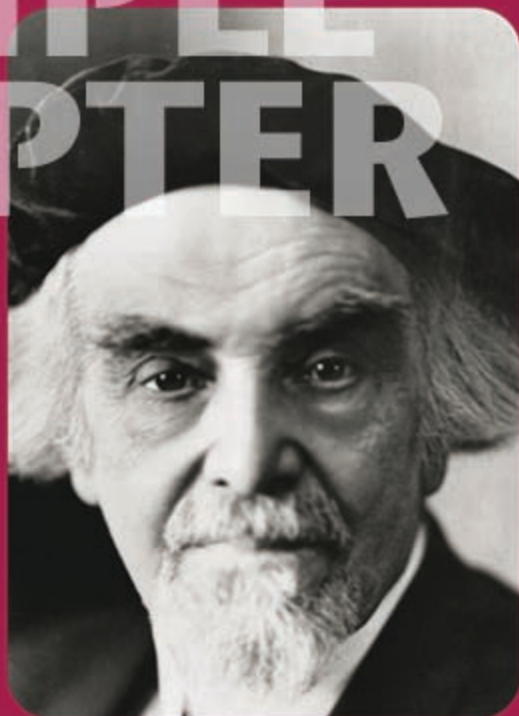


C.G. Jung and Nikolai Berdyaev

Individuation and the Person

SAMPLE
CHAPTER



A Critical Comparison

Georg Nicolaus

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Berdyaev's life

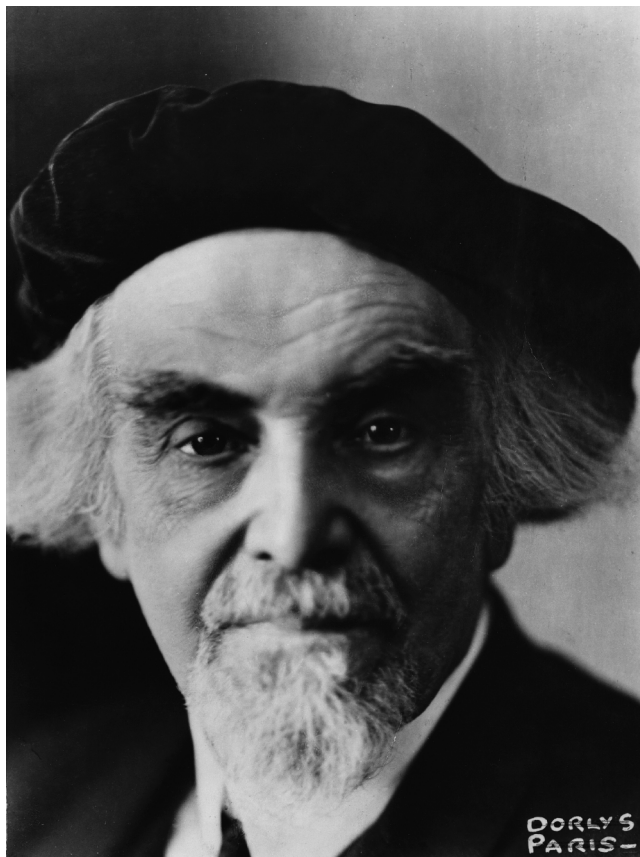


Figure 2.1 Portrait of Nikolai Berdyaev in Paris towards the end of his life.

As most readers will not be familiar with Berdyaev, I want to begin, in addition to offering some biographical details, by conveying a flavour of his personality. The French writer Madeleine Davy, who knew him personally, gives us a particularly vivid description of her impression of Berdyaev:

Tall, of athletic stature, although fragile, a subtle dignity emanated from his personality. Nothing was vulgar with him or the least bit banal. When one listened to him, his sonorous voice awakened the best in oneself. His sheer presence drew one beyond one's limitations, communicated a new dynamism to the spirit and modified the rhythm of time. Everything received a new clarity. . . . When one was with him one forgot oneself and savoured a strange joy . . . Something became alive . . . to use an expression of Novalis, it seems possible to say that it was the 'divine child' in oneself that moved.

(Davy 1991: 74, trans.)

Berdyaev wrote an autobiography, which is one of his most readable books. Similar to Jung's *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* (1995) it is not so much a factual account but rather a portrait of his journey of individuation in its intimate connection with world events. Neither in his autobiography nor in any of Berdyaev's other writings does one feel any gulf between life and thought, so much so that Berdyaev writes: 'When I think about my life I am led to the conclusion that it has not been the life of a philosopher in the current sense of the word . . . I was always aware of its irrational and unpredictable nature' (Berdyaev 1950: xiii). It is this awareness of the irrational that makes Berdyaev's thinking so rich in psychological insight.

Berdyaev was born near Kiev in 1874 when vague forebodings of the collapse of Tsarist Russia were already in the air. He was imprisoned twice, lived through two revolutions and the First and Second World Wars, and spent the second half of his life in forced exile in Paris. As a consequence, all his thought is marked by an acute awareness of volcanic energies always looming close to the surface of the seemingly solid ground of bourgeois existence, ready to erupt at any moment. The opening sentences of his philosophical autobiography convey to us this mood of soul. Berdyaev never felt at home in the world:

The first response to the world of a creature who is born into it is of immense significance. I cannot remember my first cry on encountering the world, but I know for certain that from the very beginning I was aware that I had fallen into an alien realm . . . The consciousness of being rooted in the earth was alien to me, and I was strongly attracted by the Orphic myth concerning the origin of the human soul, which speaks of a falling away of man's spirit from a higher world into a lower.

(Berdyaev 1950: 1)

We get a flavour of the 'gnostic' mood that pervades Berdyaev's philosophy here: the world is an alien realm, the exile of celestial souls.¹ With Berdyaev, we find ourselves in a very different world from Jung's. While Jung experiences a strong bond with the earth, nature and its mysteries, Berdyaev's fundamental intuition is that of a spiritual origin of the human soul, which is 'thrown' into an alien realm. Along with the Heideggerian sense of existential *Angst* in relation to 'this world', for Berdyaev there is an equally vivid sense of the reality of the spiritual. Philosophy is for Berdyaev a way to 'renounce and be relieved of this unspeakable anguish . . . anguish takes its rise in life . . . and drives man towards the transcendent' (ibid.: 44). In Berdyaev's inner world there is a constant fiery clash between darkness and light. Out of the darkness, light is born; such is the creative process that overcomes 'the world'. Creativity is for him 'that very movement towards transcendence and the evocation of the image of the wholly other in relation to this life' (ibid.: 44). It is a response of man's total existence to the facticity of his 'thrownness'.

Berdyaev's rich inner life took shape in a protected but also deeply troubled family environment. His family belonged to the disintegrating Russian nobility. In his ancestry 'inbred aristocracy, inherited mysticism, the best traditions of military valour and ancient chivalry, independence of thought to the point of agnosticism' (Lawrie 1960: 13) mingled. This imbued him with a strong, rebellious dislike of control by external authority and an ethos of 'spiritual chivalry'.

His father came from Russian nobility with a long military tradition. He was a freethinker who liked Voltaire and used to make jokes about the Bible at the dinner table to the dismay of his French Catholic mother. But her religious inclinations did not go very deep either. Berdyaev made his way towards Christianity only much later, without the sort of baggage which Jung had to carry from his pastoral home. On his mother's side of French origin 'there was scarcely an ancestor without a title, count or prince or even king' (ibid.: 13). Once again, typical for Berdyaev, he writes: 'I was never conscious of belonging to my parents . . . the ties of blood . . . evoked a strange aversion in me' (Berdyaev 1950: 1). As a student he would rebel against his noble descent and join the social revolutionaries, who sought to overthrow the old order. He was 'unable to recognize true aristocracy, the aristocracy of the spirit' (ibid.: 19) in the aristocratic society to which he belonged. His sympathies were with the misfits of society. He became and remained for all of his life a socialist who at the same time believed in an 'aristocracy of the spirit'.

Berdyaev had one brother, 15 years older than him, who had serious psychological problems and eventually had to be hospitalized. He spent his childhood in Kiev, essentially growing up as a single child, left very much to his own devices, fiercely defending his independence even as a little boy. His room was his kingdom, which nobody was allowed to enter. Illness, neurotic tendencies and outbursts of violent rage were common in the Berdyaev household. Berdyaev himself had a lifelong tendency to fall into rages, and he

suffered from hypochondria and a nervous tic all his life. All of this contributed not only to a vivid sense of the frailty of the human condition but also to an intensely introverted attitude, coloured by a sense of alienation from the surrounding world. He lived in his own inner world. He began to read novels and philosophical books at a very early age. He writes that 'already as a boy I became conscious of my philosophical vocation' (ibid.: 11). He read Kant, Schopenhauer and the novels of Tolstoy and above all Dostoyevsky. Dostoyevsky in particular 'shook his soul' (ibid.: 25). One character of Dostoyevsky's novels he felt a special kinship with was Stavrogin, the revolutionary anarchist from *The Possessed*:

There was, however, an evil spirit in me, since everyone has, as it were, his positive and his negative 'Other one' within himself. My evil spirit was typified by Stavrogin. When I was a young man people used to call me Stavrogin and I used to relish the identification. I liked being 'the aristocrat of the Revolution' . . . There was, as a matter of fact, something of Stavrogin in me, although I believe I have successfully gotten the better of it . . . It is a sign of ignorance and narrow-mindedness to be surprised at contradictions in man. Man is fundamentally a contradictory being; and this denotes something deeper and more important than any seeming absence of contradiction in him.

(ibid.: 25)

The fiery temperament of the revolutionary remained always alive within him but he was able, for the most part, to contain and transmute its destructiveness.

In 1894, now as many other intellectuals of the time a Marxist, he became a student at Kiev University. He was arrested on several occasions and was finally excluded from the university for taking part in illegal demonstrations. At this time demonstrations and student unrest were the order of the day. He began to make a name for himself as one of the leading intellectuals of the Marxist Movement. In his earliest writings he argued for a non-materialistic interpretation of Marxism, which posits as the foundation of the human social world the dimension of the psychic: 'All social institutions are nothing other than the objectified psyche of man' (Roessler 1956: 13, trans.). Both the material, economic basis and the ideological superstructures ought to be dissolved into the psychic basis as the most fundamental reality. We find here already the beginnings of Berdyayev's later metaphysics of the spirit, which is here still termed the psychic. This is an interesting parallel with Jung, which we will be able to enrich and elaborate as we go along.

Gradually Berdyayev's interpretation of Marxism, which was never materialistic, found itself more and more at odds with the economic materialism of the Marxist orthodoxy. He increasingly rebelled against the collectivism of the movement and 'the problem of the revolution becomes for him the problem of the human personality' (ibid.: 20). After being imprisoned in

1901 by the Tsarist regime he studied philosophy in Heidelberg for a short period, and then immersed himself in the literary and philosophical circles in St. Petersburg, before finally moving back to Moscow. In St. Petersburg and Moscow he had contacts with many Russian intellectuals, including Sergei Bulgakov, Lev Shestov and Dimitri Mereshovsky. In St. Petersburg he immersed himself in the eccentric literary world of the Russian cultural renaissance: 'We saw the glow of a new dawn, and the end of an old age seemed to coincide with a new era, which would bring about a complete transfiguration of life' (Berdyaev 1950: 141). But, as with all such movements he got involved in, Berdyaev soon kept his distance, noting 'unmistakable signs of decadence in the whole movement' (ibid.: 141). He felt that 'Eros held decisive sway over Logos: and this involved above all a disregard, especially painful to me, of the problem of personality and freedom . . . these people were vividly and highly pronounced individualities, but they lacked personality' (ibid.: 155).

In Moscow Berdyaev spent much time with the 'pilgrims, tramps and vagabonds of "Holy Russia"' (ibid.: 196). It is characteristic that he felt much greater kinship with these simple, uneducated peasants than with most of the educated intellectuals. He admired their vivid language and imagery, which was 'vigorous and daringly original . . . The whole atmosphere was expressive of a passionate concern and search for truth and a great spiritual and intellectual intensity' (ibid.: 197). Among them he found individuals with the elementary visionary temperament of a Jacob Boehme. These for him were 'the true revolutionaries of Russia, more genuine and ultimately effective than the social and political revolutionaries' (ibid.: 200).

In 1904 Berdyaev entered into a marriage with Lydia Trusheva, but they remained childless. In his autobiography he mostly keeps silent about their relationship but it appears that they did have a very close bond of love. Throughout this time Berdyaev was already publishing his work, as well as editing various philosophical journals, and he founded a 'free academy for spiritual culture' in 1919. He became a promoter of the 'New religious consciousness' which sought a fresh, undogmatic approach to Christianity. In 1916 he published his first magnum opus, entitled *The Meaning of the Creative Act* (1962).

Berdyaev had in the meantime moved from his early sociological interpretation of Marxism to an interpretation of it in the light of Kant's and Fichte's transcendental idealism. Their opposition of being and moral obligation became for him a 'revolutionary idea', a 'symbol of the protest against reality' (Roessler 1956: 24). The fundamental ethical idea founded on this opposition was for Berdyaev that of the personality. To be the eternal protestant against all sheer reality was for Berdyaev, like for Max Scheler,² a basic human quality, which marks man as a person. Kant's notion of the personality as an end in itself became for him the guiding principle of revolutionary action. *Spirit* now became for him the truly revolutionary force and this

meant that a way had to be sought out of the abstractions of transcendental idealism and into a transcendental realism of the person as a living, concrete spiritual reality. Berdyayev found the means for such a breakthrough in the integral epistemology of Khomyakov, Kireevsky and Soloviev. We will see in the course of this book how this spiritual realism becomes refined into Berdyayev's specific form of Christian existentialism.

In the *Meaning of the Creative Act* (1962/1916) he finally offered *his* vision of a new Christianity, which integrated a radical notion of freedom and creativity and was strongly inspired by Jacob Boehme's theosophy. The writing of the book was precipitated by an overwhelming experience of a sudden illumination.

After having been a professor without a proper degree at Moscow University Berdyayev got imprisoned once more, this time by the new Soviet government, and finally was exiled from Russia along with a number of other Russian intellectuals. After a short time in Berlin, where he met Max Scheler, he finally settled in Paris. Just as in Russia, Berdyayev was in steady contact with a large number of intellectuals there, including Jacques Maritain, Gabriel Marcel, Etienne Gilson and E. Mounier. Apart from various gatherings of like-minded spirits, including regular weekly meetings at his home and the occasional delivery of a talk, Berdyayev's life in Paris was concentrated on writing (including a vast amount of daily correspondence) and contemplation.

Berdyayev was extremely well read but his thinking 'had another source and proceeded from some primal experience which cannot be acquired by means of study and reading' (Roessler 1956: 82). What interested him was the raw eruption of the untamed creative impulse, which was 'absolutely unique, unbidden and lawless' (ibid.: 218). He wrote 'in response to an inner voice which commands me to transmit my spiritual experience'. His writing was for him 'no luxury but a means of survival, an almost physiological necessity' (ibid.: 218), a 'form of spiritual hygiene, meditation and concentration, a way of life' (Berdyayev 1953a: 246, trans.). He describes how 'the discursive and deductive processes of reasoning give place in my mind to sudden disturbing visions. The thoughts to which I attach most importance came to me like flashes of lightning, like instantaneous illuminations' (ibid.: 219).

We could say that for Berdyayev the creative process of his writing had the psychological significance of actualizing the transcendent function. We would therefore expect his thought to penetrate beneath the surface and offer us a perspective that draws upon the sort of 'primitive' visionary consciousness of the Russian God seekers, which he so loved, giving it the refinement of philosophical reflection.

In Paris Berdyayev wrote a number of books in which his theory of personalism gained its final definition, in dialogue with contemporary existentialist thought. Berdyayev's wife, Lydia, died in 1945 and he died three years later, on 23 March 1948, while writing, the finished manuscript of his last work, *The Existential Dialectic of the Divine and the Human* (1949a) on his desk.