

The Spiritual Essence of Man and the World in the Philosophy of Vladimír Hoppe*

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Vladimír Hoppe (1882–1931) liked to declare that his philosophy did not stem from theoretical study, but from spontaneous experiences of transcendence. He admitted to three such mystical experiences and it is arguable that it was his lifelong endeavour to understand them that stimulated his research and led him to formulate a specific figure of man as a transcendental¹ being:

“Man, in fact, though he experiences one part of life through his physical organism, is by nature disposed to surpass his original *conditio humana* and enter a spiritual cosmos he himself created.”²

The impact of Comte’s positivism and the emphasis on empiricism still echo within Czechoslovak philosophy of the interwar period. Science understands man as a sort of a machine and reduces his soul to a cluster of nervous impulses and chemical reactions. Hoppe, together with other thinkers, belongs to the movement that vigorously refuses such reductionist thinking and offers alternative interpretations of both man and the world. Yet, Hoppe’s radical idealism is rather outstanding even within the context of this movement.

The core of Hoppe’s philosophy is built on the idea that all being is of one spiritual essence and that the materialistic interpretations of his contemporaries are but consequences of a general spiritual decline. In order to explain

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1 Hoppe always uses the term “transcendental”, never distinguishing between “transcendent” and “transcendental” in the Kantian or Husserlian sense.

2 Hoppe, V., *Spiritual Renewal as the Basis for the Renewal of the World (Duchovní obrození jako základ obnovení světa)*. *Naše doba*, 28, 1921, No. 6, p. 417–430, esp. p. 424.

his idea of the spiritual unity of man and the world, Hoppe must first demonstrate the insufficiency of the scientific and even the philosophical approach. His conclusion is that, in the end, man, the world and the spiritual are the subjects of religion and faith.

To Know and to Know Man

In one of his first books, *Nature and Science (Příroda a věda)*,³ with the subtitle *The Noetics of Natural Sciences (Noetika přírodních věd; 1918)*, Hoppe carries out a detailed autopsy of the scientific approach, and especially of the image of man and the world that such an approach creates. Here he argues that abstraction and generalisation as the main methodological procedures of science are insufficient – they can never fully explain nature in all its diversity and variability. Though they promise to provide a true picture of reality, all they can offer, in fact, are but simplified schemes and mechanisms.⁴ Moreover, the approach of exact science is being forced upon other disciplines, too.

This creates a serious problem, since philosophy and the human sciences are expected to proceed in the same manner as physics or chemistry – to formulate laws of human society and man’s soul with mathematical exactitude, very much like astronomy.⁵

Although abstraction and generalisation cannot be avoided, and Hoppe does not reject them *per se*, it is important to note that such a noetic approach brings about two major complications. Firstly, because of their demands on the objectivity of knowledge, the exact natural sciences always necessarily retreat from the object of inquiry, at the same time ridding themselves of substance:

“physics is a science about matter without matter, biology is a science about life without life, psychology is a science about soul without soul.”⁶

The exceptionality of an object with all of its unique details falls prey to abstraction whose goal is to produce a term, an image based on sensory perception that is related by reason to other objects and phenomena under scrutiny.

3 Hoppe, V., *Nature and Science (Příroda a věda)*. Praha, Unie 1918.

4 Hoppe, V., What Philosophy Should Mean to Us (Čím nám má být filosofie). *Naše doba*, 10, 1917, No. 24, p. 741–748.

5 “Astronomy, with its simplicity and harmony it introduced into the discord of phenomena, gave the sciences an archetype of ideal and simple science according to which not only all sciences but also philosophical systems should be built.” *Ibid.*, p. 44.

6 Hoppe, V., *Spiritual Renewal as the Basis for the Renewal of the World*, p. 424.

The so-called scientific discoveries are therefore but results of the subdivision of these terms to other terms, i.e. it is an unoriginal generation of quasi-knowledge, infinite chaining of relationism and relativism.

Does that then mean that breakthroughs in knowledge are impossible? Of course not – but their source must lie in intuition and imagination, not reason. According to Hoppe, only the two can unveil the qualities of an object, enabling us to see the substance of a phenomenon and, by extension, of the world and life as such. Through intuition and imagination, man's spirit can *tune in* (*vcítit se*) to the object of knowledge, and by doing so, perceive all its details at once, allowing the object to unveil itself on its own, and see it directly, unmediated, entirely, absolutely and in images. Thus, the object is not broken up into a countless number of relative aspects locked up in a rigid space-time grid. Images and insights that intuition and imagination provide are then systematised and processed by reason.⁷

Hoppe tries to demonstrate that intuition and fantasy are unjustly excluded from the noetic process, and for this reason, he distinguishes between two types of knowledge. *Mediated knowledge* is knowledge based on concepts and terms; it is “static” and corresponds to our understanding of scientific knowledge. Conversely, *intuitive, imaginatively immediate knowledge* constitutes direct penetration of reality through “living” images. This brings us to the second complication inherent to the positivist approach to knowledge. In Hoppe's view, an individual's personality, or individuality, is made up of many deep and interconnected layers, partially obscure and inaccessible by consciousness, which makes it impossible to be grasped entirely by traditional methods relying on reason. Most of what we do is motivated by irrational desires and incentives stemming from deep within that we ourselves do not understand. Not to mention that the spontaneous experiences we have of ourselves cannot be perceived through the senses, but only without their mediation!

The scientific approach construes a false image of man – instead of bringing him closer to his own essence, it merely deepens his self-alienation. Man's own sum and substance remain forever hidden to the analytical eye of science, because they are of a *spiritual* nature – they can only be accessed through intuition and imagination, by an immediately imaginative, intuitive kind of knowledge. This spiritual essence of man is the source of all qualities and ideals that form the fabric of the “sciences of the spirit” (*vědy duchové*). Not only do intuition and fantasy afford man access to his own essence, as well as to the world of ideals and qualities, but they also help him *actualise*

7 Hoppe, V., *An Introduction to Intuitive and Contemplative Philosophy (Úvod do intuitivní a kontemplativní filosofie)*. Brno, Filosofická fakulta 1928, p. 20.

those ideals and qualities. This means that man must first, using intuition and contemplation, turn away from the mediated, relative and conditional part of himself to be able to concentrate his attention and inner sight, or inner “hearing”, on the Divine Spark feeding his transcendental Self in order to draw from it deliberately.

And so, in addition to these two kinds of knowledge, Hoppe also distinguishes two world orders – the sensory world of quantities which is relative and conditional, and an unconditional, transcendental world of absolute qualities.⁸ By analogy, man too is composed of two “personalities”: a *sensory* personality that is accessible by empirical methods and *superior transcendental being* that encompasses feelings and superindividual, transcendental commitments. This transcendental being is the root of all subjectivity and individuality.

Spiritual Philosophy

Here we encounter one of the key motifs of Hoppe’s thinking – the irrational. His critique of science that we have covered so far implies that the source of true knowledge, even the source of everything that exists, lies beyond reason, in fantasy and imagination, that is, in the sphere of the irrational.⁹ A part of man’s personality is subject to this sphere, too, and so man in his entirety is inaccessible by reason. Science’s attempts to understand man postulate him as a sort of a complicated machine with plenty of components, but no spirit. No wonder, then, that the spirit is inaccessible by science and reason – they reject even the very possibility of its existence! The problem of man is thus of a *meta*-physical nature and falls within the competency of philosophy:

“I see the task of philosophy precisely in this unique discovery of the great Self and in the turn towards the Self as the source of true, spiritual life. This turn towards the great spiritual Self is a turn towards aspects of eternity not only within ourselves, but also towards the same aspects of all historic development of human society.”¹⁰

8 Evidently, Hoppe builds on the terms of German idealism (*mundus sensibilis*, *mundus intelligibilis*), somewhat transforming their original meaning.

9 “In this respect, intuition is the gateway to the irrational unconditional that neither life, nor cultural development of human society is possible without.” Hoppe, V., *The Prerequisites of Spiritual Philosophy and Religious Faith (Předpoklady duchovní filosofie a náboženské víry)*. Praha, Kruh přátel filosofie V. Hoppeho 1935, p. 2.

10 Hoppe, V., *The Desiderata of the Czech Philosophy (Tužba a cíle české filosofie)*. *Národní listy (Vzdělávací příloha)*, 63, 1923, No. 109, p. 9–10.

In other words, the task of philosophy is to research access to the transcendental Self that forms the centre of each and every individual. To know our true nature also means to unlock the door to knowledge as such. The “world of quantities” produced by science is nothing but a world of de-humanised qualities. True knowledge turns inside, is existentially interested and thus is the exact opposite of neutrality and objectivity (!) of science – it is *subjective* in the Kierkegaardian sense that will be explained in a moment.

Because man is a spiritual being, his individuality is based in his interiority. Spirit or soul (Hoppe does not distinguish between the two) is the true foundation of man and, consequently, of a healthy human society, too. The cultural niveau of a society, its values and ideals depend on the spiritual niveau of its individual members – not on technological and scientific progress. Put differently – the more spiritual the individual, the more spiritual the society and, vice versa, the more spiritual the society, the more spiritual its members. At this point we may bravely state that Hoppe understood the imperative “know thyself!” cosmically.

Science, Philosophy, Religion

Where exactly do science, philosophy and religion stand in this matter? In order to give the most precise answer possible, it should first be noted that, in addition to man’s empirical and transcendental personality, Hoppe distinguishes between three layers with regards to consciousness – the subconscious, unconscious and conscious. The conscious layer is founded on and accessible by reason, with science being its product. The remaining two layers constitute the obscure substratum of the human soul which is the realm of both freedom and creativity, as well as irrational unconditionality. Philosophy and religion are dedicated to them. Both philosophy and religion reach out for infinity, both use intuition to do so, both postulate the soul as the key to the universe, and both strive to actualise pre-constructed ideals in both the individual and society. However, only religion builds on absolute qualities that are inaccessible by reason.

The deficiency of philosophy in comparison to religion lies in its inability to release the individual from his “conditional and natural existence to the free and spontaneous realm of the unconditional”¹¹ because it itself builds on a conditional basis of sensory knowledge. The rational basis of philosophy cannot take us any further than to antinomies and antitheses. In fact, our own consciousness is founded on contradictions and conflicts, functioning

11 Hoppe, V., *The Prerequisites of Spiritual Philosophy and Religious Faith*, p. 14–15.

in a dualistic manner. In Hoppe's view, when philosophy uses terms such as spirit or soul, they remain too abstract; redemption from the conditional to the unconditional is only possible in religion, as it deals with the deepest essence of an individual *in concreto*.

Science is concerned with sensory knowledge, while philosophy finds a solution in distinction between the sensory and the intelligible world (*mundus sensibilis* and *mundus intelligibilis* or *phenomenon* and *noumenon* – after all, Hoppe's division into the empirical and the transcendental personality is also precisely of this sort), but only religion is fully concerned with the sphere of interiority.¹²

Ultimately, it is the task of every single man to try and establish a relationship with transcendental being, to strive for a connection between the Transcendental Self and God. Here Hoppe refers to the First Epistle to the Corinthians 15:47 (“The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven.”)¹³ and the Gospel of John. The Transcendental Self is the core of an empirical man. However, in order for him to even become aware of it, in Hoppe's eyes, he must experience a deep transformational moment that shakes the very core of his being, opening up this dimension to him. This powerful philosophical, religious or aesthetic experience brings man to the very limits of his personal being and causes his opinions, ideals, worldview to gradually change or even crumble completely. It even causes one's perception of time and space to change from the finite to the infinite and unlimited.¹⁴ At the same time, it affords man a deep inner confidence in his own feelings and mainly in his own subjective values – it enables him to become an individuality that is indeed grounded in interiority.¹⁵

Hoppe adds that, upon revelation of this transcendental essence, man gains access to his innate ideas or ideals of how his relationships to other people and the world as such should be. The individual then grasps these ideals unmediated, and consciously strives to turn them into a new reality.

Identification with one's transcendental essence is a transformative act. Although transcendental experiences lead to the discovery of “a transcendental spiritual subject”¹⁶ they alone are not enough for this newly found

12 “The truths that remain at an inaccessible distance to scientific knowledge, that philosophy does not find a satisfactory solution for, are reserved for religious inquiry: it is mainly the mystery of supernatural revelation; then the mystery of the redemption from the chains of man's natural existence and, finally, the problem of the determination of our soul.” *Ibid.*, p. 15.

13 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

14 Unfortunately, Hoppe does not deal with this temporal aspect and offers only a plain statement.

15 Hoppe, V., *The Prerequisites of Spiritual Philosophy and Religious Faith*, p. 44.

16 *Ibid.*, p. 45.

subject to remain in the transcendental state, for the new transcendental reality to become his *everyday* reality. Moreover, as has been said above, philosophical contemplations are of no help here, because they are based on reason whilst here we are in the territory of the deepest interiority which is irrational.

Absolute unconditionality is irrational – no rational path leads there. The limits may be transcended solely through an absolutely subjective religious experience which then becomes the very substance of faith. At this point, Hoppe is greatly inspired by the philosophy of Søren Kierkegaard.¹⁷

The Spiritual Revival of the Individual

For Kierkegaard, the *desideratum* of all human endeavour is the deepening of interiority, intensification of one's subjectivity as interiority.¹⁸ Briefly put, this intensification of the individual's spiritual essence is achieved by intensifying one's relation to transcendence and to God as the power that posited him. The emphasis lies on the term *individual* (*Individet* in Danish) as, ultimately, this relation cannot be mediated by anything or anybody else (with the exception of God himself, in whom this relation is posited). In other words, existential transformation is the result of individual's spiritual endeavour (with the assumption of God's grace).

For Kierkegaard, the apex of this spiritual endeavour is the moment of the individual's "absolute relation to the absolute" which is itself, however, paradoxical.

"The paradox is that he [Abraham, T. B.], as the single individual, places himself in an absolute relation to the absolute."¹⁹

From the point of view of reason, it is impossible for a finite, conditional human being to have an *absolute* relation to the absolute – and if it is possible, than solely outside of reason. The paradox, specifically the paradox of faith that Kierkegaard has in mind, represents the very limit of reason, the limit

17 Hoppe fully accepts Kierkegaard's "Philosophy cannot and must not give faith, but it must understand itself and know what it offers and take nothing away, least of all trick men out of something by pretending that it is nothing." Kierkegaard, S., *Fear and Trembling*. In: Hong, H. V. – Hong, E. H. (eds.), Preliminary expektoration. *Kierkegaard's Writings VI, Vol. 6. Fear and Trembling/Repetition*. Princeton, Princeton University Press 1983, p. 33.

18 For a detailed analysis and interpretation of Kierkegaard's work within a Czechoslovak context, see Marek, J., *Kierkegaard. An Indirect Prophet of Existence* (*Kierkegaard. Nepřímý prorok existence*). Praha, Togga 2010.

19 Kierkegaard, S., *Fear and Trembling*, p. 62.

of the understandable, rational, and thus necessarily relative and founded in sensory experience. This limit is transcended by faith, “because faith begins precisely where thought stops.”²⁰ Faith is the most subjective, innermost truth that pertains to that layer of the individual that can only be penetrated by religion. For Hoppe, faith thus determined by the moments of irrationality, absoluteness and transcendence constitutes the possibility to redeem oneself from conditionality by the power of the unconditional.

Thus, Hoppe formulates Kierkegaard’s famous leap of faith as a leap from the objective to the subjective, from the conditional to the unconditional, from quantity to quality.²¹ Up to this point it seems that Hoppe eagerly agrees with Kierkegaard’s analyses. Yet, Kierkegaard would certainly be exasperated by Hoppe’s conclusions. Hoppe takes things a step further and declares that man can and should merge with God – whereas Kierkegaard would never admit to this possibility. In this connection, which Hoppe describes using a metaphor of the fusion of the microcosmos and macrocosmos, not only is a direct relation of the individual to God established, but, what is more, the individual absolutely identifies himself with God and, by doing so, becomes a god-man.²²

Man’s spiritual development is completed in the figure of the god-man. On the one hand, the relation to his essence necessarily lifts him from the collectivity of society and allows him to emerge as a true individual. He is the subjectivity *par excellence*, absolutely surpassing all the “unawakened” people. On the other hand, this very individuality is simultaneously surpassed in the figure of the god-man, as he is in a state of permanent union with the source of all life. It is this very union that gives him access to the knowledge of all creation, a spiritual wholeness encompassing all mankind and each individual human being. Thus, the nature of Hoppe’s god-man is paradoxical.

Being a god-man, however, gives rise to new spiritual tasks. A god-man, fully endowed with spirit and in permanent communion with God, is supposed to help the rest of humanity to achieve the same spiritual niveau, to show others both the path and the destination.

“Due to his purity from the slag of sense and self-transformation into the deepest spiritual elements – into a creative spiritual principle – a god-man shows the rest of humanity the path to a true, creative freedom, a path from fatal laws of matter that cannot be avoided, towards

20 Ibid., p. 53.

21 Hoppe, V., *The Prerequisites of Spiritual Philosophy and Religious Faith*, p. 46.

22 Hoppe finds support for his thoughts on god-manhood in the texts of V. Solovyov, the idea of the completion of history in the figure of god-man is based in Nikolai Berdyaev.

a life-giving spiritual freedom and spontaneity. A god-man is thus not only the completion and goal of human history, but also an unrivalled example to all humanity, who will long for him as for a timeless model of their redeemer.”²³

The European Spiritual Crisis and the Spiritual Rebirth of Society

The spiritual rebirth of the individual at the same time brings about the spiritual revival of society from two points of view. The more the individual's spiritual niveau rises above the spiritual niveau of society, the stronger his bond to society becomes due to his spiritual mission – the mission is the conscious promotion of the spiritual development of society and all of its members. Hoppe's texts also imply a second aspect to this two-fold revival. If all people, regardless of the extent of their spiritual awakening, are of the same essence, then a spiritual development of one must inherently strengthen the whole structure. Put differently, the uplifting of one necessarily uplifts all. Yet again we encounter the dialectic relation of individuality and society with regard to spirit.

It would be a mistake to conclude that Hoppe's thoughts are but day-dreams about the Kingdom of Heaven on Earth, deliberately turning away from the “real” world that is slowly recovering from the horrors of the First World War. On the contrary, Hoppe perceived the state of affairs with all its seriousness and weight, identifying the spiritual crisis that Europe found itself in. His ideas are no escapism, but are, in fact, his own proposal on how to overcome the crisis. If the collapse of society was caused by ignorance of spiritual values, a spiritual revival is the only way out – that is the point which all of Hoppe's texts lead to:

“Therefore it will be necessary to change the spiritual structure of today's man from scratch, should the renewal of the world be successful.”²⁴

Such spiritual renewal is not possible without the re-education of new generations and without overall reform of society. Hoppe, much in the manner of Komenský,²⁵ calls for thorough education of all of society in spiritual matters

23 Hoppe, V., *An Introduction to Intuitive and Contemplative Philosophy*, p. 186.

24 Hoppe, V., *Spiritual Renewal as the Basis for the Renewal of the World*, p. 426.

25 The educational aspect of Hoppe's philosophy was strongly influenced by J. A. Comenius, whose teaching was widely spread at that time, see Floss, P., *John Amos Comenius in the Czech Philosophy of 1930's (Jan Amos Komenský v české filosofii třicátých let našeho století)*. In: Gabriel, J. – Bretfeldová, H. (eds.), *The Czech Philosophy of 1930's (České filosofické myšlení ve třicátých letech našeho století)*. Brno, Univerzita Jana Evangelisty Purkyně 1989, p. 47–54.

listing the necessary steps – the publication of texts introducing the public to the spiritual sciences, libraries founded with the aim of spiritual enlightenment, and public education in the form of freely accessible lectures.²⁶

Hoppe even suggests that those already aspiring to connect to their transcendental Self, this “spiritual elite”, should found a university dedicated to the spiritual sciences and ways of achieving union with God. Apart from public lectures, this university would also publish an annual journal. One of the main tasks of this “Academy of Spiritual Life”, as Hoppe calls it, would be to interpret the cardinal texts, principles and values of Christianity. As we have said above, what Hoppe has in mind here is not a sudden spiritual revolution, but a gradual transformation of society. The Academy would later be instrumental in forming a sort of spiritual brotherhood, the “League of Spiritual Peace”. Ideally, the League would co-operate both spiritually and politically with the League of Nations (the “predecessor” of the UN). In the future, both leagues would ideally be capable of preventing the same bloodshed and destruction that humanity brought upon itself in the First World War.

The Individual as a Transcendental Being

Although Hoppe does not deal with the problem of individualism explicitly, it does emerge in his work in the form of the idea of a shared spiritual essence of man and the world. The goal of Hoppe’s philosophical endeavour is to direct society back onto the path of spiritual life that it seems to have abandoned. He aspires to a rehabilitation of subjective experiences of transcendence in a material world led by strict positivism and the dictate of science.²⁷ In his view, the individual – although Hoppe rather prefers the terms “man”, “person”, “personality” – is not primarily a malign element disrupting the unity of the young Czechoslovak state. The essence of an individual is indivisible from the essence of all life, it is the Transcendental Self that is the source of all qualities and values (“true”, i.e. spiritual values). This Self can be mediated to man neither by science, nor philosophy, as these both depend on reason and sensory knowledge. Only religion is capable of transcending the limits of the conditional and disclose to man his essence, to liberate him to what he has always been – a god-man.

26 Hoppe, V., *Spiritual Renewal as the Basis for the Renewal of the World*, p. 505.

27 “Until now the spiritual experience and experiences were looked askance upon, rather unjustly, as these very experiences are the most certain and secure knowledge that man can attain in the field of morality. The same goes for religious experiences and the certainty these experiences can offer with regards to the noumenal sphere.” Hoppe, V., *The Prerequisites of Spiritual Philosophy and Religious Faith*, p. 45.

If individuality is understood in the same way as Kierkegaard did in terms of subjectivity and interiority, then the god-man as the highest level of such individuality also represents the surpassing of individuality. According to Hoppe, each man is capable of achieving this state. He constantly emphasises that spiritually enlightened individuals have a responsibility to their neighbours in that they should serve as examples and use their experience and knowledge to help society towards an overall spiritual renewal – as has always occurred in the past, which Hoppe supports with reference to Jesus, Buddha, etc.

For Hoppe, the idea of god-man, as well as the establishment of the Academy and the League, are not merely theoretical contemplations, but very seriously meant proposals for an emendation of society. Let us remember that Hoppe himself had three transformative spiritual experiences and throughout his whole life practised his method of contemplation or meditation, taking a deep interest in spiritual texts and traditions of all cultures – he practised what he preached. Whatever our stance towards Hoppe's philosophy might be, we must admit that his radical idealism is, indeed, worthy of respect – Hoppe managed to maintain immense faith in the divinity of mankind, despite having witnessed with his own eyes the most horrific slaughter the world had ever seen. After Hoppe's death, the legacy of his lifelong work in philosophy was preserved by his closest colleagues and friends that founded the *Circle of Friends of Vladimír Hoppe* (*Kruh přátel Vladimíra Hoppeho*) in 1933. The *Circle* was instrumental in the publication and translation of number of Hoppe's texts.