



Florovsky's logical relativism: a philosophical and theological analysis

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Abstract

Georges Florovsky's essay 'On the Grounding of Logical Relativism' has attracted attention from various theologians and students of Russian thought but has until now avoided a serious philosophical analysis and critique. The complex but thought-provoking essay presents Florovsky's so-called logical relativism, a position which he seemed to maintain for the rest of his career. This paper will show that by conflating 'scientific' with 'alethic' relativism, Florovsky exposed himself to detrimental philosophical and theological critique. After some methodological remarks, the first part of the paper will introduce Florovsky's article, and present its central argument as a scientific relativism which is then conflated with a truly logical or alethic relativism. The second and third parts will highlight the philosophical and theological problems with Florovsky's position.

Keywords Georges Florovsky · Relativism · Neo-patristics

Georges Florovsky's essay 'On the Grounding of Logical Relativism' has attracted attention from various theologians and students of Russian thought but has until now avoided a serious philosophical analysis and critique. The complex but thought-provoking essay, originally published in Russian as 'K obosnovaiuu logicheskogo relativizma' [On the Grounding of Logical Relativism], is where Florovsky develops his so-called logical relativism, a position that he seemed to maintain for the rest of his career. This paper will show that by conflating 'scientific' with 'alethic' relativism, Florovsky exposed himself to detrimental philosophical and theological critique.

The first part of the paper will introduce Florovsky's article, and present its central argument as a scientific relativism that is then conflated with a truly logical or *alethic* relativism. The second and third parts will show that where Florovsky does expand this scientific relativism into alethic relativism, serious philosophical and theological problems arise. Florovsky's 'relativism', generally speaking, contradicts not

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only mainstream approaches to logic and apologetics, but also the mainstream patristic philosophical tradition, thus ironically betraying the neo-patristic project itself. Before we turn to Florovsky's essay, however, we highlight an important distinction between *scientific* relativism, and *alethic* relativism. The application of this distinction will first be defended in light of the critical literature. For now, the distinction can be understood as follows:

Scientific Relativism: The empirical findings of natural-scientific experimentation are relative to their domain, epoch and conceptual framework. This leaves our scientific knowledge of reality forever incomplete.

Alethic Relativism: Cognitive norms, i.e., the laws of logic (including the Law of Non-Contradiction) are relative to their domain of application, or to one particular finite 'logic', and thus provide no absolute truth.

Florovsky's relativism: a new framework

Florovsky's essay was originally published in Russian in 1924 in an émigré journal in Prague. It was translated by Catherine Boyle and appeared in Florovsky's *Collected Works* in 1989. A copy of the original is currently housed in the National Library of the Czech Republic and was consulted for the present purposes. The essay is the product of research that was first begun at Novorossiysk University in Odessa under the guidance of the logician and psychologist Professor Nikolai Lange (1858–1921). It is to this professor that the essay is dedicated.

'On the Grounding of Logical Relativism' has gained some attention in Orthodox theological spheres, being praised, for example, by Robert Arida (2013, p. 24) as a 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'. Nicholas Lossky similarly sees no serious issue with Florovsky's essay. He writes that 'Florovsky's relativism differs profoundly from that of Protagoras: he simply means by it that human knowledge is formal and unfinished and its progress is *in indefinitum*' (Lossky 1952, p. 391). Such evaluations will be shown to be limited in their assessment of Florovsky, as his serious theological and philosophical weaknesses are not discussed by Arida or Lossky.

The article has also attracted some attention within Russia, particularly from the philosopher and specialist of cultural studies, Yuri Solonin (1941–2014). For Solonin, Florovsky's essay reveals the influence of so-called 'fictionalism'. This is a trend in early twentieth-century European philosophy, associated with Hans Vaihinger (1852–1933) and his work *The Philosophy of As-If*. As Solonin writes:

One important representative of the fictionalist point of view on the essence of scientific knowledge and its theoretical structure was Georges Florovsky. We have the right to confirm this on the basis of his work 'On the Grounding of Logical Relativism', which has not received the attention which it deserves. Florovsky subjects the seriousness and structure of scientific experiment to a logical-methodological critique, which aims to establish its conditional and fictional nature. According to Florovsky, theory explains reality only in the aspect

of 'as-if' [kak esli by], leaving to one side questions of validity and the objective significance of knowledge. (Solonin and Dudnik 2006)

The author of the present paper will certainly not attempt to question Solonin's interpretation. The latter is strongly supported by Florovsky's text itself, where reference to Vaihinger's work is evident when, for example, Florovsky refers to scientific hypotheses as 'The production of a creative fiction [tvorcheskoe vobrazhenie] which is directed towards facts' (Florovsky 1924, p. 110). Florovsky even uses Vaihinger's trademark phrase in the following:

If the world were such, *then* such phenomena would take place and such "lawfulness" would determine their correlation in experience. *If*, furthermore, our experience justifies these "predictions", then we recognise our schemas as "true". (Florovsky 1924, p. 110)

Solonin's interpretation of 'On the Grounding of Logical Relativism' is this fully justified. This interpretation, however, in no way conflicts with the framework of scientific and alethic relativism that is being employed here. This is because we can consider Vaihinger himself to have focused chiefly on a *scientific* relativism, in relation to scientific laws, and the nature of empirical method. He made this clear in the preface to *The Philosophy of As If*:

There were two possible ways of working out the Neo-Kantianism of F.A. Lange. Either the Kantian standpoint could be developed, on the basis of a closer and more accurate study of Kant's teaching, and this is what Cohen has done, or one could bring Lange's Neo-Kantianism into relation with empiricism and positivism. This has been done in my philosophy of "As if," which also leads to a more thorough study of Kant's "As if" theory. (Vaihinger 1935, p. xxii)

Although Solonin is correct in his ascription of Vaihinger's fictionalism to this period of Florovsky's career, this does not mean that Florovsky does not sometimes overstep this sort of relativism and enter into a more serious and problematic form. As will be made clear, Florovsky, in some places, seems to expand Vaihinger's sort of empirical scientific relativism into an alethic relativism when he seems to doubt the validity of the basic laws of logic. It is worth mentioning that other philosophers who have drawn attention to Florovsky's paper do so chiefly in light of the scientific relativism contained therein, which is admittedly its most obvious aspect. Teresa Obolevitch summarises Florovsky's paper as follows:

Florovsky stressed that all scientific theories are nothing but the symbolic (or approximate) descriptions, not accurate explanations of the world. They have a relative nature because they have been permanently transforming or even replacing other theories. Science uses some presuppositions which are capable of constructing coherent concepts, but these presuppositions themselves have a hypothetical nature and can be amended. (Obolevitch 2015, p. 199)

Some may suspect that the distinction of scientific and alethic relativism ought not apply to Florovsky since the philosopher himself never used this terminology. There should, however, be no issue with using contemporary philosophical terminology

to categorise ideas that we find in the works of the great Russian thinkers such as Florovsky. This methodology has been employed, for example, with great success in Paweł Rojek's work. Rojek pioneered the use of terminology such as 'Theological Philosophy' in relation to Florovsky, despite the fact the Florovsky himself does not use this terminology (Rojek 2016). Furthermore, thanks to the precisification of technical terms in analytic philosophy, we are now in possession of clear distinctions that were not available to Russian thinkers like Florovsky in their particular historical and geographical context. The distinction between scientific and alethic relativism is just a convenient way of talking about two different sorts of relativism that Florovsky himself did not seem to distinguish clearly. One of which is benign and even finds support in the writings of the Church Fathers, whilst the other has much more serious philosophical presumptions and difficulties, especially in light of the patristic tradition of logic.

Along with the fictionalist tradition that manifests itself in Florovsky's essay, 'On the Grounding of Logical Relativism' must also be understood in light of further contextual information, namely the essay that was written in 1923, a year before the publication of 'On the Grounding of Logical Relativism' but never published, entitled 'Philosophy and Religion' (Florovsky 2013). As Ermishin claims, this essay, 'gives us a good idea of Florovsky's philosophical views in 1923 and of the sources of his latter religious philosophical evolution' (Ermishin 2013, p. 93). Importantly for our purposes, Ermishin suggests that Florovsky's suspicions towards logic and logical sciences are prevalent in this essay:

Florovsky invites us to forget all the contemporary debates surrounding religion and to leave the intellectual dead-end by returning to the starting point. For this we must forget about the universal validity of *logical* reason and keep this statement in mind: "A religious thinker ought to piously observe the boundary of the divine and the human". The non-religious thinker, however, is doomed to an endless game of reason with himself. (Ermishin 2013, p. 97; my emphasis)

Ermishin even hints at the framework that is being employed here when he suggests that Florovsky's relativism entails both the imperfection of empirical method, and also that of the nature of all thought itself: 'For Florovsky, the unbiased phenomenological analysis leads unavoidably to the recognition of a "Logical Relativism" that is described as both the incompleteness of experiment, and also that of the formal nature of thought itself' (Ermishin 2013, p. 99).

'Philosophy and Religion' also confirms the voluntarist tone of this period in Florovsky's intellectual development. Not only does the essay often cite the single philosopher most famously associated with the label 'voluntarism', namely Duns Scotus (1265–1308), but also states explicitly that 'God acts through freedom, without "sufficient grounds", and thus his will is inscrutable' (Florovsky 2013, p. 102). This for Florovsky means that God should remain unfettered by our attempts at Natural Theology that he claims would necessitate creation as a causal link would be made between the world and God. This clearly correlates with the focus on the will in 'On the Grounding of Logical Relativism' where the rejection of the absoluteness of the laws of thought is a 'profound and religious act of the intellectual will' (Florovsky 1924, p. 125).

One final observation concerning 'Philosophy and Religion' should be made. Whenever Florovsky refers to formal logic here, it is always with a disparaging and negative judgement. Florovsky relates formal logic with rationality and then critiques specifically the 'rationalisation of being'. The latter, he claims, leads to both 'doctetism [a Christian heresy], namely the undervaluation of "natural" reality, of the "given world, since all attention is cast upwards to the noumenal or intellectual ground of phenomenal things', and also 'naturalism or absolute realism since the entire pathos of "deduction" reduces all to a unity where each part finds its place in virtue of logical foundations or causal combinations' (Florovsky 2013, p. 101).

Florovsky's relativism: an outline

As we now turn to the essay in question, 'On the Grounding of Logical Relativism', it becomes immediately clear that, for Florovsky, knowledge cannot be contained in any exhaustive epistemological system. In other words, we cannot know all the facts and their factual relations. In light of this common-sense humble approach to human knowledge, Florovsky's essay claims to develop a phenomenology of how we do come to know what we claim that we know. This is a 'preliminary phenomenology of scientific experience' [fenomenologiya nauchnogo opyta] (143; 94), which will provide 'the correct and efficient posing and resolution of questions concerning the logical nature, structure and significance of knowledge' (143; 94).¹

Florovsky first turns to the notion of an 'axiom'. He says that when a scientist (in this case a geometer), maintains the truth of a theorem, he is 'asserting that the given proposition *flows with logical necessity* from the series of preceding ones, from axioms and theorems' (143; 94). Similarly, a proposition is rejected if it contradicts one or more of these axioms. The author, however, immediately begins to question the 'absoluteness' of these axioms. In the case of geometry, Florovsky reminds us that Euclidean Geometry is '*only one of* the (logically) equally possible deductive theories of "space"' (145; 95). Both Euclidean and non-Euclidean geometry possess truth. Hence, the criteria for truth, Florovsky argues, is merely an internal coherence of these axiomatic systems, not absoluteness. For this reason, Florovsky boldly asserts that 'here, we cannot ask the question "Is it true or false"' (145; 96). As we read:

Every systematic whole that is inwardly-focused and clearly delimited from all other such bodies has its own particular sequence of deductive transitions, the continuity and validity of which constitute the only standard for and justification of the "truthfulness" of each individual theorem within the "system". (145; 96)

Florovsky then proceeds to support his argument by highlighting the apparent discontinuity between "ideal space" in geometry and our own real experience of space. He

¹ In text references refer, respectively, to both the English translation of Florovsky's essay and the Russian original. Boyle's translation is problematic in certain areas and has thus been adjusted where necessary. Noticeably, Boyle's translation does not maintain Florovsky's original italicised emphases.

writes, ‘Ideal space is a *model* [skhema] of the sensory continuum, a conceived *substitute* for visual diversity’ (146; 97). Since another system of symbols could easily replace Euclidean ones, they are deemed as relative.

It is here that Florovsky seems to extend this scientific relativism to the sphere of logic. He denies that there are ‘fixed laws for the process of thinking’ (149; 100), or ‘laws independent from haphazard objects’ (149; 100)—espousing a sort of logical pluralism. Florovsky continues to suggest that each sphere of knowledge, or each discipline, can make only relative truth claims. When Florovsky defends the relativity of ‘each and *every* sphere’ of knowledge, this seems to include the sphere of logic itself. Indeed, Florovsky critiques Kantor for his attempt to deduce the fundamentals of mathematics from the laws of logic, precisely because of the latter’s relativity. He joins forces with Henri Poincaré (1854–1912) in his critique of Georg Kantor, but claims that Poincaré did not go far enough ‘[Poincaré] did not emphasize the principle *relativity* (meaning of course the *relativity* of logic) of mathematical concepts, which does indeed render meaningless any design for “absolute” mathematics’ (149; 101).

In the second part of his essay, Florovsky discusses the nature of ‘experience’ (*opyt*) in the natural sciences, he subdivides experience into observation (*nabliudeniie*) and experiment (*eksperiment*). He first notes that interpretation is not secondary, or posterior to, observation. This is a key aspect of scientific relativism, namely the fact that there is no pre-theoretical pure observation—all observation is already theory-laden. Florovsky also seems to be suggesting that there is always some level of experimentation in observation, that ‘it is incorrect to omit the role of the instruments used, both material and ideal’ (151; 104).

In this respect, Florovsky continues to affirm that natural-scientific judgements are not reducible to sense-experience. This is true, for example, of the geologist who does not appeal *ad oculos* when he speaks of the Ice Age (152; 105). Florovsky also distinguishes, for example, between our experience of some liquid, benzene, and our experience of its molecular composition. The latter is ‘the construction of a *hypothetical symbol* which unites sensory facts despite all the dissimilarity and incommensurability between them’ (153; 106). The author concludes that such formulas will always be provisional due to their relativity:

We should never lose sight of the conditionality and the relativity of these formulas, which are significant and meaningful only as long as our “experience” maintains the structure that it currently has and that it could lose at any time—not because some kind of devastating catastrophe will occur in nature, but because new traits and new facts will perhaps be revealed to us. (153–154; 106–107)

He refers to Claude Bernard’s claim that experiment is an ‘open-ended discussion’, and relies on our theoretical imagination. However, even observation, has been ‘theoretically worked-through’ (155; 108). Any observational statement, in Florovsky’s words, ‘goes beyond the limits of any final number of individual perceptions (and even beyond the potential infinity of their indefinitely continuing sequence) confirming the necessity of an ideal construction’ (155; 109).

Florovsky expands his scientific relativism to the notion of a ‘law of nature’. He claims that theoretical laws ‘represent neither a constituent part of the “outer” world

as it “exists” (better to say “as it would exist”) without cognition, the cognitive process and cognizability, nor a constituent part of sensory world-representation’ (156; 109). Florovsky claims that the laws of nature are not strictly necessary, but that our assessment of these laws is an ‘incessant movement’ (158; 111). He writes: ‘Nowhere will we encounter complete rest: this would only be possible in the event of a total cessation of the quantitative growth of the factual material’ (158; 112). (This is commonly known as the under-determination of data.) Florovsky reminds us that laws are always dependent on individual cases and that if digressions from the theoretical type go beyond the limits theoretically predetermined, it becomes unavoidable to review either the theoretical premises (‘laws’) or the right to assemble these facts into just such an “ideal case” and no other (159; 113). It could be noted in passing that since the discoveries of Saul Kripke (1940–2022) and the so-called ‘necessary *a posteriori*’, many philosophers do now consider the most fundamental laws of physics, along with the natures of things, as necessary. If this is the case, then Florovsky’s scientific relativism (to say nothing of his alethic relativism) would be more seriously questioned in today’s philosophical environment than in Florovsky’s own context.

In the third section of his essay, Florovsky addresses the ‘otherness’ and ‘pre-cognitive givenness’ of experience. This is the negative condition of cognition. It is here where Florovsky first suggests an escape from the almost sceptical relativism he has thus far been suggesting. As we read: ‘Experience is *received* in the same way that it is given—here we are involved with a state of conditionless-ness [bezuslovnost’]—precisely on account of the conditionless-ness of experience, there is something outside of logical thought, something that is mysterious to it, something resulting in “wonder”’ (161; 115). It thus seems that only the mystery of the given can lead us outside of local thought (this is, thought relative to the individual’s time and place).

Florovsky goes on to sketch out an epistemology, the pinnacle of which will be such an intuition of the mystery that lies beyond logical laws. This begins with judgments of perception. These judgments project a constancy and a unity to a visible given. Such an act of judgement supposes that all other visual givens that possess precisely these qualities and relations will be designated in the same way. A definition then arises as an authentic judgement of naming. Florovsky then immediately claims that the concepts of ‘truth’ and ‘falseness’ play no role here. He writes: ‘These concepts are not applicable to definitions—symbols, as nothing more than fixed shapes, are outside of this distinction, which only has the right to exist once “interpretation” begins’ (164; 120).

Similarly, when sensory images are replaced with a logical scheme, then their truth is determined by what Florovsky calls the ‘fulfillability of a prediction’. This means that for a judgement to be true, certain predictions relating to that judgement must themselves become true. ‘If “this is a cat” then it *will* scratch and meow when I grab it. If this does not happen then it is clear that this is not a cat and I have performed an “*unsuccessful*” symbolization’ (165; 120). According to this framework, ‘any cognitive evaluation of a judgement presupposes other judgments, in relation to which the evaluation is produced and has force . . . “truthfulness” is applicable only to a body of interrelating judgements. We therefore have occasion to go to the axiom supply, where the question of truth loses meaning’ (165; 121).

This applies also to the sphere of logic itself, since Florovsky claims there are no stable axioms. He makes this clear when he states that ‘we are revealing the relativity not of facts but of the *logical principle*’ (166; 122). ‘There is no justification for conferring absolute value onto *any* ideal model, no matter how stable and historically functional it may be’ (166; 122). Florensky undoubtedly includes here the very model of formal logic itself, based as it is on its own ‘axioms’ such as the Law of Non-Contradiction.

When Florovsky considers such laws of logic, these are, in his view, merely a sort of ‘definition’ of knowledge, in the sense that they describe the workings of knowledge, but do not seem to have any normative power. He still maintains that these laws lack ‘qualitative conditionless-ness’ and that ‘It is possible to reject them in actuality’ (168; 124). This is the end result of Florovsky’s essay—a rejection not only of the hubris of natural-scientific theory, but of the absoluteness of basic axioms of logic. Since knowledge, and even logic, is relative, our only way of making conclusions, of believing anything to be objectively, absolutely *true* is via an act of will. Florovsky ends his essay with what he calls ‘a profound and religious act of the intellectually understood will’ (168; 125). This proves what some critics have discerned in Florovsky’s philosophy: ‘The volitional element is taken as the fundamental key for the interpretation of man’s whole psychical life. Therefore, it is to be seen that Florovsky was, from the outset of his academic career, under the influences of a decided voluntarism’ (Shaw 1992, p. 242). This voluntarism, which seems to discard the universality of logical laws, puts Florovsky, along with many philosophers of the Russian tradition, in a difficult position vis-à-vis the philosophy and theology of the Church Fathers.

A philosophical critique

It should be clear from the above analysis that Florovsky leaves us with not only a *natural-scientific* relativism, but an *alethic* relativism—a relativism concerning the laws or ‘axioms’ of formal logic. Florovsky goes so far as to claim that we should approach reality ‘outside the realm of logical thought, outside the category of the cognitive Logos, outside of “yes” and “no”’ (168; 124). Furthermore, in claiming that ‘the laws of logic *could* not exist’ (168; 124), he tacitly rejects the necessity of the Law of Non-Contradiction and thus actually rejects its truth—for, as most of its defenders hold, if it were true it would be so necessarily. Florovsky, by denying the Law of Non-Contradiction, clearly falls into the trap of several twentieth-century Orthodox thinkers, including Pavel Florensky (1882–1937), Christos Yannaras (b. 1935), Sergei Bulgakov (1871–1944) and Alexei Losev (1893–1988).

Of course, recent developments in philosophy have seen the rise of a group of formidable logicians who do, in fact, deny the Law of Non-Contradiction. Dialetheism, a recent position in the philosophy of logic, maintains that there are some true contradictions, such as the Liar’s Paradox, Russell’s paradox, or the various Sorites paradoxes. This section does not aim to refute dialetheism or paraconsistent logics outright, but merely to show to the readers of Florovsky (and of the many Russian thinkers who reject classical logic) why precisely these new logics are fraught with

controversy. Indeed, the most recent poll concerning this question revealed a 71% majority of professional philosophers prefer to retain the basics of classical logic such as the Law of Non-Contradiction (Bourget and Chalmers 2023, p. 14).

Dialetheism, the most popular paraconsistent logic, makes a distinction between permissible contradictions, and impermissible contradictions (such as $0 = 1$ and $0 = 0$). However, the key question is: how do we know when a contradiction or paradox is permissible or impermissible? According to the movement's founder, Graham Priest, there is no universal criterion here. As Priest explains:

I am frequently asked for a criterion as to when contradictions are acceptable and when they are not. It would be nice if there were a substantial answer to this question, or even if one could give a partial answer, in the form of some algorithm to demonstrate that an area of discourse is contradiction free. But I doubt that this is possible. (Priest 1998, p. 411)

Priest thus concedes that it is not logic that distinguishes the permissible from the impermissible, but the 'specific theoretic content of each statement'. However, what do we do when that content is logic itself? Consider the following contradiction, suggested by Thomas McCall:

It is possible that there is at least one true contradiction and it is *not* possible that there is at least one true contradiction. (McCall 2021, p. 190)

The difficulty in question arises when we try and figure out whether this is a permissible contradiction or an impermissible one. If this is a permissible contradiction then we have a modal collapse: 'If the second conjunct is true, then there is no world in which the first conjunct is true; while if the first is true, then there is no world in which the second is true. Either way, there is no world in which both are true' (McCall 2021, p. 190). This is surely an undesirable outcome. For McCall's contradiction to be denied, however, there must be something *theory specific* to warrant its denial (as logic itself cannot refute it according to dialetheism), but the 'theory' here is logic itself, thus according to dialetheism we must accept this contradiction as permissible, and be left with 'modal collapse'. The latter, however, is detrimental for theology as it simply disallows important Christological distinctions (such as Christ possessing divinity *necessarily* and humanity *contingently*) as well as arguments for a necessary being from the contingency of the universe, and various ontological arguments, such as Plantinga's and Gödel's, which continue to spark debate in natural theology.

The enemies of the Law of Non-Contradiction have repeatedly pointed to so-called vagueness and 'borderline contradictions'. One example often cited is of a balding man. The question as to whether he is bald or not is a vague one. Similarly calling someone tall when they are only just above average is another case of vagueness. In these cases, there is no clear border between 'bald' and 'not bald', or between 'tall' and 'not-tall', suggesting that someone could be both bald and not bald, or both tall and not tall. Another classic example is of a colour spectrum ranging from red to orange. The colours in the middle of the spectrum are in a vague no-man's land and could reasonable be assigned to either 'red' or 'orange'. Here, one attempt to solve the issue is to 'supervaluate' the predicates of 'red' and 'orange' by 'precisifying' their wavelengths and thus giving them a clear enough range of specificity:

I may be unable to assert truthfully of a given color chip in the red-orange range that it is red, while also being unable to assert that it is not red. Once the notion of red is sharpened or precisified to a particular interval of wave-lengths, I am in a position to assert either the positive proposition “a is red” or its negation “a is not red”, but which one depends on the details of the sharpening. A sentence S is supertrue iff it is true on every sharpening and superfalse if it is false on every sharpening. If it is true on some sharpenings and false on others, it is neither supertrue nor superfalse. (Horn 1997)

This, however, still leaves us with a rejection of the Law of Excluded Middle, and many have argued that cases such as these should lead us also to reject the Law of Non-Contradiction. This is clear if we introduce the notion of ‘subtruth’: ‘S is subtrue iff it is true on at least one sharpening, subfalse iff it is false on at least one sharpening, and neither subtrue nor subfalse if it is true on some sharpenings and false on others’ (Horn 1997). Summarising both ‘supertruth’ and ‘subtruth’ Horn (1997) writes: ‘Where supervaluation theory allows a is not tall or a is not bald to be neither (super)true nor (super>false if a represents a borderline instance of tallness, subvaluation theory would characterize such an assessment as both (sub)true and (sub>false’. However, it seems we cannot escape the Law of Non-Contradiction so easily. Even when ‘a is tall’ and ‘a is not tall’ are both true (in virtue of their respective disambiguations or qualifications), their conjunction is not true, as tautology (between the two ‘a’s), requires truth *simpliciter*, and not merely sub- or supertruth (Hyde 1997: 654). In other words, we have to be talking about precisely the same individual ‘a’ for the sentence to make sense.

In light of the increased complexity, new theoretical categories such as subtruths and supertruths (which ought to dissuade any philosopher who accepts the principle of parsimony), and technical difficulties of trying to explain such paradoxes, it would seem that a more philosophically and theologically intuitive response to the traditional paradoxes would simply be to distinguish between *apparent*, and *real* contradictions. We could, for example, see what looks like a lake from a distance but on closer inspection discover it to be a mirage. In a similar way, these paradoxes of formal logic, may simply be awaiting more broadly acceptable solutions. Such solutions, for a Christian philosopher may not even be available in the present life but are awaiting us in the next. This is the path taken by Anderson’s *Paradox in Christian Theology* (Anderson 2018). There is also further philosophical support for such a view in Bonini et al. (1999, p. 387).

A theological critique

Florovsky’s rejection of the Law of Non-Contradiction also has more obvious theological significance, as it seems to distance him from the very patristic tradition that he so fiercely defended. However, we should first note that certain Church Fathers held attitudes to the natural sciences that do indeed correspond to Florovsky’s *scientific* relativism. Like Florovsky, many Fathers pointed out the *specialised* nature of the natural sciences, their specification, isolation and inability, due to their methods and instruments, to speak about the greater whole. We find this attitude, for example,

in Clement of Alexandria. As Alexei Nesteruk has shown, in the *Stromata* Clement defends a view of truth according to which truth is relative to each separate sphere, or 'language game': 'In geometry there is the truth of geometry; in music, that of music; and in right philosophy, there will be Hellenic truth' (Nesteruk 2000, p. 18).

Furthermore, the Greek fathers, along with Florovsky, viewed purely natural-scientific knowledge as unable to penetrate to the very essence of things. We read the following in Gregory of Nazianzus' *Theological Orations*: 'Granted you have a grasp of revolutions and orbits, conjunctions and separations, settings and risings, the finer points of degrees and all other subjects you take such inordinate pride in knowing: this is not a *real grasp* of the *actual things* by any means' (Gregory Nazianzus 2002, 28.29, p. 61). The latter 'real grasp' is presumably present for Gregory only in a higher *spiritual* connection with reality.

Although Florovsky and certain Fathers may share a scientific relativism, it seems that we would be much more hard pressed to attribute an *alethic* relativism to the Fathers. Our knowledge of patristic attitudes to logic and in particular the Law of Non-Contradiction is cursory. In general, the question of how early Christian philosophy dealt with the laws of logic lacks serious study. Jonas Dagys' recent paper begins to tackle this issue and notes that the question 'seems to have deserved virtually no attention and is scarcely reflected in the literature' (Dagys 2020, p. 75). Dagys goes on to paint a picture of early Christian apologetics as being essentially a-logical, and even anti-logical, an attitude that is only overcome when we arrive at Clement of Alexandria (Dagys 2020, p. 76). He quotes several Pagan philosophers, such as Galen, who deride the Christians for their lack of argument, and their acceptance of propositions based on trust rather than proof. Dagys also quotes from Lactantius, the Christian advisor to Constantine the Great who writes the following in his apologetic work *The Divine Institutes*:

There remains that third part of philosophy which they call logic in which the whole of dialectics and the entire method of speaking is contained. Divine instruction does not desire this because wisdom is not in the tongue but in the heart and it is not concerned with what sort of speech to use. For things, not words are sought. And we are discussing not grammar, not oratory, the knowledge of how it is fitting to speak, but we are concerned with wisdom whose doctrine rests in how it is necessary to live. But if that necessary plan is not physics, nor this logic either, because they cannot make one happy, it remains that the whole strength of philosophy is contained in ethics alone. (Dagys 2020, p. 77)

Some have attempted more directly to assign a sort of dialetheism, and thus a sort of 'alethic relativism' to certain Church Fathers. Basil Lourié (2018) has suggested that Maximus the Confessor held to a form of dialetheism and thus a denial of the Law of Non-Contradiction. He points to a contradiction that Maximus seems to hold as irresolvable. This is namely the fact that, according to Maximus, we are in the same sense of the word both free and not free. Maximus, however, is nowhere explicit that this is itself a true contradiction. In fact, his attempts to delineate different modes of freedom surely highlight attempts to qualify freedom so as to avoid contradictions.

Although many of the early Fathers may not have been as skilled in the art of logic and dialectic as their pagan counterparts (which would justify Galen's accusations

of Christians as self-contradictory thinkers), neither their lack of good arguments, nor their scientific relativism are sufficient evidence that they rejected wholesale the laws of classical logic themselves or were dialatheists in the contemporary sense. Additionally, we ought not to rely solely on authors such as Galen, who was known for scathing polemics against Christians, and his comments concerning their inability to form logical arguments may be part of his aggressive rhetoric. For the Church Fathers themselves, it seems that Law of Non-Contradiction was surely absolute.

We know this as it seems for many Fathers that contradiction was to be avoided at all costs, and was even perceived as a mark of heresy. To take an immediate example we could look to St Irenaeus' *Against Heresies*. Here, the author condemns the opinion, widespread in the second century, that our universe was created by another divine being alongside the God of the Old Testament precisely because of its contradictory nature. He writes:

If any grant that this creation to which we belong was formed by any other or through any other than the one God, he must of necessity fall into much *inconsistency* and many *contradictions* of this sort to which he will be able to furnish no explanations which can be regarded as either probable or true. (Irenaeus 2018, Book IV, Chap. 32)

Similarly, Tertullian employs a common strategy of reducing his opponents' position to a contradiction and then rejecting it precisely on that basis, having assumed the absolute validity of such basic rational laws as the Law of Non-Contradiction. Tertullian uses this method noticeably in *Against Hermogones*. Hermogenes believed that God created the world from pre-existent matter, and also that matter was an unruly and malicious sub-structure. Tertullian, however, argues that one cannot accept both that God is Lord and that matter is a principle of evil, since if God were the Lord then he could have rendered the matter to be without evil by ruling over it (Tertullian 1885, 9.1–2). Such style of argument was widespread amongst the early apologists. As Karamanolis explains:

[A] tool of early Christian thinkers was the proof *per impossibile*, namely the argument according to which the suggestion of the adversary leads to absurdity or violates rational principles such as that of non-contradiction. (Karamanolis 2013, p. 56)

Clement of Alexandria also had a high view of logic and avoided contradiction where possible. He saw logic as a powerful tool that could be used both for good and for evil purposes. The latter resulting in 'sophistry' or 'merely human wisdom'. One commentator summarises Clement's position as follows:

His respect for logic and dialectic made him determined that they be employed in the attainment of divine wisdom and knowledge rather than for worldly gain. For this reason, logical discussion played a vital role in the Gnostic's life. It was important that the gnostic is capable of countering all that is falsely predicated of the divine and is able to clearly delineate the true philosophy of Christ. (Itter 2009, p. 82)

The 'gnostic', in the current sense being he who seeks knowledge of God, according to Clement, employed the art of dialectic to dispel doubt concerning intellectual

subjects, doubts concerning the truth of the Christian message. As we read in the *Stromata*: 'Logical discussion, then, of intellectual subjects, *with selection and assent*, is called Dialectics; which establishes, by demonstration, allegations respecting truth, and demolishes the doubts brought forward' (Clement of Alexandria 2016, VI). He then immediately goes on to say that this sort of philosophy was established by God himself, arguing that if it was not from God, then he would not be omniscient. Presumably because if he did not create it, it would be outside of his knowledge:

Those, then, who assert that philosophy did not come hither from God, all but say that God does not know each particular thing, and that He is not the cause of all good things; if, indeed, each of these belongs to the class of individual things. (Clement of Alexandria 2016, VI)

Although the argument itself does not seem cogent, or fully intelligible, it at least shows that Clement believed assent to be rooted in God himself. Since 'selection and assent' seem to assume a bivalent selective account of truth, it seems that Clement also assumed some form of the Law of Non-Contradiction. We thus have evidence here that Clement believed that this law was rooted in God himself. This would then neatly explain the Law's necessity, immateriality and absolute reality.

Later Fathers would show even greater aversion to contradiction, especially in their exegetical works, as Ephraim Radner points out, 'Almost all the Fathers were wary of affirming that Scripture had within itself real "contradictions", a charge associated with the enemies of Scripture. And much effort was made to explain the presence of such apparent tensions within the texts' (Radner 2016).

The same applies to the creedal statements of the Church. Theologians remind us that despite the paradoxical and jarring language of some of these creeds, for example the Chalcedonian definition, there is no *true* contradiction here. As Sarah Coakely explains:

Here "paradox" simply means "contrary to expectation," and the mind is led on from there to eke out an explanation that can satisfy both logic and tradition. However, we should be careful to distinguish this meaning of "paradox" from a tighter one in which not merely something "contrary to expectation" is suggested, but something self-contradictory ... The overwhelming impression from following the debate leading up to Chalcedon, however, as well as that which succeeds it, is that the "paradoxical" nature of the incarnation in the first sense is embraced (with greater or lesser degrees of enthusiasm), but that "paradox" in the latter sense is vigorously warded off. (Coakely 2002, pp. 154–155)

We might also take as evidence St John of Damascus' obvious and seemingly unchallenged dependence on Aristotelian logic as proof that an application of dialetheism to the Church Fathers would be a blatant anachronism. John of Damascus puts matters plainly when he writes, 'A negation is opposed to every affirmation and an affirmation to every negation, the negation opposed to the affirmation and the affirmation opposed to the negation are called contradictions. One of these, moreover, must necessarily be false and one true' (John of Damascus 2012, Chap. 63, p. 97).

Furthermore, recent developments in the philosophy of religion have drawn parallels between the notion of Christ as Logos, and the unity of logic. Some have suggested that Christ as *Logos* has an analogical relation to logic itself. This relation has

been pointed out by Alexander Paseau who suggests that both logic and Christ are maximally infinite. Paseau, in this way, argues that the unity and maximal infinity of Christ imply the unity and maximal infinity of logic, i.e., logical monism (as opposed to Florovsky's logical pluralism). Paseau then flips the argument around and argues from the maximal infinity and unity of logic to the maximal infinity and unity of Christ, thus providing an original contribution to natural theology.

Finally, the most recent and fruitful advances in natural theology and Christian apologetics have all been made by assuming the basic laws of logic as *absolute*. Not only does apologetics presuppose the normative efficacy of these laws, but several arguments actually depend on the real mind-independent existence of these laws as premises. James Anderson and Greg Welty, for example, have developed an argument for God's existence from the Law of Non-Contradiction. They argue that so-called 'That' clauses imply the existence of the proposition they contain, for the proposition to be true. In this way, 'The statement "Smith knows that no statement can be both true and false" presupposes not merely the truth of the Law of Non-Contradiction but also the *existence* of the Law of Non-Contradiction' (Anderson and Welty 2011, p. 331). Additionally, the law bears a property (namely the property of being true), and everything that bears a property exists in some fashion, so the Law of Non-Contradiction certainly *exists*. Since the law is intentional (about something), it is assumed to be a sort of thought, to be mental. The Law, however, cannot be *our* thought alone, as Anderson explains:

The laws of logic couldn't be our thoughts—or the thoughts of any other contingent being for that matter—for as we've seen, the laws of logic exist necessarily if they exist at all. For any human person S, S might not have existed, along with S's thoughts. The Law of Non-Contradiction, on the other hand, could not have failed to exist—otherwise it could have failed to be true. (Anderson and Welty 2011, p. 332)

Therefore, if the laws of logic are necessarily existent thoughts, they can only be the thoughts of a *necessarily existent mind*. Also, so Anderson and Welty suggest, that is what we call God.

Florovsky's rejection of this most basic Law of Non-Contradiction could, from an intellectual-historical view, be traced to his earlier infatuation with German Romanticism and Idealism. As is well known, neither Hegel nor Schelling held to the Law of Non-Contradiction and many Romantics also rejected its universality. Novalis, for example, famously proclaimed that 'to destroy the Law of Non-Contradiction, is perhaps the greatest task of the higher logic' [Den Satz des Widerspruchs zu vernichten, ist vielleicht die höchste Aufgabe der höhern Logik]. Gallaher (2021) has convincingly demonstrated Florovsky's dependence on such influential trends of German Romanticism. Among various themes, for example, Gallaher highlights the 'vision' of the Fathers, which Florovsky claimed must be resourced by contemporary Orthodox theology. This sort of 'vision', however, is very much akin to the intellectual intuition found in Novalis, Schelling and other Romantics:

This vision of faith in which truth is received appears to be a sort of indemonstrable intuition, what the romantics called "intellectual intuition" . . . Dogma is not a discursive axiom which would be open to logical development, but an intuitive truth. (Gallaher 2021, p. 187)

This sort of 'intuition' not only rejects the need for natural theology, which was a project endorsed by many Church Fathers, but also seems to disregard the importance of logical consistency and the respect for the laws and axioms of logic itself. As another area of possible influence, we should mention the pre-revolutionary Marxist philosophy that was widespread in Florovsky's homeland. As faithful to much of the Hegelian tradition, many Russian Marxist philosophers rejected the Law of Non-Contradiction. A notable example would be Georgii Plekhanov (1929). In light of these intellectual currents, it seems even more unlikely that Florovsky inherited his rejection of the Law of Non-Contradiction from the Church Fathers.

Conclusion

In conclusion, despite its reputation, Florovsky's essay leaves us in a crisis of reason, a crisis that can only be solved by the arbitration of the human will, a radical leap of faith. It is surely because of Florovsky's distrust of reason, his final state of crisis whereby the most basic laws of logic are rejected, that he began to take an extreme anti-apologetic stance. In another essay, 'Religion and Philosophy', he goes so far as to claim that "'Rational" justification of faith means its destruction' (Florovsky 2013, p. 101). This attitude, however, as Alexei Fokin has recently shown, departs drastically from that of Church Fathers as various and influential as Clement of Alexandria, the Cappadocian Fathers, John Chrysostom, John of Damascus and Maximus the Confessor. All of the latter clearly and repeatedly rely on Cosmological Arguments and Teleological Arguments, assuming for their purposes the absoluteness of the laws of logic.

Despite Florovsky's diversions into the theologically suspect world of para-consistency (especially for Orthodox theologians who take the consensus of the Fathers, where this can be found, as normative), he remains an insightful theologian and an invaluable interpreter of the Christian past. It is hoped that critical engagement with Florovsky, along with others of the Russian emigration, would reveal not only their deep, prayerful and essentially Orthodox lives, but also their points of intellectual departure from the very same Orthodox tradition within which they were rooted.

Declarations

Competing Interests I confirm that this paper complies with all necessary ethical standards and that there are no conflicts of interest.

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