

Nikolai Lossky's Argument Against Nominalism

Matthew Raphael Johnson
Johnstown, PA

The Russian exile movement had the unintended consequence of bringing an entirely new way of thought to the western world whose technocracy had just helped slaughter 10 million men in World War I. This war proved the moral bankruptcy of the west. More accurately, it proved the bankruptcy of modernism as an ideological and scientific mindset. Russian intellectuals in western exile filled an intellectual void despite themselves.

As science developed, the weapons and tactics that turned warfare from an unfortunate necessity to a global catastrophe that slaughtered tens of millions. Yet, science still continued to function on the offensive; God and the church, on the defensive. To claim that science was dragooned into the service of the state as a means defending her role in the war is dishonest: science was always a self-interested establishment which functioned at all times and places as either a servant of the state or of capital. Usually, she served both.

Her origins are in the Royal Society and British elite organizations, there was never a time when the scientific establishment was on the “outside.” To claim that modern states ever showed anything but the most lavish financial support on the scientific establishment that increased her power to levels that Hobbes or Plato could never have imagined or conceived is also to be dishonest.

The scientific establishment became the dominant institution in the western world because she proved her usefulness: science was the secret to political or economic success. Science was financed by those with power because she created the machines that both sustained and augmented that power. To say that “nationalism” or “imperialism” (polar opposites, in fact) is the “cause” for the Great War is to mystify the role of modern science. Those responsible for the war, chiefly Britain and Austria, were not aware of the millions that would be killed. No one was prepared for the might of science unleashed on the battlefield.

A rational man would think that this war would have forced Europe, just having slaughtered tens of millions of men in a few short years, to completely reevaluate her priorities at every level. She did not. She then signed her death warrant. The Russian exile community brought a very distinct mode of thinking to the west immediately following the meaningless slaughter of the best of Europe's working men. Today, Russian philosophy is a tad faddish, and has already been banalized by institutionalization in the mainline Orthodox church and its smug seminary staff. Its extremely radical idealist and anti-nominalist point of view has long been blunted through being forced into western scientific categories.

Modern Marxists used to say that Realist metaphysics was man's yearning for Truth during times of chaos. Marx, from Feuerbach, had a tendency to explain all non-material conceptions as some kind of “yearning.” This was not exactly scientific. Broadly, in times of peace and prosperity, the argument goes, Realism is solely replaced by some kind of nominalism. Realism, in other words, is presumed to be false in part because it is the “creation” of man's “yearning” in times of pressure. Of course, there is no logical reason to hold that this “yearning” implies that what is yearned for does not exist. In fact, the very reality of this “yearning,” indulged by the eternal abstraction of “man,” is implied by the very act and state of its desire.

The history does not match up here, but of course, Realism, as nominalism, does have social antecedents and consequents.

Nikolai Lossky's greatness derives from his directness. This writer's own bluntness derives from the disgust against academic leftist polemics hiding behind officially sanctioned verbiage and slogans. It is rare in metaphysics to see such a confrontational frontal assault on something so fundamental. He provides both a critique of nominalism and a defense of Realism.

Lossky reduces philosophical talk on “universals” to three broad categories that make up most college philosophy courses: Realism, nominalism and conceptualism. The first two are well known, but “conceptualism” is similar to what Aristotle meant by “universal.” Aristotle's “universal” is very different from his concept of “substance,” or of “essence.” It is an empty abstraction that comes into existence because of the requirements of speech. A universal is an empty category of things that share a specific quality. A universal is not an essence in that the latter is the real constitutional core of objects as belonging to a species. A universal is any word that refers to a collection of things grouped together for a particular purpose. It is a linguistic convention, not an ontological category. This is not how this paper uses the term “universal.” Rather, we mean a Platonic form rather than a mere abstraction.

Lossky argues persuasively that particulars that lie at the root of nominalist ontology are actually general ideas. General things alone are known: either Forms exist or nothing does. Science begins from Cartesian and rationalist concepts, yet often defends itself through stressing its empirically based methods. Science is based on mathematical equations that are sets of abstractions. They are extrapolated from some kind of observation. Empirical reality is not at the basis of science, since only general ideas turn out to be its “objects.” The natural laws that are discovered in the scientific method are only instantiated in objects, but are not “objects” of themselves.

If objects in classes are collected and given a name, the name itself cannot be the sole mode of identifying the particulars; what they all have in common. If the word that identifies a group of things is properly used, then this word must be intrinsically connected to ontology. Nominalism's argument that collections and sets are merely utilitarian short-cuts rejects any real physical connection between the collection, the word, the universal and the objects taken together. Realism originates in the mind, so to speak, because there is a connection between the set and the word used to describe it. The truth is that the word tell us why it is a set. Either these commonalities are a true, real object in the strong sense, or the commonalities are mere random natural events whose connection exists solely in the mind.

Lossky uses empirical methods to grasp the falsity of nominalism. Contrary to a common belief among younger students, there is no intrinsic connection between nominalism in ontology and empiricism in method. Lossky's argument here revitalizes metaphysics and the very nature of perception. Ultimately, Lossky argues for “objects” that exist in a “medium” level of generality. Objects as sensibles and particulars are always arbitrary. They are constructions because there has to be a “decision” about how to draw lines between the object and the not-object.

If the “individual” in the true, ontological sense (rather than mere utility) are to be considered, then there are really only two: the Whole and the tiniest sub-atomic particle. Neither are really objects of experience. Like most Realists, the argument centers, at first, around the equivocal and arbitrary concept of “individual.” An individual object is far from something easy to comprehend.

The broader argument is that any sensation that is resolved into an “object” and given a name is itself a complex community of objects brought together under a universal. In other

words, what are normally called “objects” in vulgar nominalism are in reality complex universals. They are not “objects,” but universals – collections of sensibles called “one” and “unified.” Thus, Lossky stresses the need—at least from utilitarian considerations—to keep our concept of “objects” in the middle range. The Whole, the cosmos as expression of reason/Logos is too large to actually be an “object,” while the tiniest subatomic particle currently discovered is also out of practical use.

Therefore, our objects that we consider utile are middle range, not totally comprehensive and not minuscule. But this middle range of objects is far from being a class of “individuals,” but rather these are universals. The more comprehensive wholes are really only open to specialists in a specific field. Large, comprehensive wholes and objects that are extremely tiny are not parts of utilitarian experience, but rather are things that specially trained intellects can use and grasp. The broader point is that which is actually conceived as a “thing” of experience is at the “medium” level of comprehensiveness.

What separates Lossky from Kant is his stress on the unity of experience. Kant made it very clear that our self is a singular, moral object. Yet, it “generates” the categories under which the manifold of sensibles is actually made orderly. While Kantians can always hold that they have gone beyond the nominalist/realist debate through the categories, the question as to the relation of the self to the manifold is left unanswered. Hegel and those following him were able to strike a powerful blow against nominalism in their answer to this problem. For Lossky's part, he refused to believe that the self (in the moral sense of Kant) and the manifold of experience grouped in these “mid-level” units is radically separate from the self that grasps them. The self is in both internal and external reality. In other words, the ego and non-ego of Fichte are present in each and every act of cognition. Our consciousness and will are as much part of the natural order as trees.

What is perceived in Lossky's mind are relations, not things. Relations are concrete universals in Hegel's sense, and hence, nominalism is false. In a sense, relations such as cause, attribute, Logos, unity/particularity, comprehensiveness and the rest are already given in the singular act of perception. They are wholly present in perception and not deduced in later cognition.

Lossky's defense of Realism can be summarized in five points:

- 1 The form, in Aristotle's sense (also substance or essence), is as particular as the unity it helps create. In Kantian terms, the same can be said about the categories.
- 2 The form, even in Plato's sense, is an individual, a unity which comes to embrace others.
- 3 A true individual, an object in the nominalist sense, cannot be divided any further, otherwise it is a universal.
- 4 The form in both Plato's and Aristotle's senses, is not “over” or “above” the object but “in” it.
- 5 Like everything in Lossky's metaphysics, separating the “parts” of a whole is arbitrary. The “particular” is not known through the “universal,” but both inform each other and assist each other in the creation of the unity. Form and matter are not distinct in any real sense.¹

In Lossky's work, everything is based on every other. The fundamental principle in his argument lies on the distinction between subject and object. The critique of western metaphysics is that knowledge and existence have always been separated, and this, in part, is based on the concept that subject and object are often seen to be based in two different universes, the one

1 This is the argument found in Lossky's *The Intuitive Basis of Knowledge*, pps 281-315 (Macmillan, 1919)

“natural” and the other not.

The main figure to recognize and bridge this gap was Hegel. Yet, he went in the other direction, since reality ended up being the structure of knowledge. Prior to this, Fichte tried the same thing, and fell into a different trap where thought became *uber alles*, and swallowed everything else.

Lossky's general theory, the one which contains the above critique of nominalism, is called “Intuitionism,” though he uses it in a different sense than Kant. The basic thesis is that knowledge contains existence. Put differently, knowledge contains, but does not create (as in Hegel), reality. Separating knowledge and reality between outside and inside is arbitrary. The two are constantly interpenetrated.

In this approach, logic is something “given” in the same sense that representations are given. Objects, in other words, come prepackaged and pre-penetrated with logical categories. Philosophers have, for better or worse, teased out the already encased logical categories that are a part of the object in itself. Objects are already infused with logical relations because the developments of the human mind are also part of the natural order.

The conclusion of this rapid summary of this approach is called “synthetic necessity.” An object, given in the senses, compels me, the knower, to apprehend existence as such. The remainder of existence in my life follows from, but is not generated by, any specific object that I might perceive. The world of objects, following from his critique of nominalism, suggests that the boundaries that have traditionally been associated with abstract epistemology, boundaries between inner and outer, one and many, object and context, essence and quality, consciousness and logic, quantity and quality are highly fluid. These boundaries might serve a positive purpose so long as they are never taken as absolute.

Existence, the existential day-to-day, the “thrownness” of Heidegger, shows that philosophers have forced strict conceptual barriers on the world which is never experienced as such. The analytic school, a near parody of philosophy (largely a surrender to relativism and scientific dominance) has increased this trend to a comic degree.

The general argument is that knowledge and being are tightly intertwined. Of course, none of this is separated in any radical or absolute way, from simple Being and acting in-the-world. Put a little more mysteriously, the knowledge of an object is akin to a new object coming to be: not just an external thing alien to me, but something crossing that arbitrary barrier and coming to change me. The constant insistence that objects always be “external” and alien to my “private consciousness” is both an epistemological and ethical problem leading to egocentrism and even solipsism. The opposite, and far less autistic view, is that form and matter; form and content; formal, final efficient and material causes are all given together. They are not essentially or even accidentally separate things. These relations are inherent in everything. Thought, as normally considered, is only a tiny part of knowledge. It is the necessary comparison and conceptualization required for any understanding whatsoever. It is not knowledge and is a small part of it.

The object of normal consciousness, as said above, is dissolved into its particulars. The problem is that each particular is a universal object. Looking at a cat, its grace, power and shape are given identically and simultaneously. Its fur, skeletal structure, eyesight and weapons themselves are particulars that make up the more complex particular of “feline.” Each component of the feline is an universal reality. From the analytic point of view, there is no “feline,” but a set of evolutionary universals such as “claw” or “fur” that adhere to nothing. The cat is not a thing, but a collection of things. Each of those other things, in turn, is made up of

many others. Therefore, the “nominal entity” of naive empiricism does not exist. Empiricism and nominalism (which are not essentially connected) make no sense, since the boundary between one and many is arbitrary and, in truth, non-existent.

The general issues in Vladimir Lossky relative to this topic of Orthodox Realism are the following:

- 1 What Fichte saw as the non-ego is in fact the ego as seen from consciousness' point of view. Fichte was fundamentally wrong to make these radical separations between the two that, when analyzed carefully, turn out to be identical.
- 2 Intuition is essentially empirical since it is based on experience. However, none of the conceptual baggage of Enlightenment empiricism or nominalism apply. This is because what is experienced is not “objects,” but, for lack of a better phrase, the complex stream of being that is Being as such in Heidegger's sense.
- 3 Lossky is here positing two very different versions of empiricism, though existentialism helped prepare the ground. The first is the naive empiricism of the Enlightenment that saw objects in space and time as making an “impression” on the subject. The other is Intuitionism that holds that while all knowledge is experience, the boundary between the external universe and the “impression” made on consciousness is fluid and always changing. All acts of experience are organically complex. There is almost a pathological drive to divide and collect; continually draw boundaries and categorical demarcations on objects/experiences that are never really experienced in that manner. This is because they do not exist this way.
- 4 Experience is being as it relates to philosophy. This is because experience contains all, including our “internal” states, impressions and reactions. All categorical ideas are already contained in these. Put a bit differently, what might transcend immediate sensation does not, in itself, transcend experience.
- 5 The social problem is this: if categories and logical relations are not given in experience, then their logical constitution is created from the mind. In Enlightenment science, “the mind” or “humanity” are dishonest and manipulative objects. Since logical relations are created subjectively, the question must be whose subjectivity. That, invariably, must be the scientific elite represented by the Royal Society, or the elites posited by Comte or Bacon.
- 6 Logical relations are given inherently in any experience whatsoever. The condition of experience therefore is the organic complex of object, form, content, relation, conclusion, predicate, subject, object, being, quality and quantity all taken together. Separating them out into empty “universals” might have a place, but to treat these as separate objects is false and arbitrary.
- 7 Essences are real, universals are not.

Bibliography

Lossky, Nikolay (1935) Value and Existence "Ценность и существование". George Allen and Unwin

Lossky, Nikolay (1919) The Intuitive Basis of Knowledge. Macmillan

Lossky, Nikolay (1951) History of Russian Philosophy "История российской Философии." International Universities Press

Lossky, Nikolay (1914) Intuitionism. Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, New Series 14, 126-151

Lossky, Nikolay (1923) The Philosophy of Vladimir Solovyev. The Slavonic Review 2(5): 346-358

Lossky, Nikolay (1926) The Primitive and the Civilized Mind. Journal of Philosophical Studies 1(2): 145-158

Lossky, Nikolay (1927) The Limits of Evolution. Journal of Philosophical Studies 2(8): 492-502

Lossky, Nikolay (1924) The Successors of Vladimir Solovyev. The Slavonic Review 3(7): 92-109

Shein, L. (1966). N. O. Lossky, 1870-1965: A Russian Philosopher. Russian Review. 25(2): 214-216

Hazen, A. Nominalism and Abstract Entities. Analysis, 45, No. 2 (1985), pp. 65-68

Koyzis, DT (1993) Imaging God and His Kingdom: Eastern Orthodoxy's Iconic Political Ethic. The Review of Politics 55(2): 267-289