

Thomas Nemeth *Editor*

Vladimir Solov'ëv's Justification of the Moral Good

Moral Philosophy

Translated by Thomas Nemeth

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Dedicated To My Father, the Historian

Sergej Mihajlovich Solov'ëv

And To My Grandfather

Reverend Mikhail Vasil'evich Solov'ëv

With a Sense of Living Gratitude

For Our Eternal Connection

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Translator's Introduction

Preface to the Second Edition

Preface to the First Edition (*A Preliminary Conception of the Moral Meaning of Life*)

The General Question of the Meaning of Life

- I. The two-fold denial of the meaning of life.—Theoretical pessimism.—The inner inconsistency of those who argue about the advantages of non-existence but in fact prefer existence.—Their attachment to life is a testament to its actual meaning, even though they do not see it.—Practical pessimism, which ultimately is expressed in suicide.—Suicides also passively testify to the meaning of life, since their despair arises from the fact that they do not find in life the fulfillment of their arbitrary and contradictory demands. The fulfillment of these, however, would be possible only if life were meaningless. Consequently, the non-fulfillment of the demands speaks of the presence in life of a meaning, which these people do not want to know, owing to their own irrationality. (Examples: Romeo, Cleopatra).
- II. The view that life has a meaning, albeit an exclusively aesthetic one, expressed in what is strong, majestic and beautiful without regard for the moral good.—The indisputable refutation of this view by the fact of death, which transforms all natural strength and majesty into nothingness and all natural beauty into extreme ugliness. (Clarification: The biblical words about Alexander the Great). Nietzsche's pitiful attacks on Christianity.—Genuine strength, majesty and beauty are inseparable from the absolute Good.
- III. The view that recognizes the meaning of life lies in the moral good but asserts that this good, as given from above, is realized in immutable forms of life (family, fatherland, church), demands from us submissive acceptance without argument. The view which forgets that the historical forms of the good in life have

¹ E] The following "Table of Contents," minus, of course, the "Translator's Introduction," first appeared in the 2nd edition of the *Justification of the Moral Good* from 1899.

no external unity and finality is inadequate. These forms, therefore, demand from us not formal submission but their essential identification and intrinsic assistance for their continuing growth.

- IV. The opposite error (moral amorphism) asserts that the good exists only in the subjective mental states of each individual person and in the good relations between people that arise from those states. Owing to their artificial and compulsory actions, all collectively organized forms of society lead only to evil.—However, the social organization created by the historical life of humanity is the necessary continuation of the physical organization created by the universal life. All that is real is complex; nothing exists outside this or that form of the collective organization, and the principle of moral amorphism, consistently pursued, logically demands a rejection of all that is real in favor of emptiness or non-existence.
- V. The two extreme moral errors, viz., the doctrine of unconditional obedience before the historical forms of social life and the doctrine of their unconditional rejection (moral amorphism), coincide in that they take the good not in its essence, but regard as unconditionally proper or unconditionally improper what by its nature is conditional (explanatory examples).—The human being in his/her reason and conscience as the unconditional inner form for the Good, as the unconditional content.—The general intrinsic attributes of the good as such: its purity, or self-legality (autonomy), insofar as it is not conditioned by anything (external); its plenitude, or all-unity, insofar as it conditions everything; its force, or reality, insofar as it is realized through everything.—The task of moral philosophy and the predominant task of the system offered here.

Introduction (*Moral Philosophy as Science*)

- I. The formal universality of the idea of the good at the lower stages of moral awareness independently of the material content of this idea (examples and clarifications).—The growth of moral awareness, gradually introducing content into the formal idea of the good that is more in accordance with it and that is internally better connected with it, naturally becomes the science of morality, or moral philosophy.
- II. Moral philosophy does not entirely depend upon positive religion.—St. Paul's testimony on the moral law "written in the hearts" of pagans.—The disputes between the many religions and denominations presuppose a general moral basis (clarifications and examples) and, consequently, the moral norms to which the disputing parties appeal cannot depend on their religious and denominational differences.
- III. The independence of moral philosophy from theoretical philosophy (i.e., from epistemology and metaphysics).—In moral philosophy, we study our inner attitude towards our own actions (and what is logically connected with it), i.e., something *indisputably* accessible to our cognition, since we ourselves produce it. We leave aside the contentious question of the theoretical validity of

the existence of the other which, in terms of morality, has nothing to do with us.—The philosophical critique of cognition can go no further than *doubt* the objective existence of what is cognized. Such a theoretical doubt is insufficient to undermine the subject's morally practical confidence that certain states and actions are obligatory and are of intrinsic worth.—Moreover, theoretical philosophy resolves its skepticism towards this confidence in one positive way or another.—Finally, even if we could be firmly confident that the external world did not exist, this would not eliminate the internal distinction between good and evil. For if it is impermissible to bear malice towards a living person, then it is all the more so towards an empty phantom. If it is shameful to submit slavishly to the inclinations of real sensuality, then it is even more shameful to do so with regard to imaginary ones.

- IV. Moral philosophy is independent of a positive solution to the metaphysical problem of "free will," since morality is possible even under determinism, which asserts the necessity of human actions.—In philosophy, we should distinguish purely *mechanical* necessity, which is intrinsically incompatible with any moral action, from *psychological* necessity and *ethical*, or rationally ideal, necessity.—The indisputable difference between mechanical movement and a mental reaction, which is necessarily aroused by motives, i.e., by ideas united with feelings and desires.—We can distinguish, in terms of the quality of the motivation that prevails in life, a good spiritual nature from an evil one. As we know from experience, to the extent that a good nature, when motivated, can be strengthened and developed and an evil nature, when motivated, can be improved and transformed, we are already given certain conditions for ethical tasks and doctrines based on psychological necessity.
- V. The universal rational idea of the moral good in the human being, acting through an awareness of the unconditional duty to conform to it, can be the motivating power that overcomes various psychological prompts. A human being can do good apart from any relation to what is pleasant or unpleasant for the sake of the essence of the moral good as such, or of the unconditionally excellent.—The concept of moral necessity, or, what comes to the same thing, rational freedom.—Just as psychological necessity (through mental stimulations) is higher than mechanical necessity and a liberation from it, so moral necessity (through the overpowering idea of the moral good), while still being a necessity, is higher than the psychological necessity of mental affects and the freedom from this lower motivation.—In order for the unconditional idea of the moral good to be able to serve as the sufficient reason of human actions, the subject must combine sufficient moral sensitivity to the good with sufficient knowledge of it (clarifications and biblical examples).—Indication of the metaphysical possibility of an arbitrary preference for unconditional evil over the unconditional moral good.—Moral philosophy, as full knowledge of the moral good, is presupposed in the fundamental formulation and resolution of the metaphysical question (that concerning freedom of choice between good and evil) and does not depend in its specifics on the resolution of this question.

Part One. The Moral Good in Human Nature

Chapter 1. The Original Data of Morality.

- I. The feeling of shame (originally of sexual modesty) as the natural root of human morality. The actual shamelessness of all animals and the shamelessness of certain savage peoples: the latter has to do with differences in external relations, and not the feeling itself.—Darwin's erroneous reference to phallism.
- II. The most profound sense of shame: The one who is ashamed separates oneself in the mental act of shame from that of which he or she is ashamed. A person who is ashamed of the fundamental processes of his or her animal nature thereby proves that he or she is not merely a natural phenomenon or process, but has an independent significance higher than the animal (Confirmation and clarification from the Bible).—The feeling of shame is inexplicable from an external utilitarian viewpoint.
- III. The second moral given of human nature—pity or the feeling of sympathy, which expresses the ethical relation of a person not to one's lower nature (as in shame), but to similar living creatures. Pity cannot be the result of the human process, since it exists also in animals—Pity is the individual psychic root of proper social relations.
- IV. The third moral given in human nature, viz., the feeling of respect, or *piety*, which expresses the proper relation of a person to the higher principle and which forms the individual-psychic root of religion.—Darwin's reference to the rudiments of religious feeling in tame animals.
- V. The feelings of shame, pity and respect basically exhaust the entire field of possible human moral relations, viz., to that which is lower, to what is equal to us and to what is higher.—These normal relations are determined here to be *domination* over material sensuality, a *solidarity* with living creatures and an intrinsic *submission* to the superhuman principle.—The other determinations of moral life (all the virtues) can be shown to be variations of these three foundations, or the result of an interaction between them and the intellectual side of the human being.—Example.
- VI. *Conscience* as a variation of shame in a clear and generalized form. The supposed conscience of animals.
- VII. Human reason deduces the universal and necessary principles and rules of moral life from the factual bases of morality.

Chapter 2. The Ascetic Principle in Morality.

- I. The moral self-affirmation of a person as a super-material creature, which is semi-conscious and shown to be unstable in the simple feeling of shame, is elevated by the activity of reason into the principle of asceticism.—The object of this negative attitude in asceticism is not material nature in general, which as such cannot be recognized as evil from any point of view (proof from the essence of the principal pessimistic theories: Vedanta, Sankhya, Buddhism, Egyptian gnostics, Manicheism).

- II. The opposition of the spiritual principle to material nature is immediately expressed in shame and developed in asceticism. This opposition is evoked not by nature alone, but by the embrace of its lower life, which tries to make the rational human being a passive instrument or a useless appendage of a blind physical process. Understanding the fact of shame, reason logically deduces from it the necessary, universal and morally obligatory norm: Our human elemental life must be subordinate to our spiritual life.
- III. The moral conception of the spirit and of the flesh.—The flesh as animality or irrationality, excited and emerging from its essential determination, serves matter or the hidden (potential) foundation of spiritual life.—The real significance of the struggle between the spirit and the flesh.
- IV. The three principal moments in the spirit's struggle with the flesh are: (1) an intrinsic distinction of the spirit from the flesh, made by the former; (2) the spirit's actual defense of its independence; (3) the explicit predominance of the spirit over the flesh, or the elimination of the evil carnal principle. The practical significance of the second moment, which causes specific and obligatory moral demands, above all the demand for self-control.
- V. Preliminary ascetic tasks: the acquisition of the ability to control breathing and sleep by the rational will.
- VI. Ascetic demands concerning the functions of nutrition and reproduction.—Misunderstandings in the question of sexual relations.—The Christian view of the matter.
- VII. The various spheres in the struggle of the spirit with the flesh.—The three moments of the psychological grip of the evil principle: thought, imagination, possession.—The corresponding ascetic principles in order that an evil mental state not pass into passion and vice: "the dashing of the Babylonian babies against a stone"; distracting reflection; the restoring moral action.
- VIII. Asceticism, or abstinence raised to a principle, is an indubitable element of the moral good.—When this morally good element is taken by itself to be the whole and the unconditional good, asceticism appears as evil with its prototype being the devil who does not eat, drink, sleep and is celibate.—Since the evil or pitiless ascetic, as imitator of the devil, gets no moral credit, this means the very principle of asceticism has moral value, or expresses the moral good, only conditionally, namely on the condition that it combines with the principle of altruism, which is rooted in pity.

Chapter 3. Pity and Altruism.

- I. The positive significance of altruism.—Just as shame distinguishes the human being from the rest of nature and sets us apart from other animals, so pity intrinsically connects us with all of life.
- II. Only pity, or compassion, and not sharing pleasures or engaging in revelry with others can serve as the intrinsic foundation of the moral attitude towards other creatures (regardless of any metaphysical theory).—Positive participation in another's pleasure means the approval of this pleasure, which,

- however, can be bad. Consequently, participation in it happens to be good or bad depending on the object. By itself, it is not, in any case, the *basis* of moral relations (which can also be immoral).—Elimination of certain objections.
- III. Pity as an inducement to altruistic actions and as a possible basis of altruistic principles.
- IV. Schopenhauer's view of the irrational, or mysterious, character of compassion, which supposedly is an immediate and perfect identification of one individual with another different one. The refutation of this view.—The fundamental manifestation of compassion, viz., the maternal instinct of animals, is clearly the tightest real connection between one who pities and the one who is pitied.—In general, the connection given in experience and natural reason between all creatures as parts of one whole sufficiently explains its psychological expression in pity, which therefore is fully consistent with the obvious sense of the universe and agrees with reason, or rationality.—The false conception of pity as an immediate and complete identification of two creatures.—Clarifications.
- V. The unlimited universal pity described by St. Isaac the Syrian.
- VI. Pity by itself is still not a sufficient foundation for *all* of morality as Schopenhauer erroneously claimed.—Heartfelt kindness to living creatures is compatible with immorality in other respects.—Just as there are evil ascetics, so there happen to be intemperate and dissolute souls who, while not directly and intentionally doing evil, harm not only themselves, but also others through their shameful behavior.
- VII. The true essence of pity is not a simple identification of oneself with another, but the recognition of the other's own (proper) significance.—The right to life and the greatest possible sense of well-being.—This idea of pity, taken as universal and as independent of the subjective mental states connected with it (i.e., taken logically and not psychologically), is connected with *moral truth* and *justice*. It is true that other creatures are similar to me, and it is right that I treat them as I do myself.—Altruism as corresponding to moral truth, or to what is, and egoism as presupposing an untruth, or what is not, since the individual self does not in fact have the exclusive and central significance that it ascribes to itself in egoism.—Although the extension of personal egoism to the family, the nation, the state and religion expresses the historical achievements of morality, it does not eliminate the fundamental lie of egoism, which is refuted by the unconditional truth of the altruistic principle.
- VIII. The two rules, namely that of justice (harm no one) and that of mercy (help everyone), that arise from the principle of altruism.—The erroneous separation and opposition of justice and mercy, which in fact are only different sides or aspects of the manifestation of one and the same ethical motive.—The moral principle in the form of justice requires not a material, or qualitative, equality of all individual and collective subjects, but only that with all the necessary and desirable differences something that is unconditional and the same for all is retained, namely the significance of each as an end in oneself, never only as a means for another's ends.

Chapter 4. The Religious Principle in Morality.

- I. The peculiarity of moral determinations of a religious character.—Their root lies in the normal relation of children to parents, which is based on an inequality that cannot be reduced to justice or deduced from pity. The infant immediately recognizes the *superiority* of his or her parents and his or her *dependence* on them, feels *respect* for them and the necessity of *obedience*.—Clarifications.
- II. The original germ of religion is neither fetishism (proof) nor naturalistic mythology (proof), but *pietas erga parentes*—first towards the mother, then towards the father.
- III. The religious attitude of children towards the parents, as their immediate providence, naturally becomes more complex and spiritualized, passing into veneration of the dead parents who are raised above all the surroundings and possess mysterious powers; in life, the *father* is only a candidate for a god and for the time being only a mediator and priest of the real god—of a dead *grandfather* or ancestor.—The character and significance of a religion of ancestors (illustrations from the beliefs of ancient peoples).
- IV. Despite all the differences of religious conceptions and ways of worshipping God—from the primitive cult of our tribal ancestors up to Christian worship, in spirit and in truth, of the one universal Heavenly Father—the moral essence of religion remains one and the same. Insofar as both the savage cannibal and the perfect saint are religious, they agree in their filial relation towards the higher and in their resolution to carry out not their own will, but that of the Father.—Such a natural religion is an inseparable part of the law written in our hearts and without which meaningful fulfillment of other moral demands would be impossible.
- V. Pseudo-godlessness, or impiety.—Examples.—Cases of actual impiety, i.e., of a non-recognition of anything higher than oneself speak as little against the moral principle of piety and its obligatory character as the factual existence of shameless and pitiless people undermines the obligations of abstinence and philanthropy.—Regardless of the presence or absence in us of any positive beliefs, we *must*, as *rational* creatures, recognize that mundane life and our own life has meaning, by virtue of which everything depends on a higher rational principle towards which we must adopt a filial attitude, subordinating all of our actions to the “will of the Father,” which speaks to us through reason and conscience.
- VI. In the sphere of piety, as in morality in general, higher demands do not cancel lower ones, but presuppose and include them.—(Examples).—Our real dependence on the one Father of the universe is not immediate, insofar as our existence is immediately determined by heredity, i.e., by our ancestors and the surrounding environment they created.—Since the higher will has determined our existence through our ancestors, in bowing before its actions we cannot be indifferent to its instruments.—(Clarifications).—Morally obligatory veneration of providential people.