

N.A. Berdyaev: A Revolutionary Spirit in a Transgressing, Dostoevskian, “Anti-Revolutionary” Mode

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Abstract

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N.A. Berdyaev is an important writer of the Silver Age of Russian literature, philosophy, and theology. Over several decades, he brought his idealist philosophy, informed by Christian theology, into dialogue with the positivism of the early twentieth century. In particular, Berdyaev challenged the philosophical underpinnings of the Russian Revolution, arguing that atheistic socialism actually presented itself as an “inverse religion,” one that paid lip service to human freedom while actually subjugating people to the requirements of a human, yet dehumanized, earthly paradise. Berdyaev’s reading of his Russian contemporaries, especially Dostoevsky, focused on issues of freedom, personality, and creativity to argue against the consequences of Bolshevik socialism. Nonetheless, his emphasis on creative subjectivity, which subordinates being to freedom and, as with Sartre, fails to ground freedom and personality in personhood, calls for adjustment: the beginnings of such a corrective are found in the thought of Berdyaev’s friend, Jacques Maritain.



One of the seminal works in Russian intellectual history produced at the beginning of the twentieth century is undoubtedly the symposium entitled *Problems of Idealism: Essays in Russian Social Philosophy* (1902), whose authors are united in their promotion of ethical idealism and the distinctiveness of

moral experience. This collection of essays was largely written in response to philosophical positivism; the authors of the collection saw positivism as incorrectly reducing ethical categories to empirical ones. In a word, *Problems of Idealism* abjured all positivist “contraband” that muddled philosophical discourse by rendering ethical and metaphysical thought into an exercise in the empirical proposition of “what is” (*sushchee*) in contrast to “what ought to be” (*dolznoe*).¹ To the contrary, for the ethical idealists of *Problems of Idealism*, the substantiality of the self, marked with inherent dignity, is the operative category in ethical reflection.

N.A. Berdyaev (1887–1948) is especially cogent in his contribution to this collection of essays, entitled “The Ethical Problem in the Light of Philosophical Idealism.”² Making Kant’s categorical imperative his own, he argues that persons are always ends in themselves, and never means. In his own words,

we can formulate the absolute condition of the realization of the moral good: it is the recognition of the unconditional value and right to self-determination of the human person, recognition of it as an end in itself (not a means), together with the recognition of the equal value of people.³

In short order, he rephrases this thesis in a religiously explicit manner: “The central idea that Christianity brought to the development of humanity’s self-consciousness is the idea of the absolute value of the human being, as the image and likeness of God, and of the moral equality of people before God.”⁴

¹ Sergius N. Bulgakov is especially clear on this point. See his “Basic Problems of the Theory of Progress,” in *Problems of Idealism: Essays in Russian Social Philosophy*, ed. and trans. Randall A. Poole (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 96, 107. The Russian original is *Problemy idealizma: Sbornik statei* (Moscow: Moskovskoe Psikhologicheskoe Obshestvo, 1902), 17, 32.

² N.A. Berdyaev, “The Ethical Problem in the Light of Philosophical Idealism,” in *ibid.*, 161–97.

³ Berdyaev, “The Ethical Problem,” 175.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 183.

Opposed to this is man's greatest transgression, to disown one's "I" and not pursue moral perfection, which Berdyaev categorizes as "*obezlichenie*" (depersonalization).⁵

Berdyaev on Socialism

Besides this contribution to *Problems of Idealism*, Berdyaev also wrote essays for the other two collections of the Silver Age of Russian letters, criticizing the Russian intelligentsia for its alienation from the Russian people themselves. These volumes are *Vekhi: Sbornik statei o russkoi intelligentsii* ("Landmarks: A collection of articles about the Russian intelligentsia") first published in 1909,⁶ and *Iz glubiny: Sbornik statei o russkoi revoliutsii* ("Out of the depths: A collection of articles on the Russian Revolution"), first published in 1918.⁷

In the first volume, Berdyaev's contribution "Philosophical Verity and Intelligentsia Truth" ("Filosofskaiia istina i intelligentskaia Pravda") tackles the fundamental problem of the Russian intelligentsia, namely, their indifference to true philosophical problems and an actual love for *truth*, which is replaced by love for egalitarian justice and the social good. As Berdyaev bluntly writes, "the intelligentsia's basic moral premise is summed up in the formula: let truth perish, if its death will enable the people to live better and will make men happier."⁸ Berdyaev bemoans the inability of the intelligentsia to engage in genuine synthetic reasoning,⁹ which would actually

⁵ Ibid., 185.

⁶ N.A. Berdyaev, *Vekhi: Sbornik statei o russkoi intelligentsii*, republished in I.A. Isaev, ed., *V poiskakh puti: Russkaia intelligentsiia i sud'by Rossii* [In search of a way: The Russian intelligentsia and the fates of Russia] (Moscow: Russkaia kniga, 1992), 21–204, and 372–75; an English translation is available in Marshall S. Shatz and Judith E. Zimmerman, ed. and trans., *Vekhi – Landmarks: A Collection of Articles about the Russian Intelligentsia* (Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1994).

⁷ N.A. Berdyaev, *Iz glubiny* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Moskovskogo universiteta, 1990); English translation in William F. Woehrlin, trans. and ed., *Out of the Depths: A Collection of Articles on the Russian Revolution* (Irvine, California: Charles Schlacks, Jr., Publisher, 1986).

⁸ Berdyaev, *Vekhi*, 30 (*Landmarks*, 6).

⁹ On this score, Berdyaev approvingly cites a witty remark of Vladimir Solovyov: "the Russian intelligentsia always reasons according to a strange