Truth Is Not Known Unless It Is Loved

How Pavel Florensky restored what Ockham stole.

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Two astute critics of modern Western thought, Richard Weaver (*Ideas Have Consequences*) and René Guénon (*The Crisis of the Modern World*; *The Reign of Quantity & The Signs of the Times*), though approaching the subject from very different backgrounds, nonetheless agreed in describing the intellectual revolution of the fourteenth century, with its mounting distrust of metaphysical intuition, as the origin of the present cultural and intellectual crisis of the West.

Both men contended that Ockham's nominalism, according to which the "universals" are simply creations of the human mind and not knowable realities (*RES*), served to sire our modern intellectual world, dominated by its quantitative quest of objectivity (*das Ding an sich*) and founded on the pervasive presupposition that certitude is available only by empirical verification and/or the laws of logic. The nominalists' denial of the mind's capacity to grasp anything other than matter and logic, to know anything real above itself, Guénon and Weaver argued, led to the forfeiture of metaphysics and the manifold other cultural and spiritual dissolutions attendant upon that loss.

Relative to that dethronement of realist philosophies by fourteenth-century nominalism, three further considerations may be proposed.

First, it is arguable that classical realism was probably on the way out already, well in advance of Ockham's speculations. Medieval scholasticism's reduction of metaphysics to an academic discipline, a classroom subject pursued very much as any other classroom subject, had already been something of a step at variance with tradition. Prior to the rise of the Schoolmen, the metaphysical quest had normally been understood as a matter of one's conversion and personal relationship to God, involving strenuous moral effort (*dharma, askesis*), the sustained purification of the heart and mind (*apatheia, puritas cordis*), the disciplined pursuit of virtue, and all the struggle preparatory to serene, loving, unselfish contemplation (*veda, visio*). In that earlier tradition, now better preserved in the non-Christian East, metaphysics had not been understood as philosophical theory but as a purified *theoria*, a vision of Reality. The real and more substantial world was that of the spirit.

Judged by such standards, it would not be unfair to say that medieval scholastic philosophy, even prior to Ockham, was engaged less in the pursuit of metaphysics than in the study of certain theories about metaphysics. Thus, from serving as a useful tool in the quest of truth, dialectics had passed to being a self-contained, self-fulfilling discipline. Already the speculative and analytical had largely replaced the contemplative and experiential, and even as this substitution was taking place, some clear-sighted observers, such as Bernard of Clairvaux, thought it obvious that the scholastic endeavor represented a very wide divergence from tradition.

Second, it may be further argued that even the meaning of metaphysics has now, in our own time, likewise perished. With few exceptions, such as the Neo-Thomism of men like Maritain and Adler, the twentieth-century Western philosopher stands several steps removed from the ancient understanding of metaphysics, so that on the whole he does not realize exactly what, several centuries ago, he truly did lose. Long

accustomed now to viewing the pursuit of knowledge solely in terms either of logical abstraction or empirical objectivity or some combination of both, most Western philosophers seem no longer familiar even with the essential nature of metaphysical thought.

Experience and language

More specifically, modern Westerners on the whole seem not aware that, for the great philosophers at the core of the ancient cultures, metaphysical "knowledge" (*jnana, gnosis*) was experiential. It was not simply the factual or logical content of a person's head, as Carnap, Wittgenstein, Feigl, and the other linguistic analysts gratuitously supposed. For the ancients, metaphysical intuition implied an ecstatic union with Reality: con-scientia, com-prehendere. "Truth is not known," wrote Saint Gregory the Great, "unless it is loved" (*Veritas non cognoscitur, nisi amatur*), and Plato spoke of an ardent yearning (*eros*), as well as disciplined dialectics, along the path to remembrance. Thinkers as different as Lao-Tzu, Ben Sirach, Plotinus, Shankara, Al-Ghazali, and Maximus the Confessor shared the presumption that noetic discourse involves noetic intercourse—that "knowledge" implies union, communion, with the Real.

So different is our modern situation in the West. Earlier this year, when upwards of a hundred philosophers, jurists, literary artists, journalists, and scholars joined together at Belmont Abbey College in North Carolina to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of Weaver's *Ideas Have Consequences*, several of the lecturers remarked that his prophetic voice, for all its eloquence, still pretty much cries out in a Western wilderness.

Third, in corroding the authority of language by its denial of the real content of abstract words, nominalism was a first step in the overthrow of life-bearing tradition.

A certain defining view of reality is supposed to be transmitted from one generation to the next by the direct imposition of a linguistic authority. The ancients believed that minds were shaped by words and were thereby shaped for an intuitive perception of the real. Michael Polanyi is one of the few recent thinkers to emphasize that each generation is supposed to learn the composition of reality by an attitude of acquiescence, a kind of "obedience of faith," the implicit acceptance of an inherited tongue.

In the ancient cultures, the words for universal concepts are assumed to express an intuition of the universal forms, as exemplified in Adam's naming of the animals. Especially with respect to those words that serve as universal terms, the authority of tradition is the starting point for the investigation of the First Principles, the catholic standards of truth—and, because standards, permanent and outside the vicissitudes of the material world.

Universal conceptual language thus has about it something of the oracular, what Hinduism calls *Brahmanaspati*. For the ancients, the stability of conceptual language was what guaranteed the possibility of the transmission of insight, *theoria*, from one generation to the next, and served to place the quest of metaphysics into a social, traditional, hierarchical context.

Nominalism, however, by reducing conceptual terms to mere "names," constructions

of the human mind itself, deprived such language of its sovereignty over the origins and structure of reflective thought. Whereas, for the ancients, words shaped minds, we now have a cultural understanding in which minds shape words, so the words express nothing more than, at the very most, a "state of mind." Consequently, here in the modern West it is taken as obvious that words are purely a matter of contemporary convention and exist simply that people may participate in one another's personal persuasions. This is what Weaver called "presentism." Words have become mere tools for the communication of opinions and persuasions. Alas, hardly anyone seems to notice that this is exactly the theory of language taught by Protagoras and Gorgias, and soundly refuted by Socrates.

Here in the West, then, we have lost the sense that metaphysics joins our minds not only with eternal truth, but with all other minds, in all other times and places, that gaze upon the truth or seek it in love. That is to say, the West has forgotten that truth is known in communion with other knowers.

Russia

Nonetheless, if we extend our understanding of "West," as truly we should, to include that vast area directly east of the Baltic Sea, one may point to an important exception to the situation just described. A significant segment of Russian philosophy, rooted in a history geographically shielded from scholasticism and many post-Scholastic philosophical developments further westward, has in great measure proved immune to the maladies chronicled by Guenon, Weaver, and others. Doubtless because of the Eastern Orthodox ascetical-mystical tradition, and in spite of Peter the Great's fascination with the Enlightenment, much of Russian philosophy has not forfeited that more ancient sense of metaphysics nor the foundational premise that knowledge of the truth includes both communion with the truth and communion with other knowers of the truth.

Already firmly rooted in classical metaphysics through its inherited Byzantine culture, Russian philosophy became very self-conscious when, in the mid-nineteenth century, it took stock of its radical differences with German idealism and other recent Western developments. That movement was called Slavophilism, and the results of its probing self-inventory are amply recorded in writers like Dostoyevsky, Gogol, Fedorov, and others, right up to the Revolution and beyond. Georges Florovsky's two-volume *Ways of Russian Theology*, reprinted as volumes 5 and 6 of his *Collected Works* hardly more than a decade ago, remains the best recommendation for those who would benefit from a popular survey of that period and its literature.

Lately, however, thanks to Princeton University Press and the translation labors of Boris Jakim, we now have an English version of what is arguably the most mature work to emerge from that Slavophile movement, Pavel Florensky's *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth*.

Florensky

Pavel Florensky (1882–1937) cannot be comfortably placed in any of our usual categories. Often compared to Da Vinci as a polymath, his name keeps showing up in the histories of numerous subjects, for hardly any topic was alien to his interest. A linguist who had mastered the principal ancient and modern languages of Europe and was completely at home in the European literature of the past three millennia, he

likewise read Hebrew and other Semitic tongues, as well as modern Caucasian and Central Asian languages. Trained in mathematics and philosophy at Moscow University from 1899 to 1904, he rejected a research fellowship to do advanced work in mathematics in order to take up theological studies in the Moscow Theological Academy. For the next seven years until his priestly ordination in 1911, Florensky steeped his mind and heart in the Bible and the entire corpus of Christian theological literature, devoting much of that effort to Greek Patrology. After ordination he joined the faculty, where he served until the Theological Academy was closed down after the Revolution.

Forced to take his studies in new directions, Florensky took up the history of art, wrote a book on the study of space in art, and another on icons. Never at a loss, he joined the faculty of the new State Higher Technical-Artistic Studios and taught the theory of perspective. Meanwhile, he authored a textbook on dielectrics, which became standard in Russian classrooms. Far from eschewing cooperation with the new Soviet government, he worked for the Commission for the Electrification of Russia and served as the editor of the *Soviet Technical Encyclopedia*, contributing many articles thereto. In 1927 he invented a non-coagulating machine oil patented by the Soviet government.

During all this time Florensky remained a priest and, even when working in Soviet government offices, habitually wore his priestly cassock. Meanwhile, as the Soviet government became more secure, it also waxed more godless, and soon Florensky's usefulness to the state was unable to shield him from its animosity toward religion. Arrested briefly in 1928, he managed to continue his priestly ministry and scholarship until the purges of the 1930s. In 1933 he was condemned to a labor camp in Siberia for a ten-year sentence, and he continued what he could of his previous work for the next four years under the most difficult circumstances. Finally, Pavel Florensky was executed by the Communists on August 8, 1937, for which event he is now widely venerated in the Orthodox Church as a martyr of the Christian faith.

After Stalin's death in 1953, Florensky's reputation was gradually restored in the political and scientific world of the Soviet Union, as a linguistic philosopher, scientist, and, more recently, theologian.

In philosophy, Florensky classified himself as a "Symbolist," a term perhaps requiring a bit of explanation here. Russian Symbolist philosophy particularly addresses the significance of language and its relationship to culture, knowledge as intuition, and the mystical grasp of the divine root of reality. K. G. Isupov, a recent historian of Russian thought, describes the Slavic Symbolists as concerned with a "conception of the world and culture as a composition of symbols, turned both upward toward its original homeland and meaning, and downward toward the fate of man in history."

For Florensky, the *noumena*, intuitively apprehended, underlie all phenomena, and the philosophical quest is strictly metaphysical—to pass from what is real and seen to what is real but unseen, to pass from the perishing to the eternal. In this respect, one of his Moscow teachers, Vyacheslav Ivanov, coined the phrase *de realibus ad realiora*, which would greatly have appealed to the likes of Plato and Ramanuja. In his introduction to the work here under review, Richard Gustafson describes The Pillar and Ground of the Truth as "the most elaborated work" of Russian Symbolism.

For Pavel Florensky, true human knowledge involves an identity of form, or

"consubstantiality," an expression manifestly borrowed from traditional Christology and Triadology. For him, *homoousios* "expressed not only a Christological dogma but also a spiritual evaluation of the rational laws of thought." That is to say, we human beings "know" by participating in the very form of that which is known: *co-gnoscere*. In asserting this, Florensky was well aware of enunciating a thesis central to both classical Greek and Hindu philosophy. He shared their conviction that "the act of knowing is not only a gnoseological but also an ontological act, not only ideal but also real. Knowing is a real going of the knower out of himself, or (what is the same thing) a real going of what is known into the knower, a real unification of the knower and what is known. That is the fundamental and characteristic proposition of Russian and, in general, of all Eastern philosophy."

This unity inseparable from the act of knowing, moreover, Florensky sees as involving other knowers. Knowing is an essentially social act, the fulfillment of that promise implicit in the sharing of an inherited tongue. It is inseparable from communion with other knowers, past, present, and future. Such a metaphysics bears fruit, he says, in a "living moral communion of persons, each serving for the other as both object and subject.... In love, and only in love is real knowledge of the Truth conceivable."

A word of caution

The text of *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth*, composed of 12 "letters" addressed to a "friend" or "brother" who appears to be Christ himself, is supplemented by several very difficult excursuses and some 150 pages of the author's endnotes. Criss-crossing one another at a thousand junctures are Florensky's myriad references to almost every conceivable subject: higher mathematics, literary criticism, symbolic logic, homotypy, human anatomy, the fathers of the church, the structure of antinomy, medieval scholasticism, Egyptian mythology, Lewis Carroll, speculations on time and space, various theories of infinity, and so forth and so forth. As soon as the reader waxes too comfortable in pursuing a particular line of thought, Florensky zips past him again from some new and utterly unexpected direction. Although eminently synthetic, the thought in this work is tied together by strands of bewildering subtlety.

Therefore, while the book is here recommended with enthusiasm, the prospective reader is warned to gird his loins for some tough going, for this is a most challenging work. All together, the book is more than 600 pages long, with refinements of thought lodged in nearly every line, and it will not yield its riches in a single reading.

Moreover, as every virtue is susceptible to being turned against itself, sometimes with what appears to be merely a slight twist, so Florensky's distinctive gifts render him vulnerable to certain temptations. Like his fellow Symbolists, he can slide quickly from rich metaphysical intuition to murky speculation. Distinguishing the one from the other can be a daunting task, given Florensky's polymathic intelligence, but the reader's investment will be repaid many times over.

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