

Ontological and Gnoseological Fundamentals of the Transcendentalism of Boris Yakovenko

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Abstract—The article discusses the works by Boris Valentinovich Yakovenko, one of the most prominent representatives of neo-Kantianism in Russia. The article examines Yakovenko’s ontological and gnoseological views. They are analyzed in the context of the essential German and Russian philosophical currents of the early 20th century: phenomenology and neo-Kantianism. As a follower of neo-Kantianism, Yakovenko devoted much of his research to issues of cognition. The article is focused on the problems of transcendence, the existence of ideal entities, the unconditionality of cognition, the correlation between subjectivity and objectivity in cognition, and the achievement of absolute knowledge.

Keywords—*transcendentalism; phenomenology; neo-Kantianism; cognition; consciousness; Yakovenko*

I. INTRODUCTION

The name of Boris Valentinovich Yakovenko is rather significant in the Russian philosophical context of the early 20th century. As a successor of the great Neo-Kantians of the Baden school and a follower of Hermann Cohen, Yakovenko was one of the organizers of the Russian publication of *Logos* international magazine and its most active contributor. However, the works by Yakovenko are still insufficiently studied in our country¹. Certain reasons for this fact were given, in part, by the Russian philosopher himself. Most of his texts are dedicated to thorough criticism of existing philosophical concepts, whereas finding such a detailed presentation of Yakovenko’s own views is a complicated task.

The basic subject of philosophy, according to Yakovenko, is the Matter — not even merely the Matter as such, but the Matter as the Matter (according to the “early” Heidegger, this is existence). “There is no such philosophical reflection that does not see the highest and the utmost goal of all its aspirations in the Matter” [6], as Yakovenko writes. Yakovenko believes that sensible intuition is the method of

¹ Modern researchers regard Yakovenko’s philosophy mainly from the point of view of the refraction of the ideas of the Baden school of Neo-Kantianism in the Russian context or in connection with the founding and philosophy of *Logos* magazine ([1], [2], [3]). The general description of Yakovenko’s philosophy is provided in the article by E. A. Ermichev and V. V. Sapovl ([4], [5]).

comprehending the Matter: it is the only thing that allows to “identify the Matter in all its integrity and originality – that is, as it is” [6]. Yakovenko refers to this sensible intuition as transcendental or rational intuition, and in some of the latest articles, he mentions mystical intuition as the only possible method of cognition².

Yakovenko emphasizes that the provision for the possibility of any “thingness”, any Matter is the possibility of cognizing them [8]. As this provision is essential to a true Neo-Kantian, before turning to the “Matter as the Matter”, we have to substantiate the methods of its cognition. According to Yakovenko, the substantiation of his own method is inseparable from the answer to the question why he refuses from other methods of cognition. That is exactly why an enormous number of his texts are dedicated to the criticism of existing methods of cognition.

In this article, we reconstruct Yakovenko’s own ontological and gnoseological views in the context of phenomenology and neo-Kantianism as the main philosophical trends of the epoch.

II. THE ISSUE OF TRANSCENDENCE AND THE EXISTENCE OF ENTITIES

Yakovenko declares himself a proponent of transcendental pluralism, that is, an adherent of complete self-sufficiency and independence of each type of Existence, between which there is no connection. Consequently, the fundamental question in relation to the Matter is that of the multiplicity of singularities, not of the unity of many things [9]. If we turn to the act of cognition and attempt to achieve a certain content on its basis, we inevitably fall into dualism, since the act of cognition and its content have a different nature. The nature of the former is subjective and transitory, while the nature of the latter is objective and eternal. These dissimilar elements cannot be combined. Yakovenko considers that consciousness and any other kind of the Matter, contemplation and thinking, the ideal and the material, etc. are incompatible. In Yakovenko’s opinion, philosophy, like any other science, “seeks to completely exclude the cognizing subject from the sphere of cognition, forget about him forever, and deal only with the very essence

² See also [10].

of the object itself'. [10] However, not everyone always succeeds in coping with this task.

Yakovenko divides all the philosophical concepts contemporary to him into two groups: immanent transcendence and transcendent immanentism. The followers of immanent transcendence (Husserl, Riehl, Rickert, and Lask) who initially declared the transcendence of the subject of cognition to consciousness, nevertheless, inevitably united in the cognitive act. The followers of transcendent immanentism, on the contrary, discover elements alien to each other in a unified fact of consciousness-as-existence (Schuppe, Cohen) or in unified thinking. For instance, according to Cohen, pure thinking shapes something alien to thinking itself into an object [11]. It follows that the transcendent still penetrates into the immanent and inevitably "mixes up" with it, though the representatives of the transcendent immanentism themselves do not seem to notice it.

Taking the above into account, it is quite natural that Yakovenko refers to the issue of transcendence as the essential issue of philosophy. He argues that the "issue of transcendence has always been the basic, central problem of philosophical thinking in one form or another" [12]. However, one cannot find an accurate and unambiguous understanding of transcendence in his works.

As we have mentioned above, in his own philosophizing, Yakovenko rejects the theoretical cognitive concept of the transcendent as incognizable, as follows from Kant — both inherently (Kant) and actually incognizable (neo-Kantianism and phenomenology). At the same time, he retains the generally significant, broad understanding of transcendence as the "otherworldly" as opposed to the immanent as the "this-worldly" [13], as independence and irreducibility (of one kind of the Matter to another one). Besides, Yakovenko also provides another concept of transcendence, which, in our opinion, could explain his dislike of any sort of dualism and rejection of all the philosophical concepts contemporary to him. The transcendent in this case is the unknown, the incomprehensible, and the unexplained. Thus, considering Schuppe's philosophy, Yakovenko remarks, "The transcendent moment is already in accepting the fact of 'consciousness as existence' as something intrinsic, inexplicable, determining and explaining everything else as the primary measure of things, the primordial experience, and designating it as the initial wonder, the original and irrepressible mystery of existence as consciousness" [14]. It can be assumed that it is precisely for this reason that Yakovenko rejects all dualistic concepts, as they are based on the "transcendent" in this sense, that is, they are "contradictory and incomprehensible".

It should be noted that, addressing the issue of transcendence, Yakovenko is in tune with his times; moreover, he follows the context of Husserl's phenomenology. To both Husserl and Yakovenko, "transcendence" also implies unclarity and incomprehensibility³. He mentions this in *The Ideas of*

Phenomenology, introducing the second concept of transcendence [15]. However, he immediately transfers this concept to a cognitive course, stating that in the course of cognition, all incomprehensibilities and ambiguities can be fundamentally eliminated, and any transcendence can and must be overcome, that is, cognized. Moreover, in *Introduction to Logic and Theory of Knowledge: Lectures 1906/07*, Husserl states that everything transcendent is an object of phenomenology [16]. Yakovenko's reasoning is fundamentally different: the transcendent (in any sense) should not be allowed into the real philosophy at all, and his task is to implement this idea.

Philosophical cognition, according to Yakovenko, should not allow the transcendent in any form, since it deals with the most ideal essence of the object, which is seen absolutely and unequivocally in the mystical intuition. "The essence of objects" is one of the few concretizations of the Matter that we can find in Yakovenko's works [7].

It can also be said with regard to Husserl's phenomenology that one of its objectives is to comprehend the essences of objects (an "object" is regarded in the broadest sense as something our attention is directed to). In his policy article *Philosophy as a Rigorous Science*, Husserl generally defines phenomenological cognition as an intuitive study of entities [18]. His similarity to Yakovenko is not limited to this concept. During his "early stage" of creative work, Husserl, trying to avoid subjectivism, emphasizes that the detection of essence (essential intuition) is not an experience, and he does not explain how this process takes place in reality⁴, which gives him the right to regard it as similar to an act of instant intuition. However, already in *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy: First Book*, we find a rational description of essential intuition as a process of variation in fantasy [20]. For example, in order to determine the essence of a table, we mentally modify its properties and features (color, materials, and component parts, such as legs), trying to understand without which ones a table would cease to be a table, and we determine its essence on this basis⁵. It is important to remark that reflection on everyday experience plays an important part in determining the essences of objects. Yakovenko, on the other hand, contrasts the study of entities and reflection; besides, he does not provide any description of mystical intuition. This difference is explained by different initial ontological starting points.

Husserl proceeds from the fact that entities are present in our daily life and can be found in the material objects around us, various connections, and relationships⁶. The process of detecting them (essential intuition) is actually the process of deducting them from the everyday world of experience, which cannot be done without reflection. Since everyday experience is in many respects sensual experience, as Yakovenko rightly points out, the central issue for Husserl is

³ On transcendence in Husserl's philosophy, see [19].

⁴ See also [21].

⁵ Speaking about a table, its necessary property is the presence of stable legs, without which one cannot sit at a table. The ability to sit at a table is its essential property which defines a table as a table.

⁶ For further details, see [22].

the problem of the correlation between the sensual and supersensual elements of cognition [23]. It is solved starting from the premise of the unity of the world, the inseparable connection between the ideal and the real material, sensual and essential intuitions, consciousness and the world. Although Husserl sometimes differentiates between them, he remarks that this is a forced abstraction; for instance, in *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy: First Book*, he explores isolated transcendental pure consciousness. Apparently, Yakovenko feels this subtly, noting that intentionality is not a correlation between consciousness and an object as between two different types of the matter.

III. UNCONDITIONALITY OF COGNITION AND ABSOLUTE KNOWLEDGE

According to Yakovenko, entities as the true Matter already exist, but they exist not in the real world surrounding us, not in our life. This is an isolated ideal existence. In this aspect, Yakovenko once again manifests himself as a true Neo-Kantian, moreover, as a follower of the Baden school. In Rickert's article *Values of Life and Cultural Values* published in *Logos* (where Yakovenko was one of the active editors) in 1912-1913, we find the thoughts about eternal unconditional values which constitute an independent ideal existence, condition both culture and life, and without which culture and life are meaningless [24]. Analogically to Rickert's values, Yakovenko also understands the "Matter as the Matter", which is the goal of philosophical absolute cognition. It is quite natural that the cognition of the Absolute is seen by Yakovenko as unconditional cognition. However, with regard to life and any of its manifestations, such as science, for example, Yakovenko is convinced of impossibility of unconditional givenness. He fully agrees with Cohen that sensations are already a judgment, and their givenness is never free from prerequisites, that is, sensations are formed by us. As to sensations, Yakovenko is more radical than Husserl, who still expresses the dogma of "pure" sensations in his texts to a certain extent.

As to the issue of unconditionality of cognition, this is a separate topic in Husserl's phenomenology, primarily because due to the introduction of epoché and reduction, working with prerequisites becomes one of the most replicated techniques of phenomenological methodology. Without going into all the subtleties of this range of issues here⁷, we would only like to remark that the cognition of entities, according to Husserl, in general, is not unconditional cognition. He actually declares the rejection of external prerequisites, yet ontological, epistemological non-rejectable prerequisites remain; therefore, a phenomenologist is supposed to "work" with them, checking and substantiating them. The essential meaning of epoché and reduction is not rejecting prerequisites, but their fixation and highlighting the coherence of any cognition. The thesis of conditionality of any cognition implies the statement of the impossibility of achieving the Absolute and unequivocal knowledge, complete givenness in obviousness. Husserl expresses it by

introducing the concept of the "thing-in-itself" as the endless idea of our cognition. However, there is a sphere in relation to which Husserl declares the possibility of Absolute unconditional cognition. This is the sphere of pure consciousness. Phenomenology represented by him is able to perceive pure absolute essences of consciousness. In fact, it does that, as these entities are intentionality and its structure, the transcendently pure self. It means that Husserl considers his understanding of consciousness to be absolutely correct, unconditional, and unequivocal, despite all his declarations. Alas, in the research practice of the First Phenomenologist, we cannot find any confirmation of his conviction in grasping absolute essences of consciousness. Turning to his numerous works (both published and unpublished ones) on the study of consciousness⁸, we can see that there is no trace of unambiguity or finality with respect to the understanding of consciousness. The concept of intentionality allows for a multitude of interpretations (as we have seen while examining the example of Yakovenko), its borders are blurred; as he attempts to clarify the difficult moments, Husserl provides new descriptions of the experience of consciousness which should concretize the old ones again and again, but they often contradict each other; this work remained unfinished, as he does not succeed in reaching the final obvious givenness of experiences of consciousness. Does Yakovenko manage to do this?

In fact, Yakovenko argues that the essential objective of philosophy is Absolute and unconditional / premise-free cognition of the Matter. Moreover, this cognition should be deprived of any subjective features; otherwise they could turn into cognizable content, which would no longer be the Absolute Matter. Hence, Yakovenko concludes that the subject should be excluded from cognition. In Yakovenko's opinion, this is exactly the point that Cohen failed to avoid while establishing the transcendental principles of science. Yakovenko is convinced that the subject (as a universal transcendental subject) is present in scientific cognition in a hidden form. Today, knowing all the achievements of philosophy of science, it is difficult to disagree with this idea. To Yakovenko, the rejection of the subject of cognition, as we have already seen, implies the rejection of addressing the act of cognition and the givenness of the object of cognition, since addressing them inevitably plunges us into psychologism implying an act of consciousness, an act of thinking, or sensations. Mystical intuition complies with all these provisions, in Yakovenko's worldview.

In the midst of a number of Russian philosophers, this position was regarded as accomplishing the Neo-Kantian paradigm of eliminating the subject from philosophical cognition and eliminating man from philosophy⁹. Leaving these disputes aside (and aligning ourselves with Ermichev's viewpoint), we will ask ourselves the Kantian question: how is mystical intuition possible?

It is difficult to find an explicit answer to this question in the published texts by Yakovenko.

⁷ See [25].

⁸ See also [26], [27].

⁹ See [28].

At first glance, it seems that Yakovenko is ready to implement the strategy expressed by Yurkevich's phrase, "In order to know, there is no need to have knowledge of knowledge itself". This sentence by Yurkevich is quoted by G. G. Shpet in the beginning of the first chapter of his famous work *Appearance and Sense* [29], which is one of the first interpretations of *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy: First Book* by Husserl. However, it cannot be said that Shpet himself implements this very strategy in *Appearance and Sense*, though he does suggest one of the possible realistic interpretations of phenomenology¹⁰.

Yakovenko does not take the path described by Yurkevich and very characteristic of Russian philosophy of that time, either. Rejecting all the prerequisites in cognition of the Matter, Yakovenko, nevertheless, does not reject the methodological substantiation of philosophical cognition, thus admitting the necessity of the prerequisite of the method of research. Therefore, summing up everything written by Yakovenko, we can distinguish the following two steps for cognizing the Matter¹¹. At the first stage, it is necessary to distinguish philosophical knowledge from all the other spheres of culture: science, religion, art, etc. At the second stage, all the links of philosophy with everyday life and all the experiences of the thinking subject must be eliminated. We believe that these delimitations in terms of methodology can safely be called the reduction method in the Husserlian sense, as it was introduced in *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy: First Book*. Moreover, the first stage corresponds to eidetic reduction, when all the external entities (such as entities, science, religion, etc.) are discarded, whereas the second stage can be correlated with transcendental reduction, which removes all psychological stratifications of consciousness. However, unlike Husserl, Yakovenko attributes the entire consciousness and thinking, including the transcendental consciousness and the transcendental self, to the psychological sphere.

However, as we have already mentioned, Yakovenko does not explain how the process of mystical intuition takes place. He merely makes a statement about its result. Thus, Yakovenko argues that philosophy "taken as the knowledge of the Matter is this matter itself" [32]. This means that, by asserting the absence of a gap between a subject and the knowledge of it, Yakovenko advocates a philosophy of the identity of existence and thinking. It seems to be quite a logical conclusion to his reasoning about the absolute cognition of the Matter and, apparently, is in perfect congruence with the atmosphere of Russian philosophy of that time. Yet in some aspects, Yakovenko is ahead of his associates in *Logos* magazine. For instance, Sesemann, considering the path to the contemplation of existence and thinking in Neo-Platonism, argues that it goes through the analysis of the act of knowledge [33].

We would like to agree with the philosophers¹² who regard Yakovenko's position as a tragic one. His tragedy is in the fact that, while doing a tremendous critical propaedeutic work on cognition of the Matter, Yakovenko still fails to provide a positive concept of this Matter. His system of transcendental pluralism remains undeveloped. We can argue that, while trying to overcome all the dichotomies of contemporary philosophy — the subject and the object, thinking and contemplation, transcendentalism and irrationalism — he does not bridge the gap between ontologism and gnoseologism in his own philosophizing.

IV. CONCLUSION

To recapitulate, we would like to draw a conclusion regarding the correlation between phenomenology and neo-Kantianism in Yakovenko's philosophy. Despite the fact that these two trends are often contrasted, on the basis of the conducted research, it can be noted that these two branches of transcendentalism actually have many similarities, including those based on fundamental positions. Their similarity is basically determined by the initial statement aimed at studying what exists: culture, science, the everyday world surrounding us, and the Matter. It is only when we have knowledge of what exists that we attempt to determine the conditions of its possibility and fix the methodology of cognizing it. If we proceed from this point, it seems to be quite natural that Yakovenko does not provide any detailed methodology for cognizing the Matter. We do not have a detailed knowledge of the Matter itself yet, it is still necessary to determine and reveal what it is, and only after that, we have to reveal the conditions for cognizing it. It should be noted that the philosophical tradition of the early 20th century represented by phenomenology and neo-Kantianism does not allow an individual (for example, Yakovenko) to formulate a detailed knowledge of the Matter. Like any objective formation, knowledge is intersubjective by definition and must function within culture. As a matter of fact, in the reality surrounding Yakovenko, such knowledge was absent, and he cannot be blamed for that.

Nevertheless, the analysis of Yakovenko's philosophical views allows us to identify a cognitive range of issues equally relevant to both phenomenology and neo-Kantianism. This is the issue of the "pure" givenness of sensations, the issue of achieving objectivity in the subjective act of cognition, the unconditionality of cognition, the correlation between the immanent and the transcendent in cognition, the issue of achieving things-in-themselves, and the role of different types of intuitions in cognition. We would like to emphasize an interesting point: the views of phenomenology and neo-Kantianism coincide in almost all of these issues, yet Yakovenko's position opposes both of them, which can be explained by the influence of the Russian philosophical tradition. For instance, both phenomenology and neo-Kantianism accept the important role of things-in-themselves and their fundamental attainability. Yakovenko, however, believes that the concept of "things-in-themselves" should be generally excluded from cognition. Both phenomenology

¹⁰ For further details, see [30].

¹¹ These stages are distinguished by Ermichev in his article *On the Neo-Kantian B. V. Yakovenko and His Place in Russian Philosophy* [31].

¹² See also the letter from E.K. Medtner to A. Belyi [34].

and neo-Kantianism assert that the subjective act of the cognizing consciousness cannot be eliminated from cognition, and objective knowledge can be achieved within it. As to Yakovenko, he believes that cognition must proceed and be substantiated without resorting to subjective acts of consciousness or thinking, and that it should be unconditional. The unconditional nature of knowledge is rejected in neo-Kantianism and questioned in Husserl's phenomenology.

Therefore, studying the works by Yakovenko allows us to plunge into the philosophical debates of the early 20th century and understand the complex relations between phenomenology, neo-Kantianism, and Russian philosophy which undoubtedly affect the current situation in domestic philosophy.

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