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SIMEON FRANK: THE PERSONALISTIC METAPHYSICS OF ALL-UNITY AS A STRATEGY OF A NEW ONTOLOGY

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In the twentieth century, one of the philosophical challenges was to build a new ontological paradigm. The classic notions of being with the different variants of substantialism lost credibility in the nineteenth century and were branded as fruitless metaphysics, although it has since become evident that an elimination of the ontological problem deprives philosophy of its foundation. A new turn to ontology was characterized by the merging of two fundamental philosophical questions—the problem of humanity and the problem of being—on the basis of the general striving to overcome the radical psychologism and absolute subjectivism, and to rediscover the transcendent.¹ In the new ontology, the human being is the main subject matter and, at the same time, a method of philosophical research, since only the human being provides an intimate joining of the subject and the object: here being finds itself as a being of consciousness.

Discussing the crisis of the contemporary philosophy, Simeon Frank (1877–1950) proposed the concept of a *new ontology* as an ontological epistemology which could *surmount* an opposition between the subject and the object. The new ontology, differing from the old one,

explores not the being transcendent to our consciousness, but that unconditionally immanent, primary being in the human perception, on the ground of which it appears the very opposition between the subject and the object, between the human consciousness and objective being.²

¹ Piama Gaidenko, *Proryv k transsendentnomu. Novaya ontologiya 20 veka* [Towards to the Transcendent. A New Ontology of the 20th century] (Moscow: Respublika, 1997), 7.

² Simeon Frank, “Krizis sovremennoi filosofii” [“The Crisis of Contemporary Philosophy”], in *The Russian Thought* 9 (1916): 36.

Also, Frank notes that in Russian philosophy we find such ontologism which claims the being of consciousness, which considers the human consciousness as a specific reality essentially connected with the cosmic world and divine being.

Frank's absolute realism is rightly identified with the tradition of the Russian philosophical school of all-unity, founded by Vladimir Soloviev (1853–1900). But Frank's philosophical approach to all-unity as "the incomprehensible" is notable for its thorough philosophical and logic analysis.

The ontological character of Frank's epistemology determines understanding of reality not only as a subject of knowledge but also as an autonomous and central philosophical problem. By this, there are some interesting parallels with the leading strategies in the West European philosophy. For example, Frank's ontologism is closed to Heidegger's *fundamental ontology*, thanks to its special attention to the immediate being which reveals itself in the preconscious *sum, I am*. Frank's distinction between two levels of being—reality and objectivity—may be compared with Heidegger's distinction between *das Sein* (the being) and *das Seiende* (what-is).

In *The Subject of Knowledge* (1915), Simeon Frank distinguishes two levels in the subject matter of our knowledge. He uses the terms "the given" and "the existing," which are equal to the German terms *Gegebenes* and *Vorhandene*; by this, he remarks that the translation *Vorhandene* into the Russian language as "the present" would be wrong, since here it should be emphasized as "a latent, unclear character of this immediate content of the consciousness."³ In his *The Incomprehensible* (1939), the *ontological* component of the analysis already prevails. Frank analyzes the very being and distinguishes "objectivity" and "reality."

First of all, objectivity has a predicate of *factuality*. It stands before us as an obstacle, but at the same time as a basis; the material world of objects is something concrete, something that which *stands* before us (compare with the German word *Gegen-stand*) as it were a physical body which we barge into. It is much more difficult to define *objectivity* in the sphere of mental and psychic phenomena with their illusions and hallucinations. Here objectivity as a *segment* of omnipresent totality does not coincide with all that *is* in general. *Reality* is wider than *objectivity*.

Objectivity is a subject of thought, extracted from the immediate experience. Objectivity is just a segment of the *rational* part in the whole

³ Simeon Frank, "Predmet znaniya" ["The Subject of Knowledge"], in *The Subject of Knowledge. The Human Soul* (St. Petersburg: Nauka, 1995), 124.

reality. At the same time, objectivity as a system of certain contents “is not something once and forever completed, something like a closed volume, but it is something *plastic and flexible*,” submerged into the ocean of incomprehensible irrationality.⁴

Objectivity is a segment of reality uncertain in its volume and limits: it is given to us in experience as a concrete material complex and as such is partly known by us. All objectivity is born from the womb of the possible as a real potentiality.

Here we may remember Edmund Husserl (1859–1938), for whom “the actually perceived... is partly penetrated, but partly surrounded with *an unclear realized horizon of an uncertain reality*.”⁵ Thus, one may see an obvious similarity of both thinkers’ approaches to an analysis of being as a unity of the actual and potential levels.

For Frank, the notion of the subject being is wider than the notion of objectivity as a material being; he means ideal, timeless elements and the links between the intelligible contents and entities, in study of which he recognizes the merits of Husserl and Nikolai Lossky (1870–1965). Like material objectivity, an ideal sphere of the subject being is not a closed sphere of concrete subjects (i.e., ideas in this case). The ideal being is not only infinite, but it also has its depth, and any analysis cannot utterly penetrate into this dimension of the depth.⁶

Here Frank is in discord with Husserl, since he does not consider the *eidōs* as an ultimate form of being and does not return to an analysis of the *noema* as a content of the consciousness. He agrees with Plotinus—*against* Plato and Husserl—that the *world of ideas* is thought to be existent only in the *divine spirit*, in an all-embracing unity which is not abstract and timeless but concrete and over-temporal (and in which the very time and all the temporal being is somehow contained).

Therefore, the subject being (in this wide sense too) arises from the womb of the *unconditional being*, and is conceivably rooted in the latter. The very subject being is divided between the reality of concrete things and processes in time and a timeless sphere of the *ideal being*. Both of them are united only in the perception of the unconditional being.

⁴ Simeon Frank, “Nepostizhimoye. Ontologicheskoye vvedenie v filosofiyu religii” [“The Incomprehensible: An Ontological Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion”], in *Works* (Moscow: Pravda, 1990), 262.

⁵ Edmund Husserl, *Ideyi k chistoi fenomenologii i fenomenologicheskoi filosofii* [Ideas to a Pure Phenomenology and Phenomenological Philosophy]. vol. 1. A General Introduction to a Pure Phenomenology, trans. Alexander Mikhailov (Moscow: The House of the Intellectual Book, 1999), 66.

⁶ Frank, *Nepostizhimoye*, 270.

Thus, according to Frank, the subject and absolute beings are not two different or isolated spheres. He claims that every object and phenomenon is penetrated with the incomprehensible being, is saturated with the potency of being. In his opinion, all-unity is not something that would have a diversity of the different particular contents *out of itself*; it is namely a unity of this very diversity, that the whole in relation to which the part could only be conceivable as a specific one, and which is, consequently, a condition of the very diversity of parts.⁷

By the way, for Frank, *the incomprehensible* is not equal to *the unknowable*, though it may signify something the unknown or the unknowable yet as such—but the unknowable by the logical, discursive reason. In a wide sense, the incomprehensible is being or life; it is not merely an absolute (i.e., all-embracing) reality, but an absolutely concrete reality. It means that the Incomprehensible may differently manifest itself in its every manifestation, in every spatial-temporal moment. “The plural is unconditionally absent in the concrete content of reality.”⁸

In his book *Reality and Man* (1956), Simeon Frank also explains the difference between *objectivity* and *reality*. Objectivity includes the outside material world, the world of psychic phenomena (of one’s own and the others’ ones), and also the ideal forms as far as they are in things. Objectivity exists in time (and the material world exists in the space too), and it has an objective character: i.e., it is able to stand as an object for sensual and intellectual contemplation.

The world of ideal forms, however, has two kinds of being: firstly, the ideal forms exist in the things changing in the time and secondly, they have an over-temporal character. Obviously, this over-temporal ideal being transcends the limits of objectivity, existing in another way that seems to be opposite. Meanwhile, it is not separate from objectivity with an impassable barrier, but it penetrates and organizes objectivity. The ideal being has no subjective character, i.e., does not belong to an individual consciousness; simultaneously, it has no objective character, since it does not stand (in the external manner) before human consciousness. This is a sphere of *thought* or *spirit*, a universal mind (“the eternal plans of God”), in which we ourselves live and partly belong to it. This sphere cannot be comprehended with subject cognition, but with living knowledge, the knowledge-being, with the knowledge in which we not merely *have* something like the external to us, but we “have it in a special way that we ourselves with our inner creatureliness co-belong to it.”⁹ Thus, the

⁷ Frank, *Predmet znaniya*, 232.

⁸ Frank, *Nepostizhimoye*, 237.

⁹ Simeon Frank, *Real'nost' i chelovek* [Reality and Man] (Moscow: Respublika,

philosopher forms a wider notion of *reality*, which embraces both the subject-object sphere of objectivity and the over-temporal being where the subject-object opposition is eliminated.

The subject as a formal bearer and the starting point of the mental sight is placed *inside* the subject as a bearer of life immediately revealing itself. The second one is not a point, but a sphere. This is the sphere of what we call the *spiritual life*, defining with this name the life perceived as a true, immediately self-revealing *reality*. Such perception is, however, a kind of revelation in which *I* is unveiled not as an impersonal companion to our external life, but as having a concrete completeness and a substantial deepness, because of which it is a bearer of *the over-world reality*. Considering this perception, Frank appeals to St. Augustine who described it in his *Confessions*, thanks to which the religious-philosophical thought “for the first time has realized an incomparable reality of the inner *personal being*.”¹⁰

To the vulgar notion that the human soul is closed inside the human body, Frank opposes an idea of the soul as an infinity extending into fathomless depths. Moreover, it is not an infinity closed in itself (like for Heidegger) but transcends its limits, connecting with something other that which is beyond the limits—only in this sense is it comprehended as infinity. We have our being merely as a part or a member of the being itself. Thus,

my own being is not a sphere closed in itself, but it is like a sprout having its roots in the depths of the common soil of being which it is brought forth from.¹¹

For Frank, in solving the problem of *possibility* of knowledge, the main obstacle is in the deeply-rooted mistake that all that the immanent is to us our consciousness, or part of our consciousness. Still earlier than Heidegger, in *The Subject of Knowledge*, Frank tried to read the well-known maxim *cogito ergo sum* with an accent on *sum* but not on *cogito*. The formula of Descartes does not seem to be suitable for the Russian philosopher, since the human *consciousness* entirely embraces *existence*, absorbs existence in itself. Meanwhile, the only right solution to be, he supposes, is to come out the limits of the notion of consciousness as an

1997), 220.

¹⁰ Simeon Frank, “S nami Bog. Tri razmyshleniya” [“God with Us. Three Meditations”], in *The Spiritual Grounds of Society* (Moscow: Respublika, 1992), 302.

¹¹ Frank, *Real'nost' i chelovek*, 237.

ultimate category of the theory of knowledge and to look for a basis for relation of the human consciousness to the *subject* in the over-temporal unity which is given to us in the form of being but not in the form of consciousness.

Here we come to the most important point: to the notion of the immediate self-being, which signifies (in the terms of Simeon Frank) man and his mental life. One may say that Frank discovers the being of personality as “*a specific type of reality*,”¹² a unique kind of being,—and makes it in his works *The Human Soul* (1917) and *On the Nature of Mental Life* (1927), in parallel as Max Scheler did it; so in this sense Simeon Frank might be rightly considered, together with Scheler, as a founder of philosophical anthropology.

However, the philosopher himself related an appearance of the notion of personality to the Christian Good News, i.e., to the Gospel. In his book *The Light in Dark* (1949), Frank writes about the spiritual revolution, unique in its kind, which has only been done with this Good News: when humans have realized their over-natural being and their relation to God. This is the revelation which unveils the Personality (of Christ) as the truth and the Truth as the personality.

Coming back to the correlation of all-unity and personalism, we can eventually put a naïve question: is personalism defined with the frequency of repetition of *I*? Obviously, the fact of the matter is: what we do interpret as this *I*? If we realize it as a cognizing subject, a subject of cognition, then its transformation into the central category of metaphysical system leads to the complete depersonalization. An identification of *I*, i.e., personality, by pure cognitive ability eliminates the human mental, inner life in all its riches, closes the way to cognition of the human soul which does not reduce only to thought.

Unlike such an epistemological pseudo-personalism, Frank claims the personalism of being but not of consciousness. The human personalities in totality of their mental life are understood as immediate self-beings, beings-for-themselves—as absolutely concrete all-unity. The moment of all-unity is in particular revealed in what, using the term of Sergey Trubetskoy (1862–1905), can be called “the communality of consciousness”—as “consciousness in general.” Such consciousness, i.e., pure thinking, has nothing in common with the living human personality, but is just a generic feature of humankind. Joining this general consciousness, a concrete consciousness does not lose its concreteness so

¹² Simeon Frank, “O prirode dushevnoi zhizni” [“On the Nature of Mental Life”], in *Beyond the Right and the Left: The Papers Collection* (Paris: YMCA-Press, 1972), 237.

far as it belongs to reality, the *form* and *character of existence* of which absolutely does not have cognition as its essential feature.

Thus, an authentic personalism is possible only on the way of realization of non-identity of *I* and a cognizing subject. In this sense, an experience of bringing *I* up to pure epistemology will actually result the real depersonalization. Therefore, *cogito ergo sum* must be not simply turned over as *sum ergo cogito*: in this form it is quite incorrect. Though the idea to put *being* before *thinking* is right, in this case one should speak not of being in general, abstractly, but namely about self-revealing self-being, or about the life of personality and of soul. Simeon Frank had an intuition (which, before his death he explained to his son Victor), it had been formulated as follows: *cogito ergo est esse absolutum* [I think, therefore, the absolute does exist].¹³

So, let us emphasize once more: for Frank, personalism is rooted not in consciousness, but in being; not in epistemology, but in ontology. Precisely on this ontological ground, the philosopher develops an original religious-ethical conception, which, as well as his metaphysics, is basically personalistic.

¹³ Philip Boobbyer, *S. L. Frank: Zhizn' i tvorchestvo russkogo filosofa, 1877–1950* [S. L. Frank: The Life and Work of a Russian Philosopher, 1877–1950], trans. Lyudmila Pantina (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2001), 103–4.