

Gleanings from Father Georges Florovsky's “On The Substantiation of Logical Relativism”

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“Florovsky’s relativism... simply means... that human knowledge is formal and unfinished and its progress is *in indefinitum*”

Nicholas Lossky¹

Introduction

To appreciate Lossky’s statement and to benefit from Florovsky’s article there is need to take a quick look back on one of the leading Sophists within the pantheon of Greek philosophers, Protagoras (481-411 B.C.). In his “Truth” (or sometimes known as “Refutation [of Science and Philosophy]”), Protagoras sets out to demonstrate that “man is the measure of all things, of those that are that they are, of those that are not that they are not”². It is this basic teaching that has, from the time of Plato and Aristophanes, become one of the pillars of relativism which establishes the subject and not the object as the basis of all knowledge. To a certain extent, the Platonic teaching on the immutable forms or ideas was a response to Protagoras.

As one of the great teachers of Greek philosophical relativism, Protagoras saw morality, law, truth, justice, and virtue as having no absolute and stable metaphysical underpinnings. Whether “man” is understood as a singular or collective entity makes no real difference in how the relativism of Protagoras plays out. Even when the person yields to the wishes of the community, sophistic

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1. *History of Russian Philosophy*, New York, 1951, p. 396.

2. Quoted by EDUARD ZELLER, *Outlines of the History of Greek Philosophy*, Meridian Books, p. 98.

relativism acknowledged, at least in theory, that the life and culture of one community could not be imposed on another. Consequently, for Protagoras and his followers “there is no absolute religion, no absolute morality and no absolute justice”³.

Florovsky’s approach to relativism is not a return to Protagoras nor is it an attempt to create a gnosiology – a system of knowledge - void of metaphysical underpinnings. Florovsky’s concept of relativism is not dependent on social, utilitarian or “individual” visions of knowledge and truth. Neither is it an attempt to present truth as being in constant flux that in turn results in the ever flowing and ever changing nature of reality as taught by Heraclitus (c.544-484 B.C.). A major departure from the ceaseless flow of Heraclitus’ unstable reality and the anthropocentric relativity of Protagoras, Florovsky’s logical relativism attempts to show that the inexhaustible nature of knowledge depends on an encounter with the other. Here we can detect a pervading theme in Florovsky’s approach to philosophy and why he was critical of German Idealism’s inability to break out of the static and suppressing prison of predetermined platonic ideas. Turning away from the German Idealists, Florovsky’s understanding of relativism perceives knowledge and truth as multifaceted. Knowledge is obtained from various sources that ultimately express in cataphatic form the apophatic nature of the other including truth. Because knowledge of the other is inexhaustible, it is also provisional since its inner dynamism aims at further apprehension and comprehension of inexhaustible truth.

In harmony with his “Slyness of Reason” and “German Idealism,” Father Florovsky continues to expand on his basic premise that knowledge and therefore truth cannot be subjected to or contained within any specific epistemological system claiming to be exhaustive. Knowledge of things and therefore knowledge of reality in general is “contingent” because things are created and cannot exist independently or autonomously. Because reality and the knowledge of reality are contingent they possess an inter-related dynamism which liberates “reality” from being fixed, static or predetermined. Given the freedom and dynamism of reality and its historical context, the human person is also free to interact and to be in relationship with it in such a way that reality cannot necessarily infringe upon human life, choice or action. This is so because

3. Ibid. p. 99.

reality awaits discovery, it awaits to be in relationship with the one seeking after knowledge.

In subsequent writings Florovsky stresses that the ascetical ordeal is the process by which the human person maintains an ever intensifying freedom in and movement towards the other. It is the ascetical ordeal that rescues relativism from its Greek sophistic philosophical anthropocentrism and places it within the eternal dynamism of discoveries and relationships.

I. Aspects of Logical Relativism

Florovsky begins his article with the bold statement: “Philosophy begins with experience, and is always the description and interpretation of experience”⁴. Experience and not the ideal (or Platonic form as pre-determined archetype) is the basis of philosophy and therefore the basis of knowledge.

Because philosophy is experiential, knowledge is an encounter with the “other.” This encounter is a discovery – which is ongoing. In his later article, “The Metaphysical Premises of Utopianism” (1926), Florovsky strongly stresses that “Cognition, as a kind of experience, is a subject-object relationship – it is fundamentally dual, and therefore heterogeneous. Man does not ‘build’, ‘create’, or ‘suppose’ his world -he finds it”⁵.

By “finding” his world man is open to its diversity, immensity and its movement into eternity. Attempting to build or create fosters a view and aim of reality which even in undeveloped or seminal form is predetermined and therefore closed to the multifaceted aspects of reality. This predetermined telos or skopos of reality is bound to truth, which is also perceived as closed and one-dimensional.

The finding or discovery of the world is in no way premeditated. The discovery of the other is one of surprise and, as Florovsky continues, “does not present itself with straightforward, compulsory, intimidating necessity”. He continues to stress that “We must somehow respond to stimuli from objects, and then accordingly find our way through the creatively opening world around us;

4. Collected Works, vol. xii, p.143.

5. Ibid. p.75.

we must make a selection”⁶. As for logical relativism, experiential knowledge appeals to the need for deductive analysis and to avoid taking for granted what appears to be self-evident. It is the deductive process with its chain of logical sequences that allows the seeker to discover and demonstrate the truth of an axiom or theorem.

Yet, Florovsky is careful not to make the axiom absolute. He cautions not to assume that axioms are “directly true” even though they are considered to be so. Even the logic associated with axioms is limited to a specific field of inquiry and cannot be considered absolute. And because no logical chain of thought is absolute, logic itself must defer to the infinite and inexhaustible.

Given the limitations of axioms and logic, the question arises as to their truthfulness and therefore permanence. Do axioms, based on the deductive chain of logical inquiry, possess truth? Florovsky offers an answer by referring to Euclidian geometry and other deductive and consequently apodictic geometrical systems outside the Euclidian model. He writes: “[O]ur traditional (Euclidian) geometry may be called ‘true’ and real insofar as it serves as an appropriate *symbol* (my emphasis) for our actually present, visually spatial world. In this sense – that is, in relation to the sensorily given world – traditional geometry is true, unlike certain of the other equally possible deductive systems. In this instance the truth of Euclidian geometry is relative for it would in a way be contradictory to propose another structure of givens in the presence of which the Euclidian system would be deprived of its working force and would lose all reason to be called true”⁷. Here Florovsky understands that the relativity of knowledge points to the relativity of truth in that both lead the seeker towards new horizons that beckon to be discovered. Logical relativism is not a weakening of truth. On the one hand it is a way to understand truth as having an infinite series of paradigms which cannot exhaust its content. On the other hand the relativism Florovsky espouses is a testament to the richness and multidimensional nature of truth from which is derived an infinite chain of knowledge.

Even judgments based on scientific experimentation are not exhaustible. Referring to Claude Bernard⁸ an experiment “is nothing more than an open

6. Ibid. p.76.

7. Ibid. p. 146

8. French physiologist (+1878) renowned for being one of the founders of experimental science.

ended discussion”⁹. Experimental judgment or the truth of an experiment rests in its conclusions. But, it must be remembered, that these conclusions follow a chain of logical premises which give it meaning. For Florovsky, an experiment is the result of thought – of logical premises – which creates an ‘ideal’ model. “An experiment is a ‘conclusion,’ and is carried out in thought and by thought – not by the work of hands; for precisely this reason it is of an essentially different nature from sensory observation”¹⁰.

An experiment is based on its conclusion. Yet, the truthfulness of an experiment is not exhaustive since there is the possibility for acquiring new data, through subsequent experiments, that draw their own and varying conclusions within their own chain of logical premises. For Florovsky, the “ideal” or “thought” behind an experiment is open to new discoveries.

Just as an experiment is true when based on its conclusions, so too are the laws of nature true in as much as they conform to specific data or facts. The laws of nature are not exhaustive neither are they absolute since they do not embrace “all new observations”¹¹. To classify the laws of nature as being universal forms that understand nature as a closed system leads to an oppressive governance of reality unable to accept and integrate new discoveries and experiences. For Florovsky the “ ‘laws of nature’ established by the natural sciences are neither ‘real’ laws by which ‘things themselves’ are governed, nor merely regular processes in nature regulating the combination and alternation of phenomena. Naturalists make a sharp distinction between ‘empirical laws,’ which only approximately and preliminarily summarize sensory ‘data,’ and ‘theoretical’ authentic laws, which are substantiated by axioms and are at the very basis of experimental deduction... Beginning with ‘experimental’ data, during the process of logical interpretation or ‘explanation’ experimental thought constructs hypothetical models for a body of phenomena that is ever-growing in scope, striving to attain the highest and ‘ultimate conclusions’, the ‘picture of the universe’ ”. As soon as the ‘picture of the universe’ – the picture of reality – ceases to expand the laws of nature become the ideal and immutable models imposed on reality. Freedom of thought and knowledge are restrained by

9. Collected Works, vol. xii, p. 154.

10. Ibid. p. 154.

11. Ibid. p.157.

predetermined paradigms and systems. That the laws of nature cannot be affected by new observations and or discoveries remains for Florovsky “unprovable”¹².

The laws of nature and, for that matter, all scientific models, while possessing a certain stability (even if only from a temporal perspective) are not beyond replacement. Florovsky warns us that “[W]e must not exaggerate the degree of stability possessed by these scientific models, nor take the preservation of the significance of any of them over a long period of time as a sign of genuine (that is, not allowing for substitution even when no contradictions are introduced) ‘unconditional’ significance (eternity)”¹³.

The laws of nature, scientific experimentation, experiences, discoveries with accompanying ideals, axioms, theories and paradigms cannot – must not – discount the exception or “anomaly”. It is because of the exception that “scientific theories are in constant movement, ‘adjusting’ to and controlling the changing phenomenon of experience”¹⁴. With this broadening of experience comes the recognition of the dynamism of knowledge and the multifaceted nature of truth. Florovsky understands that the “[c]onstructions which successively replace one another do not become ‘better’, do not develop: they simply change and become ‘broader’”¹⁵.

Having raised the pivotal question of truth and falsehood, Florovsky maintains that truthfulness is relative in as much as what is known to be true is incomplete. The incompleteness of truth is due to the inexhaustible chain of experience. “There are no reliable grounds to maintain that our experience is unconditional and unchanging, and indeed such grounds will never exist...”¹⁶.

Change is a given based on our experience. But change is not predetermined. It has no inherent logic to predict its course. “For this reason”, Florovsky argues, “there is no justification for conferring absolute value onto any ideal model, no matter how stable and historically functional it may be: no quantity of confirming justification, no matter how large, has the power to transform probability into certainty; absolutes are inaccessible to all series of

12. Ibid. pp.156-157.

13. Ibid. p.158.

14. Ibid. p.159.

15. Ibid. p.159.

16. Ibid. p.166.

accumulated relative theories, even if they are potentially infinite and progressive”¹⁷. Here Florovsky strikes at the core of absolutes derived from fixed ideals and laws which are inherently static since they cannot adjust to new information or experiences which are subsequently interpreted and evaluated. Ideals and laws are, for all intents and purposes, closed. Nothing can be added or removed from them. All experience, interpretations and judgments must conform to their preexisting and predetermined ideals which define all reality. When knowledge and truth are closed, they develop into falsehood.

Florovsky maintains that the relativity of knowledge and truth is not that of “Heraclitean pandynamism”. Relative knowledge and truth are based on the given not being entrapped by logic or reason. The acquisition of knowledge and ultimately the acquisition of truth is dependent upon freedom.

II. Concluding Remarks

Logical relativism attempts to show, among other things, that when knowledge and truth are deprived of their heterogeneous, multifaceted and infinite contours, they become reduced to a homogenous and utopian i.e. idealized tool which inevitably dominates, in all places and at all times, the person, society and culture. The freedom imposed by utopianism is a freedom bound by the chain of pre-determinism that is dependent upon the contrived and solidified laws of nature.

Logical relativism maintains the heterogeneity of knowledge and its infinite unfolding which is dependent upon the infinite and ever expanding encounter with the truth. It is this infinite movement in free discovery that gives rise to a living and abiding faith. Faith is the exit leading away from a monistic naturalism and legalism that cannot be questioned but only accepted and obeyed.

Just as the earthly utopia of communism was a closed system, so too are the earthly utopias created and fostered by Christianity. Earthly utopias, whether atheistic or theistic, are ultimately oppressive, suppressive and repressive. They stifle the Holy Spirit by subordinating the Divine Hypostasis to the spirits of

17. *Ibid.* p.166.

reason, metaphysics and created nature. So too is the human spirit stifled by being duped into substituting the divine, uncreated Spirit for the created and breathless spirit of a particular human construct, a particular ethos seduced and captured by its own inherently defined myopia.

The challenge of Father Florovsky's logical relativism is the challenge to encounter Truth which, when it is discovered or when we allow it to discover us, leads us to freedom, metanoia (i.e. a true change or turning of the mind), creativity and transfiguration.