

Is Russian Philosophy a Philosophy of the Other to the West?

Abstract

The paper articulates ideas of Nikolai Berdyaev expressed in his book *The Russian Idea* and wonders if it is the case that, “The fate of the philosopher in Russia is painful and tragic”. If we think of Socrates, for example, his death was painful and in the end tragic. So, how is it the fate of the philosopher in Russia different from other philosophical traditions? Maybe the answer is that we can grasp Russian philosophy's otherness only by non-intellectual and non-theoretical rationality, which is not rooted in the mind but in the heart. As one of the Russian poets, Fyodor Tyutchev said, “Russia is not to be understood by intellectual processes. You cannot take her measurements with a common yardstick, she has a form and stature of her own: you can only believe in Russia”. Thus, the paper explores why Russian philosophy is the other and can be understood only within its connection within its cultural and historical background.

Keywords: Russian Philosophy, Russian Idea, Ontologism, Sobornost, All-Unity

It would be redundant for my argument about the otherness of Russian philosophy to define the subject matter of philosophy. If someone is teaching an introductory course of philosophy, then we all would agree on definition what philosophy is, right? If we would think about the philosophy of any kind we could ask what makes it philosophy? Is there a difference between German and Russian philosophy? Are there differences inside the Russian philosophical tradition? Can we say that there IS Russian philosophy and it has some restricted national or cultural identity lexicon? Are there some terms first used in Russia, which became common words used in all languages to describe such phenomena? Too many questions, perhaps, to start an article, one may say, but this is what philosophy is about, it asks questions, stirs curiosity and provides the opportunity for intellectual discourse.

“Philosophy”, Bertrand Russell famously observed

though unable to tell us with certainty what is the true answer to the doubts which it raises, is able to suggest many possibilities which enlarge our thoughts and free them from the tyranny of custom. Thus, while diminishing our feeling of certainty as to what things are, it greatly increases our knowledge as to what they may be; it removes the somewhat arrogant dogmatism of those who have never travelled into the region of liberating doubt, and it keeps alive our sense of wonder by showing familiar things in an unfamiliar aspect¹.

In my article, I will try to be a host for a journey to the land of Russian Idea and bring some level of familiarity to unfamiliar.

The otherness of Russian philosophy can be articulated through the topics with which it is preoccupied, themes that are relevant mostly to the questions that pertain to the problems of historical and cultural development of Russia, its people, and topics based on ontological perceptions of those dimensions. Russian philosophy did not take

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¹ Russell (1990).

the same route as Western European philosophy but rather stepped away from highly abstract systems, which contributed to Russian philosophy's realism. «Its originality can only be fully perceived when we regard it from the perspective of Russia's intellectual history from the point of view of the issues that had moved the hearts and minds of thinking Russians the most and were believed by them to be the most important for the fate of their country. This is especially true of the 19th century»².

Vasyli Zenkovsky in, *History of Russian Philosophy*, emphasized a common "misunderstanding" of the study of philosophy in Russia by the West. According to him, «the opinion which holds that theory of knowledge is an indispensable and basic part of philosophy» should not be used a criterion to decide what is philosophy and what is not. «This opinion has become especially strong in the history of philosophy since Kant, and it has frequently been said that where there is no theory of knowledge there is no philosophy»³. If we accept that «philosophy has not one but several roots, and this is precisely what determines its uniqueness», philosophy will be «present where-ever there is an attempt to unify the spiritual life by rational means»⁴. We can then say that Russian philosophy is not much different from other philosophical traditions of East and West. Each of these traditions employs the same philosophical categories and branches of knowledge but not each of them places theory of knowledge as a cornerstone. «In contradistinction to Kantian epistemological idealism Russian intuitivism is a form of epistemological realism»⁵. This realism expressed itself in the fact that Russian philosophy

forestalled the Western in discarding the doctrine that sense data are subjective mental states of the observer, and admitted their transsubjective character. Another expression of this realism is the Russian philosophers' confidence in the mystical intuition which gives knowledge about metalogical principles⁶.

Common points of criticism directed toward Russian philosophy single out its lack of abstract systems. Western philosophy is deeply rooted in the philosophy of antiquity, with its interest in metaphysics, ethics and logic, and emphasis on the rational element of discourse. This way of inquiry is perfectly expressed in Plato's allegory of the divided line, such inquiry ceases to depend on the tangible world, «making no use of anything sensed in any way, but using forms themselves, going through forms to forms, it ends in forms too»⁷. With certainty, I can say that the *logos* of Russian philosophy does not get to such a level of abstract thinking.

While looking at the history of Western philosophy from a standpoint of its origin in Ancient Greece, we can see a shift from philosophizing as a way of living, as a dialogue deeply rooted in everyday life, into a form of an abstract theorization and creation of systems of abstract thought. This is, I believe, became a yardstick in accessing what philosophy is as such. If this approach is justified in classical Western philosophy, we cannot say that it holds true for many philosophical schools, even in Europe itself after the second part of the nineteenth century. This measure is not useful for grasping Russian philosophy and the notion made by Pierre Hadot may illustrate this well.

² Walicki (2015), p. 21.

³ Zenkovsky (1953), vol. 1, p. 3.

⁴ Ivi, p. 4.

⁵ Lossky (1952), p. 404.

⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁷ Plato (ed. 1969), (511c), p. 191.

In general, historians of philosophy pay little attention to the fact that ancient philosophy was, first and foremost, a way of life. They consider philosophy as, above all, philosophical discourse. How can the origins of this prejudice be explained? I believe it is linked to the evolution of philosophy itself in the Middle Ages and in modern times⁸.

It is always beneficial for the understanding of ideas of any given time to recognize the historical and cultural context that led to the formulation of a given philosophical tradition. In this sense, Russian philosophy is deeply rooted in its soil and someone who is not familiar with Russian history and culture may have difficulty to comprehend its content. Fyodor Tyutchev, one of the Russian poets said, «Russia is not to be understood by intellectual processes. You cannot take her measurements with a common yardstick, she has a form and stature of her own: you can only believe in Russia»⁹. Thus, Tyutchev expressed here some very essential ideas, which may help to understand Russian philosophy in the diversity of its embodiment of philosophical thoughts, interpretations, and intuitions, with its belief that intellectual process alone cannot grasp the depth of living experience, and that faith has to be understood as trust.

Both scientific knowledge and faith are a penetration into reality. But scientific knowledge contemplates from a place from which not everything is visible, and horizons are closed, its penetration is private, limited. The claims of scientific knowledge are true, but its denials are false. Science faithfully teaches about the laws of nature, but falsely teaches about the impossibility of the miraculous, falsely denies other worlds. And in modesty knowledge is the highest pride of science. The supreme gnosis that gives us faith does not undo the truths of science as the lowest. There are no lower truths, all truths are equal¹⁰.

If Western thought tends to separate faith, theology, and philosophy, Russian thinkers do not do this so distinctly. As a result, faith, theology, philosophy and other parts of the culture in Russia are intertwined and sometimes it is difficult to separate one from the other¹¹. Thus, we can talk about the idea of an organic, all-integral unity of epistemology, integral knowledge that combines different aspects of the cognitive process: subrational (sense qualities), rational and superrational experiences, «which combines sensuous, intellectual and mystical intuition»¹².

The historical conditions for the development of Russian philosophy were rather difficult. As a separate discipline, it did not appear until the second half of the eighteenth century¹³. This is a consequence not only of Russia's geographical position, historical and political development but is as well an outcome of an oppressive and controlling state. The destiny of a thinker in the Russian Empire never was an easy one. The free expression of ideas always was a struggle. «It is not the case that philosophic thought is always and everywhere born from doubt»¹⁴; «...the essential point is that philosophic thought grows only in conditions of free inquiry — and inner

⁸ Hadot, (1995), p. 269.

⁹ Berdyaev (1992), p. 19.

¹⁰ Berdyaev (1989a), p. 66.

¹¹ Špidlík (2006), p. 313.

¹² Lossky (1952), p. 404.

¹³ See more: Berdyaev (1992), Lossky (1952), Zenkovsky (1953).

¹⁴ Zenkovsky (1953), p. 1.

freedom is here no less important than external freedom»¹⁵. The lack of freedom before czarism when Russia was under the yoke of the Tartar¹⁶, then the oppression by czarism for many centuries, and after the October revolution of 1917 by the Bolsheviks and then by the Soviet system, made it difficult to have a free philosophical discourse. The rich content of the Western European philosophical tradition provided a lot of food for thought to Russian thinkers, which may have not only a positive but a negative effect. Negative in the sense of its highly developed lexicon and the existence of systematic knowledge embodied in many schools of theoretical philosophy, which not only influenced a lot of Russian thinkers but put some level of pressure on them.

Despite this, Russian thinkers began early to clear their own path (not always bringing their projects to completion), and thus dialectically prepared for the appearance in a later period of original philosophic systems. This means, of course, that there is *dialectical and historical unity* in Russian philosophic thought; and, by the same token, it provides ample evidence of its independence and hence originality¹⁷.

Without uniformity in the vastness of the ideas in Russian philosophy, there are still some deep similarities among them all which are embodied in their dominant interest in certain topics, which are more prevalent and recurrent throughout the centuries. Ontology is one of them. Ontology in the sense of ontologism, which stresses the all-inclusiveness of the human being in the world, where philosophical reflection cannot rely solely on reason alone. «Russian philosophers have tended in the solution of epistemological problems to ontologism, i.e. the recognition that cognition is not the primary and defining principle in man»¹⁸. Our cognition is recognized as one of many activities in the world, «it is a certain event in the life-process, and thus its meaning, its tasks, and its possibilities are determined by our general relation to the world»¹⁹. The main interest here is drawn to the very foundation of being and what is essential for the existence of human being as a part of it. It was an attempt of liberation from the cage constructed by abstract epistemology, to overcome the limitations of the division of ontology and epistemology in Western philosophical thought, to create an epistemology that is consciously ontological²⁰. From the perspective of Russian philosophy, the Western philosophical tradition is dominated by the contemplation of the rational perceptions of reality, from the perspective of a cognitive subject that is above the object of cognition. In the Russian philosophical tradition, this cognitive process is intertwined, human being coexists with other parts of the world. «Knowledge in which we by a method of reflection declare subject and object, by all means, is something secondary, derivative from life itself»²¹. This understanding of ontologism embraces, cradles human being, claims that we need to look at this world through the lens of an all-inclusive perspective. Berdyaev sees here the possibility of a dialectical process of development in the history of philosophy, from its presuppositions about philosophy as being, then as cognition, to philosophy «that sees in cognition a function

¹⁵ Ivi, p. 2.

¹⁶ Copleston (1986), p. 8-10.

¹⁷ Zenkovsky (1953), p. 10.

¹⁸ Ivi, p. 5.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*.

²⁰ Berdyaev (1989a), p. 122.

²¹ Ivi, p. 114.

of being»²², which is organic and realistic. Russian philosophers believed that a rational approach alone is incapable of elucidating all the complexity of the world and human existence in it. This philosophical attitude is rooted in the natural inability of humans to explain it all and offers an opportunity to embrace uncertainty as a part of our existence. As philosophy cannot exist without human being and human being is only one of the many beings, subjects and objects of cognition, they all are parts of this ontological reality. Before pure consciousness can exist and can “step” outside of this material world, have a thought about it, before metaphysical reflection about it arises, we need to have an ontological sense of this world. Thus, in Russian philosophy theory of knowledge is rooted in life experience and such an approach manifests itself as being present, reasoning in this world, as opposed to attempting to realize cognition from outside of this world. It is not experienced in the sense of English philosophical empiricism, it is a life experience, where by virtue of it the human is united to something beyond itself through inner contemplation and empathy, comprehends something internally and acquires it in its entirety and its life manifestations²³. Recognizing the limitations of the scientific, formal-logical comprehension of the world as a whole, Russian philosophy offers other forms of understanding, which include not only intellectual but also a spiritual experience. Experience and comprehension of the world, therefore, is not limited only to cognition and the employment of the scientific method but is acquired in other ways as well. Thus, Russian philosophy manifests itself as a world-view perspective and opens the door to other types of philosophical reflections, which are intuitive, artistic and symbolical. «The view that the external world is knowable is widely prevalent in Russian philosophy, and indeed is often stated in its extreme form, namely, as the doctrine of intuition or immediate contemplation of objects as they are in themselves»²⁴. «Philosophy is the inner cognition of the world through man, while science is the external cognition of the world outside of man»²⁵.

This ontologism as the all-inclusive understanding of being required a new way of philosophical discourse, a different language for the articulation of philosophical ideas, which Russian philosophy provides. The Russian word “pravda” is a great example here, as it combines “truth” and “justice”, which illustrates the embodiment of theory and practice²⁶. Semeon Frank in his 1925 lecture in Berlin argued that

the literary form of Russian philosophical creativity is a free literary work, which only occasionally is given to a uniquely defined philosophical problem – usually this work is being devoted to a particular issue of historical, political or literary life, which illuminates the deepest, cardinal worldview issues along the way²⁷.

This characterizes the special Russian style of philosophical thinking, emphasizing its national character, which makes it distinct from Western European philosophical culture. In this sense, the lack of formal-logical systems seems to be natural, as the internal logic of Russian philosophical works manifests itself in its aesthetical art form and is close to the logic of literary artwork.

²² Ivi, p. 115.

²³ Frank (1992), p. 476.

²⁴ Lossky (1952), p. 403.

²⁵ Berdyaev (1989a), p. 295.

²⁶ Ivi, p. 404 and Zenkovsky (1953), p. 7.

²⁷ Frank (1992), p. 474.

Another characteristic of Russian philosophy is its anthropocentrism. The human being as a whole gives meaning to the world, is a part of its wholeness and unity, living and acting in it. The human's contemplation and reflection about this world are a part of this interconnection. Human nature is common to all human beings; however, in the world, each person is unique, indefinable and unknowable in its uniqueness. «Human being is the crossing point of the two worlds... A human being is not only from this world but also from the other world, not only from necessity but also from freedom, not only from nature but also from God»²⁸. According to Berdyaev's description, a human being is a part of the macrocosm and can relate to it as a microcosm. This is not a relation conveyed by antiquity where a man was an extension of the natural world, rather, it is a relationship between the divine and human nature through Christ, and it is expressed as a concept of Godmanhood. A human being as a whole gives meaning to the world. This is a new world which does not exist without the human, and the human cannot exist without it as well. Thus, a crucial characteristic of Russian philosophy is its interest in anthropological questions. Attentiveness to spiritual connections is exemplified in another distinct characteristic of Russian philosophy, which is spiritual collectivity, *sobornost*²⁹. According to Semeon Frank this spiritual collectivity is something specific for Russians, it is converse to the Western worldview which holds that the "I" (ego) is the starting point, where individual personalism corresponds to idealism and Descartes "cogito ergo sum" as an individual consciousness is a fundamental principle here, whose spiritual reality is rooted in the reality of the particular. The other way to look at spiritual reality is from the perspective of "us", where this unity is "sobornost", which cannot be reduced to a mechanical sum of parts but is a spiritual unity of a higher level³⁰. Berdyaev asserts, «I suffer; therefore, I am»³¹, emphasizing the tragedy of human existence in this world and the attempt to comprehend it through sympathy. The only way to overcome suffering, according to him, is through internal acceptance of Christ and human creativity in which human adapts itself to God. This phrase according to Tomáš Špidlík, «is more true and deeper than Cartesian cogito. The French philosopher wanted to prove his existence on the basis that he thinks (cogito ergo sum). And the Russian philosopher does not prove, he just excruciatingly 'feels it'. He begins not with thoughts, but with the very existence»³². This point of view gives some perspectives and may deepen the understanding of the Russian Idea as "the other" to the West, and shed light why it is not an easy task to grasp its essential nuances without a context. To the Russian spirit the way from "cogito" to "sum" is absolutely artificial; the veritable way for it is the way from "sum" to "cogito"³³. Being is perceived as givenness in its ontological wholeness and the mastery of the human spirit is the comprehension of an object in its all-embracing integrity. In this life-experience, logical evidence only touches the surface of the truth without penetrating to its inner core, and therefore it always remains insufficient to wholeness of verity. Thus, before approaching any

²⁸ Berdyaev (1989b), p. 296.

²⁹ The idea of *sobornost* developed by Khomiakov is of great importance. "Sobornost means a combination of unity and freedom of many persons on the basis of common love for God and for all absolute values. It will be easily seen that the principle of *sobornost* is of value not only for the life of the church but also for solving many problems in the spirit of synthesis between individualism and universalism" (Lossky, 1952, p. 407).

³⁰ Frank (1992), p. 486.

³¹ Berdyaev (2002), p. 245.

³² Špidlík (2006), p. 306.

³³ Frank (1992), p. 479.

philosophical idea of Russian philosophy it is necessary to unfold the meaning of a given concept and not to assume it has the same propositional content as it embodies in the Western philosophical tradition.

Among themes that are prevalent and well known in the Russian tradition of philosophical thought are sobornost, the concept of All-Unity, Godmanhood, and the Russian Idea. The Russian Idea³⁴ is a term first introduced by Vladimir Soloviev in 1887 and after that it was used by many Russian philosophers of the “silver age”³⁵ to interpret Russian identity, culture, its national and world destiny, its Christian heritage and future, and finally, its ways of connecting people and transforming humanity. This term came about when Soloviev experienced disappointment in his initial vision of the Russian people as the bearer of the future religious and public revival for the entire Christian world. Soloviev concluded that neither the state, nor society, nor the church, taken separately, can express the substance of the Russian Idea. But only all members of this “social trinity” together, as they are intrinsically connected and at the same time “unconditionally free”. The essence of the Russian Idea in his view is congruent with the Christian transformation of life, and it is based on verity, goodness, and beauty. According to him, it is unwise to connect this idea with pan Slavism or any kind of ethnicity or branch of Christianity. Rooted in his concept of All-Unity, the Russian Idea embodies the doctrine of world theocracy, wherein Christian East and West are united. This concept affected many different philosophers and became an important point of debate between many thinkers of that time. Many consider that the Russian Idea of Soloviev and Dostoevsky’s idea of the “universal sympathy”³⁶ of the Russian soul played an important role in the development of Russian philosophy, serving as a justification for the cultural rise in Russia of the early 20th century³⁷. Nikolas Berdyaev’s *The Russian Idea* was published in 1946 in Paris, at which time Vladimir Soloviev’s idea of theocracy ceased to be up to date. Given the turmoil of historical and political events during the first part of the twentieth century not only for Russia but for all of Europe, Berdyaev without rejecting its Christian heritage and the essence of the Russian Idea presented a new angle and perspective on this concept. Berdyaev’s book shows the development of the Russian Idea through the centuries, identifying the nineteenth century as its pinnacle. He emphasizes that although at that time freedom in society was still oppressed, nevertheless the Russian people were able to express their internal freedom in many areas of culture and thought. This was the epoch of the Renaissance of Russian philosophy and a part of the Silver Age³⁸ of Russian culture that lasted until World

³⁴ Walicki (2002).

³⁵ From the late 19th century until World War I a term used as recognition of an excellence of achievement, at the beginning in areas of the Russian visual, literary, and performing arts, later on as a general term for the brilliance in all areas of spiritual life in Russia in a given period.

³⁶ Dostoevsky (1880). When Dostoevsky talks about Pushkin’s period of creativity where «universal ideas were pre-eminently reflected, in which the poetic conceptions of other nations were mirrored and their genius reincarnated», he relates this “universal sympathy” of Pushkin to Russian people as a whole. «This capacity, the pre-eminent capacity of our nation, he shares with our nation, and by that above all he is our national poet. The greatest of European poets could never so powerfully embody in themselves the genius of a foreign, even a neighboring, people, its spirit in all its hidden depth, and all its yearning after its appointed end, as Pushkin could. On the contrary, when they turned to foreign nations European poets most often made them one with their own people, and understood them after their own fashion. Even Shakespeare’s Italians, for instance, are almost always Englishmen. Pushkin alone of all world poets possessed the capacity of fully identifying himself with an alien nationality».

³⁷ Maslin (2017), p. 241.

³⁸ “Silver Age”, Encyclopedia of Russian History.

War I. Its most distinct and original ideas were of religious orientation, seen as a reaction against materialism and positivism popular at that time among the radical intelligentsia. Berdyaev's book was written after three revolutions, civil war and two world wars, which gave him a different perspective. Russia became a very different country and the question was: what is valuable in its past and what can be taken to the future? Is there something in the Russian Idea that is not affected by the political system but rather depends on internal qualities?

Russian thought and the Russian quest at the beginning of the nineteenth century and at the beginning of the twentieth bear witness to the existence of the Russian Idea, which corresponds to the character and vocation of Russian people. The Russian people belong to the religious type and are religious in their spiritual makeup. Religious unrest is characteristic even of the unbelievers among them. Russian atheism, nihilism, materialism have acquired a religious coloring³⁹.

Berdyaev claims that even after rejecting the Orthodox faith the Russian folk did not stop their search for God, divine truth and quest for the meaning of life. The Russians are believers even when professing material communism, and even those who carry on persecution of the Orthodox church were shaped by the ideas of Orthodoxy. «The Russian Idea is eschatological, it is oriented to the end; it is this which accounts for Russian maximalism»⁴⁰. This eschatological tendency is embodied in Russian consciousness as striving after universal salvation; for this reason, Easter is the chief festival of Russian Orthodoxy. Berdyaev emphasizes sobornost as one of the main characteristics of the Russian Idea and believes that this is very specific to the Russian people. The Russian Idea is the idea of the community and brotherhood of man and people, and this according to him, is manifest in many areas of life. The Russians «value love more than righteousness», are having less sense of family than Western people but «immeasurably more of the community spirit». Possessing the biggest State in the world they do not have a love for «historical grandeur», for State or power, they are «antihierarchical, almost anarchists». Russia's moral consciousness is different from the West and, according to Berdyaev, is more Christian in its nature as «Russia's moral values are defined by an attitude towards man, and not towards abstract principles of property or of the State, nor toward good in the abstract». Berdyaev believed that the divine design for people remains the same regardless of external circumstances, and the task of human freedom is to remain true to this vision. There is some indeterminism in the life of the Russians, which is incomprehensible to the more rationally deterministic life of a Westerner. This opens up many possibilities for integration but at the same time may create difficulties, because the nature of the Russian is very polarized, as it is composed of opposites⁴¹. There is no contradiction here, as verity has in itself antinomies, «Russians are not preoccupied with contradictions, they live in them»⁴².

To sum up, the main topics of discussion for Western and Russian philosophy are the same. There is a Russian approach to philosophical problems, a Russian way of their understanding and deliberation. And to understand the otherness of its thought in relation to the West one may need to take «a broad view»⁴³, which includes all

³⁹ Berdyaev (1992), p. 265.

⁴⁰ Ivi, p. 266.

⁴¹ Ivi, p. 266-268.

⁴² Špidlík (2006), p. 60.

⁴³ Copleston (1986), p. VIII.

aspects of Russia's history: spiritual, political, artistic life embodied in philosophy, culture, and religion. This would allow the recognition that the comprehensive view of reality essential to Russian philosophy is indeed an all-integral unity of its parts, knowable to the human spirit or not. Ontologism, epistemological realism, all-unity, sobornost, 'universal sympathy' provide evidence of the independence and originality of Russian philosophy. This approach manifests itself in the inner cognition of the world through man on another level, where human being conjoins it all in its wholeness through inner awareness and empathy, which brings about the ability to comprehend it internally and to possess it in its entirety.

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