



German idealism and the early philosophy of S. L. Frank

Harry Moore¹

Accepted: 22 January 2022 / Published online: 29 April 2022
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Abstract

This study argues that the early philosophy of Semyon Liudvigovich Frank (1877–1950) exhibits significant intellectual correlations with nineteenth century German Idealist philosophy. The idealists in question are Immanuel Hermann Fichte (1796–1879), G.W.F. Hegel (1770–1831) and F.W.J. Schelling (1775–1854). It will be suggested that the critical tension of Frank’s early philosophy is precisely a tension between his Hegelian and Schellingian tendencies. The paper will first introduce Frank’s theory of a “personal absolute”, exploring its surprising parallels with the religious philosophy of I. H. Fichte. The analysis then addresses the self-dispersal of Hegel’s absolute, before finally turning to Schelling’s immediate intuition of subject-object identity.

Keywords German Idealism · S. L. Frank · G. W. F. Hegel · F. W. J. Schelling · Fichte the Younger

Introduction

In Vasily Zenkovsky’s comprehensive *History of Russian Philosophy*, we come across the following assessment: “Thanks to the strength of his philosophical vision, S. L. Frank can be considered the greatest Russian philosopher, and not only amongst those who shared his ideas. Without hesitation, I believe Frank’s system is the most profound and significant in the development of Russian philosophy” (Zenkovsky 1991, p. 158). It is thus a great misfortune that the varied contributions of Semyon Liudvigovich Frank (1877–1950) are largely ignored in Western philosophy and theology.¹ Despite its originality and its critical engagement with classical German philosophy, Frank’s work awaits recognition in world philosophy.

¹ The main exception to this rule is Boobbyer’s biography of Frank: (Boobbyer 1995). The only detailed extensive engagements with Frank’s early philosophy are by Swoboda (1992) and Tannert (1974). Neither of these studies, however, gives room for Frank’s dependence on German Idealism.

✉ Harry Moore
harry.moore@bnc.ox.ac.uk

¹ Brasenose College, Radcliffe Square, Oxford OX1 4AJ, UK

The present paper will argue that Frank's early philosophy, culminating in *The Object of Knowledge*, exhibits some striking correlations with nineteenth century German Idealism.² The analyses will expose largely unrecognised points of contact between Frank and the Idealist thinkers, Immanuel Hermann Fichte (1796–1879), G. W. F. Hegel (1770–1831), and F. W. J. Schelling (1775–1854). On this basis, it will be suggested that the critical tension of Frank's early philosophy is precisely a tension between his Hegelian and Schellingian tendencies. Although Frank was, on a cursory level, familiar with both Hegel and Schelling's work, there is no evidence that he read Fichte the Younger. The present analyses, however, do not wish to demonstrate a concrete historical influence, but rather present significant intellectual "correlations" between Frank's ideas and those of his German predecessors. Such correlations do, however, emphasise the shared thought-world of nineteenth century Germany and late imperial Russia, thus discrediting the belief that Russian thought is uniquely isolated.

The paper will first introduce Frank's theory of a "personal absolute", exploring the latter's place in the religious philosophy of I. H. Fichte. The analysis then reveals Frank's dependence on a Hegelian self-dispersal of absolute being, before finally turning to Schelling's immediate intuition of subject-object identity.

The Personal Absolute according to I. H. Fichte.

Alexander Men (1935–1990), in his lectures on Russian religious thought, recollects Frank's method as the following:

Frank's own experience was the foundation of his thought, a deep experience of knowing reality as a whole which coincided with a certain encounter with God, an encounter with that which could not be defined in human language. Frank passed this experience, common to Christian history, through the crystallizing gates of discursive reason and allowed it to be expressed, not in mystical poetry, but in the transparent and clear language of a philosopher-sage. (Men 2003, p. 238)

Not only was Frank's religious experience *expressed* in his philosophy but, via a unique productive cycle, his philosophy then *intensified* this experience. As one contemporary Frank scholar claims, "Frank complements a purely mystical experience of the absolute with a demonstration of the possibility of logical access to this absolute" (Aliaev 2009).

The integrity of Frank's mystical experience and his philosophy is further confirmed in the high point of Frank's early thought, in *The Object of Knowledge*. Here, the determination of discursive thought presupposes a sphere where "laws

² This work is the most rigorous defence of Frank's epistemology, written in Germany from around 1905 to 1915, and later accepted in St Petersburg as Frank's master's thesis. There is no English translation of this work which has been hailed as "the Russian *Critique of Pure Reason*". See: (Evlampiev 2000, p. 359). The text was first published as (Frank 1915a). Quotations here are taken from (Frank 1995). The work has been translated into German (Frank 2000) and partially into French (Frank 1937).

of determination” (Frank’s own shorthand for the law of identity, law of non-contradiction and the law of excluded middle) do not apply, since all determination is abstracted from a greater indeterminacy. And, it seems, Frank also had some “mystical” experience of this realm:

We are not intending to “break” the law of determination, but rather to overcome it. We have in mind an ascent (*vozkhozhenie*) into a sphere where the law is no longer effective ... This is the ascent (*pod’em*) of consciousness up to a summit where it cannot remain for long but which can be reached only for a moment, so that then, having descended into the normal sphere of discursivity, it may possess in the form of abstract knowledge the content of its previous intuition, perceived and retained in memory. (Frank 1995, p. 269)

Such “ascents” seem to have increased in Frank’s later life, culminating in the dramatic raptures and visions of his final moments.³

The so-called demonstration of our knowledge of this “absolute” (*absolutnoe*) owes itself to an interpretation of the meta-logical foundation of all logical thought, of which (because of its presupposed presence in consciousness and our participation therein) we have *immediate* knowledge. In short, the absolute’s presence is presupposed because all logical determination presupposes an infinite meta-logical remainder. Furthermore, only in virtue of our “being embedded” in this meta-logical absolute, and thus possessing an internal organic kinship (*srodstvo*) with every known object also embedded therein, is our normal “abstract” knowledge of these objects made possible.

For Frank, this quest for the “absolute”, understood strictly etymologically as the unbounded and unconditioned, is the final and most important task of philosophy. We read the following in a key 1934 article, “Das Absolute”: “It must be emphasised that the absolute—whether one likes it or not—is the actual and only object of philosophy” (Frank 1934, p. 147). Frank’s absolute is variously depicted in *The Object of Knowledge* as “absolute being” (*absolutnoe bytie*), “trans-temporal unity” (*sverkhvremennoe edinstvo*), “primary unity” (*iskonnnoe edinstvo*) and “total-unity” (*vseedinstvo*). In Frank’s own words:

This being is not “objective being”, or simply “transcendent being” which we ought to attain to and arrive at by extrinsic methods: this is *absolute being*, outside of which there is nothing, and which is not just transcendent but is rather the absolutely immanent foundation of all transcendence ... the *foundation* on which, in the form of a produced duality (*proizvodnoi dvoistvennosti*), there arises the distinction of the “immanent content of consciousness” and “transcendent (objective) being” ... the foundation of both the flow of actual experiences of consciousness and that which is necessarily thought beyond the boundaries of consciousness. (Frank 1995, p. 156)

The justification of this absolute emerges throughout Frank’s reflections on knowledge and consciousness, spread across the three parts of *The Object of Knowledge*. For Frank, the act of consciousness (*soznatushee*) necessarily demands *that which*

³ Such are discussed in (Gallaher 2020).

one is conscious of (soznavaemoe), and is thus always a member of a relation. On the one hand, that which one is conscious of is certainly a part of consciousness, “belongs to the make-up (*sostav*) of consciousness” since it defines consciousness and is the necessary content thereof. But on the other hand, it (the *soznavaemoe*) must also be autonomous as it cannot be engulfed or *exhausted* by consciousness since then the concept of consciousness would disappear entirely, it would be bereft of the independent object against which it is defined its necessary “other”. But how do we know of this necessary “other” to consciousness if whenever we think it, it is already in our consciousness? Frank solves this problem by proposing a pre-cognitive acquaintance with this “other”. This “other” in virtue of its infinity, turns out to be the absolute, in which we are embedded—“that eternity which we possess immediately” (Frank 1995, p. 155).

In this way, from a peculiar *interdependency of concepts* (consciousness and its object), Frank claims that reason demands an ascent to the absolute: “An ascent (*voskhozhdenie*) from each member of the relation to the nature of that relation itself which embraces both members *as a whole*” (Frank 1995, p. 154). Frank further suggests that we require such an “ascent” because any relation presupposes some metaphysical space in which the two notions relate, and the inseparability of the notions only hints more strongly at some common ground. This “background” of the relation is the absolute principle: “The relation of two members presupposes that basis, in which there is not yet a division between the two members, but upon which this division must arise” (Frank 1995, p. 154).

This is Frank’s argument that absolute subject–object unity is immediately (*neposredstvenno*) accessible to us. We do not “know” the absolute as we know objects, but rather we have an ontological access, we “possess” (*imet’*) this being, because, in virtue of its absolute nature, we also “are” this being. According to Frank’s experience, we are dealing with a “Self-evident and irremovable being, which we do not ‘know’ but *are*, and with which we merge (*s kotorym my slity*), not via the means of consciousness, but via our own being” (Frank 1995, p. 173). Through this absolute we have an independent (that is, independent from the actual mutable forms of consciousness), pre-conscious access to the transcendent, or to the object (*predmet*) itself: “If the ‘object’ is necessarily thought of as transcendent to ‘consciousness’, and if its sphere of the ‘available’ (*imeiuscheesia*) does not coincide with consciousness but is in this sense transcendent to consciousness, then this sphere—independent from its relation to consciousness—is absolutely immanent for us” (Frank 1995, p. 155).

In Frank’s view, to participate in this absolute, to know absolutely, is simultaneously *to be known by* the absolute. We read in the *Object of Knowledge* the following: “[Absolute] being ... is by me (*u menia*) and with me (*so mnoiu*): it not only *belongs to me* (*prinadlezhit mne*), but *pertains to me* (*prinadlezhit ko mne*), or more precisely *I pertain to it*” (Frank 1995, p. 156). There is here a “flipping-over” of active and passive roles through cognition of the absolute, whereby if we think that *we* are knowing God, it is actually *God*, in virtue of being absolute, who completes this cognition through us. This is essentially the same state as that described by Vladimir Lossky (1903–1958) in his lectures on dogmatic theology: “An openness of our thought to a reality that surpasses it, to a new mode of thinking where

thought does not include, does not grasp, but finds it is included, seized, mortified, and vivified” (Lossky 2017, p. 16).⁴ This same “switching” of active to passive roles in knowledge of God can even be traced back to St Paul’s Epistle to the Corinthians: “If anyone imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know. But if anyone loves God, he is known by God” (1 Corinthians 8:2–3).

This sort of participation in God as “absolute” was outlined a few years after the publication of *The Object of Knowledge* in a shorter, more accessible work, *The Meaning of Life*.⁵ Here, Frank claims that “our consciousness, our ‘mind’, that principle in us by virtue of which we ‘know’ something, demands, as it were, a metaphysical foundation, rootedness in the ultimate depths of being” (Frank 1994, p. 520; 2010, p. 34). A philosophical demonstration of this rootedness was proposed in *The Object of Knowledge*. It was here where Frank plunged the depths of epistemology and developed his theory of the absolute: “By inquiring into the fact of knowledge and its nature, we discover for the first time, alongside the empirical world of objects, the presence of *absolute* being (if only in its indistinct and most general contours) and the fact that we immediately and primordially belong to this being” (Frank 1994, p. 537; 2010, p. 55).⁶

One of Frank’s principal concerns throughout his intellectual development, was that this absolutism would not “de-personalise” God or turn him into an abstract or generalised concept. We should of course remember that it was precisely the absoluteness of God which gave personal life to the “substance” of Spinoza and made his philosophy more attractive for certain Idealists. After all, a personal omnibenevolent God should be completely ontologically invested in the universe. Such sentiment is powerfully expressed in Goethe’s famous lines:

Was wär‘ ein Gott, der nur von außen stieße,
Im Kreis das All am Finger laufen ließe!
Ihm ziemt’s, die Welt im Innern zu bewegen,
Natur in Sich, Sich in Natur zu hegen,
So daß, was in Ihm lebt und webt und ist,
Nie Seine Kraft, nie Seinen Geist vermißt. (Goethe 1960)⁷

The author of *The Object of Knowledge* demonstrates a similar sensitivity to the living personal qualities of absolute being. This sensitivity becomes explicit in later works, such as *God with Us*, where we read that “Religious experience is a living experience acquired through inwardly participating in the reality revealed in it ...

⁴ The full passage reads: “Un certain caractère ‘gnostique’ doit être propre à toute théologie, dans la mesure où celle-ci est toujours ouverture de notre pensée où la pensée n’inclut pas, ne saisit pas mais se trouve incluse, saisie, mortifiée et vivifiée par la foi contemplative” (Lossky 2012). Despite the commonplace opposition between the religious-philosophical and the neo-patristic schools of the Russian emigration, it would seem that Frank and Lossky share some common ground here.

⁵ This work was first published as (Frank 1925), and is quoted here from (Frank 1994). The English translation can be found in (Frank 2010).

⁶ Jakim’s translation has been amended here.

⁷ Note that Goethe is referencing St Paul in Athens: “For in him we live, and move, and have our being” (Acts 17:28). I offer my gratitude to Professor Johannes Zachhuber for introducing me to these verses.

[the] God of the living religious experience is not an entity that can be thought of objectively, is not a ‘he’ or ‘it’ but a living ‘Thou’—God-with-me, entering into my life” (Frank 1946, p. 93). This personalism is, however, already present in Frank’s earlier essays such as “Person and Thing: The Philosophical Foundation of Vitalism”.

In addition, the central idea in *God with Us* of the “presence” of the transcendent God is simply an extension of the “presence”, or the availability (*imeiuschee*), of the absolute in the act of knowledge, an idea developed throughout *The Object of Knowledge*. In other words, the necessary “presence” of absolute being in all cognition is another expression of the *personal* presence of a transcendent God. As Vladimir Zelinsky summarises, “We can consider Semyon Frank’s philosophy as the crowning achievement of a *reconciliation* which is possible between two approaches to reality: a purely rational approach, on the one hand, and, on the other, a mystical experience, re-enacting an intimately *personal* sort of knowing” (Zelinsky 2015, p. 116).

This personal aspect of man’s relation with the absolute necessarily incorporates his relation with other persons. As Frank writes in *The Fall of the Idols*:

By overcoming the inner self-enclosedness of our soul, by opening our soul and allowing it to participate in the totally-one living foundation of being [absolute being], we immediately participate inwardly also in the supra-temporal total-unity of people, living, like us, in God and with God—we participate in the supra-individual soul of the church and the unity of holiness and religious life, as the eternal storehouse of holy truths and traditions. (Frank 1990a, pp. 179–180)⁸

In other words, our being embedded in the absolute (which conditions our abstract knowledge of the world), finds its final expression in our being embedded in the “total-unity” of others, the community of believers, the Church. As Dominic Ruben summarises:

Just as the possibility of rational and empirical knowledge depends on man being immersed in a level of being that includes the objects of his potential knowledge, so it is with religious knowledge: man belongs to a “collective whole of which each individual feels himself a part [and which] is itself a living individual... its limit is a kind of supra-temporal unity, the single collective organism of Godmanhood ... In this sense, organic togetherness coincides with the “church”, in the most profound and general meaning of this term”. (Ruben 2010, p. 460)

In this respect, Frank is, in his own way, contributing to nineteenth century debates on the “personal absolute”, associated mainly with Immanuel Hermann Fichte “the Younger” (1796–1879), Christian Hermann Weisse (1801–1866) and Hermann

⁸ The relevant chapter from *Krushenie kumirov* has now been translated as: “The Spiritual Emptiness of Our Time and Meeting with the Living God” in Frank (2010, pp. 115–136 [135]).

Ulrici (1806–1884). It was I. H. Fichte who developed the most systematic handling of this issue. It seems at first strange and arbitrary to compare Frank with a forgotten “speculative theologian”. Fichte the Younger, however, seems to have shared with Frank a general approach to philosophy.

What first strikes us is that both thinkers show pronounced realist tendencies. Frank decisively rejected any reduction of the objective world to our consciousness thereof and did not believe the world could be produced by our own representations: “The concept of a ‘representation’ has a determinate sense only in contrast with the concept of ‘reality itself’ or the ‘object itself’. With the destruction of the latter, the former loses its meaning” (Frank 1995, p. 83). Similarly, Fichte the Younger emphasised that “Without a real non-I, no real–ideal-I would be possible (whilst Fichte [the Elder] allows the former to be posited by the ‘I’ and thus produced) since the preconscious essence of spirit is conscious of itself only with consciousness of another” (Fichte 1869, p. xviii). Thus, representations of consciousness or the self are not constitutive of extra-mental reality, but rather only “illumine” a pre-existing reality. “Consciousness, in the final analysis, does not *produce* but rather *illuminates* the state of affairs at hand” (Fichte 1864, p. 167).

What is more striking is that Fichte and Frank both suggest that a “removal” of the subject–object opposition coincides with an “ascent” to an absolute ground (both the removal and the ascent are expressed by the term *Aufhebung* in Fichte’s case and *vozvyshenie* in Frank’s case).⁹ For I. H. Fichte, consciousness is always mediated by objectivity, and vice versa (consciousness is an object, and objects *are* only as cognised), and by realising this mutual mediation, we remove their mutual opposition. As discussed above, this relationship of mutual mediation is an *interdependence* between the two notions of consciousness and being, subject and object (one is never without the other) which is interpreted by both Frank and Fichte as somehow suggesting an identity which is the absolute.

The following excerpt shows Fichte deducing the absolute in this way, namely by trying to explain the nature of consciousness, to find its “exhaustive notion”, which is not simply that it “objectivises” itself, thus making itself finite, but that it is a member of this interdependent relation:

The true and exhaustive notion of consciousness is not that it knows itself as finite, we cannot in this way return to the notion of the absolute ground. The fully exhaustive notion of consciousness is rather that in every act of knowledge it is *mediated* with the known, with objectivity, also desiring the possibility to mediate *it with itself*. In this way, that very opposition of subject and object, of the self and the real, is removed (*aufgehoben*) in the true notion of consciousness, and is no longer an opposition. This opposition is no longer valid with respect to the notion of the absolute. (Fichte 1846, p. 3)

⁹ Although *Aufhebung* is commonly translated into Russian as *sniatie* (taking away), the notion of *vozvyshenie* (normally bearing the simple meaning of “ascent”) equally applies to this multivalent term. As one critic notes: “The logic of *Aufhebung* can be summarized according to these three meanings which the notion possesses: each stage is a removal (*Aufhebung*) of the falsity of the previous stage, a preserving (*Aufhebung*) of the truth of the previous moment, and also an ascent (*Aufhebung*)” (Sokolov 2018, p. 101).

In this very same manner, Frank asks us the following question: “How can we possibly hope to solve the foundational problem of epistemology—the problem of the relation between subject and object, consciousness and objective being—other than by introducing a sphere which raises itself above (*vozvyschenie*) this relation and only thus provides the possibility to examine it?” (Frank 1923, p. 258). Once the consciousness-being opposition is removed, we are presumably left with the absolute since there is nothing else which does not fall under either consciousness or being, their unity is a “total-unity”.

More importantly, however, for both Frank and I. H. Fichte, the absolute ground must be fully personal. Fichte the Younger attacked David Friedrich Strauss (1808–1874) who saw personhood as a limited concept defined chiefly by other persons, and thus irreconcilable with unlimited absolute being.¹⁰ For I. H. Fichte, however, the defining mark of personhood is not the opposition of other persons, but rather a separation of the nature of the self from the self which is cognizing it, whilst retaining that self’s unity with this nature: “God distinguishes himself from his own infinity in eternal immutable unity ... this is his infinity, the real side in him, the nature in God” (Fichte 1846, p. 208).

In this way, personhood in itself doesn’t require other persons. In the case of the absolute, its nature is the divine ideas, or forms of all created things. God’s cognition of these as his own self is what gives the world its ordered unity: “There is no absolute, as a unity of the world with itself, without this notion of a primordial self-intuition of the same in its own infinite difference” (Fichte 1846, p. 241). The absolute’s knowing of the infinity of its own objects, or the divine ideas, presupposes its knowing of itself as a subject to whom the ideas belong—it thus knows itself both in its “real” infinity as identical to its objects, and its “ideal” infinity as identical to its subjective cognizing self:

So that the infinitude of worldly things can, in both an *ideal* as well as a *real* manner, be *thought*, *created* and *known* as one, as inter-related means and ends, the absolute must in a yet more original manner be complete in an eternal act of self-intuition: the universal consciousness which draws all to unity (in a dual-sense) must necessarily be preceded by self-consciousness. The highest notion, one which truly solves the problem of the world, is that of an absolute which knows itself in its ideal as in its real infinity, the absolute personhood. It is here that we first earn the right to describe the absolute as *God*. (Fichte 1846, p. 238)¹¹

Frank, unlike I. H. Fichte, rarely describes the experience of the absolute from its own perspective, and does not deduce personhood from this sort of reflexivity. However, personhood (*lichmost’*) was for him still fully compatible with absolute being, albeit for different reasons. For Frank, living personhood, just like absolute being,

¹⁰ For I. H. Fichte’s relationship with David Friedrich Strauss see (Ehret 1986, 92).

¹¹ On the dual-sidedness (*Doppelseitigkeit*) of Fichte’s absolute see (Horstmeier 1930, p. 83).

is not opposed to its other, or defined by what it is not. As the author of *The Object of Knowledge* explains, “A foreign life, my connection with it, everything which I give to another and receive from them, all of this is immediately lived by me and forms the content of my own living experience” (Frank 1995, p. 358). Furthermore, for Frank, second person I-thou language makes more sense with regard to absolute being. A personal (second person, “thou”) relation is not *limiting* like an impersonal (third person, “it”) relation. In other words, the devotional phrase “O, God ...” is truer to the nature of God’s absoluteness than any phrase beginning “God is ...”, since it contains no determination of the indeterminate, a conditioning of the unconditioned, a limitation of the absolute. Ruben aptly summarises Frank’s position here: “The absolute, being beyond objective knowledge, cannot be objectified and thus knowledge of the absolute ‘is expressed not in talk about God, but in words addressed to God (in prayer), and in God’s words to me.’ Thus, the absolute (God) is always revealed through the seeker’s being as a Thou” (Ruben 2010, p. 460).

Despite our intimate personal relation to the absolute, the presence of the latter, Frank maintains, cannot be reduced to the presence of some psychological fantasy or “fanatical dream” (Frank 1994, p. 540; 2010, p. 58). We are free, of course, to imagine anything we want, as it exists in consciousness, and claim its “immediate presence” indicates its reality, or claim that its immanent existence is part of its nature. But for Frank, such fanatical dreams always have as their object some *empirical content* of life and are thus really *extensions* of “empirical desires” (Frank 1994, p. 540; 2010, p. 58). However, the longing for and the epistemological presence of the absolute derives from a wholly different non-empirical intuition; it is “something we have never encountered and never seen in the world ... something *other than the whole world*, and at the same time it is *given to us*” (Frank 1994, p. 541; 2010, p. 59). Such reasoning will be developed in the flowering of Frank’s Kant-critique and defence of the absolute, namely his “Ontological Argument”.

It was thus Frank’s task to provide philosophical justification or warrant for absolute being—showing how abstract knowledge of objects is necessarily *conditioned* by “absolute” knowledge. It is precisely this task which uncovers various intellectual correlations between Frank and his idealist predecessors, not excluding the absolute idealist G. W. F. Hegel (1770–1831).

G. W. F. Hegel and the self-dispersal of the absolute

At first glance, Frank’s absolute has little in common with that of Hegel, Frank is, after all, a self-professed absolute *realist*, and not an absolute *idealist*. Frank rarely cites Hegel in *The Object of Knowledge*, and does not consider the more technical aspects of his thought. Nonetheless, some recent proposals of possible intersections between the two thinkers deserve our attention. Dennis Stammer, for example, points to a parallel between Frank’s negative theology and Hegel’s use of negations. Both of these result in a “*knowledge* of the limitation of the concept and thus knowledge of that reality which transcends every abstract concept, and which as living knowledge is self-evident in every process of determination” (Stammer 2016, p. 83).

Additionally, George Kline has uncovered the use of Hegelian terminology such as “moment”, and “concrete”, within Frank’s political and ethical thought. The “central claim” of Kline’s essay is that “Frank is much closer to Hegel in his treatment of these topics [law, the state, civil society]—especially such questions as the right to property, the right of inheritance, and freedom of conscience—than to the position of most Russian philosophers” (Kline 1996, p. 213). Concerning theoretical philosophy, however, Kline only briefly remarks that “Frank is highly appreciative of Hegel, seeing him coming close to a doctrine of living, concrete [in the Hegelian sense of grown-together] total-unity, that is, as coming close to Frank’s own central insistence that the universal ‘living total-unity’ is many-sided, is adequately related to its many constituents, and involves the complex mediation and self-mediation of these constituents” (Ibid., 221).

These considerations, however, do not address the more pertinent correlations discussed below. Kline’s investigation does not consider the nature of the absolute itself, whilst Stammer’s reading of Hegel seems somewhat stretched. Hegel himself never spoke of such “living knowledge” of a “transcendent reality”. The above considerations also overlook the most noticeable disparity between Hegel and Frank—between absolute *idealism* and absolute *realism*.

The basic structure of reality is not thinking itself, or “pure thought”, in Frank’s eyes, but rather that which “thinking” and “what is thought” together presuppose. For this reason, it seems, Frank rejects Hegelianism: “Hegel’s uniqueness is found in the artificiality with which he forces total-unity as absolute being into the frames of an abstract moment of *thinking* or *meaning*, and grasps it as a *concept* or the *idea*” (Frank 1995, p. 415). For Hegel, substance turns out to be identical to the concept in that both are the maximally *concrete*. The latter is understood etymologically as that which “grows together” and is integrated with its surrounding.

Frank took issue with this claim, as is evident in his short essay marking the 100th anniversary of Hegel’s death. Frank warns us of the dangers of any form of idealism: “The concept does *not* coincide with the concrete fullness and vitality of reality itself, but is merely its frozen residue, removed from living concreteness—what we call an abstractedness (*otvlechnost*), an abstraction (*abstraktsiia*)” (Frank 1932, p. 42). Frank did recognise Hegel’s solution, namely the “life” of the concept, its spiritual dialectical creativity, but still found Hegel lacked an explanation of the chaotic irrationality of living concreteness. With intended irony, Frank writes: “Hegel’s powerful philosophical edifice is poisoned by the one-sidedness of *pantheism*, demolished by the bitter fact of *the fall* (*grekhopadenie*)” (Ibid., 47).

Despite what seemed to be the obvious shortcomings of the Hegelian system, Frank believed its author to be a “genius of thought” and that any one-sided rejection of his ideas would be unsatisfactory: “Hegel can and should be overcome—but only in such a way as Hegel himself understood the act of overcoming: not a naked negation, but rather the sublation (*vozvedenie*) of his ideas to a higher level where they are both overcome and retained” (Ibid., 51). It is in this light that we are at liberty to present some intellectual correlations between Frank and this giant of idealism.

Firstly, the latter famously argued that relativity cannot be rejected in favour of the absolute, but must instead be seen as a “moment” of the latter. In other words,

relative mediated knowledge is a constitutive moment of immediate absolute knowledge and the latter is not a rejection of the former. Hegel confirms this in the preface to the *Phenomenology of Spirit* where he seems to be criticising the romantic preference for absolute being over and against relative being:

Whatever is more than such a word [the word here being “Absolute”], even the transition to a mere proposition, contains a becoming-other that has to be taken back or is a mediation. But it is just this that is rejected with horror, as if absolute cognition were being surrendered when more is made of mediation than in simply saying that it is nothing absolute, and is completely absent in the Absolute. But this abhorrence in fact stems from an ignorance of the nature of mediation, and of absolute cognition itself ... Reason is, therefore, misunderstood when reflection [i.e. relation] is excluded from the True, and is not grasped as a positive moment of the Absolute. (Hegel 1970, p. 25; 1977, §20–21)

A similar formulation is found in Hegel’s *Encyclopaedia*, where (via a commentary on Kant) it appears that the “graciousness” (*die Güte*) of the absolute allows for its dispersal into the relative:

It needs to be noted that it is not the subjective activity of self-consciousness that introduces absolute unity into the manifoldness. The identity is, rather, the absolute, the true itself. It is, so to speak, the benevolence of the absolute to release the individualities to their self-enjoyment, and this drives them back into the absolute unity. (Hegel 2010, p. 87, §42; 1970, p. 118, §42)

This is the case because the absolute (as infinite) must include the relative (as finite), in order for it to truly be infinite. For this reason, Hegel rejects the “old” metaphysics:

Here infinity is rigidly set over against finitude, although it is easy to see that when both are opposed to each other the infinity, which is supposed to be the whole, appears as one side only and is bounded by the finite. A bounded infinity, however, is itself something merely finite. (Hegel 2010, p. 69, §28)

Frank’s absolute, just like Hegel’s, is supposedly *enriched* (*obogaschennyi*) by its dispersal into relativity and individuality. As Igor Evlampiev explains:

Suggesting that any act of knowledge is continuous with and is conditioned by the intuition of total-unity, in which we somehow “know” all the fullness of the absolute, Frank comes to the question as to why we need partial, unfulfilled, finite knowledge of separate determinations (for example a separate object), if we already “know” the “whole” of the absolute. The only exit from this position consists in the realisation that the expression of the intuition of total-unity [i.e. “knowing” the absolute] in the form of abstract finite knowledge, is actually the *enrichment* of this very intuition. (Evlampiev 2000, p. 390)

This self-enrichment of the absolute via its self-dispersal is key for understanding Frank's absolutism. The absolute enriches itself through its permeation of the relative, a sort of *kenosis* wherein the absolute is made truly absolute by its "self-relativisation". As Frank himself summarises, "The absolute is first found by opposing it to the relative; it is outside and above the latter; *but* it would not be the absolute if at the same time it did not *permeate and embrace* all that is relative" (Frank 1994, p. 573; 2010, p. 100).

Frank also evidently accepts the Hegelian critique of Kant from *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. Here, Hegel takes issue with Kant's assumption that we can step outside of cognition and consciousness in order to analyse it as a tool. As Stephen Houlgate explains, "Specifically, [Kant] takes for granted that cognition is an 'instrument' or 'medium', that 'there is a *difference between ourselves and this cognition*', and that, consequently, we can examine by itself, and set limits to, such cognition" (Houlgate 2013, p. 4). Frank agrees with Hegel that there could be no difference between ourselves and this cognition. This is because, in Frank's thought, cognition constitutes the absolute, within which we ourselves are also embedded (*ukorenniyi*), and therefore we cannot find a position outside of this absolute to analyse cognition externally.

Finally, a persistent feature of Hegel's *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* is that our knowledge of God coincides with his self-knowledge through us. Hegel expresses this idea in the following key passage:

Consciousness as such is finite consciousness, knowing something that is other than the "I". Religion is also consciousness, and has therefore finite consciousness within it, though sublated as finite because absolute spirit is itself the other that it knows, and it is only by knowing itself that it becomes absolute spirit. Consequently, however, it is only mediated through consciousness or finite spirit, so that it has to *finitize* itself in order by this finitization to come to know itself. However, if the divine, in order to be spirit in this way, finitizes itself so as to become human, i.e., to become a knowing, singular, immediate consciousness, [this] is not on the other hand the affair of the single human being; rather, what is singular is precisely sublated thereby, and religion is *the self-knowing of divine spirit through the mediation of finite spirit*. (Hegel 2007, p. 318.)¹²

Similarly, what Frank calls the kinship (*srodstvo*) of ourselves with the absolute, our shared element, correlates with some ideas in Hegel's early religious writings: "How could anything but a spirit know a spirit? ... Faith in the divine is only possible if in believers themselves there is a divine element which rediscovers itself ... in that on which it believes" (Hegel 1948, p. 266). What both Frank and Hegel are expressing is, at its core, an interpretation of John's Gospel: "God is spirit, and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and truth" (John 4:24).

¹² As Hodgson himself comments on this passage: "Religion, speculatively defined, is not merely our consciousness of the absolute but the self-consciousness of absolute spirit, mediated in and through finite consciousness" (Hodgson 2005, p. 84).

The immediacy of subject-object identity in F. W. J. Schelling

Perhaps a little more obvious are Frank's intellectual correlations with F. W. J. Schelling (1775–1854). The latter, in his 1800 *System of Transcendental Idealism*, famously breaks with his mentor Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762–1814), by regarding him as “failing to move beyond the sphere of self-consciousness to consciousness's *ground* [my emphasis] in a being of which it is only one aspect” (Bowie 1993, p. 13). By the time of *The Object of Knowledge*, it seems that Frank has come to share with Schelling this particular reading of Fichte, a thinker for whom he had earlier shown great admiration.¹³ As Frank writes in a review of Boris Vysheslavtsev's *Fichte's Ethics*, “The central task in the study of Fichte is to show how, in the face of Fichte's work, idealism overcomes itself, as Fichte approaches and ought to have arrived at Platonism and an *ideal-realist* philosophy of the absolute”.¹⁴

As Schelling himself suggests in the *System*: “How both the objective world accommodates to presentations in us, and presentations in us to the objective world, is unintelligible unless between the two worlds, the ideal and the real, there exists a *predetermined harmony*” (Schelling 1978, p. 11; 1858, p. 348). This ideal-real subject-object “ground” neatly mirrors Frank's reflections on ideality and reality, when he writes that “It is only on the ground (*na pochve*) of total-unity, as two correlating worlds, that ideal or a-temporal being on the one hand and real, concrete-temporal being on the other hand, are even thinkable” (Frank 1995, p. 316).

Furthermore, in Schelling's view, this “ground” is presupposed by *all* acts of determination, as we read once again in the *System*: “All determining presupposes an absolute indeterminate (for example, every geometrical figure presupposes infinite space), and so every determination is a blotting-out of absolute reality, that is, negation” (Schelling 1978, p. 36; 1858, p. 381). Likewise, in Frank's philosophy, any object or determination “A” presupposes an endless background “x” from which it is abstracted, and which is “accessible” by way of subtraction. And thus all determination infers prior access to this utterly indeterminate “x”. It is only thanks to this prior relation to the indeterminate that this relation can then be split apart into our experience of objects external to ourselves and to our thought.

Of yet greater importance for Frank's thought is Schelling's insistence that philosophy itself cannot objectively and adequately represent this ultimate absolute ground. This position is expressed in the *System* when Schelling asserts that the ground of knowledge cannot itself be an object of knowledge, but we instead require a “higher” sort of knowing:

This unconditioned [literally “un-thinged”, *unbedingt*] cannot be sought in any kind of *thing*; for whatever is an object is also an original object of knowledge, whereas that which is the principle of all knowledge can in no way become

¹³ This is most evident in (Frank 2019, p. 310). Here Frank endorses Fichte's idealism and his defence of the individual: “That the world is the content of consciousness and that for this reason philosophy is not a theory of the universe, not a science of nature, but a system of the mental life – this is Fichte's enormous, and truly scientific achievement”.

¹⁴ Frank (1915b, p. 32). Frank's article was a review of Vysheslavtsev (1914).

an object of knowledge originally, or in itself, but only *through a specific act of freedom* ... So if it is to become an object of knowledge, this must come about through a type of knowing utterly different from ordinary knowledge ... a knowing whose object is not *independent* thereof, and thus a *knowing that is simultaneously a producing of its object*—an intuition freely productive in itself, in which producer and product are one and the same. (Schelling 1978, p. 27; 1858, pp. 368–369)

In this regard, Schelling's absolute resists all objectification. It could also seem that Schelling endorses here a subjective idealism, but this "knowing that produces its object", viewed in the light of Schelling's entire development, is nothing like individual human consciousness. It simply cannot be a consciousness like ours which is, by its very nature, always limited by some external object (even if that object is our self). Schelling clearly expresses this sentiment in the following extract from his 1795 essay *On the I*:

Do you not consider that the I, to the extent that it comes into consciousness is no longer a purely absolute I, that for the absolute I there can be no object at all, and that it can itself neither be an object? —*self-consciousness* poses the danger of losing the absolute I. It is no *free* act of the immutable, but a forced striving of the mutable *I*, which, through its being conditioned by the not-I, strives to save its identity and to grasp itself in the persistent stream of change (Schelling 1856, pp. 180–181).

As Manfred Frank explains, this "free act of the immutable" is not consciousness but immediate being: "The I as it exists in eternity cannot be objectivised, it is never for itself or to itself. Its way of being (*Seinsart*) is, in this way, immediacy: being" (Frank 1985, p. 59). In virtue of this immediacy, Schelling's "knowing which produces its object" turns out to be immediate being itself. We find the very same immediacy of being in Frank's thought: "An immediate possession of all-embracing being—a possession within which the moments of thought contents and the instantiations of being can only be abstractly separated" (Frank 1995, p. 348).

In other words, the absolute is pre-reflective for both Frank and Schelling: "A being which precedes all thinking and representation" (Schelling 1856, p. 167). Our access to the absolute, therefore, must be *ontological* rather than reflective or cognitive. This is because, if we want to access absoluteness through what seems most absolute, i.e., our original self-awareness, then thinking of it as "thinking" is already accepting a certain determination of it. We should rather think of it as "being". As Schelling writes:

If we free ourselves from all presentation, so as to achieve an *original* self-awareness, there arises—not the proposition *I think*, but the proposition "I am", which is beyond doubt a higher proposition. The words "I think" already give expression to a determination or affection of the self; the proposition "*I am*", on the contrary, is an infinite proposition, since it is one that has no

actual predicate, though for that very reason it is the locus of an infinity of *possible* predicates. (Schelling 1978, p. 26; 1858, p. 367)

Schelling's position here clearly correlates with Frank's insistence that we have access to a "being, which we do not 'know' but *are*, and with which we merge, not via the means of consciousness, but via our own being" (Frank 1995, p. 173).

By now there has arisen an obvious tension, even a paradox, between Frank's apparent endorsement of aspects of absolute being found in both Hegel and Schelling. In Frank's case, this tension is best described as a sort of "antinomy", or necessary paradox. Such antinomies were certainly common among the contemporary Russian intelligentsia (Moore 2021). The paradox in question is between, on the one hand, a Schellingian intuited immediate knowledge of the absolute (as opposed to the relative), and on the other hand a Hegelian turn to reflection and relativity itself as moments of the absolute. If we read Frank as an "antinomian" thinker, then there is no reason for him to attempt to resolve such a paradox, however frustrating it may seem.

Frank's antinomism becomes clear in later works such as *The Unknowable*, where Frank develops the notion of "antinomian mono-dualism":

It does not matter what logically graspable opposites we have in mind: unity and diversity, spirit and flesh, life and death, eternity and time, good and evil, Creator and creation. In the final analysis, in all these cases the logically separate, based on mutual negation, is inwardly united, mutually permeating; in all these cases the one is not the other but it also is the other; and only with, in, and through the other is it what it genuinely is in its ultimate depth and fullness. This makes up the antinomian mono-dualism of everything that exists; and in the face of this mono-dualism every monism and every dualism are false, simplifying, distorting abstractions, which are not able to express the concrete fullness and concrete structure of reality. (Frank 1983, p. 97)

Indeed, it could even be argued that Schelling himself provides a correlate even for Frank's unique "antinomism". For Schelling, the only correct dualism is, we read: "A dualism which at the same time admits a unity" (Schelling 1936, p. 33).

Conclusion

The present study has suggested that the task of Frank's early religious philosophy was to demonstrate, proceeding from the act of knowledge, a divine and personal absolute being. Frank's philosophy of the absolute has been presented as possessing varied and intricate "correlations" with nineteenth century German Idealism. What ought to be clear is that these correlations may not necessarily suggest historical influence. In Frank's case, such concrete historical influence is made clear in his preface to the *Object of Knowledge*, where Frank mentions Platonism, Henri Bergson and "certain currents of Russian philosophy" (Frank 1995, p. 39–40). Indeed,

Frank believed that “according to its general spirit”, his philosophy strongly deviates from German Idealism. Nonetheless, Frank still recognised certain “points of contact” (*tochki soprikosnovekiia*) with the German Idealists, and it is these points of contact, or correlations, which the present study has aimed to uncover. Such correlations, in turn, remind us that Russian thought is not so remote from Western ideas as often suggested, and has in no way been estranged from nineteenth century German Idealism.

It has been shown, for example, by paying close attention to primary sources, that some clear parallels between Frank’s thought and the nineteenth century post-Hegelian debates on the personhood of the absolute can be drawn. Frank, like I. H. Fichte, shows that for the absolute to remain unlimited no objectivising language is permissible, leaving second person address as a more appropriate form of language. The necessity of a Hegelian self-dispersal of the absolute into the relative, was shown to correspond to Frank’s idea of the “self-enrichment” of the absolute. Finally, it became clear how the latter theory stands in an irreconcilable tension with the “immediate intuition” of the absolute which we also find in Schelling’s works. Although this paper only exposes some of the central nerves of Frank’s rich oeuvre, it is hoped that such explorations will encourage our appreciation of Russia’s greatest émigré philosopher.

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