

Krzysztof Skorulski

The disappearing sense of words and the birth of the philosophy of dialogue. The concept of “word” in Ferdinand Ebner’s thought.

The dissonance between words (language) and reality – is a frequently described aspect of culture in the period of the declining Austro-Hungarian Empire. Many classic works of literature try to express the tragedy of a situation when words lose their relation to the actuality of life, life becomes alienated, but still cannot be abandoned. There are two philosophical attempts to resolve the problem. On one hand, there is a school of “language criticism” (Sprachkritik) (Mach, Mauthner, Kraus, Wittgenstein), on the other, the “pneumatology” of Ferdinand Ebner, a thinker whose contribution to the rise of the philosophy of dialogue was substantial.

As to the representatives of “language criticism”, their common assumption is the identification of language and thinking. They write predominantly on “ideal language” or “metalanguage”, focusing on what is “objective” and viewing language as a system of concepts. Mauthner, for example, postulates to liberate language from outdated, obsolete notions and to reach a state of “being silent”. Kraus, in turn, suggests to return to the original ethical and aesthetical ideal of language. Finally, Wittgenstein proposes not to talk on such matters as ethics or God, but on the other hand sees the possibility of “making manifest”, as a method of a communication in these areas.

Ebner’s solution to the problem is different. He understands language not as a system of concepts, but rather as speech (spoken language). He asks what the essence of the word in mental and spiritual sense is. Ebner’s purpose is to “realize the spiritual sense of the word” That sense is comprised above all in the fact that a “living” word has a form of dialogue, not monologue, it “creates both the being and the sense of I and You. In the word I and You are objectively perceivable”. We regard here the word as to the “spiritual realities” (I and You/Thou), leaving the loneliness of I, and overcoming idealism together with its intrinsic monologism. We notice also that Ebner understands the word in the actuality of its “being spoken”; he searches its origin (inspired by the Prologue of St. John’s Gospel) and combines the word with love. At the end we emphasize that Ebner’s solution is relevant to the present time: to proceed from an abstract word-notion to the living word, a word that creates the relationship between I and You (Thou).