“Integral Knowledge” and Enlightenment Rationalism: A Reply to Pruzhinin and Shchedrina

Mikhail Sergeev, University of the Arts, Philadelphia, PA


http://wp.me/p1Bfg0-3xu
In “The Ideas of Cultural–Historical Epistemology in Russian Philosophy of the Twentieth Century” Boris Pruzhinin and Tatiana Shchedrina write about the socio-cultural dimension of Russian epistemological theories. They maintain that since the turn of the twentieth century those theories were characterized by the concepts of “wholeness” and “whole knowledge,” which “consists of the unity of value and cognitive elements” (17). The Russian philosophical project of “positive philosophy” (not to be confused with “positivist philosophy” or “positivism”) consisted in arguing that “[k]nowledge acts as the most important element in cultivating the human soul” and as such has to “meet not only the requirements of our mind, but also the demands of our hearts” (17).

This epistemological perspective has led Russian thinkers to emphasize the cultural-historical circumstances and the existential condition of the human cognizer. As the authors of the article write, “Cognitive content of knowledge always has a concrete meaning for the person, for it is always to be found in particular life context. And in this context knowledge acquires value for a human: not only practical (or everyday) usefulness, but also of an existential significance (or higher value)” (18).

Pruzhinin and Shchedrina believe that this existentially oriented Russian epistemological tradition not only exerted significant impact on the development of semiotics and structuralism in the twentieth century—they trace its influence back to the Russian phenomenologist Gustav Shpet (1879-1937) and linguist Roman Jakobson (1896-1982)—but also retains its philosophical value and potentials in our contemporary post-structuralist world.

Historical Dimension

I would like to make several comments with regard to the thesis of the article—the first one being related to its historical roots. The origin of the idea of “integral cognition” goes farther in history than the turn of the twentieth century. I prefer to translate the Russian expression “tsel’noe znanie” as “integral” rather than “whole” knowledge—as it is rendered in the anthology of Russian philosophy first published in 1965 and still used as a standard textbook on Russian thought in American universities.²

The concept of “integral cognition” was introduced into Russian philosophy by one of the founders of the Slavophile movement Ivan V. Kireevsky (1806-1856). A religious and philosophical school in Russian thought, Slavophilism was conceived in the nineteenth century as a response to the challenge of European Enlightenment and its supposedly one-sided notion of abstract reason. The Slavophiles searched for new principles in philosophy—ones that are based on the Orthodox Russian tradition and are capable of providing new

---

impetus to modern thinkers who were torn apart by the separation of human rationality and faith.

As we read in the anthology, “Kireevsky’s chief philosophical contribution to this task was centered in his doctrine of ‘integral cognition’ … which he also called ‘faith’ and sometimes imperceptibly identified with Russian Orthodox belief.” In his philosophical program Kireevsky did not oppose abstract reason or logical thinking *per se*. Rather he maintained that

… there is a kind of cognition which underlies such logical thought, which is identical with the “whole personality” of the individual ... is not a separate faculty [and] includes the realms of feeling, motivation, desire, and intention which put man in contact with reality and with other men prior to any process of abstract thinking.  

Introduced by the Slavophiles, the concept of “integral knowledge” was picked up by Vladimir Soloviev (1853-1900) whom Pruzhinin and Shchedrina refer to in their article. Soloviev was a philosopher and religious thinker who tried to formulate the middle way between the two extremes of Russian Slavophilism and Westernism. A devout Orthodox Christian himself he attempted to navigate between the Scylla of Orthodox nationalism and the Charybdis of Western secularism.

In the center of Soloviev’s philosophical speculations lied the notion of *vseedinstvo*, which is usually translated into English as “all-unity” (or sometimes as “total-unity”). In “his doctoral dissertation, the Critique of Abstract Principles (1880) Soloviev described those ‘abstract principles’ as “various aspects of All-Unity, which, by separating from the whole and establishing their autonomy, lost their true character, conflicted with each other, and plunged humanity into a state of disunity and chaos.”

Soloviev’s program of philosophical reintegration was directly influenced by Kireevsky’s concept of “integral cognition” to which (reintegration or the achievement of “all-unity”) it fits nicely as its epistemological hypostasis. Later Kireevsky’s and Soloviev’s ideas were explored by other Russian philosophers in both religious and secular directions.

---

3 Ibid, 168.
5 For more on Vladimir Soloviev’s project of modern Orthodoxy see, for example, my article “Liberal Orthodoxy: From Vladimir Solov’ev To Fr. Alexander Men.” *Religion in Eastern Europe*, vol. XXIII, no. 4 (2003), 43-50. http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol23/iss4/2/.
7 For more on Kireevsky’s influence on Soloviev see Walicki, *A History of Russian Thought*, 375-76. On page 376 Walicki writes, for instance: “The first work in which Soloviev outlined a system of his own was *Philosophical Principles of Integral Knowledge* (1877). The title itself clearly harks back to the notion of *tselnost’, or “wholeness,” which was the kernel of Kireevsky’s philosophical works.”
Modern Implications

The second comment that I would like to make is in reference to modern applications of the concept of “whole” or “integral” knowledge. In their article Pruzhinin and Shchedrina point out that the “specificity of cultural-historical epistemology is related to a special interpretation of knowledge as a cultural phenomenon that has an existential-symbolical meaning for the cognizer.” They further argue—and I repeat this key idea of the article—that “[k]nowledge acts as the most important element in cultivating the human soul (cultural and cults designating, correspondingly, the cultivation, of the soul)” (17).

In Kireevsky’s mind, as well as in Soloviev’s, the existential dimension of such an epistemology had a very specific meaning and presupposed Orthodox Christian moral and religious values as a necessary condition for the spiritual growth of the human soul. When divorced from its original religious background the notion of integral cognition, in my view, loses its essential orientation and turns into an idea that is quite ambiguous.

What would the “growth of the human soul” mean in the context of secular culture? It could mean very many, in fact, quite the opposite things, to different people. Without the initial religious and spiritual compass the concept of “integral cognition” seems to lose its existential precision and may as well be used as justification for any ideology that claims to serve as an instrument of “human growth.”

Conclusion

I would like to commend Pruzhinin and Shchedrina for raising awareness of the American readers and for an in-depth discussion of one of the key concepts in classical Russian philosophy. I believe that this cultural and philosophical exchange of ideas is not only productive but essential for the growth of humanity (pan intended). In the spirit of such a dialogue I would like to offer a short list of the most important books and anthologies of Russian thought that were published in English over the last half-century.8