

Lev Karsavin: Personhood as the fullness of being and Orthodox thought

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1. All-unity and personalism: Karsavin versus his contemporaries

Karsavin can be called a philosopher of personalism and of all-unity. In this paper, I want to show how Karsavin's thought is rather special, both historically – as compared to his contemporaries – and how it can provide much food for thought today.

We have already encountered a case of his specialness. Usually personalism and all-unity are seen as incompatible: the former tries to rescue the uniqueness of the human person from the encroachments of individualism and collectivism; and the latter has often been seen as dissolving the person in the Absolute, and so might seem inimical to personalism. Karsavin combines them, however, and tries to resolve this incompatibility. The result is that despite being an advocate of all-unity, Karsavin is more personalistic, I would argue, than many who rejected all-unity as drowning out human freedom in totalitarian uniformity.

An interesting case in point is Nicolai Lossky, Karsavin's older contemporary. He deliberately places God beyond the all-unity, in order to evade charges of pantheism, as well as to stop the dangerous fusion of God and man that such all-unity can give rise to. It is in this way that he defends the independence and freedom of the human person. And yet Lossky can write about God, the paradigmatic case of personhood in whose image human personhood is created: "Speaking of Him, one must characterize Him only by negative predicates ('negative theology'), or predicates designated with the word 'outside of': He is not Mind, but outside of Mind; *He is not personal, but outside of person*, etc." (Ibid, 339). It is an odd personalism that can see God as at some deep level not personal.

If we look at Semyon Frank, we see something similar. For him, the personal aspect of the Absolute is only that side of the Unknowable which reveals itself in communication with man: that "lower"¹ aspect of the highest "reality" is the God of I-Thou relations known to us. Again, the deeper aspect of God is not, of course, *im*personal, but it does belong to some category that is beyond the personal. Something similar can be observed in Soloviev. And furthermore, in Soloviev, the salvation of man involves his dissolution in the all-one of the higher Absolute. Thus the personal aspect of humanity disintegrates in God where all distinctions cease to exist.

To take a final case: Berdyaev was well-known for defending the absolute value of the human person and personal creativity. He critiqued Frank and Soloviev for those features we have just seen, whereby man's unification with God results in the dissolution of the person, and like others, he attributed this to the fact that all-unity included man and God, so devaluing both. But Berdyaev's solution is not very comforting: for him, both man and God have their origins in the pre-divine abyss from which freedom springs. Thus God cannot predict the paths of man's creativity or control the evil that freedom gives rise to.

¹ How the "upper" (not-personal) and "lower" (personal) aspects of God relate, given God's unity, and whether it is appropriate to call them higher and lower, are of course thorny questions. Lossky distinguished his philosophy from Frank's and Karsavin's by insisting that his "Principle" was above being and not connected to the world. He was critical of their inclusion of God in "all-unity" and rejected the term for his own system.

Against this background, Karsavin's personalist all-unity is extremely suggestive and perhaps unique among Russian or Western philosophers, as the contemporary thinker Yevlampeev has suggested. We will look at his solution now.

2. Personhood all the way up

In contrast to what we have just seen, a striking aspect of Karsavin's thought is that for him, God's personhood does not dissipate under the pressure of his strong insistence on apophaticism, and yield to some *thing* *trans-* or *supra-*personal, rather than *someone* personal. I would argue that this is because the heart of the mystery of God and Christian faith for Karsavin lies in personhood and the dogmatic definition of God given by the Fathers and Councils of the Orthodox Church as tri-hypostatic Being. Thus, contrary to what some have argued, Karsavin's metaphysics is driven by a very real, and not merely *post hoc* and superficial, theological impetus. Of course, Karsavin's development of the Biblical and patristic understanding of God as person is driven by modern sources, but this does not negate what has just been claimed.

In this understanding, the irreducible personhood of God also does not swallow up human personhood – as it does for Soloviev; nor is there a confusion of the human and divine, as in Frank. Nor is God himself overwhelmed and “disempowered” by Nothingness, as in Berdyaev. These advantages of Karsavin's system arise in part due to his incorporation of Nothingness into the concept of personhood, initially divine, but then human. Let's see how this works.

Karsavin initially defines personhood as concrete being, a definition which can loosely be tied to the incipient Hellenistic and then more fully defined patristic contrast between *ousia* and *hypostasis*. In Karsavin's preliminary definition given in *On Personhood* [p.249], personhood is: “the self-concentration and self-revelation of being in its special image, out of which and with which being correlates its other images.” As such, personhood is what Karsavin calls “two-volumed”: it is all of being, and one of its images. “Personhood does not oppose the being of other images, or oppose itself as being, but correlates the images to itself as a special image of being.”²

Personhood is the whole of being, and in the welling-up of being personhood correlates other manifestations of being to itself, and draws that being into personhood and indeed *becomes* that being, while not impinging on the separate being of newly arising personhood. Personhood is thus the concretization and relationalization of being.

Personhood is also thus the unification of all being, or, all-unity. But true all-unity is tri-unity, a point Karsavin expounds in different ways. In *Petersburg Nights*, he takes a more Augustinian approach showing how Being is the relationship of Lover, Beloved and Love. In *On First Principles*, for example, he takes a more Plotinian approach. That is, he acknowledges without embarrassment that much Christian thought was shaped by Neo-Platonic categories. Further, he posits that Neo-Platonic concepts were representations of genuine insights into reality, which however, suffered from the distortions arising from a lack of directly revealed content. Thus, as a radical returning to the same neo-Platonic roots of Christian thought that nourished Maximus the Confessor, pseudo-Dionysius, Gregory of Nyssa and other Fathers, Karsavin gives an account of all-unity as tri-unity

² I think here we already have a less explicitly stated case of what Yevlampeev calls Karsavin's Dostoevskianly irrational equation of the part and the whole, which he sees as being absent in other systems of all-unity more indebted to the Rationalist tradition.

that has a somewhat mathematical feel. Here I will recount his philosophy from this somewhat less familiar angle.

The root of Being, Being-in-itself to borrow a not entirely accurate Kantian turn of phrase, is a First or Prime Unity. Prime Being as it knows itself is expressed in a Second Unity. This Second Unity constitutes a division in Being, as Prime Unity comes to know itself. But this Second Unity consists of a self-emptying as it receives and makes known the infinite multiplicity of the First Unity. The difference, or otherness, that obtains between First and Second Unity, between 'I' and that which is not 'I' in Being, is thus dissolved in extreme multiplicity, which is the same as Nothingness – for there is now complete absence of Unity.

However, there is a restoration of 'I' from Nothingness. In order that Second Unity, and with it First Unity, does not terminate in Nothingness³, a Third Unity – which, like Second Unity, arises out of the First Unity – recapitulates Second Unity and returns it to First Unity. First Unity is thus perfectly expressed in Second Unity: the First and Second are a perfect dual-unity. In addition, Second and Third Unity also constitute an identity-in-difference.

Importantly, Karsavin underlines how the showing forth of the First in the Second, the disintegration of the Second and its reintegration in the Third are not divided by 'before' and 'after': all these processes happen 'simultaneously' in non-determinate Prime Unity: this is the whole of the three stages, and not a fourth stage, which is to be contrasted with "determinate" prime-unity, so-called because its wholeness is the source and principle of division: determinate prime-unity is always dissolving, while non-determinate prime-unity is the fullness of dissolution and reintegration.

As can be seen, the language here is abstract, impersonal one might say: but of course, it is not hard to link this back to the Trinity. Determinate First Unity is the Father, Second Unity the Son, Third Unity the Holy Spirit, and Non-determinate Prime Unity is the divine Ousia. Unlike for Plotinus, *all* the unities express the *fullness* of being and are not a diminishing emanation of being; determinate prime-unity is always disintegrating fully into second unity; and it is always reintegrating fully "after" such disintegration into first unity. Unity, disunity, and re-unity are always perfectly executed and together constitute non-determinate prime-unity. Non-determinate prime I is always I-about-to-give-birth, not-I, and I-again, or as Karsavin puts it, so blowing his Hellenistic cover, God's highest being, His ousia, is best expressed in God's own words that "I am" – which on Karsavin's reading must be read paradoxically as both a processual-dynamic *and* static being⁴. We cannot fully explore how this can be, but Karsavin is fond of mathematical analogies: thus infinite movement is stasis, on the basis that all points on the continuum would be filled at an infinite velocity, so that for the infinite rest and stasis, time and eternity are included in all-space and all-time.

3. The pre-eternal divine-human

This last point is extremely suggestive as regards the ability of Karsavin's version of all-unity to avoid the tendency to see the soteriological incorporation of the creature in the Absolute as pure

³ Which can be conceived of as pure multiplicity.

⁴ Incidentally, this not only adapts and improves Plotinus, it is also encodes a confessional aspect: unlike for Roman Catholics, the determinate prime-unity (the Father) is the root of being's self-expression as personhood, or theologically put: the Father births the Son and issues the Spirit, and the Spirit is not also issued by the Son. So Karsavin gives a non-filioquistic triadology.

dissolution in undifferentiated oneness, a situation which has been called “the unavoidable ‘totalitarian’ tendency [of all-unity] towards the neglect of the meaning of the separate personality”. For Karsavin, the creature – who actually emerges from the Nothingness of the Second Unity, or Logos – must die and lose his individuality in order to be saved, or deified. This much is true. But the death of the individual and his incorporation in the Logos means that the creature ‘piggy-backs’ on the death of the Logos by being swept up in the current of the Logos as He is reconstituted by the Third Unity, the Holy Spirit. Emerging from Nothing, being Nothing, but mistaking itself for something, the creature can reaffirm its Log-ic Nothingness and thus be reintegrated into the Father through the Spirit. But the Nothingness of the creature, the creature’s past history of having been created is preserved after reintegration – due to the fact that eternity is not the negation of time but the infinite preservation of all its moments. This is the meaning Karsavin gives to the situation of the deified creature, or saint, who becomes, according to Orthodox theology, uncreated through grace, rather than through nature.

I believe this avoidance of totalitarianism could have many philosophical, theological and perhaps – as the well-chosen term suggests – even political repercussions, but I would like to ponder on how Karsavin’s incorporation of Nothingness into tri-unity is rich in theological content.

In *On Personhood*, Karsavin states that the God-man, Jesus Christ, exists pre-eternally in God. This implies that the created and human exist eternally in God. This seems to open Karsavin up to the charge that his metaphysics is, like other versions of all-unity, dogmatically suspect, because pantheistic. For some, this is unimportant, and perhaps even welcome, as it shows that Karsavin’s theological language, tedious for those who believe philosophy should steer well clear of theology, is mere *post factum* garnish and crowd-pleasing. But I am not so sure he has crossed dogmatic boundaries here.

The reason he maintains that the godman is pre-eternal is that the deified creature’s self-consciousness would be richer than God’s if this is not assumed. Given that for God knowledge is being and vice versa, this would mean the deified creature would have a fuller being than God. This extra knowledge comes, briefly put, from having traversed a greater ontological distance than God: from non-being to being, which God does not experience from within.

Except that Karsavin argues that the whole meaning of Christ is that God *does* experience this from within. For just as the “uncreated creature” transcends his own creatureliness, so God is able to transcend his own creator-liness – by overcoming the difference between Divinity and creaturehood in Jesus Christ. The difference between creation and creator is dissolved in the all-annihilating Nothingness that is a part of God’s constant assertion of His “I am”. This gives a new insight into the patristic definition of person: Christ has two natures, but to what kind of entity could these two natures belong? The answer given to solve this slightly ill-posed question is that they are two natures of – a person, the second person of the Trinity, the divine Logos. This formally adequate solution is perhaps given transparency and consistency by Karsavin’s development of the notion of personhood to mean the dynamic-static interaction of three unities around the axis of a kenotic descent into Nothingness and a resurrection out of it.

Unlike others, I don’t think Karsavin’s work on the Fathers and his metaphysical works contradict each other. Thus I find it interesting that in the former, he talks of St Cyril’s deliberately hyperbolic reference to Christ as having one divine-human nature: by this the saint meant only to emphasize that, undivided and unconfused though the *two* natures were, there could be no doubt as

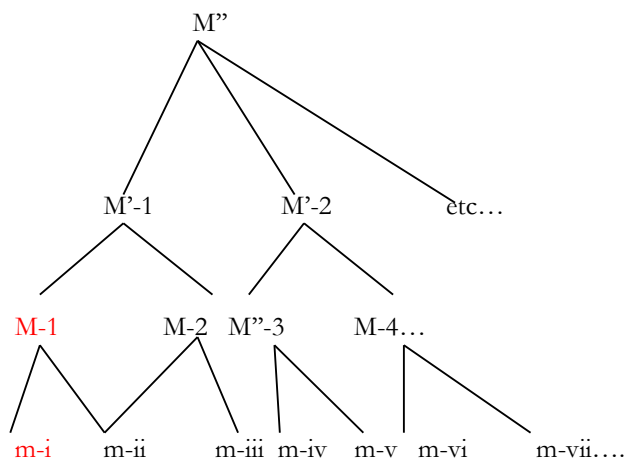
to the deep, deep meaning of their hypostatic *unity*. One might add in support of this reading that Christ said on earth: “Before Abraham was, I am.” In what capacity was Christ speaking: only as human? Only as divine? Cyril and the Church urge us to acknowledge that Christ was speaking as both human and divine, and that therefore His, God’s “I am”, speaks in the human⁵ - at least in humanity which has been perfected and deified.

Thus Karsavin’s integration of Nothingness into the life of God seems to add clarity to how we can conceive of divine-humanity. It also, I believe, shows what is meant by God dying in Jesus Christ. The mocking challenge thrown by Nietzsche to Christianity in his parodic adaptation of the Christian death of God is met by Karsavin. The Father does empty Himself utterly in the completely receptive unity of His Son, reaching the ultimate boundary of nothingness, utter disintegratedness, non-being, or death. And yet, how can Being be bounded by non-being? How can the All be bounded? How can creation, ontologically speaking a nothingness, a mere derivation of being, put a limit to being? The boundary between creation and creature does exist, but it is a boundary that God’s descent into Nothingness can shift. Karsavin’s personalism is thus obviously part of the Russian kenotic tradition; it is a kenotic personalism in which ontological death plays a great role – as it did for Heidegger. The difference with Heidegger, however, is that though Being is oriented towards death, *this* death is a gateway to restoration and resurrection.

4. Society and the individual

Personalism, as we know, struggles to reconcile the value of the individual and the collective. Karsavin’s own solution to this dilemma draws on the above concepts. He sees collective entities like the nation, the church, the family and so on as having a personalistic nature. A higher personhood M is instantiated in its moments m-1, m-2, m-n through different hierarchical layers, in a tree-like structure. An individual is thus the expression of his nation, family, his spousal unit. But how are to avoid saying that the individual is merely a function of higher entities and thus a determined unit?

DIAGRAM (1): Part of X²-tree showing collective person individuation



⁵ It is important that Karsavin emphasizes that the “I am” of the deified saint is not the “I am” of God – for that would be pantheism. We cannot go into this here for lack of space.

The answer is that the higher personhood does not exist outside its instantiation. For a single pair (M,m), M is m and m is M, a dual-unity, and neither determines the other, each needs and is the other. Hierarchicality and equality are reconciled. But where M terminates in more than one m, M is defined as the sum of all m's, and is thus of a different order to m. M is not real without all m's. The only way for the equality-with-hierarchicality to obtain, then, is if M can "rewrite" as m-1, m-2, m-n uniquely and sequentially, while at the same time all other m's become invisible. To depart slightly from formal language, we are saying that all m's must temporarily "die" in order for there to be equality for every other m, and for each m not to be determined by M. Then, incorporating Karsavin's notion of all-time and all-space, we can imagine this as follows.

If a live pairwise relationship between (M,m) is represented by a red line, we will see this red line passing through the tree sequentially. But to get the dimension of all-time, we must add an extra dimension to our imagination to get the paradoxical situation whereby each connection both is and is not red and the whole tree is both a hierarchy and an equality, just as before we imagined infinite velocity as stasis.

In the Orthodox canon recited before communion, the believer affirms that he is "first among sinners" before he receives the body and blood of Christ. And we see how easy it is in Karsavin's system to slip from logical formalism to the language of Orthodox piety. Indeed, any single m that refuses to die for the other m's will bring upon itself its own determination by the whole and the determination of all the others, so that the tree of life-through-death collapses.

These last comments, as well as the tree formalism, are my own but a very similar formalism is found, especially in Karsavin's *Philosophy of History*, and the spirit of switching from formalism to patristic, Biblical or liturgical interpretation is typical of Karsavin.

5. Conclusion

Here I wished merely to give a taste of Karsavin's rich personalist philosophy. I will conclude by hinting ways in which he is interesting for today, as a kind of prolegomenon to further research.

Firstly, although in a special sense he saw European history as a decline of the West, he was absolutely optimistic that every period of history – every m of M – was as valuable as any other, and he argued strongly against progressivist notions of history, which undermine both epochs and cultures that precede the progressivist. As such, unlike many of his contemporaries, he was confident that out of Europe's and Russia's disintegration would come a Christian reintegration – and I think this bears investigating in our current day.

Secondly, Karsavin confounds the usual division of Russian philosophy into a slightly eccentric sophiological-theosophical camp (Soloviev, Bulgakov and so on) versus a more mainstream neo-Patristic, Orthodox camp (Vladimir Lossky, Florovsky etc). Karsavin's personalism arose out of his historical research and he always grappled with the problems of the historical grounding of his thought. Nowadays, it is becoming clear that the neo-patristic approach suffers many problems regarding method, interpretation of patristic sources, ecclesiological suppositions, and perhaps most importantly unexamined philosophical assumptions. The work of Zizioulas, in part a rejection of Florovsky's approach, shows a deep interest in returning to European philosophical sources as a way of understanding the Christian mystery. Karsavin's interest in fusing history, dogmatics, and appropriately used modern European metaphysics as a way of building up

Orthodox thought in many ways preempted this turn, and it would thus be very fruitful to look at answers he proposed in relation to Zizioulas. In a sense, they are answers that got lost in the famous Lossky-Bulgakov “dispute about Sophia”.

Finally, Karsavin the historian of Medieval Catholicism who lived for two decades in Catholic Lithuania, engaged in Orthodox-Catholic dialogue and was influenced by the thought of Augustine, Boethius and Aquinas. In our age of East-West Christian encounter, again, this is highly suggestive.

However, these hints can only be cashed out in future study, and here I have only had time to highlight some rich veins in Karsavin’s thought which could be further mined in future research.

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