

V. S. Soloviev and the Russian Roots of Personalism

Personalist philosophy is generally understood to have emerged in the middle of the last century. But an earlier antecedent of this important school of thought has been overlooked.

by Dylan Pahman

While the importance of thinkers such as N. Berdyaev, S. L. Frank, and other Russian émigrés to the development of twentieth-century personalist philosophy is widely acknowledged,¹ one major influence on their respective religious philosophies is often ignored in discussions of their contributions to personalism: the nineteenth-century Russian Orthodox philosopher Vladimir Soloviev.² While Soloviev does not speak of himself as a personalist, several essential aspects of what came to be called personalism can be found in his thought: viz. the inviolable dignity of the human person, understood in terms of Kant’s categorical imperative; the importance of free human action; and the relational nature of persons, advocating a middle way between atomistic individualism and collectivism.³ Soloviev’s personalism is significant not only for its incorporation of German antecedents such as Kant⁴ but also for its use of insights from the Western saint Thomas Aquinas as well as from Eastern Christian sources.⁵ This paper examines the three personalist aspects of his thought listed above—(1) human dignity, (2) human agency, and (3) human relationality—as he employs them in his *magnum opus* of moral philosophy, *The Justification of the Good*.⁶

Human Dignity

While Soloviev’s philosophy has many differences from that of Immanuel Kant, Soloviev credits his German predecessor with being “[t]he founder of

moral philosophy *as a science*.”⁷ Taking a more theological stance, Soloviev formulates his own “unconditional principle of morality”:

*In complete inner harmony with the higher will and recognizing the absolute worth or significance of all other persons, since they too are in the image and likeness of God, participate, as fully as in thee lies, in the work of making thyself and everyone more perfect, so that the Kingdom of God may be finally revealed in the world.*⁸

However, when explaining what this means for our social relations, Kant’s influence can be heard loud and clear:

Pity which we feel towards a fellow-being acquires another significance when we see in that being the image and likeness of God. We then recognise the *unconditional* worth of that person; we recognise that he is an end in himself for God, and still more must be so for us. We realise that God Himself does not treat him *merely* as a means.⁹

For Soloviev, the categorical imperative comes from taking a God’s-eye view of our neighbor, so-to-speak, always looking to the dignity of the human person: “I pity in that being not merely his sufferings but the cause of them—I regret that his actual reality falls so short of his true dignity and possible perfection.”¹⁰ As such, the categorical imperative cannot be fulfilled from an individualistic point of view, but requires social and even political action:

[N]o human being can alone realise either in himself or in any one else that absolute fullness of perfection in seeking which we are likened to God.... Consequently it demands that we should take part in the collective organizations—especially in that of the state as inclusive of all the others—by means of which the historical process is, by the will of Providence, carried on.¹¹

So as not to be misunderstood as overly statist, however, Soloviev clarifies, “Not every one is called to political activity or to the service of the state in the narrow sense of the term. But it is the duty of every one to serve, in his own place, that same purpose—the common good—which the state ought to serve also.”¹²

We might recognize here the Thomistic claim, reflected in Catholic social teaching, that the state is “the means of promoting the common good in civil

society”¹³—a claim that, of course, must be understood in light of the principle of subsidiarity.¹⁴ We will see below that the same is true for Soloviev as well. For now, we need only note his own grounding of the principle: “*The only moral norm is the principle of human dignity or of the absolute worth of each individual, in virtue of which society is determined as the inward and free harmony of all.*”¹⁵ Thus, human dignity is understood as that God-given worth which requires us to limit our treatment of our neighbor and respect her freedom as a rational animal, because to do otherwise would be to treat her as a mere means to our individual ends.

Human Agency

Soloviev objects to the idea of absolute freedom as a requirement for morality. Determinism, on his account, is grounded in the principle of sufficient reason that “everything that happens ... is *determined ... by sufficient reasons, apart from which it cannot take place, and given which it happens with necessity.*”¹⁶ He outlines three different kinds of determinism: mechanical (inorganic), psychological (irrational), and “*rationally ideal.*”¹⁷ The last of these he affirms to be not only compatible with rational freedom but necessary for morality. The first is “exclusive of morality” and the second at best only “allows for some moral elements.”¹⁸ Minerals are bound by mechanical necessity, irrational animals by psychological. However, since animals have some power of self-determination, freedom is not sufficient for morality to Soloviev: Their actions may be regarded in moral ways—they may be ferocious or meek, brave or cowardly, but they “are not aware of these qualities as either good or bad.”¹⁹

Human beings, conversely, are able to make such judgments. As such, moral action cannot rely on absolute freedom where, quoting Duns Scotus, “nothing except the will itself causes the act of willing in the will.”²⁰ Rather, when it comes to moral action, such actions are determined by the good. We might say that Soloviev’s moral necessity is a species of Aquinas’s “necessity of end”²¹ and in that sense it cannot be arbitrary or absolutely free. Indeed, for Soloviev only evil actions can be arbitrary: “When I choose the good, I do so not because of my whim but because it is good, because it has value, and I am capable of realising its significance.”²² Again, as Aquinas put it, “the good understood is the object of the will, and moves it as an end.”²³ Soloviev stipulates, “A sufficient knowledge of the good in combination with a sufficient receptivity to it *necessarily* determines our will in the moral sense.”²⁴ Under these two

conditions,

The good determines my choice in its favour by all the infinite fullness [sic] of its positive content and reality. This choice is therefore *infinitely* determined; it is absolutely necessary, and there is no arbitrariness in it at all. In the choice of evil, on the contrary, there is no determining reason, no kind of necessity, and therefore infinite arbitrariness. The question then assumes the following form: given a full and clear knowledge of the good, can a rational being prove to be so unreceptive to it as to reject it utterly and unconditionally and choose the evil? Such lack of receptivity to the good that is perfectly known would be something absolutely irrational, and it is only an irrational act of this description that would truly come under the definition of absolute freedom or of arbitrary choice.²⁵

To be morally and rationally free, to Soloviev, is to be free from the lower forms of necessity—mechanical and psychological—and bound to the ideal of the good. However, moral freedom, which Soloviev regarded as “an ethical *fact*” is not the end of his understanding of the importance of human agency. He also affirmed “political freedom” as “an ethical *postulate*.”²⁶ To examine this, I turn to human relationality.

Human Relationality

Despite his high claims for the state elsewhere, Soloviev claims that, first and foremost, “the Church” is “the fundamental form of the moral organisation of humanity.”²⁷ In its catholicity, the Church is the fulfillment of the moral meaning of our natural dependence upon one another:

The individual does not find true freedom when his social environment weighs upon him as external and alien to him. Such alienation is abolished by the conception of the universal Church alone, according to which each must find in the social whole not the external limit but the inward completion of his liberty. Man *in any case* stands in need of such completion by the ‘other’; for in virtue of his natural limitations he is necessarily a dependent being, and cannot by himself or alone be a sufficient ground of his own existence. Deprive a man of what he owes to others, beginning with his parents and ending with the state and world-history, and nothing will be left of his existence, let alone his freedom. It would be madness to deny this fact of inevitable dependence. Man is not strong enough and needs *help* in order that his

freedom might be a real thing and not merely a verbal claim. But the help which man obtains *from the world* is accidental, temporal, and partial, whilst the universal Church promises him secure, eternal and all-sufficient help from God. It is with that help alone that he can be actually free, that is, have sufficient power to satisfy his will.²⁸

Soloviev transitions from the role of the universal Church to the role of the state through examining the conversion of the Roman centurion Cornelius in Acts 10:

If the centurion Cornelius, having become a real Christian, remained, nevertheless, a soldier, and was not divided into two alien and disconnected personalities, it is clear that he must have become a *Christian soldier*. A collection of such soldiers forms a Christian army. Now the army is both the extreme expression and the first real basis of the state; and if a Christian army is possible, a Christian state is therefore even more possible.²⁹

Admittedly, the idea of a Christian state was far more plausible at the close of the nineteenth century than it is today. Indeed, Soloviev's own political vision assumes a monarchy with close and positive church-state relations. However, for the purpose of demonstrating his personalism, that context is irrelevant. And in any case, his insights transcend it.

As already noted, Soloviev understood human persons to be "dependent rational animals," to borrow a phrase from Alasdair MacIntyre.³⁰ Solidarity is a demand of morality due to our natural relation to all other human beings:

Every single individual possesses as such the potentiality of perfection or of positive infinity, namely, the capability to understand all things with his intellect and to embrace all things with his heart, or to enter into a living communion with everything. This double infinity—the power of representation and the power of striving and activity, called in the Bible, according to the interpretation of the Fathers of the Church, the image and likeness of God—necessarily belongs to every person. It is in this that the absolute significance, dignity, and worth of human personality consist, and this is the basis of its inalienable rights. It is clear that the realisation of this infinity, or the actuality of the perfection, demands that all should participate in it. It cannot be the private possession of each *taken separately*, but becomes his through his relation to all.³¹

Our fundamental relationality is the basis for the realization of our moral development. The good of the individual cannot be fulfilled apart from the common good, and vice versa: “subordination to society uplifts the individual” and “the independence of the individual lends strength to the social order.”³²

There is a certain resonance here with the Roman Catholic articulation of subsidiarity as “a graduated order” that enables the state to “more freely, powerfully, and effectively do all those things that belong to it alone.”³³ Social atomism is an idle fantasy to Soloviev:

isolated individuals do not exist and therefore do not grow in perfection. The true subject of moral progress—as well as of historical progress in general—is the individual man *together with and inseparably from the collective man* or society. In other words, the relation between the true significance of the individual and the true force of society is a direct and not an inverse one.³⁴

As for politics, “The order of the state is a *relatively* higher but by no means a perfect form of social life, and it therefore has only a *relative* advantage over the organisation based upon kinship.”³⁵ The state does not abolish the primitive clan but rather transforms it into the family as we know it, which retains certain rights by virtue of natural law.³⁶ And the state is not the highest form of social organization: as I have already noted, for Soloviev this place is held by the spiritual communion of the Church.

Once again, in explaining the morally essential nature of human society in accordance with the categorical imperative, Soloviev reiterates what makes humanity superior to other animals, such as ants, who also have some form of society:

The right of the person as such is based upon his human dignity inherent in him and inalienable, upon the formal infinity of reason in every human being, upon the fact that each person is unique and individual, and must therefore be an end in himself and not merely a means or an instrument.... Society, therefore, can compel a person to do something only through an act of his own will,—otherwise it will not be a case of laying an obligation upon a person, but of making use of a thing.³⁷

Soloviev thus walks a careful line. While insisting on the essential dependence of the individual on society, the inherent relationality of human persons, he is careful not to lose sight of the personhood of the individual as a free rational animal in the social whole that is the basis for her moral fulfillment.

This personalist perspective has wide-reaching social-ethical implications, helping Soloviev affirm, for example, the moral good of patriotism while simultaneously and without contradiction denouncing the moral evil of nationalism.³⁸ The individual has a duty of piety to the nation, but the nation too must serve the common good, not only of its individual members but of the rest of the world as well. How to walk that line between globalism and nationalism, to be *of* one's country yet *for* the common good of all, is perhaps the most important question facing the world today, and Soloviev's insights, grounded in, and themselves grounding, the personalist tradition, remain as salient for our own time as they were for his.

Conclusion

By the mid-twentieth century, fifty years after Soloviev, Jacques Maritain could write of a “‘personalist’ current” sweeping across a wide variety of philosophical schools throughout the world. While we should remember Maritain's caution that personalism is not monolithic, we can see in Soloviev the general “phenomenon of reaction against [the] two opposite errors” of atomistic individualism and totalitarian collectivism that characterized later personalist philosophy.³⁹ Through his likely influence on the Russian émigré community in Paris and elsewhere,⁴⁰ and due to the clear resonance of his philosophy with the emergent personalism of the time, we are overdue to acknowledge Soloviev as a significant font of Maritain's “personalist current.” Nor should his work any longer remain obscure to personalist philosophers and theologians of today.

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Notes

1. See Robert Bird, "Concepts of the Person in the Symbolist Philosophy of Viacheslav Ivanov," *Studies in East European Thought* 61, no. 2/3, The Discourse of Personality in the Russian Intellectual Tradition (August 2009): 89-96; Kristina Stöckl, "Modernity and Its Critique in 20th Century Russian Orthodox Thought," *Studies in East European Thought* 58, no. 4, Orthodox Christianity (December 2006): 243-269; Gasan Gusejnov, "The Linguistic Aporias of Alexei Losev's Mystical Personalism," *Studies in East European Thought* 61, no. 2/3, The Discourse of Personality in the Russian Intellectual Tradition (August 2009): 153-164; Philipp Fluri, "Personalism: A New/Old Trend in Postmarxist Russian Philosophy," *Theoria: An International Journal for Theory, History and Foundations of Science*, Segunda Epoca 8, no. 19 (November 1993): 149-155; Helmut Dahm, "Russian Philosophy: Traditional and Contemporary Accounts," *Studies in Soviet Thought* 22, no. 3 (August 1981): 165-173.
2. Richard Hughes, for example, makes no mention of Soloviev in his overview of Berdyaev's personalism. This is no criticism for Hughes but simply illustrative of the common trend. Richard A. Hughes, "Nikolai Berdyaev's Personalism," *International Journal of Orthodox Theology* 6, no. 3 (2015): 63-80. It should be noted herein that Russian names admit of various transliterations in Roman characters. Thus, "Soloviev," "Solov'ëv," and "Solovyov" are the same person. I here use "Soloviev" in the body of this paper because that was his own preference. See Vladimir Wozniuk, "Vladimir S. Soloviev: Moral Philosopher of Unity," *Journal of Markets & Morality* 16, no. 1 (Spring 2013): 323-329.
3. In his accessible introduction to personalism, Jonas Mortensen identifies the three fundamental values of personalism as "Humans are relational"; "Humans are beings that engage"; and "Humans have inherent dignity." Jonas Norgaard Mortensen, *The Common Good: An Introduction to Personalism*, trans. Benjamin Marco Dalton (Frederiksværk, Denmark: Boedal Publishing, 2014), 16, emphasis original. I follow him herein by focusing on human dignity, action, and relationality.
4. Soloviev's German preceptors also included Leibniz and Schelling. See Randall A. Poole, "The Neo-Idealist Reception of Kant in the Moscow Psychological Society," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 60, no. 2 (April 1999): 319-343.
5. Soloviev cites the Eastern Church Fathers throughout *The Justification of the Good*. On his use of Aquinas, see Vladimir's Wozniuk's notes on the last chapter

of the *Justification*: V. S. Soloviev, "The Moral Organization of Humanity as a Whole," *Journal of Markets & Morality* 16, no. 1 (Spring 2013): 339n14, 340n15.

6. All quotes from this work herein are from Vladimir Solovyov, *The Justification of the Good: An Essay in Moral Philosophy*, ed. Boris Jakim, trans. Natalie Duddington (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 2005).

7. Solovyov, *The Justification of the Good*, lxix.

8. *Ibid.*, 152, emphasis original.

9. *Ibid.*, 154, emphasis original.

10. *Ibid.*, 154.

11. *Ibid.*, 154.

12. *Ibid.*, 154.

13. Pope John XXIII, Encyclical Letter *Pacem in Terris* (April 11, 1963), 136, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-xxiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_j-xxiii_enc_11041963_pacem.html.

14. See Pope Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter *Caritas in Veritate* (June 29, 2009), 67.

15. Solovyov, *The Justification of the Good*, 231, emphasis original.

16. *Ibid.*, 12, emphasis original.

17. *Ibid.*, 12, emphasis original.

18. *Ibid.*, 12.

19. *Ibid.*, 14.

20. *Ibid.*, 16.

21. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiæ* Ia 82.1.

22. Solovyov, *The Justification of the Good*, 18.

23. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiæ* Ia 82.4.

24. Solovyov, *The Justification of the Good*, 18, emphasis original.

25. *Ibid.*, 18.

26. *Ibid.*, 18n-19n, emphasis original.

27. *Ibid.*, 373.

28. *Ibid.*, 373, emphasis original.

29. *Ibid.*, 380.

30. See Alasdair MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues* (Chicago and La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1999).

31. Solovyov, *The Justification of the Good*, 176-177, emphasis original.

32. *Ibid.*, 180.

33. Pope Paul VI, Encyclical Letter *Quadragesimo Anno* (May 15, 1931), 80.

34. Solovyov, *The Justification of the Good*, 352, emphasis original.

35. *Ibid.*, 185-186.

36. See *ibid.*, 185-190.

37. Ibid., 229.

38. See *ibid.*, 239–258. See also, Greg Gaut, “Can a Christian be a Nationalist? Vladimir Solov'ev's Critique of Nationalism,” *Slavic Review* 57, no. 1 (Spring 1998): 77–94.

39. Jacques Maritain, *The Person and the Common Good*, trans. John J. Fitzgerald (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1946), 12.

40. I look forward to future scholarship indicating the precise character of Soloviev's influence on Berdyaev, Frank, et. al.