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The Transcendental Foundations of the Individual in the Philosophy of Sergei I. Hessen

The article analyzes the rationale for S.I. Hessen's idea of transcendental empiricism, which highlights the issue of the individual (das Individuelle) and makes it "the fundamental bedrock of truth." The author also discusses Hessen's understanding of individual causality and its forms in the process of cognition of historical reality.

Keywords: *transcendental empiricism, objective reality, primary, individual and personalized causality, Kant, Rickert, Hessen*

In the history of Russian philosophy, if one turns to transcendentalism or the theory of culture, it is difficult to ignore Sergei Hessen, who in the words of V.V. Zenkovsky was "the brightest" Russian transcendentalist and who "undoubtedly possessed great philosophical talent."¹ For Hessen, the focus of philosophical investigation was always individuality, personality (*Persönlichkeit, lichnost*'), and the absolute values of culture involved in this context: science, art, morality, law, and economics. The preservation of individuality and identity from disintegration, from the influence of external

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Translated by Peter Golub.

feelings and ideas in an era of diversity and rapid change, the desire to remain oneself through a relationship with one's suprapersonal origins was first and foremost Hessen's own life goal. Therefore, despite all the vicissitudes of fate, he remains a man of "individual law," "inexhaustible by any general formula of profession or program, while remaining within the bounds of the law, testifying to that suprapersonal principle, aspiration toward which shapes human personality."²

Hessen studied philosophy and defended his dissertation, *Über individuelle Kausalität* [On Individual Causality] (1909) in Freiburg. His advisor was the famous Neo-Kantian, H. Rickert, to whom Hessen dedicated the work with the words: "To my dear teacher Professor Heinrich Rickert with heartfelt respect and gratitude." In turn, Rickert described Hessen in a letter to the well-known publisher Paul Siebeck as "one of my most gifted pupils, a young man of extraordinary intelligence and energy."³ Following Rickert, Hessen's position in the dissertation is based not in determinism, inherent in the natural sciences, but in causality in relation to history, ethics, aesthetics, and religion. This methodological platform is the foundation of Hessen's theorization of social reality, and becomes the basis for separating the *methods* of cognition into the *monistic* and the *pluralistic*, which will later be supplemented with the *heterologous* method, also borrowed from Rickert. In Hessen's career it is possible to trace the move from theoretical interests like epistemology, sociopolitics, ethics, and law to pedagogical interests, that is, "applied philosophy" and the education of the personality.

The search for the transcendental foundations of the individual

The two texts that would become formative for Hessen's philosophy are H. Rickert's *The Limits of Concept Formation in Natural Science* and I. Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. Hessen grounds his views in the categorical-notional (*kategorial-begrifflichen*) field of Neo-Kantianism, in which he includes notions (*Begriffe*) such as "transcendental empiricism," "individual causality," "primary causality," "objective reality," "fragments of reality," and others. The aim of his dissertation is to transform the notion of individual causality into the "fundamental bedrock of truth": "We want to oppose the transcendental rationalism of Kant, which is influenced by precritical rationalism, with the transcendental empirical position, which simply highlights the problem of the individual, transcendently develops it, and insofar by means of the individual not only does not undermine objectivity, as did the precritical empiricists, but, even more, strengthens it."⁴ Individual causality Hessen ties to individual law and supraindividual,

transpersonal being. Hessen admitted that the notion of individual causality seems paradoxical. The resolution of this paradox, according to Hessen, will broaden the area of philosophy that contributed to the concept formation and made this notion possible—transcendentalism. Traditionally, the concept of the general and objective is used to describe the cognition and unification of reality. Kant introduces the notion of the *transcendental*, the a priori universality (*apriorische Allgemeinheit*), which he marks with the word “in general” (*überhaupt*). Hessen writes:

The truth is connected with universality. But this universal is true not because it understands the particular in itself, or because it is derived from the particular, but because it rests on necessary and universally valid *premises*.... The whole sense of this universality consists in the necessity and u n i v e r s a l v a l i d i t y [*Allgemeingültigkeit*] with which a l l subjects ought to recognize various a priori notions, which are presupposed at all true universal and particular judgments about objects⁵ (my italics—J.M.).

Thus, there is a distinction between the *generic universal* and the a priori *universally valid*, which raises the question of *their relation to each other* and to *the empirical*. Kant, however, *substituted* the universally valid (*Allgemeingültiges*) for the generically universal (*gattungsmässiges Allgemeines*)—the first relates to universally valid logical constructions, and the second presupposes experience. Post-Kantian *transcendental rationalism*, represented by the Marburg school, *ties a priori* universality with the generic, and “to a degree sees in the *a priori* the highest empiricism, the *true highest laws about reality*”⁶ (my italics—J.M.). Hessen contrasts transcendental rationalism with *transcendental empiricism*, which *rigidly distinguishes* between the empirical and the a priori; the latter is the sphere of philosophy and is not related to the empirical sciences. Kant’s discovery of the a priori brings to the fore the “area of preconditions,” that is, the *area of values*, “which by anyone who performs a scientific judgment, performs an ethical act, or feels aesthetic pleasure, are implicitly recognized, and which now only need to be disclosed and brought to consciousness.”⁷ The *a priori universality of value is not connected* here with *generic universality of the notion*, which is now only one of many possible evaluations (of trueness) of empiricism. This makes it possible to assume not only the universal and notional, but also the individual (*empirical*) in the a priori, which in turn makes it possible to introduce individual causality. *The individual*, whether it relates to an individual understanding of history or individual reality, can be as *transcendentally justified*, as universal generic notions. In this context, a supreme law of nature is as empirical as a vague sense impression, the givenness of which can be affirmed

and thought of transcendently, and consequently as objectively as any universal law. Here we run up against the question of values within the process of transcending the empirical—the question of ought. Critical empiricism asserts the presence of a homogeneous being not on a transcendental basis, but on the basis that “all being is equally based on ought.”⁸ Since this duty exists independently of being, it can be called transcendental. Hessen refers to Rickert, who was able to show that *regularity* is a “*methodological form*” that conforms only to the *scientific* comprehension of reality, “a form of the notional world of science,” not “a constitutive form of reality itself.” The limitation of comprehending reality only through the notional world of science amounts to naturalistic monism, which for Hessen is broadened in his development of transcendental empiricism, which, paralleling Rickert, recognizes *various methodological forms* to investigate reality, not only as nature, but also as history. Although the latter consists in a single individual course of events, it can also be understood from the point of view of causality, the basis of which, following Kant, is the “objective” succession of events in time. Based on this position, Rickert distinguishes between “*general epistemological preconditions*” for finding causality in conceiving historical reality and “*special methodological forms*.” He concludes that “it is impossible to equate the notion (*Begriff*) of causality with the notion of natural law.”⁹ The first is an active “condition,” “binding” for discovering laws, but “cannot itself be a law of nature, and therefore relate to laws of nature as a universal generic notion to unique ones.” Thus, “any real cause and action connection must be characterized as a *historical causal connection* in the broadest sense of the term, since every cause and every action is different from all other causes and actions. ...the notion of a single, individual causal series eliminates the possibility of expressing it via the notions of the laws of nature.”¹⁰ A law is a special case of causality, which can relate not to a general sequence of events, but only to a single case (e.g., November 1, 1755, when there was an earthquake). Hessen uses Rickert’s understanding of historical causality to develop his concept of individual causality by *strengthening* its *objectivity* by means of transcendental processing.

Critical philosophy raises the problem of the rationally untouched, free from any “introjection,” irrational reality, which transcendental empiricism calls “objective reality,” and which must be *transcendentally* justified *without the mediation of notional scientific forms*. The a priori that constitutes reality is *deeper than the a priori of science*; this is the way, according to Hessen, that empiricism is rehabilitated, not being limited to exclusive recourse to notional scientific generalization. Hessen argues for the existence of a deeper, prenotional reality in order to “translate empirical requirements into the transcendental”—the notion of “objective reality,” at

the heart of which is a new understanding of “intuition” (*Anschauung*): “Intuition is the objective reality, which like the notions is constituted through various forms (categories): causality, thingness, and the forms of space and time.” Thus, the “objective identical intuition” and the notion of being are differentiated not by objectivity, but by the obvious manifoldness (*Mannigfaltigkeit*) of intuition, “with the result that precisely from the necessity of overcoming it, the logical performance of the notion is to be understood.”¹¹

Based on the above distinction between generic universality and universal validity, the old contradiction between subjective intuition and objective notion produces new pairs of contradictions-notions: “The notion of value or form—intuition as the pure content and notion of being—intuition as manifold reality. The notion of form possesses transcendental universality and may constitute not only universal, but also individual notions and even individual reality.”¹²

In many of his claims, Hessen relies on Rickert. The ingenuity of Hessen’s transcendental empiricism is not so much the notion of individual causality, to which his dissertation is dedicated, but the notion of “primary causality.” Following the transcendental method, the notion of primary causality must undergo a purely formal treatment. This implies starting at the formally “imperceptible” (and therefore “nonexperiential”), the “non-being” (neither metaphysically nor empirically) element,¹³ which means the objective reality from the perspective of transcendental empiricism. *Primary causality designates a form that enters content and constitutes an original necessity of judgment.* Hessen refers to the infinite manifoldness of intuited reality determined by him earlier, untouched by scientific, generalizing treatment of *notions*, and defines *primary causality* as “the necessity of temporal sequence of pieces of reality,”¹⁴ for which “the possibility of recurrence (*Wiederkehrens*) is excluded,” because “reality never repeats. And the same also applies to historical causality....”¹⁵ The notion of *pieces of reality* (*Wirklichkeitsstücke*) necessarily presupposes a *whole*, “a totality of reality” that does not yield in its infinite manifoldness to a finite thinking subject. Hence the need for the assumption of an “*intellectus archetypus*, perhaps, which intuitively contemplates this complete objective reality enclosed within itself.”¹⁶ Having discerned the “primary causality of reality” (*primäre Wirklichkeitskausalität*), Hessen suddenly introduces the idea of “a thinkable metaphysically completed reality,” that is, he goes outside the boundaries of objectivity and science toward metaphysics, and in this move he indicates the boundaries of transcendental empiricism, which is

incapable of resolving the problem of the completeness and totality of reality. This reality conceivable as completed turns out to be “the kingdom of absolute necessity,” and the notion of primary causality loses its specific properties, turning in the opposite direction toward the notion of necessity. Turning the consequent analysis of primary causality to its opposite (i.e., necessity), according to Hessen, testifies to “the impossibility of applying the notion of form to the totality of content.”¹⁷

The notion of *primary* causality is one of the last in this theoretical area, because it *does not assume any further reduction*. *Primary causality* is a *general condition* of general *regularity* and *historical causality*, even though it does not relate to either as a notion of the whole to its parts or as a universally generic notion. The notion of primary causality as a necessity of temporal sequencing applies only to causal *reality*. It designates a different type of the universal, of abstraction: “transcendental universality is the universality of the precondition that resolves the contradictions of the lowest forms, [the universality] of the requirement that reveals the problem that incorporates all lower problems.”¹⁸ Hessen explains that he wants to use “a priori (the transcendental ought) to only strengthen the empirical sciences, and clear away all metaphysical prejudice.”¹⁹ But this does not mean that outside science there are no other possible solutions to the problems; there are *other feasible areas* and *means*.

On historical causality

When considering historical causality, Hessen stresses that “individual formations of history are only notions, not realities (*Wirklichkeiten*),”²⁰ and explains: “by penetrating to the notion of reality in order to access the purest form of the causality’s reality (*Wirklichkeitsform der Kausalität*) we are already abandoning the grounds of *methodological* investigation on which rests the problem of historical causality, and are appealing to *theoretical epistemic speculation*.”²¹ Rickert, who Hessen continues to track, introduced the individualizing method into his theorization of history. The method presumes that “the possibility is not excluded that there exists a kind of scientific treatment that is in a completely different, that is to say, closer relation to empirical reality than natural science.”²² This sort of treatment of reality aims at recognizing empirical reality from the perspective of individuality and singularity. The task is to identify the *specifics* of the notional understanding of history, to show that the “notion of historical causality” is formed by means of selecting from the infinite set of “secondary

historical objects” which can be used for the purpose of investigation. Rickert points out that as in science everything is reduced to simple things, and in the mind to simple sensations and “mental elements,” just as the “words *atom* and *individual* appear to mean the same thing”—“indivisible,” in terms of their notional content they are directly opposite. If the atom designates the simplest indivisible object, the individual always designates the complex. Rickert states that “any body we encounter is formed individually.”²³ Hessen, however, disagrees with such a broad interpretation of the individual:

We agree with Rickert’s understanding of history as an individualizing science of culture; in our opinion, he understood the essence of the historical method better than anyone. However, our classification of science differs from Rickert’s. For us, the notion of the individual is inextricably linked with the notion of cultural values, which is why we do not recognize the “individualizing sciences of nature,” or (if ignoring the philosophical cognition of culture) the “generalizing sciences of culture.” In this lies, for us, the correctness of Münsterberg’s classification of science (especially as expressed by him in his *Philosophie der Werte*.²⁴ Ours differs from his, however, in that (1) history for us is as objective a science as natural science, which is why we believe it is wrong to call it a “subjectivizing” science, and (2) history operates with the notions of causality and necessity, and not merely aims to describe the content of human volition.... Finally, our position differs from the “Marburg School” (Cohen, Natorp, Stammler) in that we believe that history is not a doctrine of progress or ought, and is independent of ethics.²⁵

In the context of history, Hessen distinguishes between the notion of the unique (*Einmaliges*) and the individual: the latter constitutes something *irreplaceable*, undividable, unified unique (*einheitliches Einmaliges*), the former means the unique in experimental reality, the manifestation of a single *example* of a universal generic notion. The universal (*das Allgemeine*), in the sense of a historical whole, correlates with the unique in the sense of the historically individual. The notion of the universal, in the sense of totality, applies to the whole of reality, but “*historical universality* (*Allgemeinheit*) is a v a l u e - o r i e n t e d (*wertbezogene*) universality of the *whole* [my emphasis—J.M.], each part of which is an individual link that has either a direct or indirect relation to some value.”²⁶

When explaining immensely manifold historical events and their interrelation, Hessen believes we should be guided by the principle of “precise correspondence of including the event to be explained into the directly

encompassing whole,”²⁷ while recognizing that this is only a point of view, *a certain type of notional processing* of a single objective reality, namely the historical, rather than reality itself. Hessen stresses that transcendental empiricism developed by him which defines philosophy as the science of values, becomes aware of the fact that it cannot solve the empirical problems and reconciles with the insight into its own boundaries. The specifics of cognition of the historical causality in relation to the causality of reality depends on the *type* of cause that is *uniquely chosen* against the backdrop of their infinity: “It [historical causality] *personalizes* all these *causes* in its own person.... History ... precisely *excludes* direct, *real* causal *relations* to be satisfied with one ‘personalized’ cause”²⁸ (my emphasis—J.M.). Hessen gives the example of the death of Caesar, which was *caused* by “the daggers of the conspirators,” and which signifies more than the physical act of a lethal blow—the act explains historical events and justifies them. Hessen agrees with M. Weber, who for notional explanations of historical relations uses the notion of “real base” (*Realgrund*) and contrasts it with the notion of “cognition base” (*Erkenntnisgrund*). Having considered the specifics of historical causality in relation to the natural science one, Hessen states that “we cannot know,” “where lie the boundaries between reality and the two worlds of natural science and history encompassing it.”²⁹ Hessen ascertains the following *contradiction* arising out of the opposing requirements of the *causal explanation* of *historical* development: on the one hand, there is the value-oriented relation and *individualization*, on the other, there is the subsumption to the *notion of the universal* void of value-oriented meaning. Hessen sees the solution to this contradiction in the assumption of the *primary causality of reality*, which differs from historical causality and allows him to consider the contradiction between individualizing and subsumption as a contradiction between means and ends, which leads to the unification of these two forms. “Taking into account the causality of reality, *historical causality* appears as a highly complex product of notional processing” (my emphasis—J.M.). Historical causality “is determined by choice in which the individuality of a phenomenon that is to be causally explained plays only a limiting role. Meanwhile the selected historical cause appears as the personalized cause....”³⁰ Thus, if we follow Hessen, historical events and facts must always be related to the individual personality, must be personalized, and this is the only way of talking about causality in history, about theorization of the latter.

Looking at Hessen’s position, it is clear that the use of transcendental empiricism to strengthen empiricism in historical reality means strengthening the objectivity of the individual. This is why Hessen introduced the

notion of primary *personalized causality* that reinforces the boundary between the natural science and historical theorization of objective reality. But Hessen does not stop at strengthening this boundary, and introduces the *subjective* element of personification, which becomes crucial for *unifying* within individual personality *different areas of value* and for understanding the irrational, mystical foundations of the realization of values, without denying the possibility of the universalization and theorization of history and the search for historical causality.

Conclusion

The “final” notion always determines the limit of objectivity, after which begins the area of subjective mysticism, of experience. Hessen consistently pursues the task of critical philosophy: the strict separation of science from metaphysics. Metaphysics begins when the boundaries of different disciplines are contravened. Is it possible to unify the objective scientific and the subjective mystical, to unify all their problems and solving them? Hessen’s answer is that only the personality can accomplish this task. He points to Kant’s doctrine of the transcendental ideal, “which Kant has understood as an ... idea in individuo, which, at the same time, had to realize all other ideas within itself.”³¹ Only the individual personality is capable of reconciling all the contradictions and growing complexities of the notional processing of reality with its orientation towards the unattainability of the goal, and unifying them in a system. “Here, however, the kingdom of philosophy as an objective science ends. Here is the boundary, where this most objective science as such and the most abstract doctrine about the eternal absolute forms of cultural activity suddenly turn into the most subjective secrets of personality, into its most sacred sanctuaries where irrational belief and faithful hope are ruling.”³² Like all representatives of transcendentalism, Hessen moves the answers to the final questions beyond the transcendental horizon; his sphere of research remains to look for ways to strengthen the objectivity of the individual by revealing its *logical foundation*. He also makes no claims about reality itself, choosing to remain within a philosophy demarcated from metaphysics.

Notes

1. V.V. Zenkovskii, *Istoriia russkoi filosofii*. Vol. 2. Pt. 1 (Leningrad: EGO, 1991), p. 247.
2. S.I. Hessen, *Osnovy pedagogiki. Vvedenie v prikladnuiu filosofiiu* (Moscow: Shkola-Press, 1995), p. 75.

3. Letter from H. Rickert to P. Siebeck, July 8, 1909. Qtd. in R. Kramme, "Philosophische Kultur als Programm. Die Konstituierungsphase des LOGOS," in *Heidelberg im Schnittpunkt intellektueller Kreise: zur Topographie der "geistigen Geselligkeit" eines "Weltdorfes" 1850-1950*, ed. H. Treiber and K. Sauerland (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1995), p. 144.
4. S. Hessen, *Über individuelle Kausalität* (Inaugural Dissertation, Faculty of Philosophy, Albert-Ludwigs University of Freiburg, 1909), p. 3.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 4–5.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 5.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
9. H. Rickert, *Granitsy estestvennonauchnogo obrazovaniia poniatii. Logicheskoe vvedenie v istoricheskie nauki* (St. Petersburg: Nauka, 1997), p. 324. [In English: *The Limits of Concept Formation in Natural Science*, trans. Guy Oakes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).]
10. *Ibid.*, p. 325.
11. Hessen, *Über individuelle Kausalität*, p. 13.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 14.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 73.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 79.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 81.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 90.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 92.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 147.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 151.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 40.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 19.
22. Rickert, *Granitsy estestvennonauchnogo obrazovaniia poniatii*, p. 224.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 217
24. Philosophy of values.
25. Hessen, *Osnovy pedagogiki*, pp. 398–99.
26. Hessen, *Über individuelle Kausalität*, p. 25.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 44.
28. *Ibid.*, pp. 45–46.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 46.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 47.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 150.
32. *Ibid.*