradict each other?
7. We apply the word “person” to beings who are very different from each other: for instance, to angels and to human beings. Therefore, persons do not form a class. What do all beings called by the name of “person” have in common, even if they are not members of the same class?
8. What is the relationship between the person and his or her nature?
9. Why is the question of truth decisive for the person? What is the relation between truth and freedom?
10. We’ve spoken about four theories of truth. Which are they and what do they say respectively?
11. What is the internal criticism one can advance against logical positivism?
12. What is meant by “scientism” and what are its two principal characteristics?
13. Which are some of the historical roots of scientism? Where does the fascination with mathematics and everything measurable come from?
14. Which are some of the criticisms that one can advance against scientism? In particular, what is the role of faith, credence and trust in the process of knowing? What can be said of Descartes’ ideal of certain knowledge? Indicate at least one further observation.
15. Why, according to David Hume, do we promise and why are promises binding? What are Thomas Hobbes, Immanuel Kant and Friedrich Nietzsche saying about this question respectively?
16. Which are the objections raised by Paul Ricoeur and Gabriel Marcel against the idea of the promise as a reality that has to do exclusively with faithfulness to oneself and with self-coherence? According to them, which crucial aspect of promising is being missed here?
17. Why do we promise for Saint Thomas?
18. According to Saint Thomas, is it morally licit to promise? Where does he see the difficulty and how does he resolve it?
19. Which are the three reasons why promises are binding according to Paul Ricoeur?
20. Can one ever be dispensed from one’s promises? Which considerations need to be made?
21. What is particular about the marital promise? How can one promise what one will want in the future? Can one avoid ending up in a situation in which one finds that one has changed one’s mind?
22. Which are the presuppositions of the possibility of repentance and forgiveness? What is forgiveness?
23. Which are some of the central elements of Marxist utopianism? Which attitude does Marxism have toward technology?
24. Explain the criticism Hans Jonas advances against Marxist utopianism. Is the ideal *feasible*? Is the ideal *desirable*?

25. According to a Marxist anthropology, where is the fundamental problem of human beings?  
How can it be resolved?
26. Does Marx really aim at the creation of a just society? Why or why not?
27. What does Jonas mean when he speaks of the “ontology of the not-yet”? Where, according to him, are its main dangers?
28. How come death exists for us human beings, despite the saying of Epicurus?
29. How is it possible that death does not necessarily abolish the meaning of life? How can one say that death is the condition of the possibility of meaning and self-possession?
30. In which sense can one say that for human beings living is a “suffering”, i.e., something that they undergo? In which sense can one say that dying is the *actus humanus*, the human act, par excellence?