

Poetically Man Dwells: An Aesthetic Being of a Person

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Abstract

The article argues that, although scarce, Robert Spaemann's considerations of fiction, creativity and aesthetics disclose an inherently aesthetic character of the constitution of being a person. It also enables us to reconstruct the aesthetic grounding of morality which offers moral certainty instead of moral objectivity as a more suitable alternative for the criterion of moral truth. The article does that by reconstructing an aesthetic constitution of being a person from Spaemann's philosophy. It argues that the category of recognition, which is the grounding of all morality, has an intrinsic aesthetic structure that is similar to aesthetic Kantian concepts of *sensus communis* and the judgment of sublime. Spaemann's statement that "Poetically man dwells" is an ontological statement about the aesthetic constitution of a person and that it has an essential importance for our understanding of morality and moral truth.

Keywords: Robert Spaemann, aesthetics, morality, Immanuel Kant, moral certainty

Introduction

"Poetically man dwells" (Spaemann 2017, 87), – claims German philosopher Robert Spaemann while borrowing a quote from Hölderlin and summarizing his own reflections on the part that fiction, art, and creativity play in being a person. Spaemann's considerations on aesthetic part of the ontology of a person are not extensive or exhaustive¹, but even more modest are the researchers' attention to those considerations². It is much more common to interpret his conception of a person in

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the context of Aristotelian or Thomist traditions (Arthur Madigan, S.J. 2024, 210-294), to concentrate on his peculiar conception of nature (D. C. Schindler 2024, 86-99) or on his dynamic relationship with modernity (Zaborowski 2010), which, undoubtedly permeates his thought. However, in contrast to these more traditional approaches, I argue that, although scarce, his attention to aesthetic moments of being a person, are not accidental or merely decorative, but has a much more substantial role. To state it even stronger, it is the overlooked central arch in understanding who a person is, especially, who he is as a moral agent. In other words, I argue that the statement about the poetical, hence, aesthetic dwelling of a person is a metaphysical, ontological statement about the inherently aesthetic constitution of a person and that it has an essential importance for our understanding of morality and moral truth.

But what exactly does it mean? It might seem controversial to talk about poetical being of a person and poetical morality – that seems to lead into such problems as subjectivism or relativism that not only Spaemann, but many contemporary philosophers try to avoid. However, I intend to show that aesthetic structures of our personal being do not necessarily lead to subjectivism or relativism. On the contrary, they enable us to reconstruct and develop a conception of moral certainty that is a reasonable alternative to moral objectivity.

Such attempt stands mostly in contrast to dominating positions within philosophical discourse. Since Plato and his famous banishing of the poets from his Republic due to the corruption of the soul and inability to comprehend and represent truth, the opposition between morality and any kind of poetics or aesthetics is kind of a default position. And even if some of the modern authors accept the possibility of a more aesthetic nature of morality and discuss such concepts as moral feeling or, as Hume, even call those who inquire into moral questions moral painters (Hume 1960: 621), then the status of the possibility of any kind of moral truth becomes questionable. Aesthetisation of morality seems to lead to moral subjectivism or relativism. This is also reflected in contemporary discourse

where, for instance, pragmatist philosopher Richard Rorty acknowledges the important role that aesthetics plays within our moral values, but distances it from the idea of truth and renders them relative and subjective while relating them more with our social practices and contexts. I intend to go to different direction and while arguing for an aesthetic grounding for moral reality, maintain its connection to moral certainty as a kind of moral truth.

My aim is to show that (1) Spaemann's considerations of various emergences of fiction within our lives enable us to disclose an inherently aesthetic character of the constitution of personal being and (2) reconstruct the aesthetic grounding of morality which (3) offers moral certainty instead of moral objectivity as a more suitable alternative for the criterion of moral truth. It is done by reconstructing an aesthetic constitution of being a person from Spaemann's philosophy. And also by showing that the category of recognition, which is the grounding of all morality, has an intrinsic aesthetic structure that is similar to aesthetic Kantian concepts of *sensus communis* and the judgment of sublime.

1. Aesthetic constitution of being a person

Although Spaemann's considerations of aesthetic features of being a person are not elaborate or fully detailed, they enable us to reconstruct and demonstrate an essential part that aesthetics plays in the constitution of a person. The main ontological structures of being a person appear to be inherently aesthetic ones. Spaemann himself puts a lot of effort trying to stress that "a person must be someone who is what he is in a *different way* from that in which other things, "or other animals, are what they are." (Spaemann 2017, 7) In other words, a person is not a thing and not an object, hence, the being of a person cannot be captured or explained by any standard objectifying description or definition. A person cannot be defined by merely factual, material being that could be identified by empirical observation, because "a person is *someone*, not *something*, not a mere instance of a kind of being" (Spaemann 2017, 29) and "[w]ho we are is not simply interchangeable with *what* we are" (Spaemann 2017, 11).

Hence, any attempt – even the most elaborate one – to describe a person in an objectifying way reduces that person to something else – to merely his objectified appearances and features.

Spaemann attempts to explicate this peculiarity of personal being by stressing that this ‘who’ or ‘someone’ is better understood not by specifying *what* we are, but by specifying the *way* we are what we are. To state it even stronger, his position enables us to claim that *the way we are* is essentially *what* we are. In other words, in contrast to objects or things, the essence of being a person is better captured by a verb, not a noun. The being of a person is not a static existence of a certain thing, but an activity, “a specific mode of being” (Horubala 2024, 48) that is “inherently dynamic and so in a state of perpetual becoming” (Horubala 2024, 41). “The concept of person does not tell us what a thing is or what properties it has, but rather how it is what it is and how it has the properties that it does” (Horubala 2024, 47). Therefore, any attempt to elucidate the being of a person must take note of its active character and to ask not ‘What a person is?’ but rather ‘What kind of activity he or she is?’ or ‘In what way specifically do persons exist?’. I argue that this certain way of being a person can be elaborated by showing it to pertain essentially aesthetic moments of representation and interpretative relation.

Person and representation

It is known that the original meaning of the concept ‘person’ pointed to the mask that actors on stage wore and through which they spoke. (Spaemann 2017, 21) “Later it was extended to mean a role in society, the social position one held” (Spaemann 2017, 21), but it still signified an external appearance, a collection of certain bodily or social features that allowed to recognize and describe the role someone had or was playing. We have already noted that when we speak of persons today, we try to capture something radically different – a ‘who’ or ‘someone’ that cannot be reduced to any objectifiable semblance, such as role, let alone to a collection of some externally noticeable features. A person is a certain mode of

activity that instead of masking something or pretending to be something, realizes and expresses that person. However, despite this seemingly radical contrariety, the ancient meaning of the concept 'person', understood as an aesthetic category of representation, can still be extremely constructive and informative in disclosing what it means essentially to be a person.

Although a person cannot be reduced to any external appearances – bodily features, social roles, character traits, actions they perform, beliefs they express – it doesn't mean that these have no part in the structure of personal being. "Persons do not belong to the sphere of 'ideal beings'" (Spaemann 2017, 68-69), they are not merely ideas or pure consciousnesses. On the contrary, "continuity of person is tied to the continuity of an organism in the world, which others can identify as that of one person in particular" (Spaemann 2017, 79) and my personal being cannot be "conceived apart from the external aspect of the person, mediated primarily through the body" (Spaemann 2017, 38). In other words, my external appearances, from the basic ones, concerning my body, to the more sophisticated ones, concerning all the social roles, are indispensable for both, constituting my personal identity and being recognized as a person by others. My outer aspect or my externality is essential for me being a person.

But what kind of structural role this externality play? We cannot define or describe a person through these external appearances, but we also cannot understand what a person is without them. "The *what* we can observe and comprehend; the *who* is accessible to us only as we recognize something ultimately inaccessible" (Spaemann 2017, 39). But how does this *what* help to constitute this *who*? How does it help a person to be a person? And how does it help us to access that person who is ultimately inaccessible in a standard way that objects are accessible?

According to Spaemann, this outer aspect or external appearances is a part of the process of self-externalizing (Spaemann 2017, 105) whose function is "to reveal my subjectivity" (Spaemann 2017, 103). Externality cannot define a person, because "a 'self' is more than is given" (Spaemann 2017,

76), hence, more than any externality can present, but it can *reveal* a person or *disclose* a person. For instance, my body language, facial expressions, tone of voice express what I feel or think. My appearance choices, my opinions, beliefs, even my acts also point to someone that is behind all of that but is expressing oneself through all these external guises. This externality or this “outside is not like other objects with no subjects, but is an *inside turned out*, an outward inwardness” (Spaemann 2017, 107) – it points to and reveals someone that is expressing his or her being through this externality.

In other words, the dynamics that is going on here and is constituting a person that is “essentially subject and object at once” (Spaemann 2017, 79) can be named representation. The external appearances *represent* that someone who is trying to express oneself through those external appearances. Spaemann himself uses the term ‘representation’ only a few times, but when he does, he clearly states the same: “other people’s inwardness is accessible only through *symbolic representation* (*italics* – author) in the form of natural features. We do not know it as subjectivity. The only thing someone else can present to me is an exterior surface” (Spaemann 2017, 107). These exterior surfaces, on the one hand, conceal the person, because present ‘something’ instead of ‘someone’ that we are looking for, but cannot be captured by empirical observation or theoretical thought. On the other hand, they reveal that person, because that ‘someone’ is essentially present in those external surfaces: I am present in my choices, in my acts, in my thoughts, in the way I commit to my social roles, construct my appearance or express myself. I reveal myself, but I am not exhausted by this revelation (Spaemann 2017, 65), those external appearances only represent me, but do not replace me.

This means that the very structure of being a person is aesthetic one: representational aspect constitutes the activity that defines a person, the way that a person is. And the ancient meaning of the concept ‘person’ gains a new significance. As persons, we wear and must wear various masks as a way of expressing ourselves as persons, because this is the way our being is structured and the way it is revealed. We cannot be

reduced to merely those masks, but they are essential for our being. We are not masks, but mask-bearers. We are not roles, but role-players (Spaemann 2017, 84). We are the activity that employs those masks and roles and exist by and through this employment. Therefore, we are inherently aesthetic beings.

Person means (interpretative) relation

Representation is not the only aesthetic trait of the structure of personal being. It has been noted by many that person means relation³. In other words, the activity that constitutes a person is the activity of relating. According to Walsh, “[r]elation is not just an aspiration, but the reality of who persons are” (Walsh 2023, 14) because „through that relationship to others <...> they gain a sense of who they are as selves” (Walsh 2023, 13). In other words, we are capable of recognizing ourselves as something more than just a natural being, as ‘someone’, only through the recognition and relation to other ‘someone’.⁴ What is more, relation is constitutive of our being not only as relation to others, but also as relation to ourselves. The way we relate to our externality and all its variations is essentially the way we are. Therefore, “[t]he real is <...> not that which lacks all relations <...> The real is the relationship itself” (Spaemann 2015, 93). I argue that precisely this relationality, that is the core of being a person, is a creative, interpretative, hence, an aesthetic one.

Spaemann indicates that this intrinsic relationality of a person is constituted by the fact that our nature is not something that we merely ‘are’, but something that we ‘have’. (Spaemann 2017, 31, 68) In other words, whatever external features, characteristics, relations can be seen as pertaining to us, they cannot be seen as simply what we are, but only as what we *relate to* in one way or another. This ‘having one’s nature’ always anticipates a difference and a reflective inner distance between me, as an activity or active ‘self’, and all the objectified appearances or roles that I may have. And this inner distance is precisely what makes the relationality of a person an aesthetic one. That is because by relating to my nature through that reflective distance, I interpret that nature in one or other way. I am capable of placing a wholly different sign – positive or

negative – before everything that my nature simply is: I can take it on, carry it through or rebel against it and refuse it. (Spaemann 2017, 45, 72)

For instance, although eating is a purely natural need given to us just in order to keep our biological life, today we have re-interpreted it into something much more, a social event, where the company, the place, the aesthetics plays almost an equal part as food consumption itself.⁵ We are also able to refuse eating, even if we are hungry, if we feel this helps to express a deeper message – for instance, go on a hunger strike for some moral or political ideal. In other words, we can choose a purely negative thing and interpret it as a positive one, or choose a positive thing and interpret it as a negative one. We are even capable to put a negative sign before our own life, if we see that as necessary – we can sacrifice our life for others, for our friends or family, or country. “Life only lives on the sacrifice of life” (Spaemann 2012, 25),- says Spaemann, having in mind that sometimes we are capable of saving our personal identity, our personal life, only by giving up our physical existence, hence, by sacrificing our life. Interpretation permeates every way we choose to externalize ourselves – the way we choose to look, the way we choose to present and express ourselves, the way we fulfil our social roles, even the way we construct our personal relations with others. For instance, although we might have many friends none of those friendships will be the same, all of them will have their own different dynamics, inner tensions and intimacies, goals and realizations. And that is because with every friend we relate a little bit differently, we interpret that relation a little bit differently.

In other words, as was noticed by Schindler, “a person cannot simply be its nature in a passive way but has to relate itself to its nature, or in other words *to take up a certain position* (*Italics* – author) with respect to his given nature” (Schindler 2024, 89-90), “to make something like a decision regarding who one is <...> the essence that constitutes personhood is a self-relating essence, which thus requires what we might call an active participation in its own reality” (Schindler 2024, 90). This means that, although a person is a

source of various relations that he has with himself and everything around him, these relations are not automatic, they include the moment of freedom. Persons relate to their nature freely, “they freely endorse the laws of their being, or alternatively they rebel against them and ‘deviate’”. (Spaemann 2017, 33) This creative freedom – a concrete way every one of us chooses to relate to our nature and the world around us – is actually what makes us more than just instances of a universal concept or a certain species (Spaemann 2017, 16, 19, 32), it makes us unique and incommensurable individuals.

This also means that relationality – an activity of relating that constitutes personal being – is an intrinsically aesthetic activity. “Poetically man dwells” means first and foremost that “we cannot make a clean break between the way we construct ourselves and the way we really are” (Spaemann 2017, 89). We are by constructing ourselves, by constantly interpreting and creatively relating to everything around us – to our own external guises, features and roles, as well as to others. Everything that is given to us, all of our nature, our bodily capabilities and appearances, our skills and talents, our character traits, psychological predispositions, social roles, biological and social relations determined by nature and society, even our needs and inclinations “contain no more than instructions for role play” (Spaemann 2017, 83). I choose the way I relate to my appearances, do I nurture or change it. I choose the way I fulfil my social roles and nurture my relationships with people, the way I am a daughter, a student, a friend. I chose even the way I relate to any kind of fortune or misfortune that might befall me – will I be a fighter, a victim, or an indifferent cynic. Poetically man dwells because the core of his being, the way he exists – his relationality – is aesthetic one.

2. Recognition as an aesthetic capacity

But as being a person automatically includes being a moral agent, it means that our moral capacity is also constituted by this aesthetic structure of being a person. In other words, moral or ethical relation to the world is at the same time an aesthetic relation. But what kind of aesthetic

relation can constitute us as moral agents and guarantee us at least some kind of moral certainty? Doesn't that automatically lead us to some kind of moral relativism or subjectivism? If morality is fundamentally constituted by aesthetic categories, how can we have any sort of moral truth?

This question can be answered considering the conception of recognition that is the way we relate to other persons and, hence, is a grounding of all our personal relations and a source of our moral capacity. According to Spaemann, first and foremost, recognition is our ability to recognize another person as real, as a centre-of-being that has its own inwardness and active subjectivity. (Spaemann 2015, 81-83) It is an instant perception that the other is not merely an object, but a subject with his needs, aims and tendencies. It is the transcendence of all the external appearances that are available for us as empirical phenomena and the grasping of that 'someone' that is behind all those external guises and is inaccessible for us as a phenomenon. In other words, it is the peculiar grasping of the reality of other's subjectivity, of that activity that constitutes the being of the person, of the way that other exists and the priority of this subjectivity over any of the objectified external guises the person might construe.

Spaemann emphasizes that recognition is an exceptional kind of relation, it is the very "entry into the sphere of the personal" (Spaemann 2017, 186) and "a step into a wholly new form of relation" (Spaemann 2017, 186) with other instead of that other's objectified cognition. According to him, "duties to persons are derived from the duty to notice them as persons" (Spaemann 2017, 184), hence, from recognition, which means that recognition enables our capacity for morality. Even our own self-understanding as persons is dependent on recognition – it is the source of personhood as such. However, Spaemann does not go into details how such a relation is possible, how precisely does it happen, how does it work and what is its inner structure.

I intend to show that, recognition, as stemming from aesthetic constitution of personal being, is also an aesthetic capacity. Its aesthetic features are disclosed with the help of Kant's considerations of aesthetic categories of *sensus*

communis and the sublime. The analysis of these Kantian ideas enables us to reveal that the intrinsic structure and the working of recognition is very similar to the aesthetic Kantian categories of *sensus communis* and the judgment of the sublime. And although it enables us to disclose the intrinsically aesthetic nature of recognition, it does not lead us to any kind of moral subjectivism or relativism. Just as Kant's aesthetics discloses the possibility of a different kind of truth than the one that is found within objective or scientific knowledge, the same is true of recognition and the personal moral sphere that it opens up. Instead of moral objectivity, which is based on scientific worldview, we discover the possibility of a different kind of moral truth – practical moral certainty.

It should be noted that Spaemann himself does not develop such parallel between his conception of recognition and Kant's aesthetic ideas. Overall, his relationship with Kant is complicated and, in some ways, conflicting. Zaborowski noted that "Spaemann maintains, for instance, that the Kantian dualism of the noumenal and the phenomenal worlds indicates a path for preserving human subjectivity and freedom against the reductionistic claim of scientism" (Zaborowski 2010: 248). However, at the same time, Spaemann believed that "Kant did not articulate an adequate notion of the free recognition of the reality of the other as similar to oneself" (Zaborowski 2010: 248). "Contrary to the Kantian narrowing of ethics, it must be said that it is not the demand for impartiality which is the basis of all moral decisions, but rather that it is the perception of the reality of the other and even of one's own self" (Spaemann 2000: 99) In other words, since Spaemann develops an ontological conception of a person as a grounding for all reality, including our moral life, Kant's transcendental position and conception of a purely rational subject remain too rationalistic and 'thin' for him to account for such personal reality. "Personhood is not the same as being governed by reason" (Spaemann 2012: 23). Instead of prioritising pure reason over life, Spaemann seeks to resolve their opposition by proposing their synthesis where rationality becomes a way of being alive. According to him he seeks to develop a position where "reason stops standing abstractly over against life, and becomes concrete and fills itself

with living power” (Spaemann 2000: 103). This also becomes a ground for further opposition between Spaemann and Kant. For instance, love and happiness (taken as a certain interpretation of eudaimonia) are the expression of this synthesis of reason and life and constitutive elements within Spaemann’s understanding of morality and moral subject. Kant, on the other hand, at least within the “Critique of Practical Reason” sees them as merely pathological determination that must be left outside of moral domain – only purely rational determination constitutes moral worth.

However, such Spaemann’s opposition to Kant is mostly based on Spaemann’s view towards the first two Kant’s Critiques. Spaemann doesn’t explicitly interpret the third Critique and Kant’s aesthetic ideas within the context of morality. I intend to argue that at least two of those aesthetic ideas – the idea of *sensus communis* and the experience of the sublime – enable us to interpret Spaemann’s conception of recognition as an aesthetic category and discloses a close connection between aesthetics and morality.

A moment of sublime

First of all, although Kant himself links sublimity with the experience of nature objects (such as stormy sea or mountains, or earthquake) (Kant 2007, 76, 93), the same aesthetic structure can be found at work within our capacity of recognition. In other words, recognition of another person can be seen as a little moment of sublime.

According to Kant, the judgment of sublime, which is one of the aesthetic judgments, is a reflective judgment. Within this judgment a boundless or immense object (for instance, a stormy sea) is just a precondition and a pretext for our mind to reflectively turn onto itself. While encountering the immense or infinitely potent external object, our imagination is trying to encompass it within our judgment but remains unable to do so. Despite that, we discover that we are able to have an idea of this immenseness or totality. In other words, the imagination’s inability to fully capture that immenseness by our senses turns our mind reflectively onto itself and onto an understanding that we are able to have a

different kind of grasp of certain things that are too immense or too absolute for our imagination to capture them by senses. We are able to have supersensible ideas. Hence, the judgment of sublime enables us to regard “the infinite of supersensible intuition <...> as given (in its intelligible substrate), [although it] transcends every standard of sensibility” (Kant 2007, 85). In other words, immense or infinitely potent experiences which are too vast or total for our imagination and senses, enables us to reflectively detect a capacity within our own nature for absolute and infinite, hence, supersensible ideas. We are able to contemplate them, to be guided by them, to rely on them in our thought and action. Such discovery, according to Kant, is a reflective discovery that there is something in our own nature that transcends pure nature and is supersensible. “Sublimity, therefore, does not reside in any of the things of nature, but only in our own mind, in so far as we may become conscious of our superiority over nature within, and thus also over nature without us” (Kant 2007, 94). For instance, even if a violent and raging storm might take our life, it cannot subjugate our freedom or destroy our capacity to do good – a person that lost his life in a storm but helped other 100 persons to survive remains the one that became superior over nature, despite the fact that the price of such superiority was his own life.

However, such superiority over nature and our sublime capacity for the supersensible can be captured not only by encountering nature itself and its immenseness and totality. The same or very similar aesthetic structure of realizing our own sublimity is found as an intrinsic feature of recognition. Through recognition we gain a relation to something that is purely supersensible and cannot be reduced to any kind of object or phenomenon – another person, his or her subjectivity, his or her active ‘self’. “This presumes, of course, a measure of passive availability to knowledge first: the other must be an object of sense-perception, construed as ‘human being’ in the way that other living creatures are construed as what they are. But the personal existence of the other is not construed like that, but ‘noticed’ by an act of free recognition.” (Spaemann 2017, 183) In other words, just like in the judgment of sublime,

we first encounter some external phenomena, which is vast or even endless – we can describe a person through many of his bodily or psychological features or social roles, we can distinguish him as a blond, tall, friendly, helpful, a friend, a brother, a student and so on. However, at the same time, the endlessness of those features discloses that there is still something more to that person that cannot be captured by any amount of those descriptions. “[A] centre of being is, by definition, not something available to knowledge as a phenomenon.” (Spaemann 2017, 182) Senses and experience on their own cannot capture what a person as a unity of life, an activity of a ‘self’, a being that thinks, acts and lives, is.

Therefore, through the encounter of the externality of a person we are directed toward that ‘someone’ that exists beyond this externality. In other words, “other people’s inwardness is accessible only through symbolic representation in the form of natural features. We do not know it as subjectivity. The only thing someone else can present to me is an exterior surface” (Spaemann 2017, 107). However, just like in the Kantian judgment of the sublime, the exterior surface, or that which is susceptible through senses, a nature, services as symbolic representation and a pretext to conceive that which is supersensible. The same aesthetic structure that was visible within the judgment of sublime is at work within recognition. The experience of outer aspects of a person leads us to conceive the insufficiency of them for the understanding of a person and directs us towards acknowledgement that a person is something more than any kind of external semblance can present.

Recognition also keeps the reflective moment found within the judgment of sublime. Only through recognizing the reality of another person I do recognize myself as a person, hence, as someone that is more than an organic center that can subjugate everything for one’s own purposes. Only by encountering the other as the other, as a free subjectivity, we detect a certain moral boundary – we cannot treat the other as a mere object, because he or she is precisely not an object, but a subject, a person, a center of being. In other words, “[t]o recognize a person means pre-eminently to restrain my own

potentially unlimited urge for self-expansion. It means to resist the inclination to see the other only as a factor in my own life-project” (Spaemann 2017, 186). So, through recognition we not only encounter the other as real, but also myself as real – as a person, a moral being, that can and must restrict oneself in relation to others.

According to Kant, within the judgment of sublime, “[t]he feeling of our incapacity to attain to an idea that is a law for us, is respect” (Kant 2007, 87). Such respect is also just another word for recognition. By recognizing the other as a centre of being and his inviolability because of that, we are recognizing the incomparable uniqueness and incommensurability of persons (Spaemann 2017, 185) that provokes our moral self-restraint. “That is ‘respect’: respect for one who can never be made an object, never a means subservient to my own universe of significance” (Spaemann 2017, 186) because he or she is something more than an object or a function for me. He or she is autonomous subject that we cannot attain or subjugate as a mere object. Here Kant’s idea of the sublime acquires a similar role as in Christian Nae’s analysis of it where it is regarded “as the ‘presentation of the absence of the other’” (Nae 2010: 379) and the Other – “as a specific limit of our representation, due to the inadequacy of our imagination in face of the Other regarded as a mere rational Idea” (Nae 2010: 379). However, in Nae’s analysis this inability to experience a direct and full relation with the Other is later explicated as our existential identification with Other due to our mutual finitude and mortality, hence, through the certain experience of negativity. Spaemann, on the other hand, depicts the recognition of the Other as a certain ability to grasp something positive about the Other that cannot be known directly through empirical experience – namely the active, constructive subjectivity of the other, his or her way of realizing personal being.

In other words, recognition is an aesthetic category because its intrinsic structure works just as an aesthetic judgment of the sublime. It stumbles upon the external appearances of the person and is directed to someone that those external appearances cannot capture but represent as existing

behind them. Just as within the judgment of the sublime, recognition reveals our superiority over nature, a transcendence of oneself and other as merely self-interested organic centre and provokes normatively binding respect. Breaking through the symbolic representation of the other, recognition enables to perceive the other and oneself as someone that is supersensible and unattainable as a phenomenon, but at the same time ontologically real.

A kind of sensus communis

The judgment of the sublime is not the only Kantian aesthetic structure that can be found at work within recognition. The ability of recognition to remain purely personal, but at the same time not to drift toward pure subjectivism or relativism and to guarantee moral certainty, even if it is not based on objective knowledge, is also constituted by aesthetic structure which is similar to Kantian *sensus communis*. Both of them – *sensus communis* and recognition – try to develop an alternative conception of truth in contrast to objective knowledge and they do that by relying on an imaginative capacity of including the perspectives of the others within the judgment.

First of all, recognition, just as *sensus communis*, is essentially constituted by and through a sympathetic connection with others. According to Kant, “by the name *sensus communis* is to be understood the idea of a public sense, <...>, a faculty of judging which in its reflective act takes account <...> of the mode of representation of everyone else, in order <...> to weigh its judgement with the collective reason of mankind” (Kant 2007, 123). In other words, it is an ability, provided by imagination, to perceive that others have their own subjective perspectives and even an ability to try these perspectives on. *Sensus communis* broadens our own judgment by including these other perspectives in this judgment as its normative qualification. The reality of others (even if they are just possible others) as the ones that have their own judgment, their own view and attitude, is intrinsically constitutive for the judgment of taste when we try to decide if something is beautiful or ugly.

It is an attempt to integrate the plurality of those possible judgments within mine.

The same is to be said about recognition. Recognition as such is constituted precisely by realizing the reality of others – their subjectivity, their ability to judge and act for themselves. It is the realization that the other is not merely an object or a phenomenon, but a centre of being, a self, the other (me), and “I am part of her world, as she is part of mine. I exist for her as she exists for me.” (Spaemann 2017, 78) We are aware not only of the subjectivity of one particular other that we happen meet, but “of the gaze of all others, the gaze of all possible others” (Spaemann 2017, 15). The reality of these possible others, that is grasped with the help of imagination, enables our self-transcendence: it creates “a point of view from outside one’s own organic centre.” (Spaemann 2017, 15) It is not the view from nowhere, pictured by Thomas Nagel (Nagel 1986). Rather it is the view from everyone or at least from those others that are relative to the situation. It is the point of view that presupposes and starts from the plurality of persons and their coexistence, not my own individual existence.

What is more, precisely because of such presupposition of plurality of others, both, *sensus communis* and recognition, are able to restrict pure self-centredness and provide us with impartiality, although none of them involve objectivity. According to Kant, *sensus communis* “is accomplished <...> by putting ourselves in the position of everyone else” (Kant 2007, 123) and this aesthetic procedure of broadening our own judgment with the possibility of wholly different perspectives enables us to avoid self-centred partiality.

Personal recognition avoids self-centredness and achieves moral certainty in the same way – by recognizing the reality of others, putting ourselves in the position of others and qualifying our moral judgment according to that. Of course, I still approach the situation as a particular person, from my subjectivity, from my first-person perspective, but I approach it with the presupposition that I am only one among many others. So, “there is a self-restraint required, on the basis of a shift in perspective. <...> To recognize a person means pre-eminently to restrain my own potentially unlimited urge for self-expansion.

It means to resist the inclination to see the other only as a factor in my own life-project” (Spaemann 2017, 186). This restraint emerges from the very recognition that the other is not an object, but a center of being requiring different kind relation than objects. At the very least, it “demands the pure “letting-be” of the other in its irreducible otherness” (Spaemann 2000, 96), hence, the inviolability of the other’s subjectivity.

However, in addition to this moment of self-restraint, recognition has a deeper level of connecting with others that enables impartiality. Recognition is the grasping of the being of the other person that lies beyond all his or her external appearances. That being is not a phenomenon or an object, it is an activity and activities or acts “are available to the extent that we engage in them, whether actively or by reflective imagination” (Spaemann 2017, 183) – it “requires a certain sympathetic engagement” (Spaemann 2017, 183). In other words, I can truly capture the being of other person only by sympathetically engaging into that being, by in one way or another “tending in the same direction, <...> being-out-toward the same” (Spaemann 2000, 97) as the other. This “being-out-toward the same” at the bare minimum can be interpreted as merely tolerating the other’s existence, his aims, acts, tendencies, but at the same time it can also be much more intense – it can be an active support of other’s dreams and plans or an actual help in realizing them. In any way, it is not only the restriction of my self-centeredness, but also an active engagement in the being of others. By taking note of their interests (Spaemann 2017, 183) recognition qualifies our moral judgment in a normative way and provides impartiality and some guidance in treating the other in accordance with that person’s perspective. And all these aspects within the structure of recognition correspond to the structure of Kant’s aesthetic judgment, at least as interpreted by such thinkers as Tamar Japaridze, who, while analysing Kant’s conceptions of *sensus communis* and the sublime, argues that “the repression of self-interest liberates the senses and affirms the encounter with the other (being)” (Japaridze 2000: 21).

Finally, because of being constituted by the inclusion of the perspectives of others, recognition just as *sensus communis*,

provides a different kind of certainty than objective or factual knowledge. The aesthetic structure of these judgments enables to disclose a different conception of truth. According to Kant, we can define taste or *sensus communis* “as the faculty of judging that makes our feeling in a given representation universally communicable without the mediation of a concept” (Kant 2007, 125). In other words, it is not an objective knowledge of a phenomena (that is the prerogative of the faculty of Understanding), but it still provides us with judgments that are universally communicable. For instance, when we judge something to be beautiful it doesn’t mean that it is beautiful only for me, I judge it to be beautiful in general and expect others to endorse such judgment, although I cannot give any evidence or arguments that it is beautiful. According to Kant, such peculiar appeal to universal validity arises precisely because the judgment of taste is an aesthetic judgment based on reflective inclusion of other perspectives. It does not refer to our subjective tastes, pleasure or displeasure provided by senses, but is constituted by the free play of the faculties of understanding and imagination. Therefore, although it does not provide us with objective knowledge, it still has some kind of certainty and universality.

The same can be said about the personal recognition – it is not knowledge, we cannot ‘know’ a person because “being a person is not an objective occurrence” (Spaemann 2017, 181). But we can and do recognize a person as someone that is ontologically real. This recognition provides us with such kind of certainty that objective knowledge never could. It enables us to notice the very being of another person, not merely his objectified appearances. According to Spaemann, through recognition “[t]ruth itself appears not as the universal that is greater than any individual, but as the unique countenance of another individual person.” (Spaemann 2017, 21) In other words, the truth that we encounter within our practical moral lives is not empirical or theoretical one that can be subsumed under some generalizations or abstract concepts. Rather it is ontological – it reveals the truth of other’s reality, the reality of a person that transcends all empirical observations and

theoretical generalizations and can only be grasped as a free activity of that other's self.

What is more, recognition of the reality of a person becomes the source of any further moral certainty. It provides not only the restriction of my own self-expansion and treating other as merely an object, but, through the sympathetic engagement in other person's reality, in his aims, dreams, wishes and needs, it also provides us with guidance of how we should act and treat that particular person in various moral situations. According to Zaborowski, "[t]he epistemological status of this kind of simple, elementary, and immediate knowledge differs significantly from philosophical, scientific, and technological knowledge. It is a 'certainty we all sense' (Zaborowski 2010, 69). On the one hand, this certainty is concrete, it stems from personal recognition, hence, from the relationship of two or more persons in a concrete moral situation. On the other hand, it is absolute and unconditional, dictated through the engagement in other's reality and acceptance of his or her inherent dynamicity – needs, aims and tendencies. Hence, "[i]t is not the most impersonal, but the most personal observation that reveals most of what reality is in itself. It is one of those persistent prejudices of modern thought to think that the less subjective something is the more objective." (Spaemann 2017, 89) And although the inherent structure of recognition is aesthetic, it does not dismiss moral truth, but offers a different conception of it than objectivity – a moral certainty that is constituted by a relation with the other as a real person.

3. Conclusions

Although Spaemann mentions aesthetic moments of being a person sparsely, they appear to be essential for understanding what a person inherently is. Spaemann himself emphasizes that the being of a person is better captured not as an object, but as an activity. This activity turns out to be an aesthetic one that is constituted by the categories of representation and interpretative relation. A person cannot be conceived without his or her external aspects – his bodily appearance, character features, social roles – however, those

external aspects do not exhaust that person, but merely represent him or her. This externality represents 'someone', a 'self', that exists behind it and only express oneself through it. Also, as person is essentially constituted by his or her relationality, this relationality proves to be inherently interpretative one. Persons exists by interpretatively relating to everything around them – their own external appearances and others.

What is more, recognition of another person, which is essentially an entry into the sphere of various other personal relations and the grounding of morality, also appears to be an aesthetic category. Its inherent structure is the same as or at least extremely similar to Kant's conceptions of *sensus communis* and the judgment of the sublime. Just as the Kantian judgment of sublime is constituted by reflective transcendence of our inability to have a sensory intuition of an immense phenomena towards our capacity to have a supersensible idea of it, recognition is the transcendence of an endless external features of a person that cannot exhaust that person towards the grasp of 'someone' behind those features. Recognition is a moment of sublime while encountering the supersensible or ontological reality of the person. And just as Kantian *sensus communis* and its universality is grounded in aesthetic capacity of including the perspectives of others within our own judgment, recognition is also constituted in the exact same way.

Consequently, the aesthetic constitution of recognition enables us to reconstruct an alternative understanding of moral truth provided by it. Instead of moral objectivity it enables talk about a different kind of moral certainty which stems from the recognition of the reality of other persons and becomes both, the restriction of self-centered partiality and the normative guidance for treating others.

NOTES

¹ Most of these reflections can be found within a brief section called „Fiction“ in his book *Persons. The Difference between 'Someone' and 'Something'* (2017).

² For instance, in his review of Spaemann's *Persons. The Difference between 'Someone' and 'Something'* Madigan mentions the section about fiction but calls it merely an 'illustration' of the fact that persons are not simply identical with their natures (Madigan 2010, 379). This paper, however, argues that persons' ability to create fictions and their aesthetic creativity in general plays a structural role within the very being of a person.

³ It is the core idea of David Walsh in his lecture "Person Means Relation" (2023) given at University of Dallas, and his other works, including his book *Politics of the Person* as the *Politics of Being* (2016). Also, this idea is developed in John McNerney's book *Myself as Another. A Journey to the Heart of Who We Are* (2024), where he analyses the idea through the thought and lives of many different thinkers, such as Hannah Arendt, Paul Ricoeur, Jacques Derrida and others.

⁴ Spaemann develops this idea through his observation that „persons exist only in plural“ (2017: 2, 77, 232, 134). The plurality of persons and the mutuality of recognition is one the core ideas in his conception of a person.

⁵ Spaemann himself analysis this example in his *Happiness and Benevolence* (2000, 166). Also, introduces various other examples in his other texts.

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