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Thomas Nemeth

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Thomas Nemeth
Old Bridge, NJ, USA

ISSN 0066-6610

ISBN 978-3-319-01347-3

ISBN 978-3-319-01348-0 (eBook)

DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-01348-0

Springer Cham Heidelberg New York Dordrecht London

Library of Congress Control Number: 2013951014

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Printed on acid-free paper

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Introduction

As is so readily acknowledged by even its own offspring, the Russian philosophical tradition extends back only into the nineteenth century, by one reckoning even as late as the 1880s. The reason for this was and is itself the subject of some dispute. Suffice it to say that one prominent participant ascribed it to the lack of appropriate institutions, another to Russia's linguistic isolation and yet another to its autocephalous Orthodox religion. All of these conjectures have some merit, however unconvincing and inconclusive we may ultimately find each to be taken either singly or collectively. What is striking to even the casual observer of this era is that although rigorous secular philosophical argumentation arose in Western Europe already in the first half of the seventeenth century, we find nothing comparable in Russia until the nineteenth century. Philosophy as understood today, in short, took hold in the West during what is commonly dubbed the "Age of Reason," whereas in Russia philosophical reflections emerged in earnest and at the very earliest only with the advent of the Russian Romantic era, a period which is commonly dubbed the Russian "Golden Age." The consequence of this for its further evolution could not be more telling. Whereas philosophy in the West appealed to reason and logic to guide its efforts, philosophy in Russia was dominated by faith and even in some instances by a vaguely defined mystical intuition and only secondarily by reason. Likewise, many of their respective concerns sharply diverged. Although philosophers in the West at the time were riveted by epistemological issues, particularly those arising from the remarkable developmental pace of the natural sciences, philosophers in Russia exhibited less interest in these matters but all the more in the role and significance of their fundamental religious convictions in the face of the secularization of the quest for Truth. Whereas Descartes, Leibniz and Locke had scientific training, Russian philosophers came to philosophy often enough with a theological background.

Another predominant concern among Russian philosophers was the place of their own nation and its way of life among the other nations of the world – a rather odd preoccupation from the Western viewpoint, arguably revealing more about a widespread sense of insecurity among the country's educated elite than a description of reality. To speak of *German* Idealism, *British* Empiricism and *French* Existentialism

is common enough among Western philosophers, but by and large the concerns of these schools of thought were and are not thought to be limited to just their respective peoples. The national designations of these philosophical schools refer to the ethnicities of their chief exponents but not that the respective concerns were limited to that ethnic group. Surely, neither John Locke nor David Hume conceived empiricism as having to do solely with the people of the British Isles and that the French, for example, could not for whatever reason recognize its veracity. Likewise, the French Existentialists did not envision the absurdity of human existence to be limited to the French and some purportedly distinctive French way of life. Save, arguably, for a brief period in its recent history, German philosophers did not concern themselves with whether their nation had a unique destiny in world history, let alone with whether the consumption of beer and sausages while wearing lederhosen would safeguard the *Volk* from the pernicious ways of other peoples. Yet virtually all textbook treatments of Russian philosophy, be they Russian or Western, accept the so-called Slavophile Controversy – whether Russia had a distinctive and unique “spirit” and therefore developmental path – as one of, if not, the major topic in nineteenth century Russian *philosophy*! If the issues bantered about in the Slavophile Controversy were part and parcel of philosophy, Whitehead was certainly wrong in holding that the European philosophical tradition consists of a series of footnotes to Plato. Additionally, and even more astonishingly and inexcusably, all major historians of Russian philosophy, with a single possible exception, fail to ridicule and condemn this identification.

Another odd difference between the emergence of philosophy in the West and in Russia – odd in that it is contrary to what we might expect – is that whereas modern Western secular philosophy emerged outside academia (Descartes, Locke, Leibniz), in Russia, apart from such “philosophical” dilettantes as Herzen and Kirevskij, Chaadaev and Khomjakov, philosophy was institutionalized from the outset with Jurkevich in Moscow and Vladislavlev in St. Petersburg, both of whom were products of insular theological institutions. Much can and often is made in histories of Russian philosophy of the positivism and ethical-nihilistic espousals of several mid-century disgruntled young radicals, Chernyshevskij, Dobroljubov and Pisarev. Yet despite their enthrallment with natural science at the expense of other intellectual activities, none of these was trained as a scientist, and their rejection of absolute moral values was a product of neither extensive anthropological research nor a detailed critique, say, of Kant’s practical philosophy. In short, much of secular Russian “philosophy” prior to Solov’ëv was not philosophy, and the rest, with but few exceptions, was theology in disguise.

This is not to say that Russian philosophers were totally at odds with the West in either their interests or their methodologies. As we will see in the pages to follow, the incipient Russian philosophical community, in fact, was certainly not averse to handling much the same problems as in the West. Indeed, one aim of the present work is to show this as well as its limitations in the reflections of its arguably most famous and influential representative. Solov’ëv, in his first major work, for example, sketched a philosophy of the history of philosophy reminiscent of Hegel, albeit with a different intent and in doing so found immanent faults in all of his illustrious

predecessors. This work, in turn, led to a serious exchange with one of his countrymen concerning phenomenalism and the role of the *a priori*. The examples could be multiplied. Arguably, the most significant of these aborted exchanges came in response to Solov'ëv's doctoral dissertation. Unfortunately, despite the harsh but detailed objections from Boris Chicherin, Solov'ëv simply chose to ignore them and thereby the opportunity to explain and refine his own thought was squandered. In short, then, contrary to the impression conveyed by most histories there was in Russia at least during the last quarter of the nineteenth century an eager audience for philosophical debate that would be recognized as such even in Western Europe at the time.

The above concerns and features come together in the subject of the present study, arguably the first Russian philosopher worthy of that designation, certainly its first systematic secular philosopher. Clearly, many historians refer to Solov'ëv as a religious philosopher, and there certainly is a great deal of merit in doing so. However, another, himself a prominent figure within Russian philosophy, at least on one occasion denied Solov'ëv was even a philosopher at all, for he “was much more a theologian and a religious pamphleteer than a philosopher. Systematic theoretical philosophy as such was of comparatively little interest to him.”¹ Undoubtedly, Solov'ëv's early works, as we shall see, treat epistemological issues only in a most cursory manner, and S. L. Frank not without grounds observed that towards the end of his life Solov'ëv, realizing the inadequate theoretical grounding of his general position, was engaged in remedying the situation. In reply, though, this need not mean that Solov'ëv was not a philosopher, just as the absence of a traditionally-framed epistemological study in, say, Heidegger and Frege, Nietzsche and Whitehead, makes any of them any the less a philosopher. My position is simply that with Solov'ëv philosophy in Russia became, on the one hand, a secular discipline independent of dogmatic theology – even though it shared many of the latter's concerns – and of politics, on the other, despite his frankly inept posturing. We do not find this in Solov'ëv's predecessors. With Solov'ëv, solutions to at least some traditional philosophical questions were offered to be judged in terms of their own cogency, i.e., were *meant* to be evaluated in a manner that would be recognized as philosophical by other philosophers, and not just theologians or representatives of a political faction. This is certainly not to say that Solov'ëv consistently and without interruption thought and wrote as a philosopher. A mere cursory glance over a list of his publications will reveal to everyone's satisfaction that he labored for a sustained period on issues far removed from the professional concerns of philosophers.

Despite his pursuit of metaphysical and, frankly, religious issues, Solov'ëv did offer treatments, some extensive, some much less so, of problems still germane to the philosophical endeavor today. Additionally, Solov'ëv's treatment initiated a

¹Frank 1996: 423. This quotation is from an essay “Pamjati L. M. Lopatina” originally published in 1930. At another, later time with a broader understanding of philosophy, Frank remarked of Solov'ëv that he “is in the history of Russian thought the first – and up to now the most distinguished – independent Russian philosopher, the first manifestation of a Russian philosophical genius.” Frank 1996: 392. The quotation is from an article entitled “Dukhovnoe nasledie Vladimira Solov'ëva” first published in 1950.

sustained conversation within Russia to which many other voices contributed until forcibly repressed by those who found free and critical inquiry of any sort jeopardized and therefore was dangerous to their political agenda. At no earlier date and with no earlier ethnic Russian do we find philosophical issues treated for their own sake and with such consistency over time as in Solov'ëv. That this was the case at least with regard to Solov'ëv forms another aim of the present work.

Certainly, Solov'ëv did not emerge as a fully formed original philosopher. Like so many before him, he too entered the intellectual arena with preconceptions and interests that he sought to defend chiefly related to his Orthodox faith, and his manifest appeal to an arational faith and intellectual intuition to resolve philosophical dilemmas is surely disquieting. It is this overall religious frame of mind coupled with notable impatience towards epistemological issues not just in Solov'ëv but in Russian philosophy in general that gave and still gives the impression to Western eyes that philosophy in Russia before the Bolshevik Revolution was synonymous with religious philosophy. However, the complexion of Russian philosophy could have been different, and there were missed and squandered opportunities for it to develop along other lines or at least develop more analytically. Of course, the suppression of all critical thought in the aftermath of the Decembrist Uprising in the 1820s was the first of these. Had the seeds planted during the early years of Tsar Alexander I's reign been nurtured by a more caring and tolerant regime than that of Nicholas I, the tentative Russian Enlightenment may have grown and prospered. Such was not to be the case. Suspicions aroused by the events of 1825 were climaxed some two decades later by an overwhelming fear of contagion from the European revolutions of 1848, which saw the effective elimination of philosophical education within Russia's secular institutions of higher education until the accession of Nicholas' son, Tsar Alexander II.

Another even more poignant missed opportunity for Russian philosophy was the Chernyshevskij-Jurkevich dispute over materialism in 1860. The origins of the quarrel actually lie in an essay by Pëtr Lavrov, a philosophical autodidact, dealing with the human individual and to which Chernyshevskij gave a lengthy, albeit polemical, reply. It, in turn, was roundly criticized by Jurkevich, then at the Kiev Theological Academy, who argued against the materialist reduction of psychic phenomena to physical processes. Admittedly, much in Jurkevich's argument was cast in Biblical terms that even to the Western reader at the time would have sounded antiquated. However, Jurkevich did bluntly repeat many of the standard irreductionist's claims that were intelligible to his opponents. He argued, for example, that physicalist renderings of mental occurrences, such as my perception of a color or my sensation of pain, make no headway in explaining my subjective impressions, just as a physiological description sheds no light on the introspective psychology of hearing music or making sense of audible words. The most that the natural sciences could possibly establish is a uniform correlation between nerve impulses and sensations or representations. Although the sciences could conceivably determine that an activity of some particular sort in my brain stands in a one-to-one correlation with certain mental states and sensations, we cannot logically conclude from this alone that the conscious mind must be located "in" the brain, let alone be reducible to it or to its functioning.

Whereas Jurkevich did not deny a certain efficacy to the physicalist model, he held that only a subjectivist model, relying as it does on introspection, can give a faithful account of sensing and thinking. For in general conscious states as such lack both spatial extension and the other properties that make, say, this table and chair before me intersubjectively sensible. Not for a moment does Jurkevich question the absolute privacy of inner states, as Wittgenstein later would. In a curious fashion, the former believes that the qualitative transformation of physical phenomena, say, of vibrations of air into sound, requiring the presence of a sentient being, is an additional argument against materialism. He adds, however, that the transformation occurs not in the subject but in the *relation* between the subject and the object. Thus, according to this conception sound and color are not properties of physical objects in themselves but arise *from* their interaction with us. Furthermore, owing to this interaction there is nothing alarming in saying that our mental representations are conditioned by necessary forms, which are introduced through the activity of our cognitive apparatus with its intrinsic constitution. Here lies, in his view, the proper construal of the Kantian thing in itself. To speak of matter, a physical thing, as it is in itself apart from any relation to a cognizant being, is an untenable conceptual abstraction. To Jurkevich, the ancients already discerned that such an abstract thought amounted to nothing. This nascent critique of reductionism and abstraction heavily influenced Solov'ëv.²

Extending this irreductionism to the moral sphere, Jurkevich disclaimed what he took to be the modern view that the mind was a faculty devoted purely to the production of representations and had nothing to do with a recognition of duties. In this construal of modernity, the job of moral philosophy is description with the goal being the establishment of abstract laws comparable to those in the natural sciences. Jurkevich responded, however, that such specifications of moral duties and of the moral law do nothing to explain the cause of moral activity. Statements of what is consistent with the moral demands of reason cannot summon us to act.

Jurkevich applauded the materialist rejection of Kant's ethical formalism, which dispensed with human nature in moral deliberations. However, he also rejected on the same basis what he perceived as the materialist espousal of hedonism and egoism: These moral doctrines exclude any consideration of the happiness of others. The error of egoism lies not in its concern with the moral actor's emotions, but with its neglect of the actor's relations to other people. The utilitarianism accepted by other materialists is also to be rejected for going to the other extreme. In holding that the moral good is tied to usefulness, utilitarianism erects yet another abstract standard. It derives human needs from the concept of use instead of realizing that the latter stems from the satisfaction of needs.

Chernyshevskij's reply to Jurkevich barely deserves mention. Its very title "Polemical Gems" is indicative of its nature, for it failed to address any substantive philosophical issues. It fell to his lieutenant at the journal *Sovremennik* (*The Contemporary*) to maintain the assault on idealism. In a series of articles, albeit of

²Jurkevich 1861: 105. After Jurkevich's death, Solov'ëv penned a panegyric essay largely summarizing Jurkevich's works that he knew.

a popular nature, M. A. Antonovich, in effect, lambasted philosophers at his country's religious institutions, calling them "old philosophers" who preached not philosophy but mysticism, as opposed to the "new philosophers" who do not believe in an absolute and do not expound on unconditional, eternal ideals. The old philosophers want to entangle and bind human thought by means of scholastic devices for the benefit of those who are concerned only with themselves.³ Although Antonovich repeated many of the same theses that Jurkevich opposed and were actually from today's perspective quite moderate, their mere iteration in a politically-charged journal placed them largely beyond the pale of academic discussion. Antonovich continued expressing his views in the decades that followed but received little recognition for his efforts. His clarion call was largely abandoned except for a few revolutionaries who preferred even more explicit utterances.

The fault, such as it was, however, was not limited to just one side. Among the idealists, there was no Russian equivalent of Otto Liebmann or Friedrich Lange in Germany to issue a wake-up call in light of the dismal state of philosophical reflection that would lead to ushering in multifarious epistemological inquiries. In any case, Jurkevich now secure at Moscow University, even though isolated and unpopular with the left-leaning student body, dropped the topic of materialism after having penned two articles devoted to it. Still S. L. Frank in the next century opined that, "In the 1860s Jurkevich was the sole independent and original Russian philosopher."⁴ After little more than a decade later, his health declined precipitously leading to a premature death. His fundamental orientation took to heart Hegel's earlier admonition in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* that science need not concern itself with asking for the conditions of its possibility: "In order to know it is unnecessary to have knowledge of knowledge itself."⁵ Epistemology, above all, must therefore be a meta-physical inquiry into our means of establishing the *veracity* of putative knowledge-claims. No psychological explanation of the forms, principles and structure of human thought per se in isolation from such veracity can illuminate the nature of knowledge. No phenomenological description or account of thought can inform us when to assert or deny something. For this reason, Jurkevich accorded scant attention to the theory of knowledge as conceived in the modern era.

Even if we see this Russian *materialismusstreit* as a scorned opportunity for philosophy to develop outside religious confines, Jurkevich's influence on Solov'ëv extended beyond the circumscribed issues of this dispute. A marked preference for a Platonic direction in philosophy is one that Jurkevich reinforced in his best-known student if such was needed. Unlike in modern philosophy, and in particular Kant, who Jurkevich considered to have launched a new era in philosophy, Plato, in Jurkevich's eyes, sought to uncover the principles that make veridical, and not just valid, knowledge possible. Plato, like Kant, spoke of appearances, though in a different sense. What is empirically given is contrasted not to isolated objects, as in Kant, but to

³Antonovich 1861: 364.

⁴Frank 1996: 423. It is unclear on Frank's criteria why he does not accord Jurkevich the rather dubious honor of being the first Russian philosopher.

⁵Jurkevich 1859: 11.

objects given in reason. The former, for Plato, are unclear forms or images of what truly exists. Whereas Kant saw reason divorced from experience as moving into the realm of shadows and dreams, Plato saw experience in much this way. Whereas Kant saw knowledge as a web of intuitions, Plato saw it as a web of ideas. Kant contended that only knowledge of appearances, of objects as they appear to us, is possible, whereas Plato held that knowledge of what truly is is possible, and only such knowledge is knowledge in the proper sense. Kant's vision was to secure useful information; Plato's was to secure truth. Thus, their respective conceptions of science are quite different. Science in the modernist understanding, according to Jurkevich, could not possibly illuminate the world as it truly is. In stark contrast to Kant's vision, the Platonic position glorified natural science as the means by which we uncover the world.

Despite his harsh assessment, Jurkevich was not short on praise for Kant's "critical" philosophy, which recognized that experience, on which we normally rely to provide knowledge, is itself a product of reason. Moreover, it was largely due to Kant's efforts that philosophy triumphed over common-sense realism and that of those sciences which posit sense objects as existing in an independent space and time.⁶ Jurkevich praised Kant for recognizing that the forms of cognized objects, which we ascribe to the empirically given, are engendered by our cognitive faculty. To this extent, Solov'ev believed Jurkevich had revealed the veridical kernel in Kant's idealism, while at the same time reconciling Plato with both Leibniz and Hume.

In Jurkevich's Platonic understanding, "realism," regardless of its form, seeks to know the essences of things, which exist independently of the cognizing subject. Realism recognizes a distinction between a thing's original, independent properties and those properties it has in its interaction with us as cognizing subjects. Idealism, on the other hand, denies the very possibility of such independent things with original properties. It holds that a thing has an essence arising from that thing's rational participation in an idea. Each thing occupies a place in the worldly order as a result of a division of a general concept not dissimilar from Plato's theory of ideas. Contrary to Hegel's position, this participation is not subject to some inner development. Nor, as in Hegel, does an idea come to a dialectical realization of itself and certainly not through some involvement in the phenomenal order. Hegel's position blurs, as it were, two separate realms: that of the ideal and that of the phenomenal or apparent. Rather, the realm of ideal being is quite separate from the realm populated with the empirical objects surrounding us. Had Jurkevich been aware of the burgeoning debate over psychologism in Western Europe, he certainly would have weighed in against it. Ideas, or essences, are not mind-dependent; they are neither created by nor strictly correlative to the human psyche. In grasping, or intuiting, the idea of a thing, we thereby intuit its essence, which exists in a realm separate from material objects not unlike Frege's position, although Jurkevich here is even more explicitly a Platonist. Kant was led to confining knowledge to the merely apparent alone on the basis of psychological theories that equated the spirit with consciousness. On the contrary, Jurkevich claimed – not surprisingly given his theological background – that

⁶Jurkevich 1865: 353.