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## The Fluttering of Autumn Leaves: Logic, Mathematics, and Metaphysics in Florensky's The Pillar and Ground of the Truth

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## The Fluttering of Autumn Leaves: Logic, Mathematics, and Metaphysics in Florensky's *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth*

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### *Abstract:*

Difficulties in understanding Pavel Florensky's work *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth* are daunting due in large part to its methodical transgressing of identities: between disciplinary boundaries (his work drawing freely from philosophy, theology, logic and mathematics, art history, linguistics, and philology); between literary identities, as he fluidly shifts between literary criticism, logical proof, poetic discourse, and philosophical dialectics in his own writing; as well as in collapsing identities between concepts that appear to be binary and incompatible. Nor does his work proceed in the developmental and synthetic manner of German Idealism, aiming toward higher and increasingly more hegemonic syntheses, but instead through emphasizing discontinuity, otherness, and antinomy. Important insights can be gained into both the foundations and the broader importance of his work by seeing that these difficulties are intentionally generated by the author, and arise largely from his philosophical commitments in logic and mathematics, and above all his attempt to go beyond the limits of the Aristotelian principle of identity through outlining a more fundamental principle of identity influenced as much by Heraclitus and the ascetic theology of the Eastern Church as it is by Georg Cantor's research into the mathematics of infinity and by the celebrated Russian School of Mathematics, of which Florensky was himself a founding member.

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### 1. Two Worlds

Pavel Florensky's *The Pillar and the Ground of the Truth* [4] (hereinafter *Pillar*) is surely one of the most unusual books of philosophy published in the twentieth century. More often than not, it produces in the reader a consternation that has caused many to reject it altogether after a few glances, thinking it an example of the aestheticism and even decadence that has come to be associated with Russian Symbolism. This stigmatization is both unfortunate and unjust, for it is a work of great logical, mathematical, and philosophical rigor as well as a source of deep spiritual insight. Moreover, one of its primary claims is that the formal rigor of logic and mathematics is ontologically rooted – not just applicable to the real, but of one piece with being itself. And another of its claims is that spirituality does not concern some rarified dimension separate from empirical reality, divorced from the human body and natural science and works of art, but that it extends into and illumines every aspect of life; it does not inhabit a world unto itself. Transcendence and immanence, visible and invisible, are not just “two worlds,” but ultimately two aspects of one world. Like Heraclitus and Parmenides before him, Florensky seeks to show that “it is wise to agree that all is one,” *hen panta*.

Thus, for example, the sky-blue color which he chose for the cover of the book (and to which he devotes a seventeen page excursus, rivaling Melville's chapter exploring the color white) is a visual representation of one of his central themes, "Sophia" or Divine Wisdom – the theme for which the book is best known, and which is perhaps better approached only after some of its more basic concepts have been mastered. So too, the book is written not as a series of chapters, but a sequence of twelve "Letters" written to a close, but unspecified friend, each of which (like a Japanese *haiku* poem) begins with an evocation of the natural surroundings that indicates the season of its writing and reflects a mood that attunes what follows. Each chapter is headed by a different graphic vignette, depicting some curious object or action, and drawn from peculiar and esoteric sources, along with rather cryptic sayings that resonate with the vignette in some indefinable manner. Yet the text that follows is never something merely "aesthetic." It might just as likely involve a discussion of scientific findings, of world mythology, of mathematical analysis or philosophical logic, of comparative linguistics and etymology, of theological controversies from the fourth or eleventh centuries, and of course perennial philosophical difficulties – all interwoven and mutually illuminating one another, all advancing the investigation which the book undertakes in a rigorous and carefully crafted manner. But this lush and lavish variety is not put forth merely to display his extraordinary intellect and prodigious learning (which have made it fashionable to compare him to Leonardo da Vinci) but to show how each of these disciplines leads to the same understanding of his great themes – and thus that, say, mathematics and theology and ethics might be not just interconnected, but properly understood, different languages for the saying the same things. If all things are one, then any starting point will lead to the same conclusion. And demonstrating this is not extraneous to the subject matter – a *tour de force* of intellectual virtuosity – but part of the argument itself, one that must be experienced by the reader, rather than merely asserted by the author.

At first glance, however, this bewildering juxtaposition of writing styles from the lyrical to the logical; of disparate disciplinary approaches and concepts; and of four different literary formats that includes two sizes of type and some 1057 footnoted elucidations occupying one quarter of the text, along with 15 often lengthy appendices – all this seems disconnected and discontinuous, requiring strenuous leaps of understanding. And this is just as Florensky intended, for the idea of *discontinuity* is itself one of the key themes of the book, and the author attempts to lead the reader to this insight precisely through the employment of "discontinuous thoughts," as he characterizes his writing – a mode of exposition that he shares with Kierkegaard and Nietzsche before him, and Heidegger after him, not to mention the "dark," aphoristic style of his master, Heraclitus. Moreover, the author goes on to announce that he will be proceeding "without system, only placing a signpost here and there" with the expectation of arriving only at "schemata" and "fragments" (*Pillar*, p. 13). Visible and invisible, same and other, heaven and earth, transcendence and immanence are not two worlds but one. And yet it takes a leap, a discontinuous trajectory, to realize this – to experience the epiphany of the one within the many, of the heavenly within the earthly – and the most demanding and rigorous philosophical work to lead to the brink of this leap – and to convince the reader not to lose heart at the edge of the precipice. How, then, can genuine rigor of thought be combined with the kind of intuitive, and indeed existential, demands that are more commonly expected in poetic and religious writing?

"Letter One," itself subtitled "Two Worlds," begins early in the morning, on that first day in which it has become evident that summer is over and "something new" is in the air. "Golden leaves whirled over the ground in serpentine, wind-driven eddies," fluttering like butterflies. "The air was filled with the cool aroma of autumn, the smell of decaying leaves, a longing for the distances." "One after another, leaves were falling to earth... describing slow circles in the air as they descended to earth." "How good it was," he exclaims, "how joyous and sad" was the "sight of these fluttering leaves." "Autumn leaves keep falling, without interruption," the author continues, and as he watches them he reflects on friends who have come and gone, he reflects on temporality and death: "Everything whirls. Everything slides into death's abyss." Is there a center, he asks, toward

which all these whirling trajectories would point – recalling perhaps the transcendent “point at infinity” that allows the infinite number of points on a given plane to converge around the Riemann Sphere, but more explicitly evoking that Center toward Whom is drawn “the whole course of events, as the periphery to the center,” and toward Whom “converge all the radii of the circle of the ages,” the Center described by the nineteenth century Russian saint, Theophan the Recluse? Or must we concur with the sad wisdom of Pliny the Elder, that since “in life everything is in a state of unrest,” then “the only certain thing is that nothing is certain and that there is nothing more miserable or arrogant than man” (*Pillar*, p. 12). How to draw together the two worlds of Parmenides, the realms of being and appearance, time and eternity, finite and infinite? How to affirm with Heraclitus that within the change and flux and fluttering upon which he dealt at such length, there is yet a unity that draws together all things, and thereby allows us to gather them together in thought and language?

## 2. Noumena and Numbers

In his autobiographical account of his boyhood in the Caucasus Mountains, Florensky describes at length the way in which nature everywhere spoke to him, manifested to him its inner life – described what he called “the unusual yet sweetly known and familiar revelation from native deeps” that he found all around him in the rugged canyons and gentle seaside of his native Georgia, and that continued to motivate his studies in mathematics, science, philosophy, and theology even to his final days, during which he occupied himself by studying algae while confined in the brutal Solovetsky Monastery *Gulag* on the White Sea, just below the Arctic Circle.<sup>1</sup> It was not physical nature as such that enthralled and enchanted him, but what he later called the “*Empyrean*” – the divine or heavenly – manifest in the empirical or earthly, and which he associated with the inner reality of things, their noumenal character as they were rooted in the Divine, a rootedness that he came to call “Sophia” or Divine Wisdom. And it was in the mysterious character of the symbol that he found the locus of this conjunction between the two worlds:

All my life I have thought, basically, about one thing: about the relationship of the phenomenon to the noumenon, of its manifestation, its incarnation. It is the question of the *symbol*.<sup>2</sup>

Not surprisingly, then, Florensky came to see his great nemesis in the philosopher whom, perhaps more than any other, he felt had led modern thought astray:

The Kantian separation of noumena and phenomena (even when I had no suspicion of the existence of any one of these terms: ‘Kantian,’ ‘separation,’ ‘noumena’ and ‘phenomena’) I rejected with all my being.<sup>3</sup>

Instead, Florensky felt strongly drawn to the tradition of Platonism, which he saw as joining together these two worlds, of showing how the visible made manifest the invisible, and how the invisible shines through the visible.<sup>4</sup> It was, then, to a strongly realist approach to mathematics (in the Platonic sense of “realism” that sees mathematics as ontological, rather than empirical or psychological or constructivist) that Florensky was drawn in his earliest studies, and above all to the investigations of Georg Cantor, whom he thanks for his own understanding that “the number is therefore a prototype, an ideal schema, a primary category [both] of thought and of being” [3], p. 195.

“For me,” wrote Florensky to his mother at the age of 18, “mathematics is the key to a world view... for which there would be nothing so unimportant as not to be worth studying and nothing that was not linked to something else” (cited in [7], p. 27). Several years later, he was to write:

My studies of mathematics and physics led me to acknowledge the formal possibility of theoretical foundations for a religious world view for all humanity (the idea of discontinuity, the theory of functions, numbers.) (cited in [7], p. 36f).

Most of Florensky’s earliest papers were on mathematics, and a recent critic, S. S. Demidov, has maintained that

without [an] understanding of the significance of mathematics in his method of understanding the world, outside the frame of his opinions on the place of mathematics in the Universe it is impossible adequately to evaluate either his method or his philosophical views.<sup>5</sup>

Florensky was fortunate to study with one of the great Russian mathematicians of the early twentieth century, Nikolai Bugaev, and he is considered by a recent study in English to be (along with Nikolai Luzin and Dimitri Egorov), one of the “trio” of founders of the Russian School of Mathematics. In this paper, then, mathematics will serve as a key for understanding some of the central concepts of his greatest work.

*The Pillar and the Ground of the Truth*, consistent with the very task it takes upon itself, can legitimately be read in many ways. It can be approached as a sustained inquiry into the theology of the Christian Trinity, perhaps one of the most important since Chalcedon. It can be read as one of the great philosophical attempts to resolve philosophy’s perennial problem of the One and the Many, the Same and the Other. It can be read, as its own subtitle suggests, as an “Orthodox Theodicy,” justifying the ways of God to man, by showing the necessity of asceticism and suffering, the ontological grounds of sin, and even the possibility of what he calls “Gehenna” in the ceaseless striving of “bad infinity.” But it can also be approached from the direction of formal reasoning, mathematics and logic, as will be done in this paper. From this perspective, it can be read as a sustained assault upon the primacy of the law of identity – a principle that has been taken since Aristotle as the foundation of formal reasoning – an assault that paradoxically employs important concepts of mathematics and logic themselves, such as the concepts of actual and potential infinity, discontinuous functions, the recurrence of antinomies, and the problem of irrational and transcendental numbers. Yet paradoxically, it is only the primacy of the law of identity that Florensky seeks to overthrow, not the law itself. Indeed, he seeks to show that the law of identity is grounded in something deeper and more basic than logic. Just as Heraclitus and Parmenides believed, it is grounded in the nature of being itself when it is understood according to the mode of truth that is proper to it.

### 3. The Law of Identity and its Limitations

It will, perhaps, be useful to present at the beginning a very abstract formulation of Florensky’s claims concerning the law of identity. Florensky argues that there are higher and lower versions of the law of identity, one that is ultimately empirical and psychological (and which has been traditionally embraced by logicians) and the other reflecting an ontological understanding, a radically realist understanding, whereby the knower in a most important sense becomes the known, where  $A=A$  only by means of becoming not-A.<sup>6</sup> Here, the term identity applies to the relation of knower to known, of thinking to being, and not the relation of the knower to himself. The knowing self ( $A=A$ , which for Florensky is ultimately  $I=I$ ) must go out of itself, leave itself behind and unite with the known, in order to know and in order to be itself in more than an abstract sense. And conversely, the not-A that is known, can be known only within this unity of knowing: not-A must become A.

$A=A$ , Florensky argues, is first of all numerical unity, and not simply generic or specific unity. Yet this numerical unity cannot be found in a thing, which exhibits only generic identity, but only in the person who is *himself* self-forming, self-realizing, self-creating. The thing, in contrast, can never be strictly speaking one, for it is merely a member of a larger unity – even if it happens to be the only member. Yet pure self-positing, in the Fichtean sense, is something purely empty, abstract, and ultimately negative. The “this-here-now,” immortalized in the first chapter of Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*, is nothing more than the negation of every other this, here, and now, a defensive or combative vacuum that indeed defines itself as a self-identity, but only in an abstract and purely negative way. “In excluding all the other elements, every A is excluded by all of them, for if each of these elements is for A only not-A, then A over against not-A is only not-not-A”

(*Pillar*, p. 23). But how, and on what basis, could A go beyond its identity to become one with not-A, I with not-I? How can the self go beyond itself to become one with the other: how does the merely psychological self-identity of self-assertion become the ontological identity that is proper to a person? Here, logic and ontology merge with theology, for the A that is A through becoming not-A is an A that is able to love, and love in this radical sense, Florensky argues, can only be realized through a kind of *ascesis* of the self-contained self, resulting in an openness to a mystical identity with an eternal reality whose own very being consists in a dynamic of unity with otherness. And the logical and mathematical principles with which Florensky seeks to undertake this philosophical journey are the concept of discontinuity; the contrast between actual infinity and potential infinity, along with the Absolute Infinity first discussed by Cantor; the antinomies of rationality, and thus the contradictions to which the lower law of identity must lead; and the contrast between generic identity and numerical identity. We will, then, take the last of the principles first, proceeding one by one through the other three until a point is reached at which a brief overview of Florensky's logical-mathematical critique and correction of the law of identity becomes possible.

#### 4. Modes of Identity

Florensky argues that the neglect and misunderstanding of numerical identity extends back to Latin scholasticism and its logic of terms. Examining the logical works first of Thomas Aquinas and then Francisco Suarez, Florensky finds three modes of identity enumerated: generic, specific, and numerical (*generice, specifice, numerice*). That is, identity is understood as the negating of division according to genus, according to species, and according to number. It is as if, he argues quoting Suarez, a state of contraction (*status contractionis*) can be observed at work here, in which diversity of genus and species is progressively negated, and finally the size of the class itself is contracted into a singular class: the individual Socrates understood as no more than a class with only one member. But this kind of understanding of identity “remains limited to the category of things,” leaving us with merely an impersonal entity that is no more than the shrunken remnant of its own tribe, a general concept identified with itself as a singular class. Strictly speaking, Florensky argues, this is not yet numerical identity at all – not truly one, but still essentially generic and general. For true self-identity to be possible, there must be something else entirely than such a “gradual evolution” from genus to species to the elimination of one member after another until there is only one left, a progression that can never yield more than conceptual, and external, identity. Rather, there must be a break, something new altogether: there must be the self-positing that is possible only from within, and thus only for a person who is not, nor cannot be, subordinated to any class at all (*Pillar*, pp. 365–368). The only beings capable of being numerically (rather than generically or specifically) identical with themselves are persons: “the source of the idea of numerical unity must be sought in the self-identity of consciousness” (*Pillar*, p. 60). For

concrete individuals possess *creativity*, are capable of creating absolute, unforeseen relations, which are not part of any group, no matter how large, of already existing relations (*Pillar*, p. 374).

Rejecting the gradualism of a smooth, continuous “contraction” of class membership that stays within the realm of things and their properties, Florensky engages here a *discontinuity* that moves beyond thingness altogether, emerging into the identity of a realm of relations that cannot be categorized and grasped through rationality at all, yet which before all concepts and rationality is always already identifying itself.

A thing is characterized through its *outer unity*, i.e., through the unity of the sum of its features, while a person has his essential character in an *inner unity*, i.e. in the unity of the activity of self-building... Therefore, the identity of things is established through the identity of concepts, while the identity of a person is established through the unity of his or her self-building or self-positing activity (*Pillar*, p. 59).

## 5. The Need for Discontinuity

Florensky argues that numerical identity is founded on consciousness, i.e. on the self-establishing reflexivity that is exclusively characteristic of persons. But this would mean that the law of identity,  $A=A$ , is really grounded in self-identity,  $I=I$ . Yet so far, the  $I=I$  is confined to simple self-positing: “I am I” means nothing more here than I am not this not-I, nor that not-I, nor yet another not-I, continuing unto a kind of infinity – the potential infinity or endlessness that Florensky argues characterizes the futility of mere self-identity in its various modes (and about which more will be said later.)  $I=I$  is sheer negation, and although it yields an actual (as opposed to merely conceptual) self-identity, it is purely negative, and thus is itself a kind of prison of self-affirmation and self-assertion. At the same time, it lacks any positive content of its own, beyond the negation that is entailed in self-assertion. Florensky describes this powerfully in a passage that those unaccustomed to the idea of linking thoughts in logic, metaphysics, psychology, and theology may find somewhat surprising:

The law  $A=A$  becomes a completely empty schema of self-affirmation, a schema that does not synthesize any real elements, anything that is worth connecting with the “=” sign. “ $I=I$ ” turns out to be nothing more than a cry of naked egotism: “I!” For where there is no difference, there can be no connection. There is therefore only the blind force of stagnation and self-imprisonment, only egotism. Outside of itself, I hates every I, since for it this [other] I is not-I; and hating, I strives to exclude this I from the sphere of being. <...> Thus, since the naked “now” is a pure zero of content, I hates the whole of its content, i.e., the whole of its life. I turns out to be a dead desert of “here” and “now” (*Pillar*, p. 23).

To escape from this “self-imprisonment,” something radical must intervene, something incommensurate with the monadic self-positing of the I. It would have to break the bonds of the Cartesian *cogito*, which seeks in futility to transcend the bubble of solipsism through concepts alone. And it would also need to be more radical than the Hegelian *Aufhebung* which, even as it gradually raises the level of development, still evolves dialectically along an epistemological and ontological continuum, seeking otherness only to assimilate it into an expanded self-identity. There must be a second discontinuity, a leap traversing an abyss that is even more radical than the first one that led from thinghood to personhood – a *discontinuity* that would lead the self beyond the prison-walls of its own self-assertion ( $I=I$ ), and thus would lead the law of identity itself beyond the monadism of  $A=A$ . Somehow, I must be more than I, and A more than A. And it is here that Florensky’s great theme of discontinuity, mentioned already at several points above, assumes decisive importance. If the soul is to ascend beyond self-affirmation, if it is to find life in a “higher, spiritual law of identity, rather than the “lower, fleshly law of identity” which confines it, then this must be “attained not through gradual approach, not through continuous development, but through discontinuous rejection of selfhood” (*Pillar*, pp. 224f). As Kierkegaard had also seen clearly in his *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Truth cannot be attained through the bad infinity of what he called an endless “approximation process.”

Florensky was always grateful to have studied with the great mathematician Nikolai Bugaev during his first semester at Moscow University. Bugaev sought to build on Cantor’s work in set theory, his work on transfinite numbers, and his analysis of the “continuum,” as a set of points – while himself pursuing research into the mathematics of discontinuous functions – in order to develop a critique of what he believed were the deterministic implications of the concept of continuity, a concept he saw as dominating the mathematical and scientific work of his time. For example, if every continuum is in fact an infinite set of discrete points, then discontinuity is more fundamental than continuity, an insight that he saw as important not just mathematically, but metaphysically as well. As Bugaev had written in 1897, “discontinuity is a manifestation of independent individuality and autonomy. Discontinuity intervenes in questions of final causes and ethical and aesthetic problems” [6], p. 68. Florensky, then, took delight in these famous lectures of

Bugaev, which linked the mathematics of discontinuous functions with “excursions into psychology, into philosophy and ethics,” an approach upon which Florensky himself was to build so richly ([7], p.27). The concept of discontinuity continued to be crucially important for Florensky throughout this work, and his undergraduate dissertation (for which he received the highest marks) was entitled, “On the Characteristics of Flat Curves as Loci for Breaks in the Continuum.”

But Florensky carried both the mathematics and the metaphysics of discontinuity beyond his teacher Bugaev. He saw the principle of continuity as the calamitous “governing principle” of nineteenth century thought as a whole, and he believed it was vital to overcome its dominance, which manifested itself in areas as diverse as Marx’s philosophy of history, the uniformitarian philosophy of Lyell in geology, and Darwin’s view of evolution as developing from gradual small changes. “The cementing idea of continuity,” he argued, “brought everything together in one gigantic monolith” ([6], p. 88). Subsequent thought has in fact, as he anticipated, vindicated Florensky on this point, from the post-modern critique of meta-narratives such as Marx’s, to the discovery of the role of chaos in meteorology and other earth sciences, to the realization of the role of mutations in biology, to the paradoxes of discontinuity in quantum mechanics, to the notion of paradigm shifts in the history and philosophy of science, but at the time the assumption of continuity and gradualism (perhaps a last manifestation of the “great chain of being” assumed in medieval thought) was dominant and everywhere taken for granted. As Florensky put it,

the idea of continuity, making these transitions, took possession of all disciplines from theology to mechanics, and it seemed that anyone who protested against its usurpations was a heretic ([6], p 88).

Nevertheless, Florensky countered,

inspiration, creativity, freedom, *ascesis*, beauty, the value of the flesh, religion, and much else... stands outside the methods and means of scientific research [as it is currently practiced], for the fundamental presupposition of such methods and means is, of course, the presupposition of connectedness, the presupposition of continuity, gradualness (*Pillar*, p. 94).

Yet Florensky sees this bondage to continuity and un-freedom as simply reflecting the limitations of nineteenth century science and mathematics, even as this presupposition was already being left behind through more recent discoveries that pointed instead to the primacy of discontinuity (*Pillar*, pp. 485f; 574).

Thus, both of the first two letters of *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth* revolve around one of the greatest of all discontinuities – the discontinuity between life and death. The first letter, discussed already, focuses not just on the melancholy of change and the transitory character of life, but more fundamentally upon the reality of death that underlies them. The endless whirling and fluttering of autumn leaves, “one after another,” suggests a kind of slow, spiritual death: the bad infinity of one sin after another, one petty baseness or inattention or cruelty after another scarring the soul, and “gradually crippling it.” And

one after another, one after another, like the leaves of autumn, those people whom our heart has come to love forever whirl above the dark chasm. They fall, and there is no return, no possibility of embracing the feet of each of them” so that “now between me and them lies an abyss.

This abyss and chasm of death – this discontinuity between life and death that radically breaks with the continuity of decline – poses at the same time the thought of renewal and new life. “It appears that the soul has a foretaste of resurrection in this fluttering,” and in this “fragrance of faded aspen groves” (*Pillar*, p. 11). Just as the ceaseless fluttering leaves evoke the longing for a center, so too do the endless truths that correspond to our boundless curiosity suggest our need for a single, central truth. Here we discover within ourselves a hunger not just for

the particular and fragmented human truths, which are unstable and blown about like dust chased by the wind over mountains, but [for] total and eternal Truth, the one Divine Truth, the radiant and celestial Truth (*Pillar*, p. 12).



And as will be discussed in a later section, for Florensky this one Truth was anticipated not only in Trinitarian theology, but also in the Absolute Infinity at which Cantor had arrived at the end of his reflections on actual infinity; which both Florensky and Cantor identified with God; and which could never be arrived at through the smooth continuity of a potential infinity.

But how, through what kind of discontinuity, are we then to approach this Absolute Truth that Florensky identifies as the highest mode of Absolute Infinity? Florensky proposes a preliminary answer in his Second Letter, called simply “Doubt.” He begins with the foundational thought of modernity, discovered by Descartes, that “for theoretical thought” the one Truth, “the Pillar and Ground of Truth,” is *certitude*. And Florensky analyses the attempts made by the soul hungry for Truth to fulfill this demand for certitude, first through various modes of givenness, which never lead beyond the self-assertion of I=I and A=A discussed already, and secondly by an analysis of the futile attempt of rationality or discursive thought – the endless pursuit of one explanation after another – to arrive at anything more than yet one more truth, which leads to an endless sequence of successive truths, where every A is derived from a not-A, which must in turn be derived from what is not-not-A, and so on. Modern thought, then, leaves us with the choice between

an impenetrable wall and an uncrossable sea, the deadliness of stagnation [in the A=A] and the vanity of unceasing motion [in the endless regression from A to its explanation by not-A]; the obtuseness of the golden calf and the eternal incompleteness of the Tower of Babel (*Pillar*, pp. 26f).

In a subtle and complex dialectic that cannot be easily summarized, Florensky proceeds through skepticism and probabilism to a final impasse, in which the *longing* for the Truth, whose light manages to penetrate the darkness of the I=I, lures the seeker to a willingness to go beyond this bubble of self-identity, not just in an endless quest for yet another conceptual not-A, which will in turn become subordinated back into the circle of self-identity, but to leave the sphere of the I altogether – to break with self-identity in a radically discontinuous movement that is nothing less than, for the I, a death unto itself and to the “lower law of identity,” in order to be reborn through the achieving of an impossible identity with what is not-I, discovering in the process a higher, truer law of identity, a “spiritual law of identity” (*Pillar*, p. 348). If Parmenides’ “untrembling Heart of immutable Truth,” and with it the ontological ground of the law of identity, is to be reached, then the path must lead not through the serene, ethereal heights into which daimonic charioteers had carried the Eleatic, but through the Garden of Gethsemane (*Pillar*, p. 45).

Consonant with all the great traditions of spirituality, then, Florensky argues that it is only through a kind of intellectual *asceticism* – like the casting-off of all that is cumbersome to the athlete in training, as the word once suggested for the ancient Greeks – that the highest truth can be found. The image upon which Florensky draws here is Abraham, the father of faith, and the father of peoples, who is called to leave behind his ancestral home for an unknown land, a new land, a “better” and indeed “divine” country (*Pillar*, p. 55; *Heb.* 11:8, 14–15). Likewise, the knower must leave behind his own self-identity, leave behind the law of identity itself, cross over the abyss of rationality and go out to another – another who cannot be proved, because He is Himself a “self-proving Subject,” which alone could be Absolute Truth (*Pillar*, pp. 33ff). Moreover, this “going out” must at the same time be an “entering in,” an ontological union with the Truth who alone can be considered as “*actual infinity*, the Infinite conceived as integral Unity, as one Subject complete in itself” (*Pillar*, p. 33). Thus,

the act of knowing is not only a gnoseological act but also an ontological act, not only ideal but 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 (*Pillar*, p. 55).

But this is to say that knowing is itself a mode of love: “in love and only in love is real knowledge of the Truth conceivable” (*Pillar*, p. 56). “Love takes the monad out of itself” and “unity in love is that which takes each monad out of the state of pure potentiality, i.e. spiritual sleep,

spiritual emptiness, and amorphous chaos” (*Pillar*, p. 236). And in knowing (and loving) Absolute Truth, which is related to every individual truth as actual infinity is to every finite element – as including them, without being contained by them – it is possible to then know (and love) finite things as well, within that Absolute.

Knowing is not the capturing of a dead object by a predatory subject of knowledge, but a living moral communion of persons, each serving for each as both object and subject. Strictly speaking, only a person is known and only by a person (*Pillar*, pp. 55f).

Hence, in a manner entirely different from the way it is argued by Spinoza, every truth known is a truth known about God. But, rather than God being dissolved into the world, the world is itself personalized within the God whose very energies it manifests, yet who nevertheless essentially transcends it. “God is transcendental for the world, but the world is not transcendental for God: rather it is wholly permeated with divine energies” (*Pillar*, p. 363). Thus, this mode of knowing that frees the self from its own self-imprisonment, that is itself a mode of love allowing every truth to entail a personal relation to God, is possible only because in each case the initiative always already proceeds from God. “God’s love goes over to us,” and indeed, it is this divine love itself that has lured the self beyond itself, enticed the I to find itself in unity with the not-I (*Pillar*, pp. 56f).

Happily, however, we need not somehow plunge into mystical unity with God all at once, and with no preparation. There are certain modes of knowing within which we are offered an anticipation, a preparation – nothing less than a “preliminary hint... of the heavenly in the earthly”:

This revelation occurs in the personal, sincere love of two, in friendship, when to the loving one is given – in a preliminary way, without *ascesis* – the power to overcome his self-identity, to remove the boundaries of his I, to transcend himself, and to acquire his own I in the I of another, a Friend. Friendship, as the mysterious birth of *Thou*, is the environment in which the revelation of the Truth begins (*Pillar*, p. 283).

Crossing the abyss, making the leap, entering into this radical discontinuity, going from the life that is a kind of death, the empty self-identity of the I=I, into a death (I= not-I) that is a kind of life, the soul discovers a “new” self, finds the truth that only by losing oneself can one self be found. But once again, we need not think that this discontinuous exit from the monadic hegemony of self-identity necessarily requires some dark night of the soul, an anguished state of mystical longing such as we find in some of the Western mystics. It can take place, to some degree, in the moment when some wisp of cloud, or an ancient scent lingering in the autumn air, or the song of a mockingbird in the calm depths of a Southern night, penetrates our shell and moves us beyond and outside ourselves, i.e. the moment in which we, however briefly, embody “the act by means of which a creature is liberated from its selfhood and goes out of itself” (*Pillar*, p. 235). We are made, Florensky argues in harmony with Patristic Christianity, in the image of God. And thus, remarkably,

to love visible creatures is to allow the received Divine energy to reveal itself – through the receiver, outside and around the receiver – in the same way that it acts in the Trihypostatic Divinity itself. It is to allow this energy to go over to another, to a brother (*Pillar*, p. 62).

## 6. The Uses of Contradiction

It would be a mistake, however, to see Florensky’s critique of the law of identity as a form of irrationalism, similar either to that of Breton and Duchamp in France, or to that articulated by his Russian contemporary Lev Shestov and his admirer, D.H. Lawrence. Florensky was first of all a mathematician and scientist, and long after his philosophical voice was silenced, he continued work in these fields. Rather, Florensky is appealing to a distinction and contrast that goes back to ancient Greek philosophy – and which was important to his Slavophile predecessors such as Khomyakov –

between lower and a higher modes of knowing, between *dianoia* and *nous*, between what Florensky terms in Russian *rassudok* or “rationality” and *razum* or “reason,” or between discursive rationality, which seeks to explain conceptually, and what German Idealism called intellectual intuition, which grasps higher truths through non-sensuous immediacy (*Pillar*, p. 7). While the former is fragmented and divisive, the latter is integral and unifying, drawing people together into a kind of loving concord that in Russian is called *sobornost* (*Pillar*, p. 430). And while “rationality” insists upon the “lower” law of identity, “reason” transcends it and operates according to a “higher,” spiritual law of identity.

Kant, of course, argued that such intellectual intuition was impossible for human beings, and employed a series of antinomies, or equally compelling arguments supporting contradictory conclusions, which arise when human understanding tries to go beyond the limits of empirical experience. Yet something on the order of *nous* or *theoria* or *contemplatio* (or intellectual intuition) has until modernity been seen by philosophers as the highest mode of knowing, from Parmenides to the Middle Ages. In his retrieval of *noesis* through *ascesis* and the experience of religious mystery, Florensky shows just how deeply the roots of patristic epistemology extend into ancient Greek philosophy, which characteristically (and notably in Parmenides, Plato, Aristotle, and Plotinus) saw noetic rationality as the fulfillment of the human condition, the mode in which (however they articulated it) human beings could come closest to the divine – yet one that for the ancient philosophers, for the most part merely flickered on the horizon, reachable if at all only for a few, and only then for brief periods. And indeed, modernity itself may be defined by its very rejection of noetic or contemplative knowledge, this purportedly direct or immediate apprehension or intuition of higher, eternal, transcendent realities, which traditional, patristic Christianity saw as the birthright of all the faithful who undertook the *ascesis* of the *ekklesia*, the ancient Christian community. Florensky, then, may be seen as undertaking the most significant attempt to justify this putatively higher rationality since the German Idealists had sought to overcome Kant’s limitations on human knowledge. But just as Feuerbach and Marx saw the need to go beyond German Idealism not within theory, but through an exodus from theory into praxis, so too (in a very different mode) Florensky also seeks to justify higher knowledge through something active and engaging – through experience, and through the love that takes the knower beyond the bounds of self-identity and the law of identity itself, i.e. through an ontological migration from self-identity to identity with the other.

How to activate or engender this higher mode of reason? In Book VII of the *Republic*, Plato had posed the question of what “*would be apt to summon or stimulate noetic activity*” (523e; [9], p. 202, translation altered). And Socrates here engages his interlocutor Glaucon with a strange exercise, asking him to hold up his fourth (ring) and fifth (little) finger, and report whether the fourth finger is little or small, to which he answers that it is large. Next, he asks Glaucon to hold up his third (middle) and fourth fingers, upon which Glaucon reports that the same finger, the fourth, has now become little. The same thing, the fourth finger, is thus both itself and not itself, both big and small. And this contradiction in the visible realm – and this encounter with what Plato in his later philosophy called the indeterminate dyad – is precisely what he maintains is able to stimulate and awaken the noetic intellect to go beyond the visible toward what is intelligible, but not visible: to make the transition from one world to another. Likewise, Florensky takes the concept of antinomy, which to Kant was a warning sign beyond which we must not advance, as in fact a spur to awaken our noetic powers.

“Rationality,” clinging to the illusory safety of the I=I and the law of identity, must undergo the discipline of *ascesis*: the rationalistic mind must be “tamed,” i.e. it must forgo its own pretensions to absoluteness, in order to arrive at a genuine Absolute (*Pillar*, pp. 7, 23). And it is precisely the great antinomies or mysteries of religion upon which this discipline and taming must be exercised:

The mysteries of religion are not secrets that one must not reveal. They are not the passwords of conspirators, but inexpressible, unutterable, indescribable experiences,

which cannot be put into words except in the form of contradictions, which are ‘yes’ and ‘no’ at the same time (*Pillar*, p. 117).

Thus, when these mysteries of religious experience are put into words, they become antinomies embracing both thesis and antithesis – or to use a word that for Florensky is synonymous with religious antinomy, they become *dogmas*.

The basis of dogma would thus be not some kind of mandate based on “blind faith,” but quite the opposite: dogma would in this case be the “mind’s eye,” or rather “that eye by which mankind looks at the inaccessible light of ineffable Divine glory,” but stated in conceptual language (*Pillar*, p. 79). Moreover, we should expect *beforehand* that whenever these mysteries and this noetic experience are translated into conceptual language, the discourse of rationality, the result will be manifest as an antinomy. Moreover, it is just this antinomic character that should stimulate rationality to purify and discipline itself, in order to arrive at “living religious experience as the sole legitimate way to gain knowledge of the dogmas” (*Pillar*, p. 5). The usual proofs for the existence of God and all the other attempts to create what Florensky sees as the absurdity of a “rational faith” would thus be proceeding in precisely the wrong direction. “So-called ‘rational faith,’ faith with rational proofs... is a harsh, cruel stony growth in the heart, which keeps the heart from God.” Rather, “the truth is known only through itself” (*Pillar*, p. 48). Even the very “existence of Truth” is “not deducible but only demonstrable in experience.

What are examples of such dogmas that invite the soul to proceed beyond the safety of its own self-identity? Surely, and above all, we must list the dogma of the Self-proving Subject, the Trihypostatic Unity which through the unity of its own embrace of otherness with itself, invites us into the very loving dynamic which has been the ontological mode of God from eternity. But there are more accessible examples, and Florensky cites many of them in *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth*. There is, for example, what he calls the antinomy of *philia* and *agape*, that salvation is esoteric and for the elect, *and* that it is open to everyone. Or that one should “preach the gospel to every creature” (*Mk* 16:15) *while at the same time* “neither cast ye your pearls before swine” (*Mt* 7:6; *Pillar*, pp. 300f; see also pp. 295f). Or there is the great antinomy of faith and works, i.e. “between God’s grace and human *ascesis*” (*Pillar*, p. 255). Indeed, sometimes the antinomy is presented in a single passage (*Phil.* 2:12–2:13) of scripture: “Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling” (the thesis) “for it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his pleasure” (the antithesis). Or the antinomy may reveal itself within a few pages of a single Gospel: “For judgment I come into the world” (*John* 9:39) and “I come not to judge the world” (*John* 12:47). Thesis and antithesis must both be embraced simultaneously, not through conceptual explanation, but through rising to the kind of noetic experience to which these binary realities in each case point.

Again, Florensky’s affinity for paradox, first honed in his work with the paradoxes of infinity around which so much of Cantor’s work revolves, is pivotal in his theological and philosophical insights here. One of the most important appendices of *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth* discusses how the problem of irrational numbers, long dismissed as “fictitious numbers” and “*numeri surdi*,” propel us to break through and leave behind the “circle of operations which arithmetic knows... in order to be born into a new, hitherto unseen and unthought of world” (*Pillar*, p. 362). This is, he argues, the world of actual infinity, entered through the portals of the paradoxes generated by the juxtaposition of the finite and the infinite, effecting “a leap, a discontinuity in development.” These insights into the role of paradox, contradiction, and antinomy cast new light upon Christ’s use of *parables* in his teaching, which usually entail an antinomy, a set of opposing insights that must both be embraced. They allow Florensky important insights into the relation between these two modes of rationality themselves, while aligning him against the one-dimensional rationality of modernity, and alongside traditional religious discourse, such as is common not only in the enigmatic paradoxes of Taoism, Zen Buddhism, Hinduism, and Sufism, but above all in the splendid paradoxes evoked by so many of the great Orthodox *Kontakia* and *Stichera*, especially those celebrating its holiest feast days, each of which centers upon a paradox: “Thou hast dwelt in a

cave, and hast lain down in a manger, O thou whose throne is in heaven... The Unseen is seen, the Untouchable is touched, the Beginningless beginneth"; "He who hung the earth upon the waters is hung upon the Cross... He who wraps the heaven in clouds is wrapped in the purple of mockery" ([2], pp. 411f; [8], p. 609).

But when it encounters this antithetical character of dogma, being foreign to the experience that engenders and underlies it, "the rational mind involuntarily shudders," for it senses "that it is required to sacrifice itself" (*Pillar*, p. 121). Rationality does not have the taste or the capacity to bring together thesis and antithesis, for "only religious experience apprehends antinomies and sees how their reconciliation is possible" (*Pillar*, p. 120). Rather, in its refusal to go beyond the security of its own self-identity, rationality clings to one side or another of the religious antithesis –

a one-sided proposition takes the place of absolute Truth, and such a proposition thus excludes everything in which is seen the antinomic complement to the given half of the antinomy, rationally incomprehensible.

The Greek word for choice is *airesis*, which came to mean "one-sidedness," and which forms the root of the English word "heresy." Thus, choosing one side or the other, thesis or antithesis, this one-sidedness of rationality is necessarily sectarian, "heretical," or one-sided: "a heresy, even a mystical one, is a rational one-sidedness that claims to be everything" (*Pillar*, p. 119).

## 7. From Actual Infinity to Absolute Infinity

Surely the greatest paradox discovered by Cantor, and doubtless the one that meant the most to him, as it did to Florensky after him, was that there were higher and lower orders of infinity, leading up to an absolute infinity that exceeds comprehension altogether, and that both men identified with God. Once Cantor began to take seriously the concept of actual infinity, as opposed to the merely potential infinity familiar from the paradoxes of Zeno and the ordinary concept of endless iteration, the paradoxical notion of a hierarchy of infinities began to pose itself – paradoxical, because it would seem that infinity is something that cannot be exceeded. And yet he came to understand that there was, for example, a lower infinity of the integers, and then a higher infinity of the integers plus all the rational and algebraic numbers. Beyond this was a yet higher infinity of what he called transfinite numbers, those irrational numbers (such as "Pi") that were not algebraic (i.e. capable of being designated by a formula, such as "the square root of two"), and whose infinite number so far exceeded all the preceding infinite sets taken together that the ratio had to be rounded to 1 – i.e. if the rational and algebraic numbers were mixed together with the transcendental numbers, the probability of randomly choosing a transcendental number would be one, and the probability of choosing one of the infinite number of integers, or one of the infinite number of rational fractions, or one of the infinite number of algebraic numbers would be zero ([1], pp. 90, 132)! And of course, the movement from a lower infinity to a higher one is necessarily *discontinuous*.

Yet the infinity of the transcendental numbers still did not stand at the top of the hierarchy. For Cantor, to whom Florensky refers to as "the founder of the modern theory of actual infinity," the realization that there were a hierarchy of infinities – at the pinnacle of which was what he variously understood as the "set of all sets," or "the totality of everything conceivable" – led him to an absolute limit to mathematical understanding, something that "cannot be known, not even approximately," and which he called absolute infinity, or simply "the Absolute," and sometimes compared to the "One" of Plotinus (*Pillar*, p. 574; [6], pp. 55, 95). Thus, for Cantor, this Absolute was by no means an abstraction, but rather that which was most real of all:

it is the single, completely individual unity in which everything is included, which includes the Absolute, incomprehensible to the human understanding. This is the *Actus Purissimus*, which by many is called God.<sup>7</sup>

Perhaps Cantor was himself a mystic, having not merely arrived mathematically at the incomprehensible concept of this Absolute that he called “God,” but had in some sense encountered this reality in experience. But it is clear that Florensky’s main innovations beyond Cantor were (a) to show a path not just theoretically, but within religious experience to this Absolute, and (b) to show that this Absolute Infinity could only be grasped by employing the higher rationality discussed above, as Trihypostatic Unity and Self-Proving Subject, i.e. as the Trinitarian God of Patristic Christianity and Orthodox Faith. It is one of Florensky’s main theses that there are ultimately only two choices: *either* the endless futility and hopeless despair of the “bad infinity,” i.e. the *potential infinity* that ceaselessly seeks what it can never have – the central dynamic of torment to many of the figures in Dante’s *Inferno* – *or* ecstatic fulfillment of the search for Truth in the actual infinite, ecstatic because it entails a “going beyond” itself for rationality and self-identity, or in theological terms, a *kenosis* or self-emptying, the sacrificing or abandonment of oneself that makes possible a new, and higher kind of existence. But is there an actual infinity, let alone a hierarchy of actual infinities? And if so, what character would this highest order of infinity possess? Finally, through what path could experience arrive at the highest level of actual infinity?

Florensky’s answer to these three questions is extraordinarily rich and complex, and can only be addressed in outline here, although it should be possible to at least sketch out an answer to them, for they will help illumine the other main topics of this paper (the law of identity, discontinuity, and antinomy). First, Florensky makes some very simple observations concerning what he regards as “the fundamental and wholly elementary distinction between *actual* and *potential infinity*,” a distinction that he feels has recently suffered from error and neglect (*Pillar*, p. 351). Both potential and actual infinity are quanta, like any other kinds of quantum. But potential infinity is a *variable quantum*, changing in relation to any other quantum with which it may be compared, since by definition it must exceed any given quantum. Thus, potential infinity is not a specific quantum at all, but simply “a special way of considering a quantum,” i.e. that it is indefinitely variable. Thus, potential infinity is not something actual at all, but an *ens rationis*, an entity posited by rationality. Its infinite character never actually exists, but is always variable, in process, underway, and thus it is never fully itself. It is what the ancient Greeks called the *apeiron* and viewed disparagingly, and what German Idealism called *schlechte Unendlichkeit*, “bad infinity,” the infinity of the ceaseless “etcetera.” And as we have seen already, Florensky associated this with the endlessness of desire and dissatisfaction, of unsatisfied striving, of a movement that can never achieve its goal and for which it is impossible to ever find peace – for as soon as it varies to exceed one quantum, there remain endless greater quanta which it must still exceed (*Pillar*, pp. 351f).

Actual infinity, in contrast, is complete in itself, and thus is not a variable quantum at all, but a *constant quantum*. It is always already fulfilled, fully itself. As a simple example, we may take the set of all points inside a certain closed figure, such as a circle or square. Since the figure is bounded, the number of points within it is complete and constant, fully determinate, rather than variable. Yet it is at the same time infinite, since the number of points exceeds each of the numbers in the series 1, 2, 3, ..., *n* ... and is greater than them. It is, then, an actual infinite. Or, to give a more theologically significant example,

we can say that the powerfulness of God is actually infinite, because it, being determinate (in God there is no change), at the same time is greater than all finite powerfulness (*Pillar*, p. 353).

Moreover, Florensky adds, the concept of actual infinity is more basic than that of potential infinity. For in order for potential infinity to be possible, there must be an already infinite domain within which its ceaseless variations can endlessly proceed. That is, “*every potential infinity already presupposes the existence of an actual infinity as its super-finite limit*” (*Pillar*, p. 353, italics in original). Moreover, it is also important to observe that no actual infinity can be gradually reached through the variation process of potential infinity, for between actual infinity and the infinite increase of a quantum that we consider potentially infinite, there is a radical *discontinuity* –

not necessarily unreachable, but certainly not attainable through increase along a progressive continuum, which could only aspire “farther and farther, without ever being able to achieve a synthesis and to find peace in the whole” (*Pillar*, p. 353).

Now we may return to the *aporia* discussed earlier between givenness and discursion, neither of which alone could provide a successful path toward Truth, leaving us with the dilemma of choosing between the lifeless desert of the here and now, which intuition offers, and the torment and bad infinity of endless explanation, which never arrives at its goal – between the egoistic assertion of a particular givenness, certain merely because it is *my* givenness, and the ceaseless discursivity that continually seeks to explain every A by some new not-A, i.e. between the law of identity and the law of sufficient reason. Yet Absolute Truth would somehow need to possess both characters. On the one hand, if it is to be experienced, it must be *given* in experience, arrived at by *finite intuition*. But if it is to be more than arbitrarily asserted, it must be exhaustively explained, and the grounds for it as a judgment absolutely proved, and this could only be possible not through a potentially infinite process, but within the actual infinity of an already completed *infinite discursion*. Absolute Truth, then, would need to be both finite infinity and infinite finitude, both actually infinite in having already synthesized its grounds, and at the same time capable of being intuited as a given, i.e. it must be a “unity of opposites, *coincidentia oppositorum*” (*Pillar*, p. 33). Moreover, since finite discursion cannot itself provide for it the actually infinite synthesis of all its grounds, Absolute Truth would have to be self-proving or self-grounding, a feature that we saw earlier (in the discussion of numerical identity) is characteristic only of a person or *subject*. Absolute Truth, then, if it exists, would be our experience of an Absolute Self-Proving Subject. And we have seen already how the *kenosis* that leads beyond self-identity and the *ascesis* that leads beyond rationality open the self for the experience of such a Self-Proving Subject. But is there such a reality? Florensky is clear that this must be discerned through ascetic experience alone: the Truth cannot be known beforehand, nor can it even be known for sure whether it exists, but rather it must be encountered in experience. He is able to show only that there must be such a Self-Proving Subject if there is to be not just truth, but the Truth; for in the same way that actual infinity provides the domain for potential infinity, Truth would itself be necessary even for a single finite truth to be possible. Thus, Florensky concludes, “rationality is possible not in itself but through the object of its thought, and if, and only if, it has an object of thought in which both contradictory laws of its activity, i.e. the law of identity and the law of sufficient reason, coincide.” And in addition, we must add that

rationality is possible if Absolute Actual Infinity is given to it. But what is this Infinity? It turns out that such an Object of thought, making thought possible, is the Trihypostatic Unity.<sup>8</sup>

But we may carry this yet another step further. To be fully a subject, such an Absolute subject would have to go beyond itself, to enter in love into another: “this Subject is such that it is A and not-A” (*Pillar*, p. 36). Let us, then, designate this not-A as B. But what is B? B too must go out from itself, transcend itself, in order to be a personal reality. But if B is merely not-A, then its going over in love to not-not-A would end up with the result that A has never really left itself at all, i.e. with A returning to itself. For if A=B, and if B=A, then we have not left the solipsistic self-identity of A=A. Thus, B must be something more than not-A, which we can designate as C. But here, Florensky concludes,

through C the circle can be closed, for in its ‘other,’ in [B understood as] not-C, A finds itself as A. In B ceasing to be A, [i.e. through B finding a not-B which is not simply A] A receives itself mediately from another, but not through the one with which it is equated, i.e., [it receives itself] from C. And here it receives itself as already ‘proved,’ already established. The same thing goes for each of the subjects A, B, C of the triple relationship (*Pillar*, p. 36).

Or, as he summarizes, “Truth is the contemplation of Oneself through Another in a Third: Father, Son, and Spirit.”<sup>9</sup> But this contemplation is far from being a lifeless, bloodless “theoretical”

state. Rather, “Absolute Truth is known in love” – not in love as a psychological condition but love as a metaphysical act, the love that makes possible the leap beyond the bad infinity of self-identity into the actual infinity of ontological communion (*Pillar*, p. 67). Thus, Florensky has shown a path whereby experience itself can “go beyond rationality, to enter the domain where rationality with all its norms is rooted” (*Pillar*, p. 44).

The First Nicene Council, which established the initial and guiding understanding of Christian thought, can be seen as primarily the search for the right word, a word that Florensky takes as central for his entire mathematical-philosophical-theological project. For the Greek word upon which the great Nicene Council of 318 finally settled as its cornerstone – the foundational word of Patristic Christianity and the fundamental word for this identity of substance (*ousia*) that is constitutive of personhood – is *homoousios*, “of one substance,” or “consubstantial.” It is for Florensky the true Principle of Identity, not the impoverished and paranoid self-identity of I=I, but the fulfilled, peaceful identity between Same and Other by way of a Third. If he is right, it is the great, foundational principle of ontology. “It is impossible,” exclaims Florensky here,

to mention without reverent fear and holy trepidation that moment – infinitely significant and unique in its philosophical and dogmatic importance – when the thunder of *Homoousios* first roared over the City of Victory [i.e. Ancient Nikea, City of Nike] (*Pillar*, p. 41).

Thus, Patristic Christianity can be seen, and indeed was seen by many of the Church Fathers (such as the Alexandrians and the Cappadocians) who were well versed in Greek philosophy, as offering the solution to what is arguably the great unsolved philosophical problem of antiquity: as articulated in Plato’s *Sophist*, it is the problem resolving the unstable relationship between the Same and the Other, without ending up in the state of perpetual warfare entailed by dualism, or the state of inescapable totality entailed by monism. Moreover, it demonstrates the ontological identity between thought and being that was sought and posited by both Heraclitus and Parmenides, through the experience of the Love of the Persons of the Trinity for one another, by means of the grace-given identity with the very dynamic of that love itself. And this would, at the same time, be the experience of the identity between Reason and Truth, between thought and being, between God and humanity, between the world of fluttering leaves and the Center toward which they, along with all things, are drawn. As Florensky writes in his concluding paragraph, “The Triune Truth Itself does for us what for us is impossible. The Trihypostatic Truth Itself draws us to Itself” (*Pillar*, p. 348).

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## Notes

1. Pavel Florensky, *For My Children*, trans. in [7], p. 9. Pyman has an illuminating discussion of Florensky's early, untranslated essay, "On the Empirical and the Empyrean" on pp. 41–45. Written in 1904, it provides an important prolegomenon to his major work, *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth*, much of which was written by 1908, but which was not published until 1914.
2. *Ibid.*, emphasis added.
3. *Ibid.*
4. "In contrast [to Kant] I was always a Platonist... the appearance was for me always the appearance of the spiritual world" And thus, "the appearance – two-in-one, spiritual-material symbol – was always precious to me in its immediacy." Florensky, *For My Children*, my own English translation from the German translation [5], p. 212.
5. S. S. Demidov, "*O matematike v tvorchestve P.A. Florenskogo*," p. 171, cited in [7], p. 260.
6. It would not be wrong to see this realism as something anticipated in the anthropologies of Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas, who both argued that in a very limited sense, the knower and known become united: what is known, in the very act of being known, assumes a new being in the understanding of the knower. But Florensky here is proposing something much more radical – more radical even than Hegel, who understands the self as needing to discover itself through its relation to the other. Rather, for Florensky, the knowing self must unite in love with the known, both in order for meaningful knowledge to take place, and for the self to be a concrete self. It is, one might say, an *erotics* of identity.
7. From one of Cantor's last letters to the English mathematician Grace Chisholm Young, cited in [1], p. 189.
8. *Pillar*, p. 347. For Florensky's discussion of the *Absolutum* in Georg Cantor's work, see *Pillar*, p. 354.
9. *Pillar*, p. 37. Florensky offers a detailed comparison between the Christian understanding of Trinity and the views found in non-Christian religions, such as the Hindu triad of Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva, on pp. 478–482.