

Father Georges Florovsky: Aspects of German Idealism (I)

I

Father Florovsky's interest in German Idealism is due in part to its influence on the development of philosophy during the late 19th and much of the twentieth centuries in Russia and Western Europe. On the one hand, one can detect a modicum of appreciation for its emphasis on the thinking mind engaged in the intellectual process leading to (pure) reason and the apprehension of reality and truth. On the other hand, Florovsky's strong critique of German Idealism stems from what he sees as its inherent limitations which affect how God, freedom and the person are understood.¹

From Florovsky's perspective, the crisis of German Idealism vis a vis Christianity is precisely a regression to the **Hellenization of Christianity**. Unlike the **Christianization of Hellenism** forged by the Greek Fathers, Florovsky's underlining criticism of German Idealism focuses on its revitalization of a Hellenistic Christianity subject to a pre-determined, idealized and static reality. God, freedom and the person are contained in this reality.

Florovsky seeks not only to expose the links between German Idealism and Hellenism but sets out in his *The Slyness of Reason* and subsequent articles to show how a fundamental shift in Christian thought, belief and life has taken place. For Florovsky, German Idealism helped to further the displacement of person by the "idealized" concept of "nature." The primacy of person – uncreated/created, immortal/mortal – became superseded by "nature" in its idealized form. The person became obedient to the defined and immutable laws of nature. God, freedom and person became subject to these laws.²

The role played by German Idealism continues to sustain this shift in Christian thought. The release of God, freedom and person from the tyranny of the law and nature or from the "ideal" remains one of the most important tasks of Orthodox theology for our time.

II

The inherent limitations of German Idealism point to a subordination of God, freedom and person to the realm of "idea" and "ideal." Within this realm the empirical i.e. that which is experienced, while having value such as in the area of science, does not apprehend the real and the eternal. It is the "idea" or "ideal" that are real and ultimately true. In the Introduction to his *Critique of Pure Reason*, Immanuel Kant, one of the earliest of the German Idealists claims "that certain kinds of knowledge leave the field of all possible experience and seem to enlarge the sphere of our judgments beyond the limits

¹ In his Introduction to *Critique of Pure Reason*, Anchor Books, N.Y., 1966 trans., F.M. Müller, p.5, Immanuel Kant lists God, freedom and immortality as the "inevitable problems, of pure reason..."

² See Florovsky's "*The Crisis of German Idealism(I): The 'Hellenism' of German Idealism*" (1931) and "*The Crisis of German Idealism(II): The Crisis of Idealism as the Crisis of Reformation*"(1931), The Collected Works, Vol.XII, pp. 23-41.

of experience by means of concepts to which experience can never supply any corresponding objects.”³

For Kant there is a knowledge beyond the senses and therefore beyond the empirical. The knowledge based on (pure) reason draws the intellect into the company of *archetypes*. Kant stresses, “what to us is an ideal was in Plato’s language an idea of a divine mind, an individual object present to its pure intuition, the most perfect of every kind of possible beings, and the *archetype of all phenomenal copies*.”⁴

In Kant’s own words we clearly see the link between Greek Platonism in the early stages of German Idealism. The senses perceive “phenomenal copies” which reflect the archetypal ideal. Within this realm of archetypes virtue, freedom and ethics have their beginning and end. Kant continues, “Virtue and human wisdom in its perfect purity are ideas, while the wise man (of the Stoics) is an ideal, that is, a man existing in thought only, but in complete agreement with the idea of wisdom. While the idea gives rules, the ideal serves as the archetype for the permanent determination of the copy, and we have no other rule of our actions but the conduct of that divine man within us, with which we compare ourselves and by which we judge and better ourselves, though we can never reach it.”⁵ This anabasis of the mind, because of its inherent limitations and the predetermined archetypes, ironically reaches a static telos.

Ethics and wisdom are ideas manifested in the ideal man, the divine man, the God-man. Ethics and wisdom apprehended by reason – by the intellect – allows them to be reflected in the external subject. The rational or rationalizing subject and the realm of the archetypes are mutually dependent. This dependency, perhaps it is more accurate to say codependency of the phenomenal on the idea/ideal, gives rise to pantheism.

Before getting to Florovsky’s critique of Idealism’s pantheistic cosmology we must see that the intimate relationship between the realm of ideas and the realm of intelligence nevertheless prevents any real personal creativity. All is contained in this idealized realm including God. From this realm ethics, order and law are imposed upon the reasoning subject who is confined within the prison of static existence. That which “can never be reached” - ultimate perfection - is perceived from afar.

III

The realm of “archetypes and ideas” raises questions relative to God and the Cosmos. Is the Cosmos co-eternal with God? Is God in some way dependent on creation? While German Idealism answers these questions in the affirmative it also advocates for a cosmic pantheism. However, pantheism in the context of German Idealism is not to be understood as identifying the Cosmos with God it is more nuanced. Florovsky describes it in this way: “Despite all its inaccuracy, this name [pantheism] conceived afterwards,

³ Op. cit. p. 5

⁴ *Critique Of Pure Reason, “The Ideal of Pure Reason, Chapter III, Transcendental Dialectic,”* pp.385-386.

⁵ Ibid. p. 386.

indicates rightly the basic tendency of German Idealism. Of course identifying God with the world is not of the question for such an equivalence was only seldom taken for granted by any of the pantheists. The difference is always made between prototype and form. Pantheism is a cosmological theory rather than a theological one, a theory of the world and not God. The basic idea of pantheism is the absolute, insoluble connection of God with the world, the idea of mutual closest connection. In the recognition of “reciprocity” lies the acuteness of pantheism. For pantheism recognizes not only the foundation of the world in God, but also claims that God absolutely needs the world, that he has to reveal himself in it, that his existence in the world – and thereby the world itself - constitutively belongs to the perfection of the divine existence. This conclusion is drawn in order to explain the world. Otherwise, the existence of the world would be completely senseless; an additional accident could disturb its harmony. Moreover, nothing unnecessary, nothing changeable can be added to something absolute, for then this perspective itself could be disturbed. Considered that way, the world becomes the eternal double of God. The world cannot be non-existent because then God would not exist either, but then God would not be God.”⁶

Again, we can glean from Florovsky’s insights that when the Cosmos is absolute i.e. when it is a closed, ideally perfected reality inasmuch as it manifests the archetypes, its behavior, its energy is also absolutized, perfected and closed. Consequently, the stress is placed on “the laws of nature” which are the laws of the cosmos idealized and perfected. These laws are antecedent to and supersede the kinetic behavior and energy of the person. Here too is the eclipsing of God, freedom and person.

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⁶ **The Crisis of German Idealism (I)**, p.27