Nicolai Hartmann: Review of Vasily Sesemann's *The Logical Laws and Being*[1]

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This book is the continuation of two older works from 1927, which were published under the common title "*Studien zum Erkenntnisproblem.* Teil 1. *Über gegenständliches und ungegenständliches Wissen; Teil II. Rationales und Irrationales*" ["Study of the Problem of Cognition. Part I. On Objective and Non-objective Knowledge; Part II. Rational and Irrational"]. The connections between these previous works, which together are almost the same length as this new essay, and the latter, are so strong that the unity of the whole is readily observable in the parts. Regrettably, these three parts did not appear together as one book. This is even more unfortunate because, while there is certainly an interest in such works in the circle of German professionals, it is difficult for a series of publications by a foreign university with predominantly foreign-language contributions to make an impact on the German book market. I feel that for these reasons, even more than would otherwise be the case, it is my duty to draw the attention of professional philosophers to this significant and in some respects unique work.

1. This is a translation of Nicolai Hartmann's review of Vasily Sesemann's book-length essay "*Die logischen Gesetze und das Sein*" (*Eranus*, Bd. II, Kowno 1932, pp. 60–230), which appeared in 1933 in *Kant – Studien* under the title: „Sesemann, Wilhelm, *Die logischen Gesetze und das Sein*" (Book Review) (*Kant-Studien*; Jan 1, 1933, vol. 38, pp. 227–32) and was also republished in the third part of Hartmann's *Kleinere Schriften* under the title "Zu Wilhelm Sesemann, 1933" (Nicolai Hartmann, *Kleinere Schriften. Band III. Vom Neukantianismus zur Ontologie*, Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1953, 368–74).

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It would be a mistake to judge this book by its title. It deals much more with "being" than with "logical laws." It is not a logical investigation, but entirely an ontological one. It thereby reaches into an area of problems that is nowadays both central and, in a positive sense, current in contemporary theoretical philosophy. No one would deny that in our time the problem of being has reached a certain maturity. But what has actually been achieved so far? A "turn to ontology" is often called for, and there is no shortage of thinkers who, in the spirit of the prevailing historicism, philosophize about this turn as if it were a phenomenon of our time. This, however, is not the way to tackle this newly developed area of problems. When one takes a closer look at what has actually been achieved, one finds neither any real attempt to formulate the issues involved, nor any properly pursued path of research beyond the posing of the most external and general preliminary questions—like the question of the "meaning" of being [*"Sinn" des Seins*], or of the relation between knowledge and being. Furthermore, even the answers that are proposed to these questions are repeatedly borrowed from old speculative *weltanschaulich*[2] standpoints, or—which is hardly less problematic—from other adjacent problem areas whose established methods are taken and applied here: over and over again, we see this happening in relation to logic, epistemology, phenomenology, and even the philosophy of history and sociology. It is thus no wonder that the sense of ontological inquiry goes missing. As a result, we still do not have the proclaimed ontology. All we have is the announcement of a "turn" towards it.

Sesemann's book offers us something quite different. Here we encounter neither just talk "about" ontology, nor a mere introduction to it. The author does not even attempt the latter. He goes straight to the point. That this is a genuine ontological investigation, and one that must be understood as such, becomes ever clearer as we follow its progress, and more so than any review can convey. Its significance lies entirely in its content, and the formulation of its questions and its approach can only be assessed from the standpoint of the latter. And this content is indeed significant. The work actually pursues at least a portion of what may be considered the basic ontological questions. The fact that the exploration begins from an oppositional relation to the laws of logic only plays the role of a starting point, which gradually recedes over the course of the investigation.

2. The German word *weltanschaulich* proves difficult to translate into English. It is the adjectival form of the word *Weltanschauung*, which means worldview. Since the word "*Weltanschauung*" is fairly common in English-speaking literature, we decided to keep *weltanschaulich* in German.

Logical structure differs from the structure of being in terms of two aspects: that of the subject, and that of the object. Accordingly, the work is divided into two parts. The first deals with the relation between the laws of logic and "subject-related and mental being" [*subjektbezogenen und psychischen Sein*], while the second deals with the relation between the former and an "autonomous being" [*daseinsautonomen Sein*]. Consciousness is very far from being completely subordinate to logical structures. We are all well aware of the alogicity in our emotional life. But far less known and researched is the fact that theoretical consciousness also exhibits quite definite limits to the logical. Not everything that we grasp is objectively determined [*gegenständlich bestimmt*]. Logical laws are laws of determination [*Gesetze der Bestimmtheit*]; where indeterminacy begins, the failure of logical structure also commences. However, this does not apply to everything that is not grasped conceptually. Rather, our perception of things shows, and also points us to, this dimension of everything connected with our conceptualization of substantial certainty and logical unambiguity, thanks to the peculiar character which it shares with the realm of thought. This character is the predominance of spatiality and the static aspect in the presented world of objects.

It has probably always been noticed that logical structure is characterized by stasis and timelessness; only extreme psychologism failed to recognize this, and it is precisely for this reason that it cannot be maintained. Far stranger than that, however, is the fact that there is also a very noticeable dominance of the spatial-static in the world of perception. The preponderance of the sense of sight in our everyday worldview, even, is proof of this. This aspect can be still more effectively characterized as a reification [*Verdinglichung*] of everything that is perceived. There is thus a striking analogy between the perceived world of things and the world of concepts. And it is precisely this analogy that enables the easy conversion of what is perceived into conceptual form. However, the case is quite different with the full phenomenal content of perception. What cannot be completely reduced to an object-form of thingness includes colors, brightness, shadows, noises, smells, and much more, yet all of that is, as it were, covered up by the same aspect of thingness. "Here is a quite definite view of the external world, a view that is still pre-conceptual, but that nevertheless partly hides the originally phenomenally given, partly modifies it not inessentially." Thus, one must also compare the logical laws directly with this original phenomenal content; indeed, one has to further rely on the "inner perception" that mediates within the psychological reality.

In pursuing this task, a series of thoroughly ontological moments appear. The most salient amongst these are those of "indistinctness" [*Undeutlichkeit*]

and "indeterminacy" [*Unbestimmtheit*] accompanying various levels of perception. Sesemann, in a masterly piece of analysis, shows how indeterminacy is not a mere epiphenomenon that only arises in subsequent reflection as a result of gaps in memory, as it can be shown to be internal to the original perception itself, in which the form of "empty space" of the overall view [*die Form von „Leerstellen" der Gesamtauffasung*] is already present. This sequence of appearances is further completed in the represented world [*Vorstellungswelt*]; it presents itself there as a certain fogginess of content that urges one to seek determination, and which increases in "dreams" [*Traumgesichts*], right up to "shifts and identifications" that are such as to remove any clarity whatsoever from the object. Their variations in the field of inner perception turn out to be completely overwhelming. Consciousness is mainly focused on thingness, but here it has to deal with a content that inherently makes a mockery of the latter. And without thingness, the objectivity of perception fails as well; that which is non-objective does not reveal the principles of logic.

Even so, all of this is just a prelude. The more serious part of the problem lies in the relation between the laws of logic and the real external world—or, as the title of the second part puts it, the "autonomous being" [*daseinsautonomen Sein*]. The basic feature of this being is "mobility" [*Bewegtheit*], "becoming" [*Werden*] in the broad sense. Spatial "movement" [*Bewegung*] in the narrow sense is only part of it. But this part can be used as an example to develop the basic relation. This is where the second part of the investigation begins.

Ancient thought was completely dominated by the laws of logic; it made their validity a "criterion of true reality." That is the meaning of Zeno's arguments that deny the reality of motion. Reinach's interpretation, which wanted to limit the contradiction contained in these paradoxes to the level of appearance, cannot be upheld. Motion has a temporal duration, but Zeno dissolved it into a series of stages, each of which is timeless and presented as "being in . . ." (namely, in one point or location). This is the reason why the stages are not merged into a continuum of one event. But more important is that even the modern physical conception of motion, despite all appearances, continues to pursue a similar spatialization of the temporal, even though it grasps the time-component in every manifestation. It transforms time into just "one more dimension" alongside the spatial ones, from which, in a mathematical context, it is indistinguishable. It also fails to in any way capture the continuous character of temporal flow as such. Its conception of time is abstract: "motion is frozen by the conceptual determination inherent to physics," while physical time is merely a "logical abbreviation of real concrete time."

To explain this state of affairs, Sesemann deploys the concept of the past in a new and expanded sense. Physical considerations adhere to the continuity of time, but there is also continuity where the flow has already stopped. Real time, by contrast, is the flow itself. If one ignores this and puts all of the emphasis on continuity, one is effectively spatializing time. As past, the temporality of motion is spatialized, and it appears as something finished and completed, as a stretch of time [*Zeitstrecke*] that can be presented and measured without any difference in a stretch of space [*Raumstrecke*]. Reduced to the mode of the past, time then becomes a "uniformity" in which the contrast of "now" to "not yet" and "no longer" has disappeared. Spatialization is at the same time an objectification of time and motion. But the original phenomenal content of time and motion has been lost, for this content is characterized precisely by the dynamic of presence as well as by the tension between the present and the future. These moments primarily constitute the "presentness" [*Aktualität*][3] of time.

That opens up a broad perspective: "motion exists in this way and by the fact that it will and can still exist." Only in that manner is motion present—but that way, it is necessarily unfinished. It is a unity, but not a totality. The totality of motion means its sublation [*Aufhebung*]. As long as motion continues, it is characteristically an *apeiron*. This means that it retains a certain indeterminacy at every stage; it can change at the very next moment, but it can also continue unchanged, or pass in silence. As long as it lasts, there is always a "multitude of possibilities" in it. Because of that, at every present moment it is missing an unequivocal, and in itself finished, determination. This means that its appearances reveal contradictory determinations. It follows from this, then, that motion is not subsumable under the laws of logic.

What holds for motion also holds for becoming in general, and since everything real is temporal and in the process of becoming, the same is valid for the whole realm of real being. Science tends to assume across the board that real being, which it cognizes, is subordinate to the law of logic; it rationalizes this by taking presentness away from becoming, by eliminating indeterminacy, and by projecting the living flow into the past. Science thereby misses the essential characteristic of *apeiron*; it always partially misses that which it is cognizing—namely, real being. There is a constant

3. The easiest way to translate the German term *Aktualität* would be *actuality*, but since the English term *actuality* has been used to translate the German *Wirklichkeit*, we have decided to use another word. This choice is justified mostly by the fact that *Wirklichkeit* is one of the basic terms of Hartmann's ontology, and so should not be confused with any other term. Therefore, in the present text the German *Aktualität* is translated as *presentness*, and the German *Wirklichkeit* as *actuality*.

process of determination in the process of becoming, in which the development of that process consists, but also a constant succession of remaining areas of indeterminacy. The conception in question grasps the former aspect but misses the latter; yet even the former is misconstrued by it as being merely a determinant and not the full process of determination. For the concept, the *apeiron* of an ongoing present happening remains an irresolvable antinomy. This is because the *apeiron* is simultaneously determined and undetermined.

The investigation then turns into a modal analysis. The indeterminacy of becoming in the present ontologically presupposes a "multiplicity of possibilities" as a kind of future horizon. What is possible now is bound up with certain conditions, and for every point in time these are located in the past; yet those conditions by no means form an antecedently closed totality, for it is rather the case that they themselves only appear together during the course of the process. So long as they are not all obtaining together, various things are still "possible." Each now "realizes" one of many possibilities, and at the same time creates a new situation in which further possibilities are opened up. Every situation in the occurrence [*Geschehen*] is definitely determined, but it also forms the "potency" of a certain series of possibilities. The progress of the process is therefore always a determination of indeterminacy and at the same time a realization of one of the possibilities; the remaining possibilities thereby all simultaneously become impossible.

As an ontological conception, such a notion of possibility is by no means without difficulties. It is obvious that only that in respect of which all conditions are present together is ontically possible; if only one is missing, it is rather "impossible." But it is different with ideal possibility, logical possibility, and even epistemic possibility. These kinds of possibilities are only partial possibilities; they are not real possibilities. So, is the "multiplicity of possibilities"—and with it, also, the indeterminacy in becoming—ontologically illusory? If this were true, there would be no leeway for possibility alongside actuality in real being. Possibility and actuality would have to coincide, and the consequence would be that possibility could not be, originally, a category of being at all, but only one of cognition: it could only be falsely carried over from consciousness into real being. Sesemann resolves this difficulty by including modal problems into the temporality of becoming. Real possibility is connected with the presentness of the "now" and its double aspect. But the "now" is itself in a state of flux. What is possible is itself the possibility of an actuality, and this belongs to the future but has its conditions in the past. In the sphere of real occurrences [*Geschehens*], the conditions for what is possible are also never completed, because so long as the event

is still occurring, it remains unfinished in its totality. The totality itself "is" not, but rather "becomes." When it reaches its completeness, the occurrence [*Geschehen*] comes to an end; the possibility turns into actuality. It then no longer belongs to the future, but rather to the past.

This is the crux of the investigation. It is obvious that, through this inclusion, static possibility is contrasted with dynamic possibility, and the consequence of the analysis is that genuine real possibility is, in general, just real temporal and dynamic possibility. It is not surprising that, for the sake of its logical structure, science subordinates everything that it grasps in real being to the category of static possibility. It freezes mobility and temporality, and in this frozen world there is no longer any openness to the horizon of the future. The implications of this result are far-reaching. They concern highly concrete issues: the impact of discreteness in a global context, the autonomy of subsystems, the structure of the world's events, the problem of determination and scientific predictions, the concepts of development and of freedom. They ultimately lead to a stratified ordering of what is possible—which, unfortunately, has been no more than hinted at all too briefly. It is only at the highest stratum that the fundamental potency of the possible is actually revealed: "It makes possible the being-for-itself and freedom of the spirit, it creates the foundation for knowledge and science, and opens for consciousness the access to the world of the ideal."

Clearly, the outcome of these investigations is not a limiting of the scope of the laws of logic. It leads to some insights about such laws—for instance, some new and weighty acknowledgements of types of irrationality—where this forms the topic of the last chapter of the book. But much more important are the internal elaborations of the problems themselves. What has already been elucidated shows them to concern the theory of categories. Motion, becoming, process, time, possibility, and actuality—all these are fundamental categories of being. That the moments of validity are consciously distinguished as categories of cognition and of being—a distinction that cannot be understood from a purely logical point of view—is something that should be taken to be of particular value here. This becomes abundantly clear inasmuch as right from the very outset the investigation transcends its strictly and narrowly defined subject matter and enters into the great problem area of determinism and indeterminism, of freedom, and of necessity and contingency. And it is no coincidence that precisely the latter questions shed new and bright light on the investigation—an outcome that I cannot spell out here, but that is implicit in the above exposition.

The secret of such an astonishing and unexpected result ultimately lies, in my opinion, in the viability of the approach. No "theory" is advocated

here, no point of view represented; behind it lies no preconceived worldview that is to be proven or even just made to appear convincing. It is rather simply a series of phenomena examined in a work of diligence. The selecting and relating of these phenomena are, however, determined by certain permanent problems at the crossroads of logic, epistemology and ontology. These are ones that owe their maturity to the current state of knowledge, and should be of interest to anyone whose thought is rooted in the latter. I would therefore like to present this investigation as an illustrative example of purely problem-oriented research—in contrast to every kind of research that is speculative, constructive, or predetermined by a certain worldview. It is a kind of approach that pursues exclusively the path opened up by problems themselves, without presupposing any worldview and without trying to achieve an all-encompassing point of view based on just the study being conducted. This is one that we rarely encounter in its pure form, especially within the area of heavily metaphysically burdened fundamental questions of being and the world—but it is nevertheless one that should be adopted for the entire field of philosophical problems.

At a time when, even in philosophy, thought seeks the sensational and follows fashionable trends, the incorruptible sobriety of such a book is extraordinarily beneficial. Today, many people hardly know how this sort of pure approach to thinking through problems works. Here they can learn it—quickly and concisely, without the risk of falling into the traps that thought itself can lead one into, or getting locked inside the cage of a system.

One need not agree with every detail of something to embrace it with admiration. I myself have my own doubts here on many points, but I have also found that this work, which is so well thought-out, leaves hanging some outstanding questions of critical importance. This this is so is certainly an inevitable consequence of the brevity of the presentation. After all, what can we say about such an outcome if someone else presents different results? Well, that is surely just a symptom of the openness and incompleteness of all basic problems, an indicator of the vitality of research as it relates to the ongoing historical progress of any far-reaching discussion. Therefore, it seems to me that it is unnecessary to add to this review any critical analysis: to do so would just be to bring in someone else's opinion, against which further objections could be raised as well, and so on. Nobody is obligated to provide authoritatively final results. The lively progress of research can itself lead to further clarifications of problems, and it seems to fair to say that Sesemann's book achieves a significant step in this positive direction.