

**«BELIEF IN THE EXISTENCE OF OTHER HUMAN BEINGS AS SUCH IS LOVE».
THE INDIVIDUALITY AND REALITY OF PERSONS IN ANDREI
TARKOVSKY'S *SOLARIS***

I

The word 'virtual' acquired the sense of «not physically existing but made to appear by software»¹ already in the 1950's when the first advances in computer technology were made. Yet, compared to the 1950's and to the clumsy fantasies of virtual reality technology in the 1980's and 1990's, it is only in our present age when virtual simulation of events and things, up to the presence of the other person, has become a real possibility. While those born in the 1980's and earlier might still remember a time when 'xeroxation'² implied a diminishing of quality in the case of the copy and hence an antagonism between the copy and the original, today the promise of digital technology seems to be something of the opposite: everything can be imitated, simulated and made to appear, to the extent that a qualitative distinction between the copy and the original is becoming obsolete.

In this short essay, I seek to show that contrary to the modern promise of virtual technology there is a limit to simulation, and that this limit and the corresponding 'unsimulatable' can be pointed out by

examining one specific film by the Russian director Andrei Tarkovsky.

II

In the film *Solaris* (1972), by Tarkovsky, the psychologist Kris Kelvin is asked to embark on a journey to the mysterious and far-away planet Solaris, while scientists inhabiting a space station orbiting the planet have ceased all communication with earth. We see Kelvin having a conversation with his old father about the prospect that he might not be alive when Kelvin returns. He meets with and interviews other scientists, who have returned from the planet, concerning some previous unaccountable events they have witnessed on Solaris, and finally sets off on the journey.

Having arrived on the space station, Kelvin to his shock finds out that his long-time friend among the crew, Dr. Gibarian, has committed suicide. The two remaining persons on the station have decided to lock themselves in their sleeping quarters. Soon it becomes evident that Kelvin and the scientists Sartorius and Snaut are not alone: The oceanic planet is producing appearances based on the humans' most hidden dreams, desires or memories, perhaps to communicate. These apparitions, or as the scientists on the station call them, «visitors», take a human form, but contrary to mere hallucinations, are something that

also others can perceive and interact with. One morning Kelvin awakes to realize that the planet's effect on his brainwaves has taken a physical form: the visitor is none other than his late wife Hari, who committed suicide years earlier. Frightened, Kelvin seeks to dispel the apparition: he leads her into an escape capsule and launches it to space, only to realize the next morning that Hari is again there...

Soon, the three persons' attitudes to their visitors begin to vary. Whereas Sartorius and Snaut regard theirs as an unpleasant nuisance, Kelvin begins to accept that Hari is another person, even though she seems oddly bound to Kelvin's presence. Kelvin begins showing her films of her and of their time together and, in the end, introduces Hari as his wife to Sartorius and Snaut. These actions earn Kelvin the disdain of others, especially Sartorius, who mocks Kelvin and calls Hari a mere ensemble of elementary particles. In one of the film's most memorable scenes, after being questioned of her existence and reality, Hari turns to address the camera and the viewer directly and confronts the scientists: «perhaps I am a mere mechanical copy as you say, but I am becoming human, I can feel as deeply as you, I love him, I am a human being...»

From this point it is evident that Hari is something more than a mere phantom, an ensemble of elementary particles. She is a subject, she has started to gain independence from Kelvin's presence, can experience

pain and even despair of her strange existence.

«It is evident» ... It is evident *both* to the viewer *and* to Kelvin that Hari is a conscious subject of her own right. Yet, one could imagine a puppet, or a zombie implanted with a programmed behavior-pattern that *makes* the device act just like Hari, to interact just like she did, and perhaps even to anticipate the doubts of her existence and answer to them appropriately to seem a real person. What guarantees that Kelvin, and the assumed viewer, are not mistaken in their belief in the independent existence of Hari, in that she truly is a conscious subject? What guarantees that Kelvin and we, the viewers, are not thoroughly deceived and the scientists Sartorius and Snaut right?

Such questions and doubts have a certain childlike quality. «What if all my family and relatives were replaced with imposters or robots that would *seemingly* behave just like real people, but *in reality*...» One can never totally assure a childlike narcissist that there 'truly is' a reality beyond her illusory world. Still, such questions have a certain urgency too, and not the least due to the current tendency towards imitation and simulation of events, persons and things.

III

But how, then, one can dispel such fears, how can one *know* that

others are 'truly there' and not replaced by robots by some malicious demon?

The German philosopher Robert Spaemann has developed a philosophy of personhood in several treatises³. At times, Spaemann has called his position a metaphysical realism towards personhood. In the following I suggest, that by explicating what such a metaphysical realism amounts to, some tentative answers to these questions can be provided.

When seeking to paraphrase a complicated philosophical position, a concrete example is often the most suitable place to start. In his work Spaemann has given two examples of his position, both variations of the same core-theme: First, consider the pain of another. Let's say a person lies in pain on her deathbed but is unable to express her inner states and feelings in any way. How are we able to know, whether the other is in pain or not? Here, the one who makes a judgement regarding the pain of another cannot possess any *objective* criteria to assess the other's felt pain. Still, Spaemann maintains, a statement regarding the subjective state of the other can be true or false. In such a case, it is just that the other's consciousness and felt pain provide the only and absolute criteria of truth for such a statement, «and we know *that*»⁴, even if we would possess no criteria to verify the truth of the statement. Or, consider a case in which you have dreamt of having

taken a walk on the mountainside with a friend, of having seen a hut with a grey roof and four birds sitting on top of it. In case of the dream, it would not make sense to correct you regarding the dream; that in reality there were five birds instead of four on the roof, that the roof was green instead of gray et cetera. The only difference regarding the content of the dream that you *can be corrected on*, according to Spaemann, concerns the *real presence of the friend*. In the dream, you dreamt not only that *you* had taken the walk, but also that the friend was "really there". As Spaemann argues:

«A non-pervert person wants to have *real* friends, and not only to dream and imagine having them. None of us would want to lie in bed for the rest of her life in a state of drug-induced euphoria. [...] If a person would hear on her deathbed that her children have been saved from a terrible accident, she would want to know, if it is also *truly so*»⁵

These seemingly banal examples contain a profound philosophical insight. They both touch upon the problem of the being and presence of the other for us. More precisely, they point out that the being and reality of the other person cannot be reduced to her being merely something *for us*. In this way, they point to the manner of givenness of

persons to each other. Namely, in their givenness persons differ thoroughly from how other beings and things are given to the subject. What Spaemann indicates through his examples is, put in more technical terminology, that the «being» (*esse*) and presence of another person never coincides with her «being perceived» (*percipi*), i.e. her being the object of one's intentional acts ⁶. In this way, the other's being a person implies that her «reality» *for herself* surpasses every possible manner of givenness for us. Such considerations have led Spaemann to express his position in the form of a claim: «[The consciousness of the other] is for us an absolute being, and as such, and not based on the possibility of communication, criteria of truth»⁷.

Such a position can indeed be characterized as metaphysical realism regarding personhood. Namely, if the consciousness of the other must be understood as the absolute criteria of her presence and existence, then her very being and existence *transcends* the bounds of knowledge and position-taking of another subject, and her existence is *in this sense* absolute, independent, and «not relative to something else»⁸. Yet, Spaemann does not argue that knowledge would have no place in human relations or that another person, her states of mind, feelings, etc. would be in principle undecipherable to the other. Rather, what Spaemann implies is that giving way to a fundamental doubt regarding

the existence of the other means that one misunderstands the way persons are given to one another. In the last instance, our relation to one another is *primarily* not an epistemic one, a matter of knowledge, but of trust and of recognition.

Importantly, for Spaemann, a paradigmatic case of a relation of the latter kind is love. His characterizations for love are derived from the aspects of personal existence elucidated in the examples given above. First, according to Spaemann, love cannot have an intentional object, whose ontological status would be *seriously* in doubt. One cannot truly doubt the existence of the person one loves, for love is first and foremost not directed towards the other as an object of knowledge, but rather as a «self», a person, whose being is «beyond any possible givenness» for us⁹. As was the case with the examples above, rather than to an ontological proof Spaemann's claim points to a dimension of trust or faith that underlies every possible doubt. Even if one could be and would be deceived regarding the being of another, what sense such a deception would have *as a deception* if it were not grounded in an underlying faith regarding the being and existence of others? Second, as already implied, according to Spaemann love is a special kind of intentional act, and differs from acts that are directed towards beings and things. Namely, what love is directed towards, its intentional object,

is not the other in her qualitative identity, her personality and distinctive features, but rather the other in her numerical identity, i.e. the other in her *absolute individuality and singularity*. Whereas every other intentional object is defined by its being thus and so, in other words by its qualitative features, the ‘object’ of love is not reducible to those. From this it follows that one cannot in a sense give reasons for one’s love. To say, «I love you because of this or that feature», «I love you because of your good looks» or «I love you because you are such and such a person», would betray that I do not in essence love *you*, but rather some feature of yourself that I find relevant for my own purposes¹⁰.

IV

Thus, it is becoming clear that Kelvin and the viewer are justified and ‘right’ in taking Hari as she appears in *Solaris* as a person and a subject. To doubt her independent existence, like the other scientists on *Solaris*, would display a truly inhuman attitude. Still, and precisely because Hari as she appears in *Solaris* truly is a person, whose independent existence cannot be fundamentally doubted, Kelvin’s love for Hari seems deeply paradoxical, even tragic. Namely, as intuitive as it is that Hari as she appears in *Solaris* is a person, a conscious subject capable of thinking and feeling, just as intuitive is that Hari *is not* ‘Hari’, the late wife of

psychologist Kris Kelvin, whom he once loved.

How so?

As has been already implied in the context of love and its object, being a person and personhood do not amount to «personality». To love someone, does not amount to valuing him or her because of her or his good character, beautiful appearance etc. In other words, the object of love, the individuality of the other, cannot be reduced to her subjective characteristics, of her being a such and such *a* person. Put in colloquial words, when asked, «why do you love me?» the best possible answer would be merely the tautology: «I love you because you are you».

Hence, as stated, the paradoxical intentional object of love, the absolute individuality and singularity of the other, is something that can never be given to us as such. But how, precisely, should such a notion of individuality and individuation be understood?

Once again, a philosophical thought-experiment can be helpful. Consider a case of two twins, Mick and Mack, who are completely identical regarding their physical properties and features of personality¹¹. At the moment Mick and Mack are both staring at the same white wall. Hence, also the content of Mick’s experience is completely identical to that of his twin and *vice versa* for Mack. In which sense Mick and Mack would be different, then? Would their difference

amount only to the fact that they inhabit a different position in space? And if so, would Mick and Mack not only be completely identical, but also completely replaceable?

Taken that Mick and Mack would be persons who have experiences, and not merely the *same* person, who mysteriously happens to inhabit two separate locations in space at the same time, a formal kind of individuation must exist between the twins. Traditionally, such a formal principle of individuation has been called «self-consciousness», «subjectivity» or «first-person perspective»¹². In the present essay, I cannot touch the philosophical problem of subjectivity in any depth. However, the following, put in the form of a question, seems intuitive: Isn't only Mick's current experience, even though qualitatively identical to that of Mack, experientially accessible for him, to his «first person perspective», whereas the experience of Mack is not accessible to Mick at all, and would not the same apply to Mack's experience *vis-à-vis* the self-givenness of his experience in contrast to Mick? If so, even though absolutely identical in the qualitative sense, Mick and Mack would still be in a fundamental and irreducible sense individual and hence two *separate* persons and subjects instead of one.

In a similar fashion, consider the possibility that the person we love would be replaced with a perfect double. The double would be a living

and breathing person, who would possess all the information we have of our life together, and behave and act just as the person we loved. By the means of our knowledge of him or her the deception would be impenetrable. Still, if the betrayal would be disclosed to us, we would *feel deceived*, the past of the other was not the one we genuinely shared together. Naturally it might happen, like in Kelvin's case, that we would begin to love *this* other too, but it would not be the same love.

For these reasons, even if Hari as she appears in Solaris truly is a person and a conscious subject, she still *is not* Hari, the late wife of Kris Kelvin, whom he once loved and who is now lost forever. Or, in more philosophical terms, even though Hari as she appears in Solaris is qualitatively identical in terms of personality, behavior, outlook et cetera to Hari on earth, and even if Hari as she appears in Solaris is an individual human being, she *for the very same reason* is still not the *same person* as Hari on earth.

V

«What can be simulated is always qualitative and quantitative»¹³, Robert Spaemann argues. In the above an account has been sketched, according to which the reality and individuality of persons is in the last instance not a matter of qualitative or quantitative individuation and

hence is not simulatable. And, this paradoxical matter is manifest in the presence of Hari for us, the viewers of *Solaris*, and for Kris Kelvin. Thus, by presenting a phenomenon that might be termed «the paradox of personhood», Tarkovsky has managed to point a limit to simulation years before any advances towards current digital technology were made.

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¹ Definition from Online Etymology Dictionary.

² From the “Xerox corporation”, manufacturer of printers and document technology.

³ Presented among others in his book *Personen – ein Unterschied zwischen ‘etwas’ und ‘jemand’*, Klett-Cotta, Stuttgart 1996, and in the essay “Über die Bedeutung der Worte, ‘ist’, ‘existiert’ und ‘es gibt’” in *Philosophisches Jahrbuch*, 2010: 1, pp. 5–19. In the following, some notes to Spaemann’s texts have been omitted for the sake of readability.

⁴ R. Spaemann, *Personen*, op. cit., p.15.

⁵ R. Spaemann “Über die Bedeutung der Worte, ‘ist’, ‘existiert’ und ‘es gibt’”, op. cit., p.85. Emphases mine.

⁶ *Ivi*, p. 191.

⁷ R. Spaemann *Personen*, op. cit., p. 15. In addition to Spaemann, many other philosophers have presented claims such as these. One of them is Emmanuel Levinas, who for example presents a similar case by employing the notions of “idea of infinity” and “transcendence” in the essay “Philosophy and the Idea of the Infinite”, in *Collected Philosophical Papers*, transl. by Alphonso Lingis, Martinus Nijhoff, Dordrecht 1987. Unbeknownst to the author when writing the essay, Sara Heinämaa has presented similar arguments as Spaemann regarding love and transcendence by employing Descartes’ concepts of admiration or wonder in her recent treatise “Love and Admiration (Wonder): Fundamentals of the Self-Other Relations” in Drummond, John and Rinofner-Kreidl, Sonja (eds.) *Emotional Experiences: Ethical and Social Significance*,

2017 forthcoming.

⁸ Which is a modification of the traditional definition of metaphysical realism, i.e. of a view that the world is as it is independent of how humans or other perceivers take it to be. For an additional definition and evaluation of metaphysical realism, see D. Khlentzos, Challenges to Metaphysical Realism. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/realism-sem-challenge/>>.

⁹ R. Spaemann, *Personen*, op. cit., p. 85.

¹⁰ On some occasions Spaemann has used the German phrase *Seinlassen* (literally: “letting-be”) of love and the reciprocal relation of recognition that is its basis. He writes in an essay: «Recognizing someone means letting the recognized be of such kind that she is conceived as independent of this act of recognition, in the sense that she is not constituted by it.» R. Spaemann, “Über die Bedeutung der Worte, ‘ist’, ‘existiert’ und ‘es gibt’”, op. cit., p. 16. Translation mine. Here I am not able to analyze such an act of recognition in detail. However, it is important to note, that recognition thus conceived amounts to responding to a pre-given demand that stems from the other. Hence, recognition in Spaemann’s sense is not primarily an active, constituting act, but rather a responsive one. I, for one, tend to see some fragments found in Simone Weil’s *Gravity and Grace* as expressions of this kind of recognitive act as “Seinlassen”. Cf. e.g. «A beloved being who disappoints me. I have written to him. It is impossible that he should not reply by saying what I have said to myself in his name. Men owe us what we imagine they will give us. We must forgive them this debt. To accept the fact that they are other than the creatures of our imagination is to imitate the renunciation of God. I also am other than what I imagine myself to be. To know this is forgiveness.» S. Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, transl. by E. Crawford and M. von der Ruhr, Routledge, London and New York 2009, p. 9. In this way, following Spaemann and Weil, love as recognition is not a matter of sharing a value-horizon with the other or caring for the other, but implies rather that one renounces every self-centered anticipation or belief regarding the being of the other, and in this way, acknowledges her being independent of one’s evaluative acts and beliefs. For a similar argument regarding love, see also S. Heinämaa, “Love and Admiration (Wonder): Fundamentals of the Self-Other Relations”, op. cit.

¹¹ The example and the argument stem from Dan Zahavi’s book *Self and Other: exploring subjectivity, empathy and shame*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2014.

¹² In addition to Zahavi’s work, see D. Henrich *Between Kant and Hegel: Lectures in*

German Idealism. Harvard University Press, Cambridge 2008, p. 323.

¹³ R. Spaemann, *Personen*, op. cit., p. 87.