

Semyon L. Frank: A Russian Contribution to Social Philosophy

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Semyon Liudvigovich Frank (1877–1950) expounded his social philosophy against the backdrop of his decisive rejection of Bolshevism and his dismay at the rise of Fascism. Expelled by Lenin in 1922 from the Soviet Union along with many other like-minded intellectuals, Frank settled in Berlin where he wrote *The Spiritual Foundations of Society: An Introduction to Social Philosophy*.¹ Eventually forced to leave Germany in 1937, due to his Jewish ancestry, Frank first settled in France where he was to live throughout the Second World War, before relocating to England and dying in London in 1950.² Born into a devout Jewish family in Moscow, Frank always considered his embrace of Orthodox Christianity in 1912 as a natural outgrowth of the Judaism of his birth and youth; in matters of faith, Frank always proffered a positive testimony of his upbringing.

One question predominates throughout Frank's quest to articulate a truly *human* social philosophy, namely, "what is the

¹ *Dukhovnye osnovy obshchestva: vvedenie v sotsial'nuu filosofiiu* (Paris: YMCA Press, 1930); English translation: *The Spiritual Foundations of Society: An Introduction to Social Philosophy*, trans. Boris Jakim (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1987). All references will be to the English translation with citations of the Russian original in brackets.

² Even though he did not live to see the eventual failure of the Bolshevik social experiment, he had a firm and prescient conviction that "the social faith, which is now triumphant in Russian communism, is enjoying only a Pyrrhic victory." *Ibid.*, 3 [10].

genuine *meaning* of social life?”³ In detailing a response to his own query, Frank radically distinguishes his vision of social philosophy from *sociology* as an empirical science, one parallel to the empirical study of nature, with the “laws” of the social life being analogous to the “laws of nature.”⁴ Not surprisingly, an inevitable discrepancy between these approaches to the data of social life can only come to the fore, grounded as the one is in positive sociology and the other (Frank’s approach) is in realist phenomenology. According to Frank, the sociological understanding of human social life sees “society [as] nothing but the generalized name for the *aggregate and interaction of a multitude of individual persons*,”⁵ meaning that “society” does not exist as an objective reality as such. In other words, all that ultimately obtains for the positivist sociologist is *singularism* or *social atomism*, each particular entity or unit in “society” being only an individual “atom” in an aggregate, “society” itself being nothing but a “name” for this aggregation.

In this empiricist perspective, society or social being does not enjoy an innate or organic unity in itself, but, as Frank remarks, “is nothing but the result of a conscious agreement among individuals concerning the organization of communal life.”⁶ Thus what obtains is the “social contract” theory of society, social life itself merely being the result of voluntary, conscious agreement among distinct individuals who themselves enjoy no internal bonds per se in their relations with one another. Of course, Frank would agree that in some sense all that occurs in society is the result of individual wills intersecting with one another, but he still raises an objection by asking how it is “that this intersection results not in chaos and disorder but in commonality and order,” only to answer his own question: “It is evident that if this disorderly unregulated interaction of individual elements results in something *common*, some unity and order, this is possible only under the con-

³ Ibid., 1 [7]. In this and subsequent quotations from Frank’s works, the emphases are those of Frank himself.

⁴ Ibid., 7 [17–18].

⁵ Ibid., 32 [59].

⁶ Ibid., 34 [61].