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S.L. FRANK AND THE CONCEPT OF *PEREZHIVANIE* (ERLEBNIS)

Frederick Matern

It is something of a mystery that two rather different technical concepts in a number of European languages should be translated into English using, basically, one term: “experience”. In the German language, the two words that we come across in philosophy are *Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis*. In Russian, they are опыт (transliterated as *opyt*) and переживание (*perezhivanie*), in English often – but not always consistently – translated by “experience” and “lived experience” respectively. These would not be the first nor the only technical terms that have risked getting lost in translation in philosophy, and these terms have also caused confusion in other disciplines: poetics, drama, and psychology (in no particular order). As it turns out, the latter term, переживание, equivalent to the German *Erlebnis*, was central to one early 20th-Century Russian philosopher’s conception of reality, but it does not come through clearly in English translations of his work. In this paper, I will therefore elucidate how *perezhivanie/Erlebnis* is at the centre of Semyon Ludvigovich Frank’s (1877-1950) realism, and explain why the result of Frank’s theory is different from the relativism that is characteristic of Life-Philosophy, particularly that of the German philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey, who, I believe, influenced Frank. I will look at how Frank’s study of Goethe led him to attempt to overcome the idea that intuitive knowledge of *reality* and knowledge by means of reasoning are incompatible. I will try to explain how Frank attempts to avoid the trap of relativism into which life-philosophy is prone to fall.

OVERVIEW

Semyon Ludvigovich Frank was born in Moscow in 1877 to a Jewish family. After the death of his father, he was raised in the household of his maternal grandfather who was a rabbi. The family moved to Nizhny Novgorod and, during his senior years of gymnasium, Frank joined a Marxist circle. He continued his political activity in the social-democratic movement during his studies at the faculty of law in Moscow. In 1896, he began to study philosophy. Due to his political activity, he was arrested in 1899 and exiled from the city. He went to Germany and continued his studies in Heidelberg and Munich. By the turn of the century he had become a critic of Marxism. He returned to Russia and, over time, developed a humanist philosophy. He began to teach in 1906. During this time, his religious consciousness developed, and he was baptized into the Orthodox Church in 1912. He was given a post as *Privatdozent* at the St. Petersburg University that same year, where he worked in the same philosophy faculty as Nikolai Lossky, who is important to the present study, although there is a

dispute over the amount influence that he had on Frank (Boobbyer 1995: 89). Frank, like Lossky, Nikolai Berdyaev, and a number of other notable intellectuals of the time, was expelled by the Soviet authorities in 1922 on what became known as the “Philosophers’ Steamboat” (though, in fact, it was not one boat, but a metaphor for the forced exodus from Soviet Russia of these intellectuals) and lived in Berlin until late 1937, when he was able to leave Germany for France. He eventually settled in London after the war where he lived his remaining years.

Lossky, who wrote one of the best-known histories of Russian philosophy, classified Frank in his own club of philosophers, the Intuitivists, since they shared the doctrine that “the cognized object, even if it forms part of the external world, enters the knowing subject’s consciousness directly, so to speak in person, and is therefore apprehended as it exists independently of the *act of knowing*” (Lossky 1954: 254). Another historian of Russian philosophy, Leonid Stolovich, agreed that Frank and Lossky both shared a conception of “ideal realism”, or (to use another descriptor Lossky used for his own system) “concrete ideal-realism”, which affirms the reality of the ideal “not only in the individual consciousness of a person, but in the world” (2005: 246). Still another well-known historian, Fr. Vasily Zenkovsky (2003), places Lossky and Frank in different groups: Lossky as a Neo-Leibnizian, and Frank in a group of philosophers who followed Vladimir Solovyov and the idea of *всеединство* (*vseedinstvo*) – or, as I translate it, *omniunity* – which is elsewhere variously translated as “all-unity,” “pan-unity,” and “total-unity.” The term is itself a calque of the German *Alleinheit*, which also has a history of being translated inconsistently.¹ Zenkovsky’s classification is legitimate, but it, too, points to the ideal-realist character of Frank’s thought, as the idea of omniunity can be linked via Schelling to Nicholas of Cusa and Neoplatonism generally. Schelling, in his turn, was the likely source of the term “ideal-realism” as it was used by Lossky and Frank (Obolovich 2012). In a way similar to Schelling, Frank saw ideal-realism as the only authentic solution to the problem of reality that both rationalists and empiricists had struggled with (Frank 1983: 63).

Frank’s intellectual history is interesting. After his turn away from Marxism early in his career, he read Nietzsche closely. He also studied Goethe around this time. According to Sr. Teresa Obolovich, who has described, in more detail, Frank’s early intellectual path (2014), he left Marxism for Neokantianism, and then, through a study of Goethe and the intuitionist theory of Bergson, came to disagree with the Neokantians, and instead began to distinguish two kinds of knowledge: abstract and intuitionist or “living knowledge”. But in the later part of his career, Frank indicates that the most important influence on his thinking was the work of Nicholas of Cusa. Frank published much in Russia and in exile. He also wrote and published in the German language. For our purposes, I will list some titles of his works translated into English and French, in order to underscore a theme of the present paper, which has to do with the problems

of translation. His works were translated into English after his death by Natalie Duddington and, primarily, by Boris Jakim. The works that are the focus of the present study are Frank's magisterial work *Предмет Знания* (*The Object of Knowledge*, translated into French as *La connaissance et l'être*); *Душа Человека* (translated by Jakim in the 1980s as *Man's Soul*); *Непостижимое*, which, before it was translated by Jakim as *The Unknowable*, was referred to in other works translated by Duddington by the more apt translation "The Unfathomable"²); and *Реальность и Человек*, translated by Duddington as *Reality and Man*.

In order to discuss the way that *lived experience* and *experience* are central to Frank's view of what reality is and how we can know it directly, I will provide a brief sketch of the concepts that Frank uses. This will be necessarily cursory, but we will return to some of these concepts later.

FRANK'S CONCEPT OF REALITY

Frank's concept distinguishes *actuality* or *empirical reality* (действительность), and *reality* (реальность). In *Reality and Man*, Duddington translates and distinguishes these as "the World of Fact" and the "Reality." The concepts also appear in the *Man's Soul* and *The Unknowable*, but are translated with less technical precision. Frank explains that, when we consider 'empirical reality,' we are talking about something more than that which is materially before us. Besides rocks, trees, houses, and all the other physical objects before us that we pronounce as real, we also have to account for the material world that was or will be; we also have to confront certain mental phenomena as not merely subjective, but as also constituting empirical fact, even if it is only our own mental state: my stage fright or annoyance about finding parking are all empirical facts that I have to deal with. My mental life is 'given to me,' but is not identical with the subject that takes account of it. For many systems, this description covers the span of reality. "Beyond the system of self-contained concrete things or entities forcing themselves upon our mental gaze there is supposed to be nothing but the sphere of 'subjective', arbitrary or mistaken presentations or opinions" (Frank 1966: 7). Frank, however, casts doubt on whether this sufficiently describes reality.

If the world of empirical reality or "the World of Fact" is not the whole world, then what is? In *La connaissance et l'être*, Frank described knowledge as made up of judgements, which take the form "A is B." For example, mercury is a metal. But we don't mean to say by this that mercury is identical to metal; we mean to say that mercury has the property of being metal; really we are saying AB is B, or something like "the metal inherent in the concept of mercury" is metal. But that is a tautology. Let us try to endure that fact for a moment. What exactly is the object of our judgement?

Before I go further, it should be noted that with the intuitivists Frank and Lossky, the logical laws of thought are ontological forms, which enter the field of consciousness of the knowing subject. Only assertoric or

apodictic judgements count, provided that there is sufficient reason. Fantasy (“water when heated turns into diamond” was an example used by Lossky) does not count as a judgement, since it lacks sufficient reason (Lossky 1923: 66).

When we are judging that AB is B , we are not talking about A , or about A and B together, but about a something else, an unknown, which A is connected to. We thus modify that formula to Ax is B (Frank 1937: 11). The x is an undifferentiated unity, or a “continuous whole.” Without it, Frank reasons in *La connaissance et l'être* (159-161), the logical relations – the laws of identity, non-contradiction and the excluded middle – fall apart: for, unless there is an undifferentiated element, an antimony arises when we compare “two” of the same thing A and find them identical ($A=A^1$); a similar antimony is found with A and $\sim A$ and the law of noncontradiction, since A can only be defined in relation to $\sim A$; and finally the law of the excluded middle contradicts itself, since to affirm that any object of thought must either be A or $\sim A$, a third term, the subject, has to choose. If, Frank reasons, he is right about the need for this unity, then it “is itself not subject to the logical laws or principles mentioned above, but transcends them or underlies them, forming a more primordial layer of reality” (Frank 1983: 26). This he calls *metalogical unity*. That unity can be thought of as the Absolute, or, as Frank understands it in a perennial tradition, *omniunity*. Using Frank’s symbolic notation, that unity x is *abcdf...n*, but also any combination of AB , AC ... *An*. As he describes it, Omniunity is not only the unity of plurality, but the unit of the *first principles* of unity and plurality (1937: 273).

An important distinction that Frank uses in his discussion of the objects of knowledge he attributes to *Theatetus* (197b-199c), and the difference between “having” (εἶς) knowledge and “possessing” (κτησις) it. Frank interprets εἶς as meaning that which is “given”, or actual, while κτησις is a knowledge that lies in the background, as a potential (Obolovich 2014: 66).³ The content of knowledge thus has two layers: the explicitly given A and that which is present as background but as yet is unrevealed to us, x . “The whole of A ... can be compared to a small island surrounded on all sides by the ocean of the unknown, x ” (Frank 1983: 8). In making a judgement about an object, our mental gaze is always turned to the unknown, which is subsumed into the *omniune*. Every particular, every individual, is a moment of omniunity.

THE CONCEPT OF PEREZHIVANIE (ERLEBNIS)

For Frank, the *I*, the subject that is conscious of itself in the very act of thinking, is a self-revealing and self-evident reality. As he says (1966: 13), “This reality is not a dumb, passive conglomeration of facts confronting our thought and revealing itself to it from without, but it is self-subsistent, immediate life revealing itself to itself.” This revelation of reality, as opposed to actuality, is in the form of lived experience, transliterated as

perezhivanie, which would appear to be a calque of the German psychological term *Erlebnis*. Indeed, as Gennady Alyayev has pointed out (2008), the process by which Frank arrives at this point of lived experience being the apodictic evidence of *being* recalls Husserl's concept of *Erlebnis* as *Evidenz*.

In order to understand how *Erlebnis* might take on this fundamental role, a short excursion into the history of the concept is necessary. Reading Hans-Georg Gadamer's *Truth and Method*, we learn that the noun *Erlebnis* had been developing in the late nineteenth century into a technical term within the human sciences. Just as was the case with the word *perezhivanie* in Russian at around the same time, it had only been used in verbal form, with the noun taking on a specialized meaning (Gadamer 2004). This concept was used and developed extensively by Wilhelm Dilthey, was taken up by Husserl (and others, such as Simmel), and had a mainly epistemological purpose, as the ultimate datum of knowledge (p. 56). It was from this usage that the technical term crossed over into Russian. While *perezhivanie* was being used to describe psychological states in the 1860s and 1870s (Vinogradov 1999: 454), Nikolaj Plotnikov characterizes the concept's history as one of a German philosophical buzzword that was picked up in Russian and was met not without a certain amount of skepticism in literary circles (Plotnikov 2008: 207).

Frank adopted the term, in its Russian form, for just such a purpose, using Diltheyan formulations such as "*La conscience est... le flux actuel du vécu proprement dit*" (1937: 112). While it is difficult to say whether the underlying verb *пере-живать* (*pere-zhivat'*) is a calque of the German *erleben* (since in both languages the respective verbs have a long history), it appears that the use of the noun form in Russian was a product of the same kind of changes that the German word had had in philosophy. What is interesting is that, in this way, first German then Russian developed an important technical term in the late 19th and early 20th centuries without a connection to Latin or Greek. It is also worth noting that there is a temporal difference between "experience," on the one hand, and *Erlebnis* or *perezhivanie* on the other. The English and French word for "experience" comes from the Latin root *ex-periri* – as 'having come through some kind of trial or danger.' (Note the similarity with German: *erfahren*, *Gefahr*). *Erlebnis/pere-zhivanie* is expressed in the present, which leads to meanings including suffering, worry, etc. Translations of Dilthey and other German-language philosophers (e.g. Husserl) into English have used "lived experience" for *Erlebnis* (Dilthey 1985). This would seem to be a useful direction for *переживание* as well, although it remains somewhat inadequate, in that it the two concepts we have been trying to distinguish still remain fused. Translations into French avoid the problem partly by using the term *le vécu*, in addition to experience.

The Russian word *опыт* (*opyt*), which is cognate to *Erfahrung* – and means "experience" in the sense we most often use it in English – plays a role in Frank's conception, although not necessarily in contrast to

perezhivanie/Erlebnis. It is important to remember that, in Russian and German, these are not two ways of expressing the same idea, but two different concepts altogether that happen to be more washed together and ambiguous in English, French, Latin, and Greek. I am forced to distinguish these two concepts, however, to try to deal with a problem – the problem that we have translations published where these are not consistently distinguished. “Empirical reality” (or “actuality”, to translate the term a bit more closely to the meaning Frank has chosen) is the totality of experiences in the sense of *opyt* (Frank 1966: 2). Furthermore, *opyt* is not a primary datum in the content of mental life, but rather something that comes as a result of reflection so that, when used as an adjective, it becomes “empirical” (1993: 165). Throughout the translations, the word “experience” is often used for both *opyt* and *perezhivanie* interchangeably, sometimes in contexts that are quite nuanced and difficult for the reader to immediately distinguish (such as in reference to the idea of “inner experience”). Without a concordance, which has yet to be done for Frank, the best and simplest rule for trying to distinguish the two in translation is to consider whether “experience” is, in a given context, a primordial, unfiltered “datum” or rather the result of reflection (“aesthetic experience”, “moral experience”).

For Frank, “pure lived experience” is immediate being that is given to us. It is the concrete reality that we refer to in everyday speech if we talk about “our soul” (1993: 95). “The domain of the psychic as such is the domain of [lived] experience, of immediate subjective being. And to the extent that the phenomena of consciousness have an aspect owing to which they are [lived] experiences in the above-indicated sense of this concept, to that extent are they phenomena of psychic life” (p. 99).⁴ This immediate being is an undifferentiated unity. In short, it forms part of the same “metallogical” background that was discussed earlier in the context of the unknown. Our lived experience is “given to us,” but it is also our connection to the *omniune* substrate of reality. The idea that lived experience is our connection to Truth is not unique to Frank. There are, however, different ways of treating and cultivating this lived experience. Frank, as has been pointed out in secondary literature on the idea of living knowledge, is not attempting to suggest that the rationalization or expression of lived experience is the source of living knowledge. Rather he is trying to describe a “thinking lived experience”, “*un vécu pensant*”, which comes to the fore in aesthetic experience or in ethical knowledge, and which reveals its general character through a series of *acts* (1937: 311).⁵ In this regard, it is similar to connatural knowledge as discussed by Jacques Maritain (1944).

FRANK, DILTHEY AND GOETHE

In recent studies of Dilthey’s reception in Russia, the outward similarity of the philosophers’ systems and the relative congeniality of Frank towards Dilthey has been commented on (Plotnikov 2000). Beyond the idea of ‘lived

experience’ – *Erlebnis* for Dilthey, *perezhivanie* for Frank – was a shared interest in the paradigm of creativity represented by Goethe. Frank’s 1910 article on Goethe’s epistemology could be regarded as a preliminary sketch to the theory of knowledge that I have just described. Goethe, in his approach to the natural sciences, was a formative influence on Frank on several accounts, for example: realism as epistemological unity of matter and consciousness; an attempt to synthesize rational thought and intuition in “living knowledge” (Artem-Alexandrov 2014: 107).

Both Frank and Dilthey took note, in Goethe’s methods, of what might be thought of – to use C.S. Peirce’s terminology – as an “abductive” form of reasoning. In poetry, Dilthey noted Goethe’s remark about one of his novels that it “contains no line that has not been experienced – but also none that is just as it was experienced” (Dilthey 1985: 137). Frank saw something similar in Goethe’s approach to scientific method. “The first characteristic indication of Goethe’s methodology is *empiricism*. Goethe might well be the author of the now-winged idiom ‘pure *experience*’” (Frank 1914: 111). By empiricism, Goethe is talking about getting as rich an empirical picture as possible, but also, and very importantly, about leaving out theory. Frank notes that Goethe’s empiricism does not take a side in the rationalist-empiricist debate. He is not speaking of empiricism as the passive apprehension of the world. Rather his meaning has to do with a preference for the concrete over the abstract. Frank says that on Goethe’s view, “genuine knowledge... is not reached through the fragmentation of the ostensive living unity of the object into abstract signs and through soulless, mechanical combination of the latter” (113). At the same time, Frank notes, Goethe’s epistemology contains an element of the irrational: “the essence of things is inexpressible in words and concepts, and in this sense ever enigmatic and irrational; it’s not captured by logic, but by art alone, which is able to see and express that which cannot be expressed and defined in the abstract” (118).

Furthermore, Frank takes note that Goethe’s epistemology is distrustful of those who would mistake a concatenation of particulars for the whole. To illustrate, Frank points out several quotes from *Faust*, among which the following makes the point quite well:

*Wer will was Lebendigs erkennen und beschreiben,
Sucht erst den Geist heraus zu treiben,
Dann hat er die Teile in seiner Hand,
Fehlt, leider! nur das geistige Band*
(Goethe, *Faust* Part I, 1936-1939).

Who would study and describe the living, starts
By driving the spirit out of the parts:
In the palm of his hand he holds all the sections,
Lacks nothing, except the spirit’s connections.
(Kaufman trans. 1990)

Frank saw a similar drive on Dilthey's part away from abstract hypothesis in psychology, due to his grounding of psychology in the data of lived experience. In an article on Dilthey in the journal *Russian Thought* in 1911, a few years before his magisterial dissertation, Frank wrote: "in connection with his elucidation of the meaning of 'lived experience,' as an unmediated given starting point for all further theoretical treatment of knowledge, Dilthey came to the conviction that psychology must be freed from great hypothetical constructs and causal explanations and be made a purely descriptive and analytic science, which should explain the content and inner structure of the ligatures of consciousness" (Frank 1911: 39). For Frank, both Dilthey and Goethe abhorred theory while relying on the whole-picture data of lived experience and, in this way, were fundamentally empiricist, using the idea of the 'empirical' in the way Frank attributed to Goethe as discussed above.

THE OMNIUNE ABSOLUTE

The foregoing sounds suspiciously, first, irrationalist, but also, finally, sophisticated and relativist, along the lines of "man is the measure of all things." I shall try to deal with both of these objections.

First, there is most definitely an irrationalism at work in this theory. Reality is greater than what we can know about it. It is elemental, and extends beyond the human capacity to reason. Frank uses, on several occasions, a reference to λογισμός νοθός, "bastard reasoning," a turn of phrase borrowed from Plato's *Timaeus* (52b), to describe the only way to reason about χωρά. It is "the distinctive, dark knowledge by which the subconscious is known" (Frank 1993: 91), and also the substrate or *prima materia* for the concrete, metalogical unity of reality in Frank's system (1983: 32). It is another reason why I think the spatial metaphor the word "unfathomable" does a better job than "unknowable" to translate the title of Frank's monograph on that subject. Despite this, saying that there is an irrational element to reality is not to say that there is no use for reason, whether in the natural sciences or the "human sciences". I do not think that Frank made such a claim. It is interesting that, in Dilthey's study of Goethe, there seems to be a difficulty in reconciling the irrational, creative side of the poet-scientist with the empirical method he used in his research on optics. "Goethe found that as an artist he was a pantheist, as a natural scientist, a polytheist, and that as a moral man he inclined toward a belief in divine personality" (Dilthey 1985: 291). For Frank, on the other hand, in Goethe "there was no difference in general between artistic and scientific truth, between Beauty and Truth... A true artist is, in his understanding, a wise man and clairvoyant, just as a true thinker is unavoidably an artist-creator" (1914: 106). In the theory Frank proposes, reason can approach the truth of reality, but reason's razor can never actually cut that reality so finely that there might be a full description that is not wanting of some other aspect of reality. The closest we can come to Truth is through living

knowledge, through direct lived experience. But that unmediated lived experience cannot be used to manipulate truth, to bring it into the abstract realm to be examined, compared, and communicated with precision.

Second, regarding relativism, while Frank certainly felt the influence of *Lebensphilosophie* (Boobbyer 1995: xxx), from a number of its protagonists, chiefly Nietzsche, Bergson, and Dilthey, I think it would be a mistake to consider him a life-philosopher. I.M. Bochenski, in his (1961) book on European philosophy in the early twentieth century, classified philosophers in six categories: those of Matter (Neorealists, Positivists, Marxists), The Idea (Neo-Kantians, Croce), Life (Bergson, the Pragmatists, Dilthey and Life-Philosophy), Essence (Husserl, Scheler), Existence (Heidegger, Sartre, Jaspers, also Berdyaev), and Being (Neothomists, Nicolai Hartmann, Whitehead). I would suggest putting Frank in Bochenski's last group. Frank is not a life-philosopher, since life is not the foundation but more properly seen as the structure on which his philosophy was built. It may be, in a sense, that he built upon the program that Dilthey had started in his critique of the human sciences (Plotnikov 2008). Ultimately, however, the fact that Frank begins with Being as an omnium Absolute, on which lived experience and living knowledge provide a window, but not in its infinite entirety, makes his metaphysical approach fundamentally different from that of life-philosophers.

There is a reason for the difference between the conclusion to which *Erlebnis* leads Dilthey and that to which *perezhivanie* leads Frank. For Dilthey, "lived experience is the structural nexus which preserves the past as a 'presence' in the present" (Rodi and Makreel, "Introduction to Volume 5"; Dilthey 1985). For Frank, lived experience is the means to knowledge of meta-logical Being. As he puts it in a discussion (1972) on Descartes, the truth of the *cogito* is apparent for him when restated as "I think, therefore Absolute Being is" (*cogito ergo est ens absolutum*). "I" am a leaf on the tree of the omnium Absolute. Rather than relative truth being a result of the process of living knowledge, relativism would, therefore, come from being *out of touch* with living knowledge of the Absolute. Living knowledge, as we have seen, is not simply about riding the waves on the ocean of the subconscious. Living knowledge in Frank's conception, inspired in large measure by Goethe rather than by Dilthey, is an active process by which lived experience is absorbed and revealed in acts; it can apply in different measures to science, to art, and to religious thought.

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NOTES

¹ See the review by Parkes (1988: 85) of *All-Einheit: Wege eines Gedankens in Ost und West* by Dieter Henrich: "A literal translation of the anthology's title would be: 'All-Unity: Ways of Thought in East and West'. 'All-Einheit' is the German term for hen-panta, the Unity of All Things". Compare with Fr. Philip Merlan's (1963: 132) citation of Husserl, who "corrects the expression 'omnitudo' [Allheit] by suggesting another, viz. omniunity (Alleinheit)". It is, in my view, entirely appropriate to coin a term based on Latin for use in English (and French, as omniunité) to translate All-Einheit/всеединство, just as Allwissenheit and всеведение become "omniscience" (not "All-science" or "Pan-science"), to name only one example.

² The work was originally drafted in German as *Der Unergründliche*, and even though the Russian noun непостижимое by itself might be translated as "the incomprehensible", the adjective is often used idiomatically to modify the noun "depth," – i.e., "непостижимая глубина", "unfathomable depth" – a construction hinted at by Frank in his book; he writes "недостижимая глубина", or "unattainable depth" in a discussion on spatial metaphors (1983: 17). Add to this the original German title and one is led to agree with Duddington's translation. Jakim was presumably aiming for clarity and consistency, since he had to translate the word in other contexts besides the title. He appears to have judged that "unfathomable" would have not conveyed the right meaning throughout the book; but in so doing lost a powerful spatial reference that I think is important to Frank's study.

³ See also (Frank 1937) Chapter III, pp. 80-110. Curiously, the reference to Theætetus is missing from the French translation.

⁴ Jakim's translation reads "the domain of experience."

⁵ Also, see Chapter II of *Reality and Man* (1966).