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A.F. Losev and A.N. Whitehead: Possible Parallels

This article compares the philosophical systems of Alexei F. Losev and Alfred N. Whitehead, demonstrating the proximity in both thinkers' styles and drawing parallels between such concepts as Whitehead's "togetherness," "interpretation," "process," and "reality" and Losev's "whole," "interpretation," "movement," and "rest." Neither "process" and "reality" nor "movement" and "rest" are opposites, but they interpenetrate each other: Reality is, as Losev says, "a mobile rest." At the heart of this interconnection and complementarity lies a "higher synthesis," otherwise known as the concept of "God."

Keywords: Alexei F. Losev, Alfred N. Whitehead, Process and Reality, Science and the Modern World, The Ancient Cosmos and Modern Science, Philosophy of Name, *process, reality, movement, rest*

When we discuss Alexei F. Losev (1893–1988) alongside the Anglo-American philosopher Alfred North Whitehead (1861–1947), who began teaching at Harvard University in 1924, we do not mean direct relationships, mutual acquaintance with each other's work, and so forth.

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Whitehead was much older than Losev, and the former likely never heard of the latter. As a “philosopher of the number,” Losev was familiar with Whitehead’s early work, the 1913 *Principia mathematica*, which he wrote together with his former student Bertrand Russell.¹ Later, in the full version of his article “Neoplatonism” (an abbreviated version was included in the *Philosophical Encyclopedia*), he would mention Whitehead along with George Santayana as representatives of Neo-Realism, in whose works we can easily identify Platonic and Neoplatonic roots.² It is surprising that Losev thought of Whitehead in this context, labeling him a modern Neoplatonist and considering him like-minded, but we could hardly say that Losev had a deep knowledge of his work.

However, the fact that these philosophers did not know each other personally does not hinder us from comparing their systems; on the contrary, it allows us a better understanding of philosophical thought in the first half of the twentieth century, and to see in Losev not only a specifically Russian thinker but also a European one. Whitehead’s primary works, *Science and the Modern World* (1925), *Process and Reality* (1929), and *Adventures of Ideas* (1933) appeared at the same time as Losev’s “Eight Books,” including *The Ancient Cosmos and Modern Science* (1927), *Philosophy of Name* (1927), and *The Dialectic of Myth* (1930). Even though these authors make no reference to each other in these works, the mature (in age and philosophical experience) Whitehead and the young Losev came together in the spirit of the times, despite living in markedly different, if not entirely opposite, everyday, social, political, and even academic contexts. They both rejected the “mechanistic philosophy” of rationalism and sought a “new enlightenment” related to the fullness and wholeness of life in all its diversity and fragmentation.³

1. Issues of Style

We already detect a certain proximity between Whitehead and Losev in their style, which is perceived as inaccessible. For example, in the book *Whitehead’s Theory of Reality*, Allison H. Johnson writes that widespread opinion holds Whitehead’s philosophical language to be incomprehensible. Some even believe his whole philosophy is incomprehensible.⁴ The difficulties of understanding Whitehead’s language and style are, at first glance, related to its very idiosyncratic terminology and sometimes to its complex syntax.

We observe the same about Losev, who himself admitted, for example, that his book *Ancient Cosmos and Modern Science* is very difficult to read. What contributes to the text's complex nature is the fact that Losev introduces numerous quotes from "very difficult primary sources that are commented upon"⁵ and, using his own concepts—such as the *one*, the *other*, and the *meon* (non-being)—develops his own unique conceptual system in which we encounter key phrases that, at first glance, seem tautological or closed, such as "Only the existent one exists. The non-existent does not exist"⁶ and "The existent one is an existent one of becoming, continuously and thoroughly becoming the one existent."⁷

However, an even more significant reason for the apparent inaccessibility of both thinkers' philosophies is that both Whitehead and Losev enjoy playing with the reader. Losev often introduces various opinions into his text, which whilst it seems monologic, it is in fact a dialogue. This "mindset toward the dialogical is one of the unique features of the Eight Books, where the material is often presented as an ordinary conversation."⁸ In Losev's case, this convolution of language is also related to his desire to mislead and confuse the Soviet censors. Russian literary critic and professor Ivan Esaulov even believes that many passages in Losev's academic work, including his books from the 1920s, "clearly gravitate toward Russian culture's 'holy fool' tradition."⁹ Here is an example:

They protest: your dialectic is abstract. Well, what did you expect? Why are you unafraid of abstraction in mathematics, in physics, in mechanics? ... Every scientific formula in the exact sciences is necessarily an abstraction, since, even when it is derived from experiments, and only from experiments, it represents an analysis of experiments, the logic of experiments, the numerical patterns of experiments. The only people afraid of abstractions are those unaccustomed to thinking.¹⁰

Whitehead's sense of humor was British. His most well-known and oft-quoted line is his characterization of the European philosophical tradition: "The safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato."¹¹ It goes without saying that Whitehead included himself among the footnotes, and he would have included Losev, too, if he had known him.¹²

However, the philosophers' affinity in thought, ideas, beliefs, and tasks is more important than style. Even the names of Whitehead's three main works, *Science and the Modern World*, *Process and Reality*, and *Adventures of Ideas*,

sound Losevian. They suggest the common interests and desires of Whitehead and Losev, including their desire to understand the modern world and modern science through the prism of forgotten inventions of ancient thought and its Christian transformations. Meanwhile, they both proceed from mathematical and natural-science knowledge at the present stage of its development, with particular attention to Einstein's theory of relativity. They also both tried to achieve a new, modern understanding of both the cosmos and of human culture by comparing and juxtaposing science's newest inventions and methods with those of ancient and Christian cosmology.¹³

2. Process and Reality

Below, I will present some of Whitehead's ideas from *Process and Reality* that seem closest to Losev's philosophy. First and foremost, this is the "philosophy of organism," which is, as Whitehead says, the inversion of Kant's philosophy:

The philosophy of organism is the inversion of Kant's philosophy. *The Critique of Pure Reason* describes the process by which subjective data pass into the appearance of an objective world. The philosophy of organism seeks to describe how objective data pass into subjective satisfaction, and how order in the objective data provides intensity in the subjective satisfaction. For Kant, the World emerges from the subject; for the philosophy of organism, the subject emerges from the world—a "superject" rather than a "subject."¹⁴

Here is another quote from the same publication:

Thus for Kant the process whereby there is experience is a process from subjectivity to apparent objectivity. The philosophy of organism inverts this analysis, and explains the process as proceeding from objectivity to subjectivity, namely, from the objectivity, whereby the external world is a datum, to the subjectivity, whereby there is one individual experience.¹⁵

Whitehead and Losev share this new path from object to subject, as they both do, incidentally, with the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl. In Losev, this proposed path leads to a desire to understand each object and each discourse about the object "from within," beginning with the object itself and the inner logic of the discourse taking shape around it. For example, in his book *Ancient Cosmos and Modern Science*, Losev argues:

I wanted to understand the ancient cosmos from within, however, not necessarily proceeding from myth and religion, as is sometimes done by those who want to penetrate into and familiarize themselves with the ancient Greek worldview, but proceeding instead from those logical constructions and dialectics that precede the Greek theory of cosmos and make it possible.¹⁶

In *The Dialectic of Myth*, Losev insists that he takes “myth as it is,”¹⁷ and that “myth must be taken as myth, without reducing it to something else.”¹⁸

3. Interpretation

A simple assertion of objectivity in the subject could be considered naïve, but Whitehead extends and thus defends the subject’s objectness through two essential manifestations of the objective within the subject, which he calls “togetherness” and “interpretation.” The first term in Russian could be translated as *sovmestnost’* (togetherness) or even as *sobornost’* (spiritual communality). This means that each separate object is defined by its neighboring objects and even by those distant from it. In his book *Science and the Modern World*, a passage from the chapter titled “God” reads:

But there are no single occasions, in the sense of isolated occasions. Actuality is through and through togetherness—togetherness of otherwise isolated eternal objects, and togetherness of all actual occasions. It is my task in this chapter to describe the unity of actual occasions.¹⁹

In *Process and Reality*, we read: “In a sense, every entity pervades the whole world; for this question has a definite answer for each entity in respect to any actual entity or any nexus of actual entities.”²⁰ We also encounter this somewhat humorous remark there: “We find ourselves in a buzzing world, amid a democracy of fellow creatures; whereas, under some disguise or other, orthodox philosophy can only introduce us to solitary substances.”²¹

“Togetherness” denotes the wholeness and interconnectedness of every existent thing, which corresponds to the Russian philosophical tradition’s tasks and definitions, including those of I.V. Kireevskii, V.I. Solovyov, and Losev. Like Whitehead, Losev defines *understanding* as cognition of the interconnectedness between the cognizable object and its surroundings: “To *understand* a thing means to relate it to some environment or another and to present it not simply as it itself, but in the light of some environment, in the light of some thing or some feature from that environment.”²²

All things are thus somehow related to one another and create a single whole, although each thing is also a separate thing different from all other things.

Finally, as a result of endless accumulation, all the world's things create a kind of unity, a primal unity that already extends beyond the limits of each individual thing, yet nevertheless meaningfully embraces each thing.²³

The essence of any particular object is determined by the wholeness of all existent things and the consequent interconnectedness of any object of human perception and cognition with all other objects. However, this determination is achieved only through a mental act aimed at understanding the interconnectedness of this object of determination with other objects in the system of their shared "world." Whitehead calls this act "interpretation": "Thus the understanding of immediate brute fact requires its metaphysical interpretation as an item in a world with some systematic relation to it."²⁴ Whitehead had already introduced the term "interpretation" at the beginning of *Process and Reality*, where he defines the "speculative philosophy" he is developing:

Speculative Philosophy is the endeavour to frame a coherent, logical, necessary system of general ideas in terms of which every element of our experience can be interpreted. By this notion of "interpretation" I mean that everything of which we are conscious, as enjoyed, perceived, willed, or thought, shall have the character of a particular instance of the general scheme. Thus the philosophical scheme should be coherent, logical, and, in respect to its interpretation, applicable and adequate.²⁵

The possibility of interpreting each object of cognition within the framework of a shared system is the goal of this speculative philosophy precisely because Whitehead's "interpretation" represents the source of every person's life experiences:

When thought comes upon the scene, it finds the interpretations as matters of practice. Philosophy does not initiate interpretations. Its search for a rationalistic scheme is the search for more adequate criticism, and for more adequate justification, of the interpretations which we perforce employ. Our habitual experience is a complex of failure and success in the enterprise of interpretation.²⁶

We also find in Losev this realization that the understanding of all existent things and of each individual object of perception and cognition is the result of an act or a series of acts of interpreting so-called facts in the sense of determining their place in the system of all objects in a holistic world. This is especially true of his theories of language and symbol from the early and late periods of his work.²⁷ As L. Gogotishvili correctly asserts:

The interpretive aspect of language has a strictly ontological significance for Losev, since he considers it not only a property of human speech, but first and foremost as an internal ingredient of the most primal names ... Being and communication are, for Losev, essentially one and the same, as are naming and interpretation.²⁸

As Losev understands it, interpretation is provided by human communicative activity, by the language itself and by the matter discussed, which is discovered and expressed through language, including that matter expressed through names: "Thus, in its name, reality produces itself both fully and entirely, straining with all its internal potential."²⁹

4. Rest and Movement

The issues of "interpretation," "togetherness," and interconnectedness (*sobornost*) raise a common question for both Whitehead and Losev, namely the correlation of *unity* and *diversity*, which is simultaneously the question of correlating the act of *becoming* (a *process*) with what is *present* (*reality*), or the question of correlating what is *changing* (also a *process*) with what is *not changing* as *reality*, and so forth. From Whitehead's perspective, dividing these terms has been the primary error of the European philosophical tradition, and indeed of its spiritual tradition as well. At the end of his book, in the chapter "God and the World," he writes:

There is not the mere problem of fluency *and* permanence. There is the double problem: actuality with permanence, requiring fluency as its completion; and actuality with fluency, requiring permanence as its completion. The first half of the problem concerns the completion of God's primordial nature by the derivation of his consequent nature from the temporal world. The second half of the problem concerns the completion of each fluent actual occasion by

its function of objective immortality, devoid of “perpetual perishing,” that is to say, “everlasting.”³⁰

We find a similar passage in *Science and the Modern World*:

Every actual occasion exhibits itself as a process: it is a becomingness. In so disclosing itself, it places itself as one among a multiplicity of other occasions, without which it could not be itself. It also defines itself as a particular individual achievement, focusing in its limited way an unbounded realm of eternal objects.³¹

Losev treats the categories of process and reality in various works of his own, especially in the book *The Ancient Cosmos and Modern Science*, where they occur as the categories of “movement and rest.”³² At first glance, Losev gives them as definitions and interrelations, inseparabilities and interpenetrations, in such contradictory formulations as “The cosmos inhabits a mobile rest and does inhabit it, that is, it possesses a becoming or continuously flowing strain on itself as a mobile rest.”³³ We can decipher these kinds of definitions through the typical Losevian dialectics of the *existent* and the *one*, on the one hand, and the *other* and the *meon* on the other. As Losev defines them, the existent and the *meon*, or the one and the other, are interdependent:

The other is the non-existent. But what is the existent? The existent is rest. The other is non-rest ... The existent is rest, but how is that possible, if it does not move and cannot move? This simple argument means the following. The existent is at rest. But it is, as we have said, also different from the other, the *meon*. However, the other, since it is the other and not the one, is a continuous and indistinguishable mobility. Consequently, the one, located in the other and differing from it, is found against a background of continuous and indistinguishable mobility, and it is something separately at peace. Infinitely flowing waves of the other seem to wash over the granite fortress of the one. But the other is the non-existent, and it is supported only by the existent. Hence, the flowing environment of the one is essentially a property not of the other, but of the one itself. The other flows around the one, and this means that the one is always changing in its borders, changing its outline and its form; this means the one itself is always in motion. Thus, being is also movement.³⁴

5. God

Understanding Whitehead's process and the present along with Losev's movement and rest, or, rather, understanding process (or movement) as the present and the present (or rest) as process or movement, leads us to a new, or at least a more modern, understanding of God. This is from *Process and Reality*:

The vicious separation of the flux from the permanence leads to the concept of an entirely static God, with eminent reality, in relation to an entirely fluent world, with deficient reality. But if the opposites, static and fluent, have once been so explained as separately to characterize diverse actualities, the interplay between the thing which is static and the things which are fluent involves contradiction at every step in its explanation. Such philosophies must include the notion of "illusion" as a fundamental principle—the notion of "mere appearance." This is the final Platonic problem ... But no two actualities can be torn apart: each is all in all. Thus each temporal occasion embodies God, and is embodied in God. In God's nature, permanence is primordial and flux is derivative from the World: in the World's nature, flux is primordial and permanence is derivative from God. Also the World's nature is a primordial datum for God; and God's nature is a primordial datum for the World. Creation achieves the reconciliation of permanence and flux when it has reached its final term which is everlastingness—the Apotheosis of the World.³⁵

I understand this to mean that the unity of the changing and the unchanging, of process and reality, is possible and non-contradictory because it is found in the highest synthesis, which unites the all-embracing with the personal. We find a similar idea in Losev, whose philosophical system A.A. Takho-Godi has labeled, and not by chance, the "philosophy of 'higher synthesis.'"³⁶ In this understanding, God is the basis both of process and of reality. Whitehead's term for this synthesis is "everlastingness." "Togetherness" and "everlastingness" are principles through which process does not oppose reality, but is reality itself. To use Losev's words in relation to the essence of the cosmos, reality is a "mobile rest."

Notes

1. See V. Troitskii, *Razyskaniia o zhizni i tvorchestve A.F. Loseva* (Moscow: Agraf, 2007), p. 257.

2. See the republished article, A.F. Losev, "Nikolai Kuzanskii v perevodakh i kommentariakh," ed. E.A. Takho-Godi, vol. 1 (Moscow: Iazyki slavianskoi kul'tury, 2016), p. 77.

3. For example, D.R. Griffin characterizes Whitehead's philosophical quest as the desire for a "new enlightenment" against "mechanical philosophy." See D.R. Griffin, *Whitehead's Radically Different Postmodern Philosophy: An Argument for Its Contemporary Relevance* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), pp. 15–16. In that spirit, Losev often protests against "formalistic and nihilistic" metaphysics, which, as he says in *Philosophy of Name*, "is a sad product of those eras when living thought and simple human perception of life were crushed by an abstract metaphysics attempting to give a point of view in place of the eye, and a chemistry of colored substances instead of a painting of the world. In A.F. Losev, *Bytie. Imia. Kosmos*. (Moscow: Mysl', 1993), p. 623. In his book *The Ancient Cosmos and Modern Science*, Losev speaks directly about the *danger of rationalism*, which "consists of the fact that it *hypostates its logos*," while the eidetic dialectics it offers must embrace all existence and thus all life, since "the 'all' that we know is also an *eidos*." In Losev, *Bytie. Imia. Kosmos*, p. 73.

4. See A.N. Johnson, *Whitehead's Theory of Reality* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1952), p. 160.

5. See Losev, *Bytie. Imia. Kosmos*, p. 886. See also H. Kuße, *Metadiskursive Argumentation. Linguistische Untersuchungen zum russischen philosophischen Diskurs von Lomonosov bis Losev* (Munich: Otto Sagner, 2004), pp. 362–66.

6. Losev, *Bytie. Imia. Kosmos*, p. 131.

7. Losev, *Bytie. Imia. Kosmos*, p. 133.

8. E.A. Takho-Godi, *Khudozhestvennyi mir prozy A.F. Loseva* (Moscow: Bol'shaia rossiiskaia entsiklopediia, 2007), p. 55.

9. I.A. Esaulov, "Proza A.F. Loseva v svete traditsii pravoslavnogo iurodstva i zapadnoevropeiskogo shutovstva," in *Losevskie chteniia: Obraz mira—struktura i tseloe* (Moscow, 1999), pp. 240–49. See also E.A. Takho-Godi, *Khudozhestvennyi mir prozy*, p. 54.

10. Losev, *Bytie. Imia. Kosmos*, pp. 621–22.

11. A.N. Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology*, ed. D.R. Griffin and D.W. Sherburne (London; New York: The Free Press, 1979), p. 39.

12. According to Losev, Platonism is very close to modern science. In *Ancient Cosmos and Modern Science*, he writes, "from the perspective of modern science, Platonism as a doctrine of other-being is an eidetically understood doctrine of the electromagnetic essence of space and matter." Losev, *Bytie. Imia. Kosmos*, p. 216.

13. See X. Verley, "Whitehead et Einstein: La relativité entre physique et métaphysique," in *Les principes de la connaissance naturelle d'Alfred North Whitehead*, ed. G. Durand and M. Weber (Berlin; New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2007). In his article "Neoplatonism" (see Losev, *Bytie. Imia. Kosmos*, p. 78), Losev also speaks of a parallelism between Einstein's doctrines and Platonic doctrines of time and space, "including, for example, the concept of a different curvature of space, and of the possibility for any material body to have any volume, all the way up to zero, depending on the speed of its movement," also making reference to his book *The Ancient Cosmos and Modern Science* (Moscow, 1927), pp. 167–93, 276–454.

14. Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, p. 88.

15. Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, p. 156.
16. Losev, *Bytie. Imia. Kosmos*, pp. 65–66.
17. A.F. Losev, *The Dialectic of Myth*, trans. V. Marchenkov (London; New York, 2003), p. 4.
18. Losev, *The Dialectic of Myth*, p. 5.
19. A.N. Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World*, Lowell Lectures, 1925 (New York: The Free Press, 1967), p. 174.
20. Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, p. 28.
21. Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, p. 50.
22. A. Losev, *Veshch' i imia*, in Losev, *Bytie. Imia. Kosmos*, pp. 823–24.
23. A.F. Losev, *Antichnyi kosmos i sovremennaia nauka*, in Losev, *Bytie. Imia. Kosmos*, p. 119.
24. Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, p. 14.
25. Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, p. 3.
26. Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, pp. 14–15.
27. Especially in his works *Philosophy of Name, Thing and Name*, and *Linguistic Structure* (Moscow, 1983). On this topic, see L.A. Gogotishvili, “Eideticheskii iazyk, govoriashchaia veshch' i mnogoslownost' smysla (k opredeleniiu konstruktivnogo iadra i evristicheskikh potentsii filosofii iazyka A.F. Loseva),” in *Aleksei Fedorovich Losev*, ed. A.A. Takho-Godi and E.A. Takho-Godi (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2009), pp. 77–118; S. Shaumian, “Dialekticheskie idei A.F. Loseva v lingvistike,” in *Losevskie chteniia: Obraz mira—struktura i tseloe* (Moscow, 1999), pp. 334–78; Kuße, *Metadiskursive Argumentation*, pp. 208–17; H. Kuße, “La sémantique de l’interprétation d’A. F. Losev et les théories de la sémantique au XXe siècle,” trans. I. Masdier and M. Dennes, in *L’oeuvre d’ Alekseï Losev dans le contexte de la culture européenne*, ed. M. Dennes, *Slavica Occitania*, no. 31 (Toulouse: University of Toulouse, 2010), pp. 281–301; Kh. Kusse, “Na puti k inferentsializmu. Osobennosti losevskoi semantiki,” in *Tvorchestvo A. F. Loseva v kontekste otechestvennoi i evropeiskoi kul'turnoi traditsii. K 120-letiiu so dnia rozhdeniia i 25-letiiu so dnia smerti*, pt. 1 (Moscow: Dizain i poligrafia, 2013), pp. 71–80.
28. L.A. Gogotishvili, “Religiozno-filosofskii status iazyka,” in Losev, *Bytie. Imia. Kosmos*, pp. 920, 921.
29. Losev, *Veshch' i imia*, p. 809.
30. Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, p. 347.
31. Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World*, pp. 175–76.
32. Losev, *Antichnyi kosmos i sovremennaia nauka*, p. 211.
33. Losev, *Antichnyi kosmos i sovremennaia nauka*, p. 212.
34. Losev, *Antichnyi kosmos i sovremennaia nauka*, pp. 116, 117.
35. Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, pp. 346–47, 348.
36. A.A. Takho-Godi, “Filosofiiia ‘vyschego sinteza,’” in *Istoriia russkoi filosofii*, ed. M.A. Maslin et al. (Moscow: Republika, 2001), pp. 527–34. As an explanation of Losev’s philosophical system, V.I. Postovalova writes that, in this system, “all of reality—God, the world, and man—represent a single synergetic-personalist ontology as a constructive process of self-revelation of the Essence.”