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Spirit and Mind: Hartmann's *Das Problem des geistigen Seins*

Eugene Kelly

New York Institute of Technology

e-mail: ekelly@nyit.edu

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7895-5902>

Hartmann has been considered a mere *Schulphilosoph*, a writer of textbooks with little originality and little to give to the history of philosophy. This paper examines Hartmann's *Das Problem des geistigen Seins* to consider its fundamental insights into the nature of *Geist* and its function in aesthetics, ethics and human history. We note the overlap with the English concept of mind as a way of focusing on what is specific to Geist. The core function of the latter term is its ability to elevate thought above what temporarily holds sway in the objective spirit of a community. Problems defying rational inquiry are identified as metaphysical and unsolvable or as *aporias* and left to the thinkers of later generations. But all turning-backward to the phenomena themselves has a *Rückwirkung*—a reciprocal effect upon the self-consciousness of its audience, enabling it to turn to the future with new questions that can be posed in the light of an exemplary presentation of what is already present in its spirit. Quite contrary to the charge of being a *Schulphilosoph*, Hartmann's creative openness to unexplored problems and possibilities looks ahead to possible new solutions to the perennial problems of philosophy.

Keywords: Nicolai Hartmann, *Geist* (spirit), mind, phenomenology, ontology

A German friend of mine heard that I was working on something concerning Nicolai Hartmann. "Oh yes," he said. "We read him when I was at the university. He was a *Schulphilosoph*." That is, he was a modern Scholastic, a man who could organize the ideas and arguments of the great philosophers without adding any

innovative ideas to them himself, something like a writer of textbooks. I'd like to correct that denigration of Hartmann as lacking historical significance by defining the special significance of his *Das Problem des geistigen Seins. Untersuchungen zur Grundlegung der Geschichtsphilosophie und der Geisteswissenschaften*.

1. Problems of Language

For an Anglophone phenomenologist such as myself, a book dealing with *Geist* or with *geistiges Sein* will be inherently problematic, for these terms have no precise linguistic equivalent in English. The term "mind" is usually employed as a translation of "*Geist*," as in J.B. Baillie's translation of Hegel's *Phänomenologie des Geistes*,¹ and at times the German "*Geist*" is retained by other translators who hope that readers can grasp the meanings of the German term and not confuse its meaning with the English "spirit" and its connotations, only some of which overlap with the German term. Anglophones may relate this "spirit" to the French expression "*Esprit de corps*" in its positive sense of the high spirits and solidarity among the members of the corps, who have a certain self-understanding of themselves as an historical entity embodying a set of values. Although the individuals belonging to the corps will change over time, the objective *esprit* of the group has a certain continuity. It absorbs the individual spirit of newcomers into itself while still allowing itself to be changed somewhat by them.

2. *Geist*: Personal, Objective, and Objectified

The English word "mind" overlaps the German word "*Geist*" differently. It is far broader than *Geist*, incorporating both thought, as its conscious activity, and the soul, that is, the Greek word *psyche* as the place of the pre-conscious feeling-states and values that work in the background of the conscious mind. If the mind is conceived as a substance separate from the physical brain-states that "carry" the

¹ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Mind*, second, revised edition (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1931).

mind, it was called by G. Ryle the “ghost in the machine,”² and, like ghosts themselves, said to be a familiar but incomprehensible metaphysical entity unsuited to science. Adhering to the German understanding of “*Geist*,” Hartmann first separates the *Geist* from the psyche, which latter is included in the connotations of mind. The psyche may be only partly aware of its psychic states, such as emotions and feeling states. Even dream states are thought to be psychic events but not “spiritual” in nature, for they are activities of the mind and may, however obscure their origin, eventually manifest themselves as conscious states of desire and may initiate action. *Geist*, on the other hand, appears on three levels. Personal *Geist* appears on the human persons as thinkers and creators. It is distinguished from objective *Geist*, i.e., the spirit of a group or an epoch, and both are distinguished from objectified *Geist* (*der objektivierte Geist*) i.e., spirit in the form of the art and literature of persons and communities. All three are in touch with one another. Both *Geist* and mind, however, have capacities such as intelligence and the power to call up memories, which are also thought to be mental in nature even when not functioning at some given time. Third, in addition to consciousness, a capacity also possessed by the higher animals, the mind of humankind can turn consciousness back upon itself and become aware of itself *as a person in* some situation. This self-consciousness may be an ontological condition of *Geist*. Thus, the differences between German “*Geist*” and English “mind,” especially in its higher manifestations as personal, objective, and objectified, are quite considerable.

3. Origin and Nature of “*Geist*”

Two further questions may be asked about the functions of the German “*Geist*.” When considering the concept of *Geist* as it functions in German, we must distinguish carefully between two questions. One considers the *origin* and metaphysical *nature* of *Geist*. For Hartmann, there is no question of a transcendental origin of an individual *Geist* or of *Geist* having a transcendental nature, and therefore capable of surviving the death of its body. A second question concerns the meaning-*content* of the concept of *Geist* in its phenomenal aspects and

² Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

how it functions in the German language. The phenomenon *Geist* appears only in the social and moral lives of individuals and groups and their creations, and its nature and provenance must therefore be studied in the human phenomenon itself and its works in history. To make this distinction clear, in the introduction to his book Hartmann distinguishes between problem-groups involving *Geist* that can be subjects of phenomenological or empirical inquiry and those that are metaphysical. For example, treatable problems include: "Is history that of individuals, or of higher unities of persons, that is, is it the history of the collective?" "Are there repetitions, similarities, and lawfulness in the process of history, or is every historical event absolutely singular and unique?" Other problems of history defy successful treatment: "Is history a blind set of happenings, as with the processes in nature, or is it teleological and led by purposes?" "Is there necessity in history or mere chance?" "Is the human being with his will active in determining the course of history?"³ Questions of the metaphysical origin and nature of *Geist* are related to these latter questions, in that a philosopher's description of its nature will conform substantially with her beliefs concerning its origin and vice versa: a metaphysical hypothesis about its nature or its origin will give rise to expectations concerning its origin or its nature. For example, if *Geist* is thought to be supernatural in nature, then it is a gift from God, or if it is thought to be a natural function of the human psyche, then it is the product of human evolution.

4. The Conflict with Scheler concerning the Impotence of Spirit

Late in his life, Max Scheler, for a time a colleague of Hartmann's in Cologne, pointed to the one essential characteristic of *Geist* which Hartmann accepts only in a sense: its nature is such that it is unable to act on its own.⁴ *Geist*, Scheler argued, is *impotent* to realize events in history; only what he called the blind *Drang*, itself devoid of spirit, can realize events. To that end, *Geist* generates ideas and

³ Nicolai Hartmann, *Das Problem des geistigen Seins. Untersuchungen zur Grundlegung der Geschichtsphilosophie und der Geisteswissenschaften*, "Geschichtsphilosophische Einleitung", Par. 11 (Berlin und Leipzig: Walter de Gruyter & Co., 1933. Dritte, unveränderte Auflage 1962).

⁴ Max Scheler, *The Human Place in the Cosmos*, trans. by Manfred Frings (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2009), 47 *et passim*.

displays them before the *Drang*, which may unpredictably choose to realize them—or may not. In this circuitous way, *Geist* generates real existence; the objects of *Geist*'s productive phantasy become real. Scheler does not question the ontology or the origin of *Geist* and *Drang*, but he merely posits them as the foundation of all real being. Hartmann's concern is at first for the phenomenology and ontic nature of *Geist*. *Geist* is visible in its constitution of our being human. While contemplating an “anthropological” theory of *Geist* as it appears in human beings, Hartmann lists several of Spirit's essential elements. I translate this passage as follows:

If one really means to define *Geist* through human beings, one will have to know in advance the content of what is called *der Mensch* ... We do not mean a man as a living body, or as its psychic life. When we wish to define what is specifically human, we necessarily reach for such characteristics as knowledge, consciousness of goals, the understanding of meanings, freedom, ethos, creative activity and the like—thus for mere fragments of spiritual being.⁵

We will assume, for the moment, that this list provides us with examples of the functions of spirit that may be subject to a phenomenological analysis that seeks to obtain a greater intuitive awareness of their content. Note, however, that Hartmann identifies these characteristics as manifesting themselves within an anthropological context, and that it leaves out of consideration the activities of *Geist* we call moral choice and the creation and appreciation of art. For insight there we would have to consider other aspects of humankind, such as the values that function in our psychic life and the semi- or unconscious urges that motivate us to actions of some specific kind. We would need to raise some metaphysical and ontological questions about the category of freedom. For this phenomenology of our moral and artistic life, we can turn to Hartmann's *Ethik* and *Ästhetik*. We see however from his description that it is by no means easy neither to distinguish individual spirit from the communal or objective spirit, which surrounds it without containing it, nor to distinguish the phenomenological question of how the term “*Geist*” functions in human language from those questions of ontology and metaphysics that arise out of them. Let us pursue these difficulties.

⁵ Hartmann, *Das Problem des geistigen Seins*, 55.

5. *Geist*: Phenomenology and Ontology

In the *Ästhetik*, Hartmann makes phenomenal rather than ontological claims about the personal, the objective and the objectifying *Geist*. The objectified *Geist* lives in the individuality of the great works of human cultures. In a painting, for example, the objectified *Geist* stands before us. Its individuality is the source of its ineffable mystery, much as the individuality of the person is the source of its mystery. Neither the artwork nor the person can become an object of intuitive or phenomenological scrutiny if only because it is not a fixed entity; it is subject to historical development. Moreover, the beauty of a work of art or the individuality of the person cannot be understood in terms of the essence of its style and content alone. Nevertheless, Hartmann claims that the greatest of works of art, in whatever medium, tend to coalesce: “All truly great works of art converge and come close to an impalpable identity,” a proposition suggesting that on their deepest levels, artworks are or can become intuitable objectified *Geist* and yet still be an ineffable mystery.⁶ The objectifying *Geist* is the individual *Geist* of the artist as he or she creates the work; *Geist* appears in the process by which it makes itself more or less fixed and public. We have here, in what may be carelessly called genius as it objectifies *Geist*, and thus, according to Hartmann, a mystery is constituted that cannot be deconstructed: “Nothing is darker and more mysterious than the work of the creative artist, even to the artist herself.”⁷ One may say the same of the genial works of scientists and mathematicians.

6. The “Mystery” of Personal Spirit

But must we assume an incomprehensible mystery? Is Hartmann perhaps asking the wrong questions, asking about *Geist* and not about the brain? If *Geist*, to resort to a cliché, is what the brain does, it should be possible to “track” an artist’s progress in creating a formidable work of art onto the architecture and

⁶ Nicolai Hartmann, *Ästhetik* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1966), Chapter 41 b. English translation by Eugene Kelly, *Aesthetics* (Boston/Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014).

⁷ Ibid.

activities of the brain. Hartmann is giving us a phenomenology of three appearances of *Geist* in history—individual, objective, and objectified and not, at this point, a metaphysical theory of art. As I understand the work of phenomenology, it is descriptive of the essences of phenomena, how *Urphänomene* constitute higher order *Phänomene*, how essences may become functional upon the natural standpoint as a condition of that standpoint, and how they are engaged by the individual and the collective in natural knowledge and behavior. It does not speculate on the foundations and nature of these essences; those are metaphysical and ontological questions that are beyond the reach of phenomenology. Nonetheless, Hartmann seems at times to be crossing those disciplinary boundaries without being conscious of them. *Geist* then becomes not a phenomenon but a real thing, and, if so, only empirical science can give an account of it. I am not arguing that *Geist* must be reduced without remainder to brain states. But the Geist of the creative artist or statesman or scientist must be conditioned by the states of the brain. We cannot, at least at the present time, give an account of those electrochemical events in their creation of a coherent world. But the mystery, if there is such, must lie in our knowledge of the brain, not of the phenomenal *Geist* alone, and we should not in any case proceed without a clear sense of what we are doing: phenomenology, metaphysics, or empirical science. Empirical studies may someday be able to grasp the individuality of artistic work of great merit along with the uniqueness of the individual person. To call something a mystery is to give up our exploration.

No doubt Hartmann believes that some developments in the evolution of the capacities of plant and animal species and even of the world itself require a supervenience or *Überbau* upon or over the lower capacities, such that the phenomenal capacities of the lower are conditions of but could never explain without remainder the capacities of the higher. We must assume that some kind of “leap” has taken place, for example from the practical intelligence of the higher animals to the inquiring *Geist* of human beings. Each level or *Schicht* of the psyche or *Geist* has a certain autonomy, although the higher levels would not exist without the lower. For example, the rise of the ability for associative memory in the higher animals, he believes, could not be traced, again without remainder, to the capacity for instinctive behavior. It appears to biologists these days, however, that structures thrown up by the evolutionary process can be repurposed to serve new ends, and these purposes can ideally be traced back to their sources. Scientists generally

assume that the laws of nature are continuous and uniform, and the process of evolution is throughout thoroughly comprehensible by reference to them. The psychological laws that explain the behavior of sentient or intellectual creatures are not incommensurate with those describing life forms that do not have such capacities; they simply do not apply to them. Perhaps we will discover in the brains of animals the conditions of such behavior as associative memory. In any case, terms such as “mystery” having as its conditions an inexplicable “supervenience” or a discontinuous “*Überbau*” are descriptive and not explanatory.

7. A Similar Problem: “Mystery” in Scheler’s Concept of Personal Spirit

Let me make a similar point in a different context. Since in *Das Problem des geistigen Seins* Hartmann is concerned with the historicity of personal, objective and objectified *Geist*, he examines what he takes to be one-sidedness in past examples of philosophical treatments of the term. One critique, concerning individual *Geist*, is discussed with reference to Max Scheler.⁸ Scheler’s error is said to consist in his imagining, in his major phenomenological works, that the life of the individual *Geist* consists in the execution or performance (*Vollzug*) of acts, such as acts of knowing, loving, perceiving—that is, intentional acts of *Geist*.⁹ Such acts are characterized by Scheler as manifesting a kind of energy, and thus as something more than a process or a state. This something enters these acts decisively and expresses itself in them. Scheler’s characterization of *Geist* as the *performance* or *execution* of acts has the consequence that acts of *Geist* exist entirely and only in performance; they have reality only so far and when they are executed. Such a concept could not, says Hartmann, help us distinguish acts of *Geist* from psychic acts, for psychic acts are all executed, but not intentionally. Many, indeed, are not conscious at all. Then what is it that performs the performance, the being in whom spirit becomes performative? And what then performs the performance of the

⁸ Hartmann. *Das Problem des Geistigen Seins*, 56–58.

⁹ I leave it to Scheler scholars to determine whether this criticism of Scheler’s concept of individual *Geist*—the human person—is justifiable. Scheler does speak of a “collective soul” and “collective spirit” and even of an intimate personhood of individuals. Cf. Max Scheler, *Der Formalismus in der Ethik und die materiale Wertethik, Gesammelte Werke*, Band 2, especially Zweiter Teil, VI B 4, ad 4 and ad 5.

performer, that is, the being who initiates the acts of spirit? For Scheler it is the Person. Does this person thus perform herself? Or does something else stand behind her as the performer? In either case, Scheler's picture of *Geist* is too limited for Hartmann. It leaves out entirely the functions and activity of spirit as objective, that is, as executed by an individual and subject to moral judgment by the collective.¹⁰ In short, Scheler's idea generates an infinite regress and with that, incomprehension. But that need not be so if we recall that the energy needed for the performance of *Geist* or Person is derived from the levels of organic life and matter upon which the phenomenon of *Geist* ultimately rests. Although *Geist* may have autonomy from the lower levels of being, it must derive its energy if not its being as spirit and person from them. And thus, the present writer concludes, we must resort to brain physiology for hints concerning its provenance, unless we wish to lose ourselves in the uncertain metaphysical speculations that draw us far from the living phenomena that we identify as *Geist*.

Hartmann was a phenomenologist, by which I mean that he identified and described moral predicates, such as injustice, functioning in our judgments of moral behavior.¹¹ Here we have phenomena, not speculations without the givens to which they obliquely refer. They have objective *geistiges Sein* and emerge from the objective spirit of a community but are not created by it, as its laws are. Laws are self-conscious objectivations of the moral spirit of a community that are enacted by some sovereign body. They demand that we conform our behavior to them or face the legal consequences of not doing so. The law, we may say, is an ass. But moral obligations are not so tractable. I can always lie to you, but I cannot make lying a moral virtue, Hartmann noted. Here we have the objective *Geist*, no doubt: for the way inflexible moral predicates become functional in a community or in a nation is itself flexible and will depend on the physical, psychic, spiritual and historical conditions of those entities, as Scheler himself believed. The unique genius of *Das Problem des geistigen Seins* goes beyond Scheler's concept to the objective spirit and identifies the concept of *Geist*, its constitution and its function in the human world of essentially historical beings. His aim is not so much to utter either singular or universal and verifiable value-propositions that assert truths in ethics or aesthetics, but to describe the phenomena of mental or spiritual being and

¹⁰ Cf. Hartmann, *Ethik*, dritte Auflage (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter & Co., 1949), XXIV b.

¹¹ As especially in his *Ethik* (part 2) where he describes at length the moral virtues of religion, ancient philosophy and modernity.

their objective function in any historical community. He wishes to identify the ways in which spirit may function in individuals, as the objective spirit of communities, in a constitution, real or proposed (Montesquieu: *L'Esprit des Lois*), or in the spirit of the religions of nations, perhaps, and as the objectified spirit in works of art, literature, and science. It is this effort and its achievements that make the reading of this work still so profitable.

8. *Geist in Aesthetics*

Hartmann writes in the present work about themes concerning art as a function of *Geist*. His reach is here is narrower than in *Ästhetik* for he is questioning the historicity of *Geist* in art and not in art as such. He notes, if I understand him properly, that what we call the appearing timelessness in art, that is, its ideality, is its capacity to communicate a profound vision of the nature and significance of human conflicts and situations, despite the liability of all objectified *Geist* to historical change. The unassimilated spirit of momentous events and achievements can be given expression and held fast by genial artists. Even if styles in art cannot escape historical location and change, art may, at its deepest levels, express an idea that can be assimilated by all who wish to enter it. Moreover, objectivated *Geist* has a reciprocal effect (*Rückwirkung*) upon its creators and its audience, making them receptive to new forms of art and to prompt them to ask the questions that can only be asked from within the experience of art. Otherwise, the great works of art could not help to create a common culture for living individuals. Art, like philosophy is always moving forward, leaving a trail of objectified *Geist*, even if artists and philosophers do not move along the road in the same way, or indeed do not know where the road is leading at all.

Hartmann read Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit* not long after its publication in 1927. His son-in-law once showed me copies of marginal notes made by Hartmann in his copy of Heidegger's book. Hartmann seems to have thought the work to be useless; he found only one sentence of it to have been worthy of his trouble. Now Heidegger was always preparing the way for new questions, leading with *Vor-fragen* about what he thought to be the real questions of being, for persons in a fallen state, where answers that hide our fallen state from us "hold sway." But are not the sublime acts of questioning and answering themselves an attempt to

elevate ourselves above whatever momentarily holds sway? This phenomenon is perhaps the core meaning of *Geist*, the *Urphänomen* upon which all its other manifestations are based. And must not questions, even the question of being, lead somewhere, that is, to at least the kind of *vor-läufige* answers that our supposed “*Schulphilosoph*” Hartmann offers us?

9. Conclusion: Hartmann as a Creative Spirit

For Hartmann's magnificent book, questioning as it does the phenomenon of spirit, only seems to be a work of *Schulphilosophie* as my friend said it was. It pours forth doctrines in a systematic way, it discovers aporia as it inches into the depths of thought, and it generates profound observations and seeks to justify them rationally and to point to the phenomena convincingly. The steps along the way are ordered so carefully that one could almost put the results in a table, as one would expect from *Schulphilosophie*. But to my mind it is much more. For all turning-backward and objectifying has a reciprocal effect upon the audience, enabling it to turn to the future with new questions that can be posed in the light of an exemplary presentation of what is currently holding sway. Hartmann gave a wonderful example of this moving forward and looking backwards as he prepared the second edition of this work. The times have much changed since the first edition (1932 to 1949), he wrote in an understatement, and then added somewhat wistfully, “whether the *Geist* to which it testifies is the same as that to which it speaks, such that the latter recognizes itself in the former, must first show itself.”¹²

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¹² Hartmann, *Das Problem des geistigen Seins*, “Vorwort,” 5.

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Streszczenie

Duch i umysł. Hartmanna *Das Problem des geistigen Seins*

Hartmann bywa uważany za zwykłego *szkolnego filozofa*, autora podręczników o niewielkiej oryginalności i niewielkim wkładzie w historię filozofii. Niniejszy artykuł analizuje dzieło Hartmanna *Das Problem des geistigen Seins*, aby rozważyć jego fundamentalne wglądy w naturę *ducha* (*Geist*) i jego funkcji w estetyce, etyce i historii ludzkości. Zwracam uwagę na zbieżność z angielskim pojęciem umysłu (*mind*) jako sposobu skupienia się na tym, co specyficzne dla ducha (*Geist*). Podstawową funkcją tego ostatniego terminu jest jego zdolność do wyniesienia myśli ponad to, co dominuje chwilowo w duchu obiektywnym danej społeczności. Problemy wymykające się racjonalnej analizie zostają uznane za metafizyczne i nierozwiązywalne lub jako aporie i pozostawiane myślicielom późniejszych pokoleń. Jednak wszelkie powroty do samych zjawisk wykazują *Rückwirkung* – wywierają zwrotny wpływ na samoświadomość odbiorców, umożliwiając im zwrócenie się ku przyszłości z nowymi pytaniami, które można postawić w świetle tego, co prezentuje się w ich duchu. W przeciwieństwie do zarzutu bycia *szkolnym filozofem* (*Schulphilosoph*), twórcza otwartość Hartmanna na niezbadane problemy i możliwości pozwala dostrzec potencjalne nowe rozwiązania odwiecznych problemów filozofii.

Słowa kluczowe: Nicolai Hartmann, *Geist* (duch), *mind* (umysł), fenomenologia, ontologia

Zusammenfassung

Geist und Verstand. Hartmanns *Das Problem des geistigen Seins*

Hartmann wird manchmal als gewöhnlicher *Schulphilosoph* angesehen, als Autor von Lehrbüchern mit geringer Originalität und geringem Beitrag zur Geschichte der Philosophie. Der vorliegende Artikel analysiert Hartmanns Werk *Das Problem des geistigen Seins*, um seine

grundlegenden Erkenntnisse über die Natur des *Geistes* und seine Funktion in der Ästhetik, Ethik und Geschichte der Menschheit zu untersuchen. Ich weise auf die Übereinstimmung mit dem englischen Begriff *mind* (Verstand) als einer Möglichkeit hin, sich auf das zu konzentrieren, was für den *Geist* spezifisch ist. Die grundlegende Funktion des letzteren Begriffs ist seine Fähigkeit, Gedanken über das hinaus zu erheben, was derzeit im objektiven Geist einer bestimmten Gemeinschaft vorherrscht. Probleme, die sich einer rationalen Analyse entziehen, werden als metaphysisch und unlösbar oder als Aporien angesehen und den Denkern späterer Generationen überlassen. Jede Rückkehr zu den Phänomenen selbst zeigt jedoch eine *Rückwirkung* – sie wirkt sich auf das Selbstbewusstsein der Rezipienten aus und ermöglicht es ihnen, sich mit neuen Fragen, die sie im Lichte dessen, was sich in ihrem Geist zeigt, stellen können, der Zukunft zuzuwenden. Im Gegensatz zu dem Vorwurf, ein *Schulphilosoph* zu sein, ermöglicht Hartmanns kreative Offenheit für unerforschte Probleme und Möglichkeiten, potenzielle neue Lösungen für die ewigen Probleme der Philosophie zu erkennen.

Schlüsselwörter: Hartmann, Geist, *mind* (Verstand), Phänomenologie, Ontologie

Ins Deutsche übersetzt von Anna Pastuszka

