

THE PHILOSOPHY OF NICOLAS BERDYAEV

Berdyaev's thought, at first glance, seems to be a complex combination of Existentialism, Romanticism, Marxism, Christianity, and certain strands of Russian thought. However, his philosophy can be said to be organised between two axes, namely, Existentialism and Christianity. Indeed, Berdyaev himself claimed that his philosophy went beyond the accepted limits of philosophy and represented a confession of faith. In other words, it was a philosophy born of spiritual experience, rather than deduced from ascertained and assured premises.

Berdyaev's thought represents, like that of all Existentialism, a reaction against the speculative idealism of Hegel. Berdyaev rejects the 'logic' of starting from 'pure being' and of moving from it to existence as absurd. Reality seen through Hegelian bifocals was a 'dying' of the infinite into the finite and of the eternal into the temporal. Then, what was central to Existential philosophy was a clear perception of the distinction between fact and value (here fact is neither the sense-perception of St. Thomas, or 'subjective' impressions of Hume). Man is presented with a reality; he is unwillingly flung into it. Values are created only by the free act of a human agent, who takes this or that to be good or bad. It is the human agent who freely makes a world of the 'reality' given to him. Just as Kant does not see any good or evil apart from will, the Existentialist does not recognise any will apart from freedom. Thus, existence is not to be associated with the 'dream-world' of speculation; existence for the Existentialist is always a very particular existence.¹ Thus, freedom itself is the source of ultimate value.

Berdyaev regards Existentialist philosophy as the knowledge of reality through human existence and its concrete manifestations. Thus, the individual existence, according to Berdyaev, is the most existential

of all. In knowing himself man is initiated into the mysteries unknown to him through his knowledge of others. Here, Berdyaev shares the idea of man the Microcosm, which was a variant of the Renaissance idea of man, drawing particularly from the ideas of Herder and Goethe. Man's personality was infinitely more mysterious and unique than the world he lived in. This was why there arose, according to Berdyaev, a conflict between history, with its complex movements and agencies, and man, with his unique and irreducible personal destiny. History and historical processes to Berdyaev were hostile and merciless to man because they arose and grew for the sake of inhuman and personal aims. But if man was a microcosm as pointed above, then there was another fundamental aspect of the conflict. This was the aspect of man's self-identification with history :

"At the deepest mystical level everything that has happened to the world happened to me... Events of my age and the destiny of the world in which I live as events happening to me as my own destiny."²

A philosophy of existence, then, according to Berdyaev, gives expression to the problems and conflicts of man and in this sense is very close to life. Berdyaev shares with the Existentialists, a commitment to freedom as the ultimate value. What marks him apart from Existentialists like Nietzsche, Jaspers, Sartre, Camus, and to some extent Heidegger, is precisely that which is unique to his thought and philosophic system.

In Fear and Trembling, what Kierkegaard was aiming at, and trying to solve, was the paradox of faith. Faith in the light of public morality was absurd, and yet in the story of Abraham and Isaac faith seemed to have had a 'secret' victory. Kierkegaard here was alluding to a fundamental issue. To him moral acts can not be explained and understood through general, rational communicable principles. This is where the problems of speculation in general and Hegelian speculation in particular lay. Kierkegaard considers the central problem to be that of the individual and his personal or subjective existence. But this existence is also existence as 'inwardness'. This is what speculation overlooks or radically misinterprets. Thus the 'secret' victory mentioned above is that of the supreme value, which only religious life can claim. This lies beyond reason, beyond speech, in the decisive moment when the will submits itself to God. All intellectual and moral processes,

thus, do not begin from 'pure being' (or even a universal subjectivity), but from a sudden flash of understanding, which Kierkegaard describes as a 'leap'. The modern Existentialists reject any domain of the ethical. The temptation of Abraham becomes the symbol not of man before God, but of man before himself, the tragic ambiguity of the human situation.

What Kierkegaard and Berdyaev seem to be pointing towards is that faith is not necessarily a banishment of all 'understanding'. Like St. Augustine, they seem to be positing that faith could merely be a mode of understanding. The need is for man to recognise himself as 'created'. His consciousness of selfhood as in some mysterious sense is forever dependent upon an inexhaustible and unconditioned source of Being, Wisdom, and Power in whose image he is made. To this mystery no rational explanation was possible. What Augustine seems to be pointing quite correctly is the primacy of some sort of inner knowledge which does not require or admit external verification. It is to Augustine, as well to Kierkegaard and Berdyaev, undemonstrable. To achieve this inwardness man needs to overcome the deficiency of thinking in terms of bodily images, which gives rise to a crude anthropomorphism. The need, thus, was to recognise the creative principle as pure spirit.

Kierkegaard's conception of Christianity, however, breaks decisively from all Christian orthodoxy, in the sense of the elimination in his thought of any conception of the notion of an objective truth of Christianity. Rather, the problem of every Christian was, according to Kierkegaard, on the subjective side. It was the riddle of his own path to faith. It could also be called the paradox of the 'God-man' (a concept we would return to in detail while discussing Berdyaev). It was a call to return to the life of intensive introspection.

What is central to Kierkegaard as an Existentialist is the fact of the necessity of free beings to be 'just this and not that'. It is a conflict between the sheer givenness of each person's history versus his aspiration as an individual. What Kierkegaard wants to interpret are these very variations of human personality as they felt to the person himself. Two points regarding Kierkegaard in particular, and Existentialists in general, need to be pointed out before proceeding to situate Berdyaev, however partially, in a particular tradition of

thought. One, Kierkegaard would believe that the immediate temporal flux of our experience is the sphere of quality, and is often misunderstood by the quantifying abstractions of the intellect. Two, the emphasis on the meaninglessness that continually underlies human life, or the contingency of human life, death being the most dramatic and the ultimately determining example of such contingency (*Geworfenheit*, as Heidegger calls it).

II

Berdyaev views man's self as an intersection between two worlds. The first he calls 'this world' or 'life' alternately; and this world, which is the world of actual living, is unauthentic and untrue. The world, thus, was limited and finite. The folly of classicism was to create the illusion of the possibility of perfection in finite, whereas, in reality, perfection can only be attained in the infinite (this is strikingly similar to Heidegger's concept of 'Das Man', existence as a formless theyness). The second he calls 'another world'. This is a more authentic and more true world, and one to which man's deepest self belongs. The revulsion towards 'life' was purely spiritual in nature, and comprised of a rejection of sexual love and the struggle for power, both of which were constitutive of 'life'. Berdyaev in rejecting sexual love can be seen to belong to the Gnostic tradition, which places emphasis on the greatest attainable purity and a going back to the basic truth.

The critique of the struggle for power forms the basis of his theory of freedom, and the resolution he attains in connection with the conflict is the one between freedom and pity. This would be discussed in the following pages in greater detail. It would suffice to point out that Berdyaev sees his thought as conflict between the Tolstoyan and Nietzschean impulses; he resolves it for himself by choosing the Tolstoyan. Berdyaev is sympathetic to Nietzsche's analysis of the advent of the superman and for his passionate thirst for the immortality of man. What he distrusts is the sliding of freedom into tyranny and cruelty in some form or the other of the will to power.

Berdyaev, thus, 'invents' the term 'objectification' in order to express what he terms as his fundamental philosophic intuition. The critique of 'objectification' stemmed from an inability to believe in and rely on the firmness and stability of the objective world—the

world of our natural and historical environment as real. Berdyaev believes that the subject begets the object. Only the subject is ultimately real, 'existential', and only the subject was capable of knowing reality. It is important to note that Berdyaev believed that reality as nature was already in a state of 'objectification'. Indeed, scientific knowledge was evidence of man's attempt to overcome the alien power of nature and to humanise it. This raises the question of the success of Berdyaev to abandon Hegelian influences, or at least Hegelian categories. It also points to Berdyaev's departure from classical Christianity. St. Augustine felt that man may realise that he embodies a spark or the divine essence. Thus possessed, he may mistake it to be *prima-facie* claim to divinity and consider himself to be above the natural order of which he forms a part. Berdyaev in this respect seems to retain the Enlightenment faith in progress and the gifts of science.

The critique of 'life' or 'this world' brings us to perhaps Berdyaev's central theme, which is that of freedom. The question of freedom is posed in terms of the extent to which 'life' denies or does violence to freedom. Freedom gives birth to suffering, while the refusal to be free diminishes suffering. Before going substantially into what Berdyaev means by freedom, it would be worth considering what it does not mean for him.

Freedom was not a creation of necessity as it was for Hegel. It was not 'free-will' either. Free-will seen as choice or possibility of choice leads to man's confrontation with a norm. It is the norm which determines a distinction between good and evil. This view of freedom in the least can guarantee man's accountability to law. True freedom cannot be thought of in psychological or moral terms, but only in metaphysical terms. In other words, what Berdyaev is attempting, in the fashion of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, is a total critique of morality, and the foundations of Western philosophic tradition. Philosophy, according to Berdyaev, does not take into account the mysterious element of inspiration. Nietzsche, Berdyaev feels, was right in asking about the place of creative ecstasy, vision and prophecy in man's effort to comprehend reality. Freedom, then, for Berdyaev is, firstly, the agent or subject's own independence, determination from within and creative initiative. Secondly, it does not depend on any norm and its exercise is not a mere choice between a good and an evil. Thirdly, freedom

is agent's own and his own creation of good and evil. Berdyaev's own conception of freedom at first glance is entirely Kantian—freedom as determination from within. But the free-will for Kant was a rational will since the content of obligation was determined purely from will, i.e., it was done by applying purely formal criterion to prospective action. Rationality here involved thinking in universal terms and thinking consistently. The acid test of the will being truly free was that it was not determined by nature. Thus, the moral subject was free in a radical sense, since 'he obeyed the dictates of his will only. Where Berdyaev, like Kierkegaard, departs from Kant is his conception of universality of formal criterion of human rational free-will, and thus, the fact that the totality of human nature could be described formally and systematically. Freedom to Berdyaev remains at a fundamental level 'inwardness' and complete self-isolation.

Berdyaev is not averse to talking about the dialectic of freedom duly being revealed in the destiny of man and the world. The Hegelian vocabulary is self-evident; moreover, it is the fact that Berdyaev begins with replacing Being with freedom and then seems to turn full circle by replacing the Geist with freedom (nor can the fact escape us that Geist chose his own nature in radical freedom from anything merely given; what, however, distinguishes him from the freedom of the Existentialists is his being bound by rational necessity.)

The above arguments raise the question whether Berdyaev's notion of freedom is merely a variation of the Kantian and the Kierkegaardian notions, or does it stand on its own merit. For answering this we must look at two of Berdyaev's fundamental conceptions; uncreated freedom and God-man.

III

Uncreated freedom, according to Berdyaev, is a limiting notion which describes symbolically a reality and does not lend itself to logical definition. For St. Augustine, freedom was a part of God's creation. It was born out of faith, gaining significance by exhibiting its dependence upon a principle which being at once beyond the subject, and in him—cosmic and personal, is put forward as genuinely creative. Berdyaev's uncreated freedom,

however, is rooted in the 'non-being' which preceded creation, relieving God from the responsibility of its existence (though his notion goes back to the Augustinian creation 'out of nothing' for its formal expression). At the same time by creating the 'nothing' into 'something' endowed with definite qualities, Berdyaev at one level remains fundamentally Manichean, though he considers himself opposed to both ontological dualism and monism. One wonders if Berdyaev's state of uncreated freedom is any different from Kierkegaard's third state of his existential dialectic, which is the religious stage. Briefly, this stage is one in which the individual, totally isolated from his fellow-men, stands in the shattering realization of his unworthiness before his God. Subjectivity can be truly subjective only in the confrontation of the individual with God, since only the absolute is completely indescribable. Only before God is a man really himself, because it is only before God that he is finally and irretrievably alone. To Berdyaev the antithesis between uncreated freedom and God is alone discripting of the relationship between God and man as experienced in this world. It is the realm of the divine, transcendent mystery, in which all antitheses and all contradictions are removed, and attempts at expressing it in logical propositions becomes superfluous. Thus, as opposed to the Augustinian view mentioned above, Berdyaev imparts supreme importance to the human person in opposition to all the impersonal and supra-personal manifestations of the objective world and beyond, which constantly threaten to crush and engulf man.

Thus, the uncreated freedom tends to be complete and wholly isolated inwardness, with the only really private and incommunicable which was the absolute, for content. This gives rise to what Berdyaev calls 'anguish', which was the point of the greatest conflict between personal existence in the world and the transcendent. It awakens in the subject his awareness of God, but at the same time signifies his God-forsakenness.

Berdyaev is uncomfortable with the focus on one's self in total isolation. The paradox of freedom and pity confronts his notion of freedom. Human life, to Berdyaev, comprises of two movements. Ascent, when man dares to transcend himself and his environment and rise to God. The spiritual strength he

gains in the process leads him to recreate the natural configuration of life and create new life and new values. Descent signifies those left below, who are weak of spirit and incapable of reaching out to the heights of creative knowledge and vision. To Berdyaev freedom could never spell irresponsibility; it is pity and compassion that renders freedom possible. In order to substantiate his argument, Berdyaev undertakes a major revision of the notion of God (It must be noted that here Berdyaev is diametrically opposed to Nietzsche, who in the *Genealogy of Morals*, undertakes a thorough-going critique of the notion of 'pity')

Berdyaev saw the image of God, not as a punitive deity beholding the suffering world, but rather that of a loving suffering, crucified God. He sought to accept God through his Son, who took upon himself and bore the sufferings of mankind. Thus, God to Berdyaev is neither Plato's idea of the good nor Aristotle's concept of the pure act. Rather, he is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; the God who is made man with whom man enters into personal relations. In surrendering to the 'impulses' of creativity, ecstasy, vision and prophecy, Nietzsche had come to the conclusion that God was dead. But the death of God to Nietzsche also marked the death of man and the advent of the superman. To Berdyaev ecstasy, vision and inspiration were a pledge of the living reality of God and man. This is the essence of the notion of God-man. It was to Berdyaev, the greatest revolution brought by Christianity in the sense of the revelation of the humanity of God. Berdyaev, however, warns against a debased God-manhood, whereby God is pedagogically adapted to the requirements of fallen nature. Pedagogy suited to one age may be unsuitable and even harmful in another. What Berdyaev stresses is the fact that this world had contained the supreme manifestation of divine truth— its crucifixion in and by the world. All this may not prove God, but it proclaims him in his divine humanity.

Berdyaev's philosophy, thus, centres around the Existentialist theme of freedom and the primacy of the subject. In an age which shares a general pessimism about man and his nature, Berdyaev's thought could be seen as situating man in a place of primacy; a lack of faith in man would mean similar lack in the divine image and the divine idea of man. "The meaning of life", says Berdyaev, "lies in a return to the mysteries of the spirit in which God is born

in man and man is born in God."³ This return is not a return to a state of primal innocence, but a process of creation, incorporating all experience which attend the destiny of man and, significantly the human condition.

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NOTES

1. Heidegger does not deny that an Existentialist must not take into account the limits of situation. What, however, he is trying to explain is facticity as well as freedom, which he terms as freedom-in-facticity.
2. Nicolas Berdyaev, *Dream and Reality*, Geoffrey Bles, London 1950, p. xi.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 302.

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