



The understanding of spirituality in French and German culture¹ *

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In this essay I will outline the most obvious characteristics of French and Germany spiritual culture.² This concept does not have the same meaning everywhere, but regardless of place it is always at the top of the hierarchy of values. A precise description of the formal differences in spiritual cultures is a good way of presenting ideals and of looking into the innermost mystery of individual or collective persons.

1. The world is essentially rational

Réné Descartes, the purest expression of French genius, while continuing the classical Platonic tradition, left an ineffaceable trace on the understanding of his nation's spiritual culture. Let us recall his famous theory of the separation of body and spirit.³ Body and spirit are absolutely foreign to each other and herein lies the originality of this theory. Up until then, according to Aristotle, the unity of the substances of spirit and matter in man was self-evident. For Descartes, these two substances do not have anything in common and can only be united by the will of God.

Just for that reason, man's psychological life, having risen from the unity of these two substances, is not purely spiritual. The body can participate in

* The copyright source of the original text in Lithuanian could not be found although many efforts were made to trace it. Professor Levinas' son has approved the idea to have it translated into English and published in *Continental Philosophy Review*.

psychological life, but since it essentially does not have anything in common with spirit, only the contamination of spirit by the body can result from their union. This contaminated-by-the-body psychology must be eliminated from the concept of pure spirit. Descartes chides sense perception because in his opinion we do not attain reality by sense perception; rather we seek what is useful through it, and this seeking of the useful comes from the union of spirit and body. Descartes creates analytic geometry because he is suspicious of the imagination and even of Euclid's geometry, which uses figures. Similarly, our emotions, senses and passions must be excluded from a life of pure spirit.

In such a way, and this is most important, spirit is not only seen as separate from inert matter, but it is also higher than any kind of biological life. Biology is a part of physics. Biological life, as Aristotle thought, does not need a spiritual principle. An animal is only a sophisticated, purely physical organism not having any spirituality.

The true life of spirit is elsewhere. Spirit, and this is typical of French culture up until now, is pure thought, beyond imagination, sensations and passions. The highest degree of spirit is found in the theorizing of a mathematician or physicist. Immersed in exact science, a scientist forgets his concrete individuality and seeks intellectual, mathematical forms which are beyond the senses.

This is the key to so-called French positivism, which is not the vulgar positivism of popular philosophy, but the conviction that only theoretical mind is true mind and only exact science is the realization of mind. Everywhere else, there is complete anarchy, a confused mixture of sense perception and biology, the lordship of matter. The contemporary philosopher to whom French youth listen most of all is Leon Brunschvig. His works are dedicated to the progress of consciousness. Progress of consciousness is understood as the directing of human thought towards the mathematical sciences. For Brunschvig, mathematics is true inner life, more profound than the intuitions of the mystics or the delirium of "enlightened" ones. For him, the truly human person expresses himself through impersonal, theoretical reason. An old paradox of French idealism! We classify idealism with positivism because it sees the essence of spirit in mathematical reason, and, for it, reason is alive and active in modern science. However, this kind of idealism does not have anything in common with ordinary, narrow positivism. In science, it is only interested in the workings of reason which will dissipate the obscurities of instinct, and, forcing itself through biological life, will be able to liberate and reconstruct it.

It is of course self-evident that, notwithstanding the abyss that separates the spiritual from the vital, a Frenchman neither negates nor denigrates the latter in everyday life. Nevertheless, for him, this opposition is absolute and

radical. A phenomenon that is half-spiritual and half corporal would be ambiguous for him. Later we will see that a German thinks differently.

Not only does a Frenchman identify spirit with reason, but he also believes that the world is essentially rational. In this way, he can discern power in spirit. Clear ideas and a sober mind can accomplish much in the psychological and social realm, even if this reality belongs to the biological sphere and is ruled by passion. It is enough to look at 18th century philosophers such as Diderot, D'Holbach and Helvetius in order to be convinced that even the purest materialists continue this French cultural tradition. From their materialism, they do not conclude that man is totally incapable of opposing himself to nature. It is enough that people come to know their social reality with greater reason and organize it in a wiser way. There is no secret force in human social or individual psychology which would be capable of opposing sober reason. While for the followers of Marx pure reason is powerless, if pure reason wants to rule and remake psychological reality, it destroys the material foundation of psychological reality. An 18th century French materialist believes himself capable of reforming people by directly affecting their psychology. To affect means to enlighten. It will be possible to attain goodness when, rationally desiring it, people shall learn to affect human reason so that all will seek the same thing and not seek their own interests, nor pay attention to their own particular situation. One must not confuse the universality of the Enlightenment with modern Internationalism. The former's foundation is not the community of interests, but the universality of reason which makes the same eternal truths binding for all men.

Not counting some deviations, we find that French politicians today also solve problems by looking at them through the lenses of universality. Political struggles are battles of ideas. The best proof of the influence of Cartesian reason in French political life is the Dreyfuss case. It was a simple case of a court making a mistake which, at the time, was more beneficial than detrimental to the immediate interests of the state. However, it caused a passionate storm of protest for decades because it touched upon the idea of justice, an abstract, austere and cold idea, but a reasonable one and thus fascinating to the soul of a Frenchman.

In the same way it is possible to explain the typical French concern for a universal morality which appeals directly to reason and which is accepted because it is true. In France, much effort has gone into creating it: 18th century and contemporary moralists like Durkheim, Rauh, Levy-Bruhl, all begin with the conviction that the spirit of man is in reason, that he is capable of rationalizing and reflecting upon his behaviour and that, as Pascal said, having measured other depths of the human spirit, "the honour of man is his thought."

2. Man as the concrete “I”

I just mentioned Pascal. He reminds us how short and incomplete this analysis is. It does not take into consideration a certain concept of French spiritual culture which can be called the Pascalian tradition and which exists alongside the Cartesian tradition. In it we could have found common features with German spiritual culture. However, does this form of spirituality exist in German culture? German culture has inherited, in part, classical and French traditions. Nevertheless, alongside the Cartesianism of Leibniz or Kant, which the Marburg Kantians inflated to the limit, there is another spiritual concept in Germany which has progressively become clearer among the romantics, and which has flourished since the beginning of the 20th century, and especially in our time.

At the heart of this concept is the search for a deeper foundation of reason itself in the concrete individual. That is why, instead of separating the body and the spirit as did Descartes, Germans begin with concrete mental existence. For this view, Descartes’s “body” and “soul” are only abstractions. The sphere of the vital and everything that expresses it in psychological life make up the essence of spirit. Man is the concrete “I,” worried about his fate and anxious before death, who looks at it straight in the eyes or runs away from it. This uneasiness and these experiences of our senses and emotions form the whole tragedy of human existence: love, hate, passions and disillusionments all go to make up one dramatic whole. It is this drama which expresses the spirit.

The spirit is not, as for Descartes, a quiet and cold observer which never descends to the light and dark zones of our instincts. If a Frenchman could order the mind to dissipate the shadows which bodies cast, he would not give that personal stirring the least spiritual meaning. Corneille, Racine and Molière in theatre, and Stendhal, Flaubert and Balzac in their classical novels, try to organize psychological chaos. They try to understand its origin and workings by making some kind of passion or idea their starting point. They take no satisfaction in chaos of the soul, and they try to find a logical explanation for it. To the contrary, a German, with his sensitivity, is interested in this inner drama, this blind-to-reason, unyielding restlessness. Germans see in it the richness and the depth of the human spirit. Understanding the spirit of man does not mean knowing the soul of man by reason, but rather living without trying to escape from life. It implies wanting to know disillusionment, sorrow and joy. This kind of knowledge is the true life of the human spirit. Any attempt to avoid the depths and sins of life, or a desire to hide from them in the brightness of reason, would mean perishing. Is reason not that by which we forget these uneasy depths? By its brightness, does it not eclipse the most distinct features of life? Does it not destroy the complexity and richness of

life like the sword of Alexander, the eternal symbol of reason, which cuts knots but does not know how to untie them?

However, making the human spirit concrete does not mean making it a material something. The forces connected with biological life, sexual restlessness, and the fear of death, are not physical phenomena. They are dark, but not blind. The originality of this view is that, for it, the contents of consciousness, the impressions, sensations and whims, are “directed towards something” and reveal the metaphysical meaning of human destiny. Modern German phenomenologists (Husserl, Scheler, Heidegger) in their beautiful analyses point to the so-called intentionality of all the content of consciousness. They underline the spiritual importance of the elementary data of consciousness which Descartes and Spinoza confined to the less important levels of psychology.

But belief in the spiritual importance of the elementary psychological data is not purely philosophical. It has widespread roots in the German soul. Let us compare a trashy German novel with a French one. In one as in the other, in hopes of large sales, authors describe sensual scenes. The Frenchman knows very well the nature of the reality which he is describing. If he is writing about physical love, then that love is first and foremost physical. He does not confuse the details of this kind of love with the tender feelings of spiritual love. Spiritual love does not exist in this kind of novel. A Frenchman does not philosophize when he is writing pornography. Most of the time he is satisfied with a happy epicureanism which takes pleasures for what they are: the blind content of consciousness. Such pleasures are experienced passively and do not reveal anything. In a German novel of the same sort, by contrast, spiritual and physical elements are mixed together. The sexual tribulations of mediocre personalities reveal metaphysical realities. The same difference exists in good literature. For example, Gide and Giradoux often describe the realm of primordial feelings. However, the mental life of the main characters consists more of a constant analysis of a life of desire, rather than of the desires themselves. A feeling is only a blow which awakens an extraordinary psychological flourishing, but is not the flourishing itself. There is some element of chastity in French literature, although outside of France there is a different opinion about it.

Another characteristic of the German interest in the human spirit is the interest in psychoanalysis. The presentation of sexual life as a psychological factor does not interest us philosophically. It does not teach us anything. Even less worthy of attention are the various fantastic dogmas of Freud's system and their implications, his key to dreams and therapy, be it precise or not, as well as all the other therapies of the world. Only the new understanding of the subconscious is of interest in this new theory. From Leibniz onwards, the concept of the subconscious has been legitimate in philosophy, but it always

belonged to the sphere of the intellect and was seen as a complement to the concept of consciousness. While according to Freud, the clear and conscious life of the mind is only the surface foam of a much deeper spiritual reality. This spiritual reality is not impartial thought, but the moving and dramatic libido. Spiritual reality is no longer the sober consciousness of Descartes, but the unconscious desires of the libido. However, the libido is a spiritual principle. No one is less of a materialist (in the 19th century understanding of the word) than Freud. But he is fighting a serious battle on behalf of pure psychological psychiatry against those who see insanity as some kind of organic disorder. Recalling the French understanding of the spirit, it is not surprising that psychoanalysis had few followers in France. It goes against the deepest convictions of the French soul.

Psychoanalysis is not the only philosophical expression of the German understanding of spirit. There are many embodiments of the German conception in so-called "philosophies of life," which in Germany are sprouting in large numbers. Nietzsche, Simmel, Dilthey, Scheler and most recently Heidegger's philosophy of existence are various forms of the German spiritual ideal. Today, Heidegger's philosophy has an exceptionally large influence among German university students. When Heidegger speaks about spiritual reality he does not use the word "consciousness", but rather "existence" (this is where the name of his philosophy, existential, comes from) wanting to emphasize the concrete and dramatic aspects of the spirit.

It is no coincidence that extremist political parties, which are presently so strong in Germany, are enchanted with this notion of spirit. They do not trust reason because reason opposes their vitality; they do not listen to reason which says "yes" when their existence screams "no." Germans believe that pain is more real than reason, which wants to smother pain, and that truth is not the impartial observing of eternal ideas, but a horrible cry of an existence struggling to survive. It is easy to forget, to lose your balance when you imagine yourself hearing a mystical voice in the depths of your soul. It is true that this is a perversion of the German ideal, but it is interesting to note that even in its false form, this ideal is completely opposed to the failings and sins of the French soul.

3. The hidden forces of being

A book which shines with true genius and which, together with the work of Marcel Proust in France, is the greatest literary event of our time, is the novel *Zauberberg* by Thomas Mann. Here we find a living embodiment of the concepts which I have briefly presented above.

The mountain of miracles, the Zaubenberg, is Davos, a city of tuberculosis and a place of sickness and death. However, death does not come quickly in the sanatoriums of Davos; often death *gives* time. There is still time to live, to joke, to partake in gaieties. During periods of recreation it is possible to temporarily forget about death, and hope is not completely exiled. Nevertheless, death is still encountered everyday in the agony and death of one's neighbour, in the decay of one's own body, in an ever present fever which does not go away and which is confirmed several times a day by a thermometer.

Having chosen Davos for the setting of his novel, Thomas Mann achieved a great literary effect. The atmosphere of Davos is a thickening of that atmosphere in which we, destined for death, flail at our fate. In the valley we forget that we have to die, but on the mountain, death is not something abstract. There, where death is so frequent, people are able to measure it on their own bodies and to know whether it has advanced or receded. In this way, the body enters into the sphere of restlessness about death, open or hidden, but constantly haunting even the most carefree moments of recreation. The sick know the state of their bodies very well and the effect that the smallest changes have upon their psychology. The inner life of the sick is infinitely connected with the body and never rises above the body. But, instead of being empty and insignificant, their spiritual life develops, becoming more profound and reaching a high level of spirit. In the valley, people are submerged in an unhealthy state of contentment with biological life. On the mountain, illness (and this, in the conception of Thomas Mann, is the role of illness in the novel) emphasizes biological existence and does not permit one to forget about it as healthy people in the valley may choose to do. The originality of the novel is in the notion that biological life, while attaching people to death, attaches them to the very source of spirituality. The shadow of death creates a metaphysical atmosphere. This tangible spirit which arises from illness can meet all the major problems which trouble the thoughts of a normal person. These problems are born, develop and become ever more intimately tied with concrete, bodily, to-death-condemned life. Thus, biological existence has nothing in common with the dead matter of traditional materialism. It fully corresponds to the German concept of spiritual life which I have briefly described.

Now we can understand the plot which constantly deepens and develops throughout the 2000 pages of the novel. Hans Castorp, a young engineer from a bourgeois Hamburg family, goes to Davos to visit his sick cousin, the young officer Joachim Ziemssen. From the day of his arrival he becomes strangely saturated with the atmosphere of Davos. It attracts and repels him at the same time. He feels, although not distinctly, the many spiritual feasts it promises and is afraid of it as if it were some kind of disorder.

However, he evolves quickly. Unconsciously, but maybe because of that more profoundly, he desires to be ill because illness transfigures the person and allows him to reach the depths of existence. At the same time, the sick Russian woman, Claudia Chauchat, attracts him in an inexplicable way. His illness begins as love begins. Being tubercular, he spends many years at Davos and does not notice them, because time has stopped on the magic mountain amidst eternal snows.

Claudia Chauchat, whose physical appearance Thomas Mann describes in minute detail, is not a woman of classical beauty. Her beauty is irregular, her movements sudden. But she also is ill. Castorp's love has nothing in common with that experienced by the inhabitants of the valley. Those people, out of touch with the depths of their being, order their feelings by rules. Castorp's love lacks a foundation in either classical aesthetics or the Platonic ideal of harmonious beauty. Neither is his love an epicurean seeking of pleasure or a blind seeking of sensation. His love for Claudia Chauchat is the same as the poison of putrefaction, which, issuing from his lungs, drenches his whole body.

This love through and for illness – a genuine flower of the Davos climate, perhaps the most beautiful of Thomas Mann's literary inventions – is the spiritual formation of Castorp – the study of his spiritual values not in accordance with traditional humanities, Greek and Latin literature and languages, but in accordance with love and illness. The science which tempts him and appears most educative is anatomy and physiology. Such are the humanities! In this assertion the full paradox of the German understanding of spirit reveals itself. And when at the end of volume one Castorp speaks to Claudia about his love for the first time, Thomas Mann attains a heretofore unheard of poetical effect. In order to describe Claudia's strange beauty, Castorp uses technical, anatomical terminology. He, as if in a state of ecstatic delirium, names all the organic substances of which she is made. The mystery of the Cartesian unity of body and spirit is experienced here as a primordial reality and is understood in the exaltation of love – biological and metaphysical love. The soul of the beloved is known in its intoxicating depths precisely when Castorp begins to speak in the language of biological science.

Castorp only knows Claudia's love for one night because she leaves the magic mountain the next morning. Castorp remains ill because he continues to love her, and, waiting for Claudia to return, he continues on the path of spiritual development. She returns. She is escorted by an exceptional person, the Dutchman Mynheer Peeperkorn, a heavy-set man who likes to eat well, drink and make merry. His idea of the ideal life is one of emotion and sensual pleasure, and he sees the lack of these experiences in a weak person to be a cosmic catastrophe, as he himself says. He speaks in monosyllables, and his

sentences are not related to each other. It seems that he does not think. If the "honour of man is his thought," is Peeperkorn a man?

Here is the paradox! That huge organism, that gigantic body, given to emotions and debauchery, is a true person. He reigns on the mountain and his silence crowds out the wise conversations of the other patients. Before his majestic, great body which knows how to feel and to live, those conversations seem sterile and foolish. This man is Castorp's fortunate rival, but Castorp feels almost happy when he can renounce Claudia and recognize, together with the other inhabitants of the mountain, the kingship of that organic force. With admiration he sinks into Peeperkorn's dark force. Peeperkorn's force, and this is important for our topic, is not the materialist's force of unrefined matter nor the force of nature of a pantheist. His force is the purely spiritual power of a person, such as is depicted by Germans when they associate it with the organic. The novel contains a characteristic scene. The inhabitants of the magic mountain go to visit a water fall. The deafening roar of the falling water can be heard from a distance, and it is difficult to converse. But Peeperkorn speaks in meaningless monosyllables. All look at him, listen to him. He eclipses the impersonal majesty of nature. His kingdom is not of the same world as the pantheistic forces of nature.

Three people try to resist the hypnosis of the mountain and the strength of Peeperkorn. One of them is the Prussian officer and Castorp's cousin, Joachim Ziemssen. He finds this spirit of decay repulsive. He dreams about getting well as quickly as possible and working in the valley. He embodies the discipline of German militarism and is at antipodes with Castorp, who likes the hidden, dangerous forces. Maybe Thomas Mann wants to reveal the philosophical meaning of the Prussian military spirit. That military discipline is not as necessary in conquering the world as it is in controlling the demon waiting in the German soul. A German knows the power of this uncontrollable demon and believes that physical force and strict discipline can resist it better than can reason. The spirit which inspires Joachim Ziemssen is the opposite side of the spirit which intoxicates Hans Castorp.

There are two other souls who struggle against the spirit of the magic mountain. On the one side, there is the Judeo-Christian tradition, and on the other, of special interest in this study, is the tradition of Latin-French civilization. The former is represented by Naphta, a Jew who converted to Christianity and entered the Jesuit order. Not only does he fight against the spell of the mountain to which he opposes the discipline of the Church, he has an even harder time combating the Latin-French culture which he hates even more. This latter tradition is represented by the Italian journalist and Freemason Settembrini. He is a disciplined man of reason. A true follower of Descartes, he worships ideas, believes that the mind can control the body,

and gives no meaning to biological and social illness. He thinks that one must conquer illness by the light of clear reason.

The never ending dialectic between the Jesuit Naphta and the Freemason Settembrini forms the framework of the novel. They both want to save Castorp and tear him away from the seductions of the magic mountain, and they fight for him among themselves. Castorp openly tells them that, in the shadow of Peeperkorn, their discussions, even though cultivated, appear to be funny and insignificant. “Admit that he could easily hide us in his pocket” Castorp tells them.

It seems that in this novel, Thomas Mann has not been able to completely liberate himself, in the highest educational meaning of the word, from the influence of the magic mountain. He knows the ways of salvation of Naphta, Settembrini and Joachim Ziemssen, but he does not follow them. Joachim Ziemssen dies, and Thomas Mann’s Settembrini speaks like a malicious caricature of French culture.

In this comparative study of French and Germany culture, it has not been our purpose to say which of the two spiritual world views is better. Every concept has its dignity, but can also be deformed into a ridiculous and dangerous form. Sometimes this happens to the delight of literary critics in large salons who play with shallow antitheses such as the “light-hearted French” and the “heavy German,” or to the satisfaction of orators in large cafes who take this game seriously and out of it make philosophy.

Notes

1. Originally published in Lithuanian as “Dvasiškumo supratimas prancūzu ir vokiečiu kultūroje”, *Vairas* (Kaunas) no. 5, vol. 7 (1933), pp 271–280. (The journal vanished during World War II).
2. I have used the words “spiritual culture” or “spirituality” to translate the Lithuanian “dvasiškumas,” which is the equivalent of the German word “Geistigkeit”. Thus, the context of the word is not religious, but rather that which pertains to the realm of the human spirit. (Translator’s note).
3. Again, the Lithuanian word which is used is “dvasia,” which would be the equivalent of the German word “Geist.” I have used the word “mind” in some contexts because of its common usage in English, but I have elected to use “spirit” more frequently for the purpose of uniformity throughout the text. At times the author uses the word “siela” (soul) instead of “dvasia.” In such cases I have also used “soul” in the English translation. (Translator’s note).