

Kultura i Wartości

ISSN 2299-7806

Nr 40 (2025)

<http://dx.doi.org/10.17951/kw.2025.40.5-12>

Nicolai Hartmann's *Das Problem des geistigen Seins.* Introductory Remarks

Leszek Kopciuch

Uniwersytet Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej

e-mail: leszek.kopciuch@mail.umcs.pl

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9128-697X>

Nicolai Hartmann's *Das Problem des geistigen Seins* was published in 1933.¹ During Hartmann's lifetime, another edition of this work was published in 1949.² In the foreword to the first edition, Hartmann defines the object of his reflections from a strictly ontological perspective:

¹ Nicolai Hartmann, *Das Problem des geistigen Seins. Untersuchungen zur Grundlegung der Geschichtsphilosophie und der Geisteswissenschaften* (Berlin and Leipzig: Walter de Gruyter & Co., 1933). The whole work has been translated into Italian: Nicolai Hartmann, *Il problema dell'essere spirituale*, presentation, translation and glossary by Alfredo Marini (Florence: «La Nuova Italia» Editrice, 1971). An excerpt has been translated into Polish: Nicolai Hartmann, *Byt duchowy: podstawowe określenia ontologiczne*, trans. Leszek Kopciuch, "Principia. Pisma Konceptyjne z Filozofii i Socjologii Teoretycznej" 1998, no. 21–22: 21–57. A discussion of reviews written about Hartmann's *Das Problem des geistigen Seins* can be found in the article: Steffen Kluck, "Nicolai Hartmanns Philosophie des Geistes im Spiegel der Rezensionen," *Horizon. Studies in Phenomenology* 8, no. 1 (2019): 160–181, <https://doi.org/10.21638/2226-5260-2019-8-1-160-181>.

² Nicolai Hartmann, *Das Problem des geistigen Seins*, second edition (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter & Co., 1949).

The specific branches of knowledge can certainly show how a particular historical course of literary or artistic development takes shape, but not what mode of being the development itself has and how it fundamentally relates to the coarser being of the material world in which it is ontically embedded. One need only focus on this point to recognize that the general problem of spiritual being as such emerges here. This is what the present book deals with.³

Referring to his historical and theoretical sources, Hartmann mentions Wilhelm Dilthey and emphasizes the invaluable role of Hegelian inspiration:

I must say here that it was precisely the many years of my repeated internal debate with Hegel's philosophy of spirit that opened up approaches to the problem I am presenting here. The fact that behind Hegel's metaphysics of the spirit there lies a valuable piece of genuine phenomenology of the spirit gained from history—by which I do not mean the work that bears this title—is an insight the significance of which has only slowly become clear to me as I distanced myself from Hegel's dialectic and metaphysics. It resulted from the fact that the problem of spiritual being required a different separation of the dead and the living in Hegel than Croce was able to provide at the time.⁴

³ Hartmann, *Das Problem des geistigen Seins* [1933], III: „Die besonderen Wissenszweige können wohl zeigen, wie ein bestimmter geschichtlicher Gang literarischer oder künstlerischer Entwicklung sich gestaltet, aber nicht, welche Seinswerte die Entwicklung selbst hat, und wie sie sich grundsätzlich zum größeren Sein der dinglichen Welt verhält, in die sie ontisch eingebettet ist. Man braucht auf diesen Punkt nur das Augenmerk zu richten, um zu erkennen, daß hier das allgemeine Problem des geistigen Seins als solchen herauspringt. Mit ihm hat es das vorliegende Buch zu tun.”

⁴ Ibid., IV: “Ich muß es hier aussprechen, daß es gerade die langjährige, immer wieder neu einsetzende innere Auseinandersetzung mit der Hegelschen Philosophie des Geistes gewesen ist, was mir die Zugänge zu dem Problem erschlossen hat, dessen Aufrollung ich hier vorlege. Daß bei Hegel hinter der Metaphysik des Geistes ein wertvolles Stück echter, an der Geschichte gewonnener Phänomenologie des Geistes steht — womit ich das Werk nicht meine, das diesen Titel trägt —, ist eine Einsicht, deren Gewicht mir erst langsam, im Maße meines eigenen Loskommens von der Hegelschen Dialektik und Metaphysik, zum Bewußtsein gekommen ist. Es ergab sich daraus, daß es für das Problem des geistigen Seins noch einer anderen Scheidung des Lebendigen und Toten in Hegel bedurfte, als Croce seinerzeit sie zu geben vermochte.” Hartmann presents his attitude towards Hegel's philosophy of spirit at great length in his work: *Die Philosophie des deutschen Idealismus. II. Teil: Hegel* (Berlin and Leipzig: Walter de Gruyter & Co., 1929).

Hartmann also emphasizes that the ideas developed in this work were formed during seminars that he led in Cologne.⁵ He states: “In this sense, I cannot simply call this book my own. That is why I am including the names of people who, in my opinion, have made the greatest contribution alongside me: Heinrich Springmeyer, Robert Heiß, and Bodo von Waltershausen. These names should no longer be completely unknown to today’s experts in this field.”⁶

The second edition of *Das Problem des geistigen Seins* was published in 1949. In a short foreword to this edition, Hartmann states:

The second edition is published late. It should have been published ten years ago, as the book had already sold out by that time. However, a book about the spirit and its historical significance, and its power and reality, was not wanted by those who decided what German readers should and should not read at the time. Despite the publisher’s efforts, the new edition did not appear, and the work has not been available on the book market since then.

When it is published for the second time today, it enters a changed world, so its fate may be different. Whether the spirit it testifies to is similar to the spirit it addresses, so that the latter recognizes itself in it, remains to be seen.⁷

⁵ The protocols from Hartmann’s seminars were published in: *Nicolai Hartmanns Dialogue 1920–1950. Die “Cirkelprotokolle,”* ed. by Joachim Fischer and Gerald Hartung, in collaboration with Friedrich Hausen and Thomas Kessel (Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2020).

⁶ Hartmann, *Das Problem des geistigen Seins* [1933], V: “In diesem Sinne kann ich das vorliegende Buch nicht einfach das meinige nennen. Ich setze daher die Namen derer hierher, die meinem Empfinden nach neben mir den Hauptanteil daran haben: Heinrich Springmeyer, Robert Heiß und Bodo v. Waltershausen. Es sind Namen, die den Fachgenossen heute nicht mehr ganz unbekannt sein dürften.”

⁷ Hartmann, *Das Problem des geistigen Seins* [1949]: “Spät kommt es zu dieser zweiten Auflage. Vor zehn Jahren wäre sie fällig gewesen, schon damals war das Buch ausverkauft. Aber ein Buch vom Geiste und seinem geschichtlichen Leben, von seiner Macht und Realität, war denen unerwünscht, die damals darüber entschieden, was deutsche Leser lesen sollten und was nicht. So unterblieb allen Bemühungen des Verlages zum Trotz die Neuauflage, und seither hat das Werk auf dem Büchermarkte gefehlt.

Wenn es heute zum anderen Mal in die Welt geht, so geht es in eine veränderte Welt, und sein Schicksal mag wohl ein anderes werden. Ob aber der Geist, von dem es zeugt, dem Geiste gleicht, zu dem es spricht, also daß dieser in jenem sich wiedererkennt, wird sich erst zeigen müssen.”

To understand the specific nature of Hartmann's reflections in *Das Problem des geistigen Seins*, it is necessary to consider its subtitle: *Research on the Foundations of the Philosophy of History and the Humanities*. Hartmann treats the concept of spirit as fundamental to the philosophy of history and the humanities. The philosophy of history and the humanities are both founded on the spiritual being and deal with changes in the spiritual reality. Ontological determinations regarding spiritual life, its types, duration, and transformation, are accompanied by detailed descriptions of spiritual phenomena and related problems. As in his other works, Hartmann conducts his thinking within a productive framework of describing phenomena, identifying problems, and formulating theories.

Das Problem des geistigen Seins consists of an *Introduction in the Context of the Philosophy of History* [*Geschichtsphilosophische Einleitung*] and three main parts. In parallel with a critical enumeration of the most important features of Hegel's philosophy of history,⁸ it is extremely important to preliminarily define the ontological understanding of history, emphasizing its multi-layered character.⁹ Equally important in this *Introduction* is the distinction between two types of questions that can be formulated in reference to the spirit and its history. Questions of the first type are strictly metaphysical in nature, unsolvable, and often associated with speculative thinking. They include the following: 1) Is history a blind process like the process of nature? 2) Or is it directed towards a certain goal? 3) Is there any tendency in history that can determine the course of history? 4) Is history determined by necessity or by "coincidence"? 5) Does human will determine the course of history? 6) Does man have any freedom to determine history? 7) Is there perhaps some "reason" that determines the course of history over man's head? 8) Do values determine history? 9) Does history create something that in its existence transcends history? 10) Or is history a meaningless process? 11) Or at least is history the process of development?¹⁰

⁸ Hartmann, *Das Problem des geistigen Seins* [1933], 5–9.

⁹ Cf. *ibid.*, 13–20.

¹⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, 20.

The second group of problems includes issues that can be studied on the basis of known phenomena and partially solved. Hartmann includes the following issues in this group in particular: 1) Is history the history of individuals, or is it the history of some other qualitative whole, the history of collectivities? 2) Is history also the history of something general, something more than a set? 3) Are the historically variable forms of economic, political, and spiritual life collectivist in nature? Or are they something else that a living community gives itself as a form? 4) Are there repetitions, similarities, regularities in the course of history, or is everything in history unique? 5) Is everything in history temporal-processual, or is there also something timeless? 6) Is the temporality of historical events identical to the temporality of natural events? 7) Is the difference between historical events and other events reduced to a temporal difference at all, or is it only a difference in the nature of the events, but they occur at the same time? 8) Is history conditioned by historical consciousness, and to what extent? 9) Is historical consciousness only determined by history, or is it itself a determining factor? Or are there both types of determination and, if so, how do they interact?¹¹

The three main parts of the work are devoted to the three forms of spirit identified by Hartmann: personal, objective, and objectified spirit. The first represents the spirit of the human individual. However, Hartmann distinguishes between the personal spirit and the human psyche because, according to him, a superposition relationship obtains between the two.¹² The objective spirit encompasses the subject and the content of historical changes, including morality, political and social life, and the language people use to communicate. Finally, the objectified spirit encompasses spiritual content fixed in a stable material medium, enabling communication and mutual connection among different forms of spirit. The three forms of spirit are interdependent, complementing each

¹¹ Cf. *ibid.*, 20–22

¹² Cf. Nicolai Hartmann, *Der Aufbau der realen Welt. Grundriß der allgemeinen Kategorienlehre* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter & Co., 1940), 188–200, 479–491. See also translations of Hartmann's *Neue Wege der Ontologie* (1942): *New Ways of Ontology*, trans. by Reinhard C. Kuhn (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1953), 73–98; *Nowe drogi ontologii*, trans. by Leszek Kopciuch and Artur Mordka (Toruń: Wydawnictwo Rolewski, 1998), 64–84.

other in their functions and actions.¹³ Hartmann argues that we can only philosophically understand the spiritual stratum specific to human beings by taking into account the three forms of spirit. Nevertheless, it is equally important to recognize the connections between the spiritual stratum and the psychological, organic, and material strata. For Hartmann, humans are beings composed of four layers.

Three papers published in the “Thematic Articles” section, by Eugene Kelly, Keith Peterson, and Artur Mordka, were based on papers prepared for a seminar on Hartmann’s concept of the spiritual being. This seminar was organized by the Institute of Philosophy at Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin, on 19 December 2023 – the 90th anniversary of the publication of *Das Problem des geistigen Seins*.¹⁴ Two other papers, by Moritz von Kalckreuth and

¹³ In an article published in Polish on Hartmann’s concept of the objectified spirit, I described this relationship as follows: “Objectified spirit itself, however, is not a stratum of reality. The spiritual layer consists of spirit as such, life of spirit as such. Spiritual life is too diverse for the general term »spiritual being« to fully describe it. The higher the layer, the weaker it is ontically, but the richer it becomes in content. In this respect, the complexity and diversity of spirit exemplify the same relation that holds between other lower layers (such as between inorganic and organic matter). Spirit appears in three ontic *forms*: personal spirit, objective spirit, and objectified spirit. These are neither layers nor mutually independent entities. Their relations are twofold: structural and functional. By the former, I mean the ontic relation of foundation; by the latter, the interrelations in the roles played by each form of spirit within the whole of spiritual life. As Hartmann himself states: ‘Only personal spirit can love and hate; only it has an ethos, bears responsibility, is imputable, bears guilt or merit; only it has consciousness, foresees, has will, self-consciousness [...]. Only objective spirit is the carrier of history in the strict and primary sense; only it is the one that properly »has history.« [...] Only objectified spirit enters into timelessness and thereby into what is ideal and supra-historical. Its relation to time and history is different. Its fate is the fate of that which—within the temporal process of history—is bound up with ideas and is in itself timeless’ [...].”¹³ Leszek Kopciuch, “Nicolai Hartmann’s concept of the spiritual being and its main difficulty,” *Idea. Studia nad Strukturą i Rozwojem Pojęć Filozoficznych* 2013, no. 25: 96–97.

¹⁴ A report on the seminar was published in *Kultura i Wartości*: Leszek Kopciuch, “Nicolai Hartmann’s philosophy of the spiritual being,” *Kultura i Wartości* 2023, no. 36: 159–170, <http://dx.doi.org/10.17951/kw.2023.36.159-170>.

Krzysztof Rojek, were written independently. However, all essays present various aspects of Hartmann's concept of spirit in detail, analyzing its content, and demonstrating its significance and contemporary relevance.¹⁵

Bibliography

- Becker Silvia. *Geschichtliches Geist und politisches Individuum bei Nicolai Hartmann*. Bonn: Bouvier Verlag, 1990.
- Breton, Stanislas. *L'être spirituel. Recherches sur la philosophie de Nicolai Hartmann*. Lyon–Paris: E. Vitte, 1962.
- Hartmann, Nicolai. *Das Problem des geistigen Seins. Untersuchungen zur Grundlegung der Geschichtsphilosophie und der Geisteswissenschaften*. Berlin and Leipzig: Walter de Gruyter & Co., 1933; Second edition: Berlin: Walter de Gruyter & Co., 1949. 3 unchanged edition: Berlin: Walter de Gruyter & Co., 1962.
- Hartmann, Nicolai. *Der Aufbau der realen Welt: Grundriss der allgemeinen Kategorienlehre*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter & Co., 1940.
- Hartmann, Nicolai. *Die Philosophie des deutschen Idealismus. II. Teil: Hegel*. Berlin and Leipzig: Walter de Gruyter & Co., 1929.
- Hartmann, Nicolai. "Neue Wege der Ontologie." In *Systematische Philosophie*, edited by Nicolai Hartmann, 199–311. Stuttgart and Berlin: W. Kohlhammer Verlag, 1942.
- Hartmann, Nicolai. *New Ways of Ontology*. Translated by Reinhard C. Kuhn. Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1953.
- Hartmann, Nicolai. *Nowe drogi ontologii*. Translated by Leszek Kopciuch, Artur Mordka. Toruń, Wydawnictwo Rolewski, 1998.
- Kluck, Steffen. "Nicolai Hartmanns Philosophie des Geistes im Spiegel der Rezensionen." *Horizon. Studies in Phenomenology* 8, no. 1 (2019): 160–181.

¹⁵ Cf. other studies on Hartmann's philosophy of spiritual being: Stanislas Breton, *L'être spirituel. Recherches sur la philosophie de Nicolai Hartmann* (Lyon–Paris: E. Vitte, 1962); Hariolf Oberer, *Problem des objektivierten Geistes. Ein Beitrag zur Theorie der Konkreten Subjektivität im Ausgang von Nicolai Hartmann* (Köln: Kölner Universitäts-Verlag, 1965); Guido Renggli, *Die Philosophie des objektiven Geistes bei Nicolai Hartmann mit Berücksichtigung Hegels*, Dissertation (Zürich: Juris Druck + Verlag, 1973); Keel-Woo, Lee, *Subjektivität und Intersubjektivität. Untersuchungen zur Theorie des geistigen Seins bei Edmund Husserl und Nicolai Hartmann*, Dissertation (Bonn: Universität Bonn, 1984); Silvia Becker, *Geschichtliches Geist und politisches Individuum bei Nicolai Hartmann* (Bonn: Bouvier Verlag, 1990); Leszek Kopciuch, *Człowiek i historia u Nicolai Hartmanna* (Lublin: Wydawnictwo UMCS, 2007); Sven Rohm, *Objektiver Geist und Ontologie der Sprache. Nicolai Hartmann und Hans-Georg Gadamer* (Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2008).

- Kopciuch, Leszek. "Nicolai Hartmann's concept of the objectified spirit and its main difficulty", *Idea. Studia nad Strukturą i Rozwojem Pojęć Filozoficznych* 2013, no. 25: 95–106.
- Kopciuch, Leszek, *Człowiek i historia u Nicolai Hartmanna*. Lublin: Wydawnictwo UMCS, 2007.
- Lee, Keel-Woo. *Subjektivität und Intersubjektivität. Untersuchungen zur Theorie des geistigen Seins bei Edmund Husserl und Nicolai Hartmann*, Dissertation. Bonn: Universität Bonn, 1984.
- Nicolai Hartmanns Dialoge 1920–1950. Die "Cirkelprotokolle"*, edited by Joachim Fischer and Gerald Hartung, in collaboration with Friedrich Hausen and Thomas Kessel. Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2020.
- Oberer Hariolf, *Problem des objektivierten Geistes. Ein Beitrag zur Theorie der Konkreten Subjektivität im Ausgang von Nicolai Hartmann*. Köln: Kölner Universitäts-Verlag, 1965.
- Renggli, Guido. *Die Philosophie des objektiven Geistes bei Nicolai Hartmann mit Berücksichtigung Hegels*, Dissertation. Zürich: Juris Druck + Verlag, 1973.
- Rohm, Sven. *Objektiver Geist und Ontologie der Sprache. Nicolai Hartmann und Hans-Georg Gadamer*. Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2008.

