

## The Philosophy of Nikolai Berdyaev: The “Objective” World as the Projection of the Bourgeoisie

Matthew Raphael Johnson  
Johnstown, PA

The central element of Berdyaev's philosophy is freedom. Nothing is more essential to him. In his case, it is an entirely new act that is determined by nothing, or at least nothing objective. There is a sharp dividing line between the world of objects and the subjective world, and the latter is the only one that's real. The former is a projection of bad faith. Objects are the opposite of freedom, these are the “brute facts” of life that are “facts” only because man wills it so. The objective world is an illusion. Rational thinking is not part of the objective world.

This paper is a critical approach to his ideas. The thesis presented here is that a free act derives from the aristocratic spirit. The objective world is that of the mass man: the bourgeois conformist that can see nothing but immediate self interest in his acts. The free act is an act done without regard to passion and self interest, and therefore, requires a tremendous amount of self control. He is Kantian in this specific respect.

Berdyaev was a profound thinker, but in his single minded drive to raise the subjective over all else, he goes too far. When this is applied to theology, several significant errors develop. These however, do not take away from his usefulness as a writer. He was a courageous critic of mass society, the Soviet regime and abstract political democracy and was thrown out of the USSR for it. In these realms, he is invaluable.

The philosophy of freedom begins with a free act before which there is not, nor can there be, existence, being. If we were to begin with being as the basis, and recognize this primacy of being over freedom, then everything, including freedom, is determined by being. But a determined freedom is not freedom at all. (The Realm of Spirit and the Realm of Caesar 1949: 109).

Determination and freedom are opposites, this is uncontroversial, Spinoza notwithstanding. In fact, if Berdyaev had an opposite, it would be Spinoza. He goes further and applies this to God. The dichotomy there is a false one, since God, outside time, saw no distinction between essence and act. For him, God was first manifest in the act, not his being. The primacy of the deed means that existence precedes essence, or the phenomenal (that is, the empirical) precedes the noumenal.

For men, it's perfectly Orthodox given the damaged nature we inherit. Not only are we intrinsically damaged, but we are further conformed to evil having been born and raised in a society dedicated to sin as its constitution. Capitalism and socialism both reject freedom in this sense. Socialism rejects it out of hand, while postmodern capitalism manipulates and hijacks man's reasoning capacity. Societies based on passion – which both the USSR and the USA are – have no patience for this doctrine.

Freedom of the spirit which itself gives birth to consequences, which creates life, is revealed to us a bottomlessness, baselessness, as a force from out the boundless deep. We cannot feel a base, any foundation for freedom, nowhere can we find

some solid element which determines freedom from within. Freedom of the spirit is a bottomless well. Our substantial nature could not be the basis of freedom. On the contrary, all nature is born of freedom. Freedom proceeds not from nature, but from God's idea and from the abyss which preceded being. Freedom is rooted in "nothingness." The act of freedom is primordial and completely irrational (Freedom and the Spirit, 1928: I,183).

"Solid" is another term for material. His point is that a free act cannot derive from a "nature" of any sort and certainly not from any material cause. There is certainly a foundation, just not a material or biological one. Human nature, in this case, is something to be achieved: moral autonomy that comes only from a lifetime of struggle.

"Irrational" can mean above reason, not mere arbitrariness; not necessarily something below reason. No act, especially that of the divine, is arbitrary. God is not material at all, so it's not relevant in His case. Of course, "to determine freedom" is a contradiction. A free act, properly considered, is a subjective act, though never an arbitrary one. Something has to act. This "something" does not exist as an objective fact here. God is pure Spirit and thus, has to be free by definition. A spirit (such as our soul) is precisely that which acts without cause, that is, without natural, empirical causality. This causality is part of the definition of matter.

"Nature begins in freedom" says two things: first, it is to say that it was God's free act that creates it. It could be nothing else since there is nothing material in God. The second thing is to extrapolate this to men. This is another matter. Our nature and existence are very different from one another. The objective order is the lowest aspect of order. Matter is a projection of the broken spirit. This includes ideology as well.

Berdyayev says "Every [sort of] freedom always predicates discipline and asceticism and always perishes if these are lacking" (Christian Existentialism, 313). In other words, freedom is not an arbitrary act, but is one that has to precede from the spirit. In this case, it refers to the soul as a non-material thing. Reason is spirit in that it is not caused by a natural means though it might work on material things. "Freedom demands that man maintain his dignity and purity, that he control himself" (Christian Existentialism, 313-4).

The more internal control the actor has, the less external control is needed. Freedom is by definition an undetermined act. This is important to understand since a lack of determination suggests autonomy and reason, since the alternative is passion and self-interest. Thus, if the act is undetermined and, as a result, cannot be the result of passion or self interest. Those acts are not free.

Berdyayev is a "philosopher of freedom" only in the older, aristocratic and more philosophical sense. The modern, American sense is an arbitrary act born out of passion or impulse. Reason or spirit need not be the origin of the act or its end in this postmodern morass. In fact, in a society ruled by the consumer impulse, rational action is bad for business. In a passage that angers liberals who pretend Berdyayev is one of them, he writes:

In reality, freedom is aristocratic, not democratic. With sorrow we must recognize the fact that freedom is dear only to those men who think creatively. It is not very necessary to those who do not value thinking. In the so-called democracies, based on the principle of popular sovereignty, a considerable proportion of the people are those who have not yet become conscious of themselves as free beings, bearing within themselves the dignity of freedom. Education to freedom is

something still ahead of us, and this cannot be quickly achieved (The Kingdom of Spirit and the Kingdom of Caesar 1949, 110).

“Education” is required for freedom. This is more evidence that his definition of the term is aristocratic. Liberalism, at its inception, was not meant for “everyone.” It was always an aristocratic concession since no one before the 20<sup>th</sup> century advocated “freedom” in its postmodern sense. The freedom Berdyaev has no basis in American thought or in capitalism in general. Freedom, since it must come from rationality without self interest or any other heteronomous source, is very difficult, requires specialized knowledge and is to be taken seriously only after years of labor. It is inherently ascetic and derives from pain.

The moment abstractions like “everyone” were used as demagogic slogans, freedom as an idea was debased beyond recognition. It was absorbed into the market, into the cash nexus, so it had to be stripped of all rational content. It became purely nominal, focused only on the qualities of things, not the essence.

So-called “public opinion” is based on conventional lies, and employs falsehood as a means of influence. Every social mode is a conventional lie. Falsehood is recognized as useful to support and organize human society, and [it] fulfills a social function. Herein lies the tragedy of falsehood: pragmatically, falsehood justifies itself; while truth and right often appear dangerous and harmful (The Destiny of Man 1931, 174).

The “noble lie” is the height of social pragmatism. These sorts of lies can be useful in a healthy society. They might be justified if the truth is easily misinterpreted due to complexity. If a public prejudice would lead their thought in the wrong direction, then the “noble lie” is necessary. These are necessary in a very limited sense because rationality is a rare commodity. Most people don't think as individuals and are easily led astray.

However, this is not what he means. Each social function has its own story to tell. “Social modes” are conventional lies because any social policy must oversimplify to function. Everyone lies, everyone tells a story about themselves to justify their current predicament. No one is innocent of that. Everyone has their “myth,” about how they got where they are. It's not a lie so much as an oversimplification of the very complex truth.

He says, “An innocent lie can be a condition for the possibility of community. So, for example, a person is polite with another person whom he hates at heart.” In other words, this kind of lying is necessary for social life. For a man to spout whatever he thinks at the moment would create a disaster for every social occasion. This is not so much a lie as a mode of self-control and restraint.

Again, Berdyaev is not talking about this either in the long quote above from The Destiny of Man. He's talking about lying at a more deeper, fundamental level. Lying as a way of life is the creation of modern life. The modern collectivist drive is designed to destroy the conscience. Berdyaev is saying, however, that lying is the very lifeblood of organized existence because its the lifeblood of organized anything:

Personality is a subject, and not an object among other objects, and it has its roots in the inward scheme of existence, that is in the spiritual world, the world of freedom. Society on the other hand is an object. From the existential point of view

society is a part of personality, it is its social side, just as the cosmos is a part of personality, its cosmic side. Personality is not an object among other objects and not a thing among other things. It is a subject among subjects and the turning of it into an object or a thing means death (Slavery and Freedom, 1939, 26).

The objective world is that of the utilitarian. It is an arena of achievement from which we think we can gain happiness. Happiness and utility derive from objectification and the idea of consumption. Nothing unfree can cause anything other than very momentary satisfaction. Society is an “object” in the sense that it is governed by utilitarian considerations and has physical, material elements as part of its purpose. It certainly has a noumenal existence, but it also has an objective one.

Kant opposed the utilitarian model of “chasing happiness” that both societies and individuals pursue. Both Kant and Berdyaev argued against it for almost the same reason. With Kant, it was the good will, while with Berdyaev, it is the free will, defined almost precisely the same at root. Defining happiness as achieving something is irrational, since one doesn't realize how achieving an end will actually be. Such achievements can be used for good or ill. In pursuing something thought to make you happy, you have an image in mind, a fantasy, about what having it will include. It is only rarely accurate. A vision in the mind is one thing, its day to day possession is quite another.

Kant argues that practical reason is not about happiness. Reason is about truth and the freedom that recognizing the truth requires. This is entirely independent of happiness and is unrelated to it. A being's instinct is far better suited for the creation of satisfaction than reason. Following the free will, as both Berdyaev and Kant argue, cannot guarantee happiness and satisfaction in a utilitarian way. Happiness is far too indeterminate and changing to be the engine for good deeds.

Happiness requires objects – achieving things like a good reputation, money, career or a great sex life – but these are highly unstable places to pursue happiness. They can be taken away in a moment. They all require a tremendous amount of work that vitiates the happiness they provide. Because society is an object, it exists in the world of lies.

The secret of evil is the secret of freedom. Without our understanding of freedom the irrational fact of the existence of evil in God's world cannot be understood. At the basis of the world lies irrational freedom, in the very depths of the abyss. And out of these depths pour the dark currents of life. This abyss hides all sorts of possibilities. This bottomless darkness of being, pre-existent before all good and all evil, cannot be rationalized, fully and completely: it always hides the possibility of the outflow of new, unilluminated energies (Christian Existentialism, 187).

Evil is the use of free will outside of truth. “Free will” here is used closely. Its when “freedom” becomes arbitrary actions, which inherently are not free acts. Hence, freedom and evil must be opposites. Free will can permit evil. Evil can only be explained by the fact that men can do whatever motives them. Goodness, unless its freely chosen, is not good. If good acts are determined, then there is no virtue. If this is true, then evil has to be a risk.

The state of nature is a revolutionary doctrine that lies at the base of all modern life. It is a thought experiment of what man is outside any context at all: linguistic, moral, national and

cultural. Its hard to consider this because the men involved would not be men, but animals. When one removes all context, it is revolutionary by definition. In all cases, freedom is a bad thing. Whether Hobbes, Locke or Rousseau, freedom always ends up destructive and, at some point, it must be vitiated for the individual's good.

However, in all three theories, "freedom" is used in the loosest of ways. It is not the use of reason, since this has not been developed. It is a product of society and education. It becomes destructive because it is not "freedom," it is rather arbitrary behavior, or the pursuit, not of rational ends, but of passions. Thus, the modern political world has based itself on an irrational myth. Hegel corrected this nonsense by arguing that, even if such a nonsensical world could exist, it is arbitrary will, not reason. Reason and thus freedom, exist only in culture and ethnicity, never in the abstract.

Like all existentialists, Berdyaev's philosophy offers men a stark choice: the truth or "bad faith." The truth is rational and hence free. This term, coined by Kierkegaard and made famous by Sartre, is the same as "Das Man" in Heidegger or the "mass man" of Ortega. It is the mindless, unthinking conformist that all modern societies need to function. Berdyaev addresses this here:

In the cultural and ideal tendencies of our epoch, dehumanization moves in two directions, toward naturalism and toward technicism. Man is subject either to cosmic forces or to technical civilization. It is not enough to say that he subjects himself: he is dissolved and disappears either in cosmic life or else in almighty technics; he takes upon himself the image, either of nature or of the machine, but in either case he loses his own image and is dissolved into his component elements. Man as a whole being, as a creature centered within himself, disappears; he ceases to be a being with a spiritual center, retaining his inner continuity and his unity. To the fractional and partial elements of man there is offered not only the right to autonomy, but to supremacy in life (The Fate of Man in the Modern World 1934: 34).

Objective reality has no freedom. Its a "brute" fact. Its called that for a reason. There's no technical progress since technical development only matters if it corresponds to inner, disciplined, ascetic freedom. Empirical reason is also unfree and has no relationship to "reason" in the true sense.

Consciousness objectifies the world. The truth is that objects, for man, have neither essences nor accidents, only different projections of the self. To organize the world of objects into a science or a state is the work of an alienated mind.

Where shall we seek criteria of truth? All too often men seek these criteria in what is lower than truth, in the objective world with its compulsions, seek criteria for spirit in the material world. And they fall into a vicious circle. Discursive truth can provide no criteria for final truth: it is only at the half-way mark, and knows neither the beginning nor the end. Every proof rests upon the unproven, the postulate, the created. There is risk, and no guarantee. The very search for guarantee is wrong and really means subjecting the higher to the lower. Freedom of the spirit knows no guarantees. The sole criterion of truth is truth itself, the light which streams out of it. All other criteria exist only for the every-day,

objective world, for social communication. (The Beginning and the End, 1947: 49).

Westerners tend to believe something is true if an object corresponds with the word spoken of it. Something is present to the senses, therefore it is. A statement can be true in isolation. Mere correspondence, as a general theory of truth, is the vision of nominalism. It takes objects out of their context and takes them apart. There is only the word and the referent. It's much more than that. Truth is always about the self. The world is our projection. If we have given ourselves over to the lies of modernity, then the world appears as a dead arena where one can thrust our demands onto a meaningless flux. It would be nothing but coercion. Once one dedicates himself to truth, then Logos can be found, the nature of things becomes present, but this is dependent on our own personal condition.

There are two ways: one is that of the love of man, which wants to make men happy, to calm and organize them, to build comfortable housing for their neighbors where they will forget their irrational and tragic freedom, will renounce their right to absolute, supra-mundane truth. This is the way of the Grand Inquisitor. It leads to the ant-hill where there will be neither freedom nor personality. The other is the way of the love of God which wants to liberate men, puts truth and super-human values above prosperity and the ordering of life. This is the way of Him who came with words of boundless freedom, and was a reminder that God and freedom and truth are above the well-being and tranquility of men. And we must choose either the philanthropic way of well-being or the God-loving way of freedom (Christian Existentialism, 120).

This is the choice Berdyaev sets before man. As this is being written in 2018, the Enlightenment promise of freedom and plenty for all has been a miserable failure. The search for comfort and lead to mass poverty. Freedom is responsibility. Freedom implies reason and discipline. Therefore, it is easier to conform and follow others. Prosperity is only for the few, and it's not the most rational.

Truth in the world of objects is necessarily circular. To say that "x is in front of me" is to assume that my senses are correctly recording what's external to me, that there is an "external" world, that my logic in making the statement is proper and many other assumptions. It always assumes a postulate that cannot itself be proven.

Truth is not objective, ordinary reality, reflected in the knower and entering into him from outside, but rather the enlightenment, the transfiguration of reality: it is the introduction into the world's data of a quality, which was not there before truth was revealed and known. Truth is not conformity with what we call being, but rather the kindling of a light within being. I am in darkness and seek the light; I do not yet know truth but I seek it. By this very fact I affirm the existence of Truth and light, existence in another sense than the existence of the world's realities. My seeking is already the dawning light, and truth already beginning to reveal itself. (Truth and Revelation, 1953: 16)

Truth is never a matter of propositions or mere correspondence. This is trivial. Truth is a

dynamic power; a set of relationships. It is connected with meaningful and purposive labor (sometimes called “creativity”). It begins with the comprehension of meaning. Truth in work and creativity means that the distinction between knower and known falls apart. “Objective” knowledge is never real because objects change, as do the people studying them. “Objects” are projections of the mind. Correspondence views of truth break down for that reason: all knowledge is self knowledge.

Berdyaev is well aware that the average man is a mindless drone, a conformist that is frightened of actual freedom. Dependency and bad faith is sought at all costs. So who is he referring to here? He can only be referring to an aristocracy of the spirit. To believe that “everyone” is capable of this metaphysical transcendence is laughable. The masses have no idea how to define the terms and care far less. We can be thankful for that. The “mass” is the same as Heidegger's “Das Man” or the one fallen into Sartre's “Bad Faith.” These terms suggest what Berdyaev calls the “objective,” that is, seeking solace and protection in institutions and structures. What he means here is that, by himself, man is nothing. By grace, that is, God's action, man can be more than merely a logical calculating machine.

“Bad Faith” hides. It hides behind institutions, “policy,” ideology and religion. The very height of this dishonesty is the bourgeoisie. They are the incarnation of Das Man. They are the most destructive and decadent group to ever walk the earth:

What are the spiritual roots of the bourgeoisie? It's an excessive belief in this visible world and unbelief in another, invisible world. The bourgeois is struck by this visible world of things, shocked by it and seduced by it. He does not take another reality seriously; he rejects all spiritual things and sees all to be like himself. The bourgeois always says to himself: we know you, you are all like me but do not want to admit it; you are deceiving yourself. All of you live by the blessings of this world and all accept nothing but external reality. The bourgeois puts himself above others because he recognizes this and admits it. The bourgeois is not a symbolist since the symbolic world outlook is alien to him (The Spiritual Bourgeoisie, 1926: 3-13)

One need not be a capitalist to fall into these categories. What they all have in common is mediocrity. “Labor” and “work” are not the same. “Work” is more like drudgery, the necessary tasks that someone has to do. Labor is the attempt to overcome the objective by mixing the object with freedom. Freedom is always rational and never merely subjective.

All men are called to communion with Truth: it exists for the whole world. But it is revealed only under certain spiritual, intellectual and cultural conditions. When Truth as it is being revealed is socialized and applied to the average man, to the human mass, its quality is lowered, its depth disappears for the sake of accessibility to all men. (TR, 14)

Truth is available only to the few. It is available only to those who reject the love of gain and seek truth for its own sake, since freedom and truth are of the same type. Truth is not a proposition and cannot be formulated in words. Its not a formulation at all, but rather is found in the life of struggle.

In his *Philosophy of Inequality*, he writes:

The world of Dionysus is democratic; the world of Apollo is aristocratic. Dionysianism rests on a spontaneous, popular basis. The unlimited triumph of democracy becomes a Dionysian orgy that sweeps away the personality and plunges the spirit of man into natural chaos. Dionysianism is hostile to every hierarchy and every esotericism. Dionysianism triumphs in the epoch of revolution, in mass popular movements. This triumph always jeopardizes the greatest spiritual values and surrenders the greatest spiritual realities. The origin is aristocratic, the beginning of a hierarchical mode of life, of form and limit, establishing differences and distances, saves the higher spiritual life, protects the sources of light and protects man from being torn apart. The existence of personality presupposes differences and distances, forms and boundaries. Revolutionary Dionysianism destroys all differences and distances, all forms and boundaries, and therefore it is deeply hostile to the individual and does not recognize his face.

Berdyayev argues that mixing persons and classes is pure chaos. It is the lowest form of plebianism that destroys all boundaries. The personal idea is qualitative, not quantitative. Chalcedon shows how the person can face the divine nature without surrendering his independence. This is the model. The “social scientists” of academia, he says, are “all in the power of the Dionysian elements, tormented by demons of chaos; you do not know the person and you do not know freedom.”

Revolutions bring about the total state and the reduction of the person to an ego. This is the primordial darkness of sin. The person becomes part of the mass by force and thus what makes a man a man is destroyed. “The spiritual principle is aristocratic, not democratic.”

In both Russian and French revolutions, the terror began when the peasants made clear their rejection of the agenda. Kept secret except for initiates, its imposition and realization led to horror.

Democratic thinking is darkness. The aristocratic is the result of the struggle between person and individual. It was the spirit forcing itself away from the static earth. The “instant” triumph makes no distinctions and calls the population a “mass.” Everything is standardized and the person is lost.

Even then he was talking about the change in the definition of “freedom.” The fact that it is used without referent either to ends or to the subject is suspect. “Freedom” for the masses is merely the enslavement to passion. If this is unchecked, then reason is effaced. Freedom is the liberation from chaos and thus, freedom from the passions. “That is why all the deep-seated people understood that true liberation involves a moment of penance, self-discipline and self-restraint.”

When the will is spontaneously empowered, it becomes a slave to its desires. He becomes exhausted by his own irrationality. He spits at the revolutionaries, “You, the “liberators” of man, who unchain the elements, have long to consider the problem of the individual more deeply. Why are there no personalities in your revolutions, why is it given to the destruction of [what seems to be] natural storms? Why do we see the image of a person drowning in the elements about which you sing praises?”

Berdyayev says that the “revolution” they romanticize is nothing more than vulgar nominalism. No revolution has harmonized man and the society or state. For those in power,



“You're out of touch with reality; for you, neither the person nor the society is real.” The most important thing he says here is that

Your “revolutionary” worldview is just extreme nominalism; in social philosophy, its merely extreme atomism. Your collectivism is just the opposite side of this nominalism and atomism. You have lost real realities and want to place a new, artificial, illusory reality in their place. Your worldview and worldview denies any ontological realism. Your ancestors are sophists. You rejected the foundations of ontological social philosophy laid down by Plato. Plato is too aristocratic for you, and you saw in him the source of the world's “reaction.” Plato's socialism was aristocratic socialism, it is based on the recognition of the hierarchy of ontological realities. Plato recognized the ontological reality of the whole, the reality of the supreme good and truth. [But] You proceed from the atomization of every whole, you begin with the rejection of the supreme good and [the highest] truth. Your truth is an arbitrary, subjective, class truth, born out of interests and passions. You start your revolution only after all that is real, all that is integral, all true communities are atomized and pulverized. Truly, you want to build your new utopia on nothing.

I'm ready to say that this is the most trenchant and potent criticism of revolutionary politics in Russian. I've written many times, and many others before me, that the Revolutionaries in Russia and elsewhere saw already functioning socialist communities. Communities that were both popular and egalitarian such as the peasant commune, the urban *artel* or the radical Brotherhood of the Holy Cross and destroyed them all. This alone is sufficient to destroy their claim to care a whit about labor. Communism, despite the pages and pages of analysis, cares nothing for the working class.

When real community is destroyed, all that's left is the ego. The personality is the creation of the commune, but the ego is the creation of chaos. With no foundation for community, men are then herded into “collectives” held together by force. The left's most fundamental contradiction, one that makes it universally absurd, is that they demand community while taking away all the ingredients that create it.

In the Brothers Karamazov, Dostoevsky speaks of the tears of an injured child is unbearable. In other words, innocent suffering is said to negate the existence of God. He says this to the left:

The atheist does not care about the tears of a child and all the sufferings of life; he rebels against God in the name of a happy and blessed human destiny on earth. But he is now ready to shed innumerable amounts of tears and inflict innumerable sufferings so that the human life will be happy and painless as soon as possible. This is the moral contradiction of all revolutionaries. You, the Russian revolutionary intellectuals, have always talked a lot about a child's tears, the unbearable suffering of the innocent was your favorite subject. You fell into a false sentimentality and then promised a painless paradise. But when the hour of your rule came, you created unprecedented cruelty; you've turned your country into a sea of tears and caused it untold misery. Sentimentality often ends in cruelty.

To create paradise, the revolution first has to create hell. Politics for Berdyaev is inherently problematic because it rejects the personality and only sees faceless masses. It sees institutions and numbers, not personalities. It certainly can deal with egos, just not people. Men have to be taken as people rather than being reduced to abstractions. When you remove personality, you're left pure quantity and abstractions, but all abstractions look the same.

Politics is about quantity and standardization, not people. The abstract "man" has no history and no connection with his ancestors. He's nothing. The abstractions of the academic social scientists are purely inventions in his mind. The alienation of the urban intellectual is merely projected onto the world and called "cutting edge scholarship."

Policy is inherently contradictory for this reason. The masses have nothing in common. They are hardly egos, let alone people. Some are innocent, some are not. Some are great sinners, some are benefactors to society. One policy could never fit them all.

To these professors and street activists, he says that they are in no position to judge the fates and destinies of concrete people. They don't know them and don't want to. Personally, they are charged with changing the world for the better in their daily lives, but this is rarely to be seen. Their personal charity is totally absent. They treat others with disdain and contempt, but they seek unlimited power to bring joy to the "masses."

First, they must actually help those around them, including themselves. Then they might have some authority, "but this affair of love and help to people can not have anything in common with the rationalistic weighing of human destinies, with a rationalistic comparison of these fates and their compulsory equation." This thesis was soon to be taken up by the British idealists such as Michael Oakeshott.

Inequality is the basis of cosmic harmony and is the justification of the very existence of the human personality and the source of all creative movement in the world. Every birth of light in darkness is the onset of inequality. Every creative movement is the emergence of inequality, it is an elevation, the isolation of qualities from a quantitative mass. . . From inequality, the world and the cosmos were born. From inequality, man was created. Absolute equality would leave man in an undifferentiated state, that is, non-being. The requirement of absolute equality is the demand for a return to the initial chaotic and dark state of the cosmos, leveled and undifferentiated, but this too is the description of nothing. The revolutionary demand for a return to equality in non-existence was born out of the reluctance to bear the sacrifice and suffering through which the path to the higher life goes. This is the most horrifying situation; the very denial of the meaning of the entire creative world process.

Equality is sameness. It has to be. Egalitarianism fears the creative; the genius and even denies its existence for the sake of their absolute value of equality; it is really mediocrity. This could be seen in the Jewish Union of Proletarian Writers and other official artistic schools in the USSR; nothing but conformism and power. In most English language collections of Berdyaev, they avoid his (1907) "Violence and Submission in Mass Psychology." He says,

The peasantry has an organic way of life based on obedience to the higher, aristocratic, noble, and ancient divine origin; peasants feel his connection with

eternity and therefore was not a philistine. Aristocratic is the group, who by a mystical impulse of obedience to God, was carried away into the crusade and went to mysterious lands to free the Holy Sepulcher. The latter became a knight of the Lord, a warrior of Christ and rose to the heights [of nobility]. The society, like a mystical organism in which all parts are subordinated to the higher center and hierarchically subordinate to each other, are never vulgar, but are always towering above the spirit of philistinism, noble, directed to the heavens. Such a society is submissive in its attitude towards God, prayerful at its center but rebellious against the evil of the world; its chivalrously courageous and militant in its struggle against slavery and its affirmation of the natural order, but how terrible is the mass anarchy, how embarrassing the mass self-degeneration, how far decadence has gone!

This does not fit with the modern American view of Berdyaev as a “philosopher of [bourgeois] freedom.” Outside of Russia specialists, it is unknown. His thesis is that the masses are not reverent of anything, and, under the influence of modernity, reject anything sacred, just adoring and asserting themselves; that is, if they are not killing themselves. They inevitably decay and become saturated with the spirit of philistinism and become ignoble in their feelings. They become, as Berdyaev would say, “flat in their consciousness.”

“A single Great God is replaced in it by a multitude of little gods, the elements of self-esteem, envy and malice are [standardized]. The rebellion of a holy uprising against evil turns into a rabid malice against absolute good; it becomes a slave's submission to natural evil.” He's no philosopher of “freedom” in the modern, vulgar sense. He's an aristocrat. In critical thinking there is always an aristocratic rebellion against evil to keep nihilism at bay. Vulgarity and self-assertion are the hallmarks of modern philistinism.

The negation of the reality of society is nominalism. And in such form nominalism has a fatal consequence for an understanding of the nature of the Church. The Church is a spiritual society and this society is imbued with ontological reality, it cannot be limited to the cooperation of individual souls. In the church is realized the Kingdom of God, and not only individual souls are saved. When I say that to be saved is possible only in the Church, I affirm *sobornost'*; salvation in spiritual community and through it. It is a salvation with my brethren in Christ and with all God's creation, and I negate the individualist understanding of it. There is no salvation in isolation. . . and I repudiate the egoism of [this theology].

The mass man, in theology or thought as a whole, sees only individual things. He sees properties, purely quantitative things that evokes desire or repulsion. He can see no essences in things, including nations and persons. Nominalism, about which this writer has written endlessly, is the belief that no universal truths exist in the world. Universal things are mere words, arrived at for purely utilitarian purposes. Nothing can typify the bourgeoisie more than this. Knowledge sees the essence beyond mere appearances. This is what most of modernity denies.

The masses will take the most revolutionary of ideas and vulgarize them. It makes revolution a laughing stock by reducing it to slogans. Freedom ends up being just unbridled and arbitrary honor, vanity and self assertion, self-excitation and self-inflation; justice is conflated

with self interest and even vindictiveness. So “anarchism” is not a philosophy of freedom, but the domination of desire. Its slavery to sensation. Sensation becomes the new absolute.

When you begin with nominalism, as all westerners have to do, no truth can be gained. If the brute individual fact – the correspondence theory of truth – is all that exists, then desire is the end of life. It is either passion or reason, not both. Yet, like always, Berdyaev sees the view of the external world as just a manifestation or projection of the internal. He castigates “social scientists” who want to cram experience into categories and then truly believe these categories are real. He attacks modern academics directly:

The application of abstract sociological categories to concrete historical reality killed historical understanding, removed its soul and made impossible the intuitive contemplation of the historical cosmos. With your sociological abstractions, you disintegrated reality, taking it from a hierarchical stage of the cosmic whole, and reduced it to the simplest elements discovered by other sciences much older than your new discipline. You're simplifiers and therefore reality never appears to you. All you have are abstract pieces of reality, fragments of being. You have long been committing a pogrom against being as a concrete and hierarchical object. This rational and frenzied attack you commit both in your science and in your politics. *You like to moralize over historical reality; you transfer your limited individual moral judgments to a super-personal historical life.* You're angry about the past and see only violence and oppression. You are not able to understand that this violence had its own place; its own truth and was God's providence breaking through the darkness (translation and emphasis mine).

The sentence above is italicized because it is a very important aspect of my own career in philosophy. One way to spot a phony, or the typical university pseudo-intellectual is when they seek to project the official university ideology onto societies hundreds of years old. It used to be just the domain of over zealous grad students but, with no one to correct them, its now “tenured professors.” The contemporary term for this is “virtue signaling.” It is a method where white male professors or clergy seek to curry favor with the Regime by spouting official slogans where there are plenty of other people around. They will loudly enunciate official doctrine so as to appear harmless to a university that perpetually has them under a microscope.

Berdyaev argues that what the social scientist equalize doesn't exist. The left will occasionally use the Gospel to justify their actions as Tolstoy did. They neither believe in or recognize them. All they can find are words and phrases they can use and redefine to manipulate their captive audience. They have no access to the church nor can they understand the Bible, a series of books written far before the suicidal ideology of liberalism existed. Christianity recognizes the absolute value of man (that is, of persons, not egos) but from here one can not draw any favorable conclusions for political, mechanical equality. Virtue signaling is career insurance, not critical thought.

Christianity did not revolt against slavery at a certain stage; it recognized only that the soul of a person who is in a slavish social state has absolute value and is equal before God to the soul of the owner. Slavery is a projection, a state of mind, not a legal category. Masters can be more slavish than the slave. The slave and lord could be brothers in Christ, and the slave could occupy a higher position in the church of Christ than his lord.

Man stands before the abyss of being or non-being and he cannot dominate this abyss by himself: he needs help from above; this is a divine-human matter. If in our time the very existence of man is threatened, if man is being torn apart, this is just because he has tried to save himself [without God]. Man is passing through what is perhaps the most dangerous period of his whole existence, but I do not think that our fate is hopeless. This hopelessness is only here, not with God. For we believe that the world's history will not go on endlessly, that the world and history will end, but this also means that we do not believe in the possibility that an ultimate solution can be found in this world. . . . This should not hinder man's creative action, and his realization of Justice here and now, for man's creative labor will affect the end times themselves and the final word, which belongs to God, will include a word of man as well (Christian Existentialism, 324).

Secularism is based on many lies and errors, but the worst is that man needs only himself to solve problems. Man is largely a creature of passion not reason, and today, that is institutionalized in capitalism. The auto-destruction of the world is available for all to see, but without any experience but a secular education, he knows nothing other than to continue doing that which will destroy it further.

In Berdyaev, the word “creative” or “creativity” crops up constantly. For the American reader, “creative” refers to the artistic realm; the ability to conceive of something new and innovative. The Russian is far broader than this. “Creativity” is synonymous with labor, but labor with a specific, moral purpose. Its not mere toil, but the synthesis of socially significant work with art. In the west, the fact that this question has not come up in Berdyaev studies suggests a deeper agenda.

Creative labor cannot be categorized as something necessary. Creativity, in all senses of the term, is the proof of freedom. Inner freedom is based on discipline; external freedom is just based on the absence of restraint, and is usually a horrible thing. Creative labor is not based on arbitrary action. However, in the age of mass production and labor oppression, the options available for real creative action are highly limited and misunderstood.

The alienation of modernity can be found in the identity of its two major political positions: bourgeois capitalism and the equally bourgeois socialism. The bourgeois mentality is the zenith of evil, its the result of decay and death:

The bourgeois realm is a realm of the quantitative. To it stands opposed the realm of the qualitative. The bourgeois spirit builds everything on the basis of welfare, felicity and satisfaction. The spirit as its polar opposite tends to build on the basis of values, it has to gravitate towards the great spiritual far off. The bourgeois spirit therefore does not love and indeed is afraid of sacrifice, whereas the anti-bourgeois spirit at its basis is sacrificial, even when it asserts power. The bourgeois were not created by socialism, it was created by the old, decrepit world. But socialism accepts the legacy of the bourgeoisie, it desires to increase and develop it and carry this spirit on to an universal triumph. (Socialism and the Bourgeoisie, 1917).

Berdyaev is arguing here that the triumph of the left destroys personhood. Personality implies the super-personal. Man is only truly such when he affirms the divine as his source,

otherwise he's merely a collection of nerve endings with no free will. All value is only a cultural expression of the divine presence in historical reality. This means freedom exists because spirit does. The divine demands sacrifice and gives him no comfort, it makes impossible any prosperity on earth while it draws him to a mysterious distance. Freedom is not pleasant. In fact, it is not even concerned with happiness, only the true.

The point of view of the personal good of each and all – egoism in all its forms – is directed towards the overthrow of the divine. Past greatness is based on sacrifice and suffering, which the middle classes reject. Greatness is incomprehensible to the mass man. The past greatness they think came from nothing, but they know it only through slogans and conformist veneration.

The mass has an aversion to the complex flowering of culture, to the glory and greatness of states or to the great historical destiny of nations. In this complex experience, in this glory and grandeur, they see a threat, but they cared not so much about the person, as about the equality of egos; the “impersonal person,” the personality of “everyone” and the equalization of personalities. In truth, it means their doom. In the name of equalizing personalities, the Regime is ready to destroy all personality and to cut the possibility of its development.

Truly every creative movement is a movement to inequality, a violation of equality in all senses of the term and a drive to elevation. The moralistic individualism of Tolstoy demanded the cessation of world history, as Berdyaev argues, and the abolition of all nations so that the center of all could be transferred to the mass, not to the best.

Tolstoy and his ilk reject the social division of labor as hostile to the individual. In reality, it is only hostile to the ego. Socialism, in its Marxian form, requires the simplification of society. The truth is that, as Leontiev says, the complex flowering of personality is tightly linked with the complex flowering of society.

“The simplistic confusion of society, which bears with it the triumph of liberal-egalitarian progress, the age of democracy, is associated with the fading of the individual, with depersonalization, with the extinction of personalities beyond the norm.” Any complex flowering of society inherently is creative of huge inequalities. The flourishing of man, in any context, requires the recognition of genius. The saints were a vivid and extraordinary manifestation of a personal struggle, but the greatest development of holiness happened in the era of great inequalities. If equality is the norm, then a great anything cannot be recognized.

The point is that the bourgeois cannot conceive of anything that's not based on money or the things it can buy. Its an attenuated, abbreviated consciousness that cannot grasp anything that does not bring it satisfaction in the short or medium term.

Berdyaev argues that without a social division of labor, a person could never rise, could not stand out from the original communism of equal darkness in chaos. Individuality, the human personality, is not given from the very beginning in the natural and historical world, as it is dormant in the potential state of chaotic darkness, in animal equality and is freed, raised and developed only through tragic history, through sacrifice and struggle. This implies the greatest inequality and division through cultures with a strict hierarchical system and compulsory discipline.

Berdyaev equally condemns the socialism of his day, as being philosophically identical to the bourgeois spirit:

Socialism also is an ideal that is ultimately bourgeois. . . an ideal forever attached like serfs to this world of bourgeois “well-being.” It would be foolish to expect

from the socialists a victory over the modern bourgeois life; it would only carry it on further to its end. The bourgeois must be sought not only in the outward forms of socialism, but also in its inward spirit. This mind is purely quantitative and rejects quality; it holds “well-being” higher than value; the impersonal masses higher than the person; satisfaction higher than sacrifice and the mundane higher than God. It is fastened down to this world since it is based on necessity rather than freedom. Socialism has not developed any scale of values besides the values of material security, satisfaction and satiety. Mentally, it lives by the assumptions of the bourgeois world. . . The socialist mind is hostile towards every sort of creative personal originality, which is the only antidote against the bourgeoisie. Socialism represents leveling, it leads to mediocrity. [Whatever is gained] from its equality comes at the price measured in the destruction of all excellence.

This is very difficult to challenge. Wherever socialism has triumphed, this has been the result. Keep in mind that “socialism,” like “the bourgeoisie” does not refer to a specific system in time, but to a mindset that exists at all times.

Whenever a hierarchical system is overthrown in the name of the ego (and it is always in such a name), when they liberate the individual from all discipline, naturally, only animal chaos results, destroying personality. Freedom of the individual, in its true, aristocratic sense, always has as its correlative a thousand years of discipline in the production of a complex culture that transforms chaos into cosmos. This is the classic Berdyaev argument. Those advocating for the mindset of “well being for all” forget that civilization comes from the lack of well being and the total rejection of equality. It comes from intense discipline, warfare and sacrifice, everything the mass man fears.

Every world is stratified in all respects. Personality is affirmed only in the cosmic world, that is, the world of spirit, in the spiritual mode of social life. In the world of chaos, of quantity, the “objective,” among the masses who throw off all hierarchical discipline, the person fades and dies. Only the sick ego remains.

Ideology cannot build a beautiful and free human society. Consciousness of guilt against duty corresponds to the real dignity of man and it is the seal of his sainthood in Berdyaev's thinking. The nobility of the Orthodox man does not depend on any external social situation. When resentment, envy and revenge poisons the mind, the spirit ceases to be free. It is then enslaved and unconscious of its relationship to God.

The state (in its true sense of “constitution”) is a difficult and ascetic life of man in a “three-dimensional and not four-dimensional space,” in a natural world lying in evil. The state cannot be based only on love. The kingdom of love is the kingdom of grace, the Kingdom of God, and not the kingdom of man. Love is based on grace, not any social form. The kingdom is a different dimension of being than the state. These two kingdoms co-exist and come into contact but, as in St. Augustine, can never merge. They also do not exclude each other or displace each other. All attempts to impose the vulgar conception of “love” or “freedom” on the state – as its only basis – lead to violence.

## Selected Primary Sources and Translations

*Kelder, D (1998, editor) Berdyaev Online. Most of the Articles Below can be found here  
<http://www.berdyaev.com/>*

Berdyaev, Nikolai (1917-1918) Socialism and the Bourgeoisie. The Works of Nikolai Berdyaev IV. YMCA Press: 19-28 (translation mine)

The Problem of Man: Towards the Construction of a Christian Anthropology. (1936) S. Janos, trans. The Way 50: 3-26

Philosophy of Inequality. (2015) S Janos, trans. FRSJ Publications

The Meaning of the Creative Act (1916). Donald A. Lowrie, trans. Gollanz, 1955

Freedom and the State (1927-28) Olicer Fielding Clarke, trans. G Bles, 1935

The Destiny of Man (1931) N. Duddington, trans. Scribner's, 1937

Slavery and Freedom (1939) G. Bles, 1939

The Beginning of the End: An Essay on Eschatological Metaphysics (1947) RM French, trans. Harper, 1952

God and Man (1947) RE French, translated from the original French, G Bles, 1947-1952

The Realm of the Spirit and the Realm of Caesar. (1949). Harper, 1953

Truth and Revelation (1953) RM French, trans. Harper, 1953

Christian Existentialism: A Berdyaev Anthology (1965) London: Allen and Unwin, 1965

The Spiritual Bourgeoisie (1926) The Way 3: 3-13 (translation mine)

Violence and Submission (1907) Mass Psychology. Moscow Weekly, December 18 (translation mine)