



## Some Basic Notions of the Personalism of Nicolas Berdyaev

Vincent J. McNamara

Volume 16, numéro 2, 1960

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1019996ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1019996ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

### Éditeur(s)

Laval théologique et philosophique, Université Laval

### ISSN

0023-9054 (imprimé)

1703-8804 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

### Citer cet article

McNamara, V. J. (1960). Some Basic Notions of the Personalism of Nicolas Berdyaev. *Laval théologique et philosophique*, 16(2), 278–302.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1019996ar>

## Some Basic Notions of the Personalism of Nicolas Berdyaev

---

The title of Donald Lowrie's recent biography of Nicolas Berdyaev, *Rebellious Prophet*,<sup>1</sup> is fittingly chosen both to express the living personality of Berdyaev, and to indicate a characteristic of his personalism. The late Professor Egbert Munzer had observed a subtle anarchism in Berdyaev's personalism, but had refrained from criticizing it owing to Berdyaev's passionate defence of human liberty in face of personality-killing totalitarianisms.<sup>2</sup> F. H. Heinemann characterized the general outlook of Berdyaev's philosophy as a mystical anarchism.<sup>3</sup> Certainly, the anarchic aspect of Berdyaev's thought appeals but to a few, yet it seems the very essence of his thought, and from it his philosophy of personalism, which does appeal to many, is drawn.

Berdyaev characterizes his philosophy as personalistic, but this term itself is vague ; it applies to several philosophic schools whose basic principles are different. The anarchism in Berdyaev, however, seems to stem from the absolute value attributed to personality, and thus to appreciate the profound anarchism of his personalism, we must determine what is his conception of the person.

Berdyaev describes the person in a series of opposites which give the appearance of dualism. We must be careful not to interpret this in an ontological sense, since Berdyaev considers that classifications as monism and dualism are simply rationalizations.<sup>4</sup> Yet to understand his concept of the person, we must consider the antinomies which he developed to solve certain problems, and which are the basic notions of his personalism. The problem of man and society he settles by distinguishing between person and individual ; again, he resolves the epistemological problem in terms of subject and object ; as to the problem of reality, he considers it in term of spirit and nature. We may add that these are the distinctions which lead Berdyaev to his conception of the creative act, which is based upon the *Ungrund* of Jacob Boehme. It is by considering these basic notions used by Berdyaev to explain his concept of the person, that we may see that the description of his personalism as anarchic is fully justified.

---

1. Donald A. LOWRIE, *Rebellious Prophet*, Harper and Brothers, New York, 1960.

2. Egbert MUNZER, *Nicolas Berdyaev*, in *The University of Toronto Quarterly*, 1945, January, p.193.

3. F. H. HEINEMANN, *Existentialism and the Modern Predicament*, Adam and Charles Black, London, 1953, pp.154-164.

4. *Dream and Reality*, MacMillan, London, 1951, p.222.

THE PERSON AND THE INDIVIDUAL<sup>1</sup>

The primary distinction in Berdyaev's personalism is that of the person and the individual. This distinction has been claimed to belong to the intellectual heritage of mankind ; it has been invoked by very different schools, and the sociological problems of our present age have given it a certain actuality.<sup>2</sup> Berdyaev insists on this distinction and in this recognizes his agreement with the French Thomists, but he considers that the scholastics of the Middle Ages had difficulty with the problem of the person owing to the manner in which they solved the problem of individualization.<sup>3</sup>

The problem of the person, for Berdyaev, is that man as a person is an enigma ; the entire world is nothing in comparison to the person and his destiny. The person lives in a constant agony wishing to know what he is, where he is going, where he came from. The Greeks, according to Berdyaev, already had seen the solution to this problem in philosophical knowledge. Man can know himself either through his divine element or through his demoniacal element, and thus can follow either his higher or lower nature.<sup>4</sup> He, Berdyaev, sees the solution to this paradox in the distinction between the individual and the person.<sup>5</sup>

For Berdyaev, the individual is indivisible, an atom in regard to a whole, and belongs to a natural, biological and sociological category ; not only is the individual a part of the species, of society, of the whole cosmos, but it cannot even be considered other than a part of a whole.<sup>6</sup> The individual can be defined in its subordination to the whole, and as a centre of selfish affirmation. For this reason, individualism, derived from the term individual, does not signify independence in relation to the whole, and to the social biological processes, but rather the isolation and the ineffectual revolt of the individual against the whole. The individual, as the product of a generic process, is related intimately to the material world ; born of parents, the individual with its biological origin bears the determinations of heredity, as well as of the genus and of society. There is no individual without the species, and no species without the individual ; the individual evolves in the categories which imply its distinction

---

1. For this distinction in Berdyaev, see : *Le Communisme et les Chrétiens*, in *Présences*, Plon, Paris, 1937 ; *Cinq Méditations sur l'Existence*, Aubier, Paris, 1936, pp.166-176 ; *Essai de Métaphysique eschatologique*, Aubier, Paris, 1941, p.158 ; *De l'Esclavage et de la Liberté de l'Homme*, Aubier, Paris, 1946, p.36.

2. J. MARITAIN, *Scholasticism and Politics*, Geoffrey Bles, London, 1940, p.47.

3. *De l'Esclavage et de la Liberté . . .*, p.34.

4. *Ibid.*, p.19.

5. *Ibid.*, p.36.

6. *Ibid.*

from the specific, and carries on the struggle for existence in the biological and social processes.<sup>1</sup> Existentially, the individual is not independent of the whole, and interiorly, has not life, but is determined exteriorly in its relation to the whole. But man, although being tied to the material world, is more than an individual, and contains a universal content, not as an individual but as a person.<sup>2</sup>

According to Berdyaev, the person is that whereby man transcends and saves himself from the world presented to the individual.<sup>3</sup> The person is the contrary of the individual, and pertains to another dimension of existence.<sup>4</sup> Man as a person is an universe, a microcosm, and belongs to a spiritual category. The positive characteristics of the person are liberty, and independence in regard to all totalities, cosmic, social, or specific, for the person itself is a totality containing an universality. The origin of the person is not to be found in the material world, but in God, in another world ; the material world provides the matter for the activity of the person, but the person is not dependent on it.<sup>5</sup> The primacy of the person to collective realities is that the person contains them as parts, for the person is itself a whole with a universal content.<sup>6</sup> Thus the person cannot be subordinated to them as a part to a whole, nor can be used as a means or instrument to an end, for the person is a whole and an end itself.<sup>7</sup>

Berdyaev explains further that the person is a microcosm, containing a potential and infinite universe under an individual form. The universal content of the person is not accessible to other realities, characterized by being parts, in the historical and natural world ;<sup>8</sup> the person is a whole, and cannot be a part of any whole. Whereas man, as an individual, comes from nature, and is subordinated as a part to the cosmic whole, man, as a person, comprises as a part of himself, the universe ; this for Berdyaev is the mystery of personalism.<sup>9</sup> Thus, man must not be considered only as a natural object, as a mere substance, for this would be a naturalist conception of him and he would be seen only partially, and not as an existential centre.<sup>10</sup>

The application of Berdyaev's conception of the person and its distinction from the individual is best seen in his work *Slavery and*

---

1. *De l'Esclavage . . .*, p.36.

2. *Personne humaine et Marxisme*, in *Le Communisme et les Chrétiens*, Paris, 1937, p.179 ; *De l'Esclavage . . .*, p.37.

3. *De l'Esclavage . . .*, p.30.

4. *Personne humaine et Marxisme*, p.179.

5. *De l'Esclavage . . .*, p.37.

6. *Personne humaine et Marxisme*, p.179.

7. *Cinq Méditations sur l'Existence*, p.168.

8. *De l'Esclavage . . .*, p.21.

9. *Ibid.*

10. *Ibid.*, p.22 ; *Esprit et Réalité*, Aubier, Paris, 1950, p.166.

*Freedom*, which is devoted to the struggle against the slavery of man. The philosophy it contains is deliberately personalistic,<sup>1</sup> and treats of man's search for liberty in face of all forms of slavery. Berdyaev considers that man is a contradictory being in conflict with himself, and for this reason not only falls easily into slavery, but even desires it.<sup>2</sup> A brief look at some of the forms of slavery may bring out this distinction a little clearer.

Berdyaev considers that being enslaves man when the primacy of the universal, the general, is affirmed ; that which is general reigns in the objective world, but is absent from the world of person.<sup>3</sup> God can also be a source of slavery, insofar as He is considered as an absolute master to whom the person is subordinated and by whom it is dominated.<sup>4</sup> But Berdyaev distinguishes between God as an existent, and as an object. He accepts Feuerbach's analysis in which God becomes a projection, an exteriorization of man himself but considers that this is God as an object, and not as a subject, and this is the source of man's slavery to God. Man's slavery to the universe, and to the cosmos, is similar to his slavery to God, but the most important of the forms of slavery is man's slavery to society.<sup>5</sup>

According to Berdyaev, society attempts to persuade man that it has produced him, and given him liberty ; man owes all that is best in him to society, and ought to give himself entirely to it. But Berdyaev, using the distinction of the person and the individual, considers that the individual is a part of society and subordinated to it, whereas the person is not ; rather, society is part of the person.<sup>6</sup> Thus, the conception of the person, implying no socialization of the interior life of man, ought to be put at the basis of social organizations, and the person be considered other than under the aspect of a means for the common good. Berdyaev considers that the common good has served to justify many forms of slavery, and that to act for the common good is to act for something which has not its own proper existence, and which expresses in an abridged, abstract, impotent way, the duty of acting for the good of one's neighbour, of every concrete being.<sup>7</sup> It is to be noted that Berdyaev's conception of a common good is tied up with his theory of objectivation.

We may add that Berdyaev has difficulty determining the reality of society as a community, but he does reject the view which attributes to it either an organic, substantial, or universal, abstract,

---

1. *De l'Esclavage* . . . , p.18.

2. *Ibid.*, p.63

3. *Ibid.*, p.80.

4. *Ibid.*, pp.89-90.

5. *Ibid.*, p.101.

6. *Ibid.*, pp.113-114.

7. *Ibid.*, pp.62-63.

character. Berdyaev primarily is concerned with showing that man as a person is not subordinated to realities which are the result of objectivation ; all realities other than the person itself that attempt to subordinate the person are forms of slavery having their source in objectivation.<sup>1</sup> For this reason, Berdyaev considers that all collective realities, the universe, society, the family, and all movements, socialism, liberalism, nationalism, and all products of man, art, culture, civilization, attempt to enslave man as a person. We may agree that these realities may be, and in some cases are a source of slavery for man, but the distinction between the person and the individual hardly provides the solution of these problems.<sup>2</sup> However, Berdyaev's defence of liberty is more radical than is evident at first sight, and is based upon a certain concept of the person ; this latter permits us to ask the following question.<sup>3</sup>

But what is this universal content, this potential universe of the person? Berdyaev will explain it in several ways, but firstly, the person, for him, is not a static and closed reality, but is dynamic and open, realising an inner infinity which is rooted in man's subjectivity.<sup>4</sup> All Berdyaev's distinctions revolve about this pivot, the person's universal content, and to understand this more fully we must turn to the distinction of subject and object which follows upon his consideration of the person as an existential centre.<sup>5</sup>

#### SUBJECT AND OBJECT

Berdyaev considers that man may be considered either as an object or a subject. This distinction simply explains further the distinction between the person and the individual in terms of knowledge and existence ; Berdyaev attempts to solve the epistemological problem presented by Kant and the idealists, and to maintain the existential basis of man to which Kierkegaard was so acutely aware. The individual belongs to the world of objects, of things, but the person belongs to the world of subjects, of existential centres.

The person as an existential centre possesses a sensitivity for suffering and joy which is not found anyplace in the objective world, not in the nation, state, or in social organizations. No community in the objective world can be recognized as a person ; to speak of the suffering of a people is to use a metaphorical language. The person is not only capable of suffering but is in a certain sense suffering

1. *De l'Esclavage . . .*, pp.62-63.

2. Joseph DE FINANCE, *Existence et Liberté*, E. Vitte, Paris, 1955, p.71, note 8.

3. *De l'Esclavage . . .*, pp.74-75.

4. *Ibid.*, pp.21-22.

5. *Ibid.*, pp.26-27 ; *Personne humaine et Marxisme*, p.179.

itself. The struggle for the person, the affirmation of the person, are acts of suffering ; the person cannot realize himself without resistance to the enslaving power of the world. However, to accept slavery, to reject his liberty, the person can diminish his suffering ; this is the anguish and tragedy of the person. The essential idea of personalism for Berdyaev is that the supreme value is the person, and not the collective realities which are part of the objective world.<sup>1</sup>

A point which will bring into focus the subjectivity of the person is Berdyaev's treatment of nominalism and realism. For Berdyaev, the problem of what is the truth in regard to universals and the objective world is incorrectly presented. It is true, according to Berdyaev, that universals are found neither *ante rem* (realism and platonic idealism), nor *post rem* (empirical nominalism), but *in rebus* ; universals exist in the singular, that is, in the person as a primary quality. Universals are not found in an ideal supra-personal sphere, but in the person situated on the existential level. The universal and supra-personal values are part of the world of subjectivity, and thus the cosmos, humanity, society, are in the person and not the contrary. The universal, then, is not general, abstract, but is in the concrete.<sup>2</sup>

But what is the relation between the general abstract world, and the personal subjective world of universality ? To answer this question Berdyaev considers the relation between the subject and object. For Berdyaev, German Idealism struck the blow at Greek philosophy and scholasticism from which they were unable to recover. The work had been started by Descartes, but was not radical enough ; it remained for Kant to question the naive realism which identified the world of objects with absolute or authentic being, and to seek in the subject the key to the problem of being.<sup>3</sup> Berdyaev considers that the older metaphysics was non-critical and was based on a confusion of subject and object, of thought and thing, and for this reason was penetrated by a false objectivity. Pre-Kantian philosophy saw insufficiently the activity of the reason, and accepted its metaphysical pretensions as reflecting real entities.<sup>4</sup> Kant was wrong in opposing the thing-in-itself to knowledge, but in doing so, the subject was thus discovered :<sup>5</sup> his precise error was to admit the existence of pure reason, and of pure thought ; for Berdyaev, thought is saturated with volitions, emotions and passions, and these play a part not only negatively but also positively.<sup>6</sup>

1. *De l'Esclavage . . .*, pp. 28-29.

2. *Ibid.*, pp.39-40.

3. *Cinq Méditations sur l'Existence*, p.41.

4. *Essai de Métaphysique eschatologique*, pp.18-19.

5. *Cinq Méditations . . .*, p.41.

6. *Essai de Métaphysique . . .*, p.25.

Yet, Berdyaev thinks that considerations of the relation between the subject and object upon which theories of knowledge have been based has not led to the pure subject which exercises the act of knowing. German Idealism substituted for the concrete subject the transcendental conscience of Kant, the non-individualized and non-human Ego of Fichte, and the universal spirit of Hegel. Thus knowing ceased to be a thing proper to man, and man ceased to be the knowing subject ; the result was a depersonalization in philosophy.<sup>1</sup> Berdyaev considers that even in the existentialist philosophies of Heidegger and Jaspers, the true problem of man, of the person, is not presented.<sup>2</sup> But what has to be considered is man in his own proper existence at the interior of being : this provides the possibility of man knowing, for man before knowing exists, and thus has being. The meaning of life cannot be discovered objectively by a person, for nothing objective can have another meaning than that conferred on it by the subject ; it is only in the subject that all meaning is revealed. For Berdyaev, a theory of knowledge which opposes the subject to the object leads it to deprive existence of the subject as well as of the object ; being disappears and becomes impossible to know. The object of thought, then, is presented to the existential subject as something alien, foreign, extrinsic ; to objectivize is to render something foreign. Thus, when being is objectivized, it is no longer authentic being, but is simply being elaborated by the subject for the ends of knowledge ; the subject, making itself into this object other than itself, finds there the expression which best fits its own cognitive structure. Knowledge, properly then, is an alienation, and is the product of the subject itself, of the spirit knowing itself.<sup>3</sup>

We shall see, in continuing our consideration of the person as a subject, that the personalism of Berdyaev, as well as that of other personalists, has an existentialist basis. Yet, as in the case of personalism, we must not identify too closely Berdyaev's existentialism with any of its recent exponents. Thus Berdyaev, to differentiate between an existential and non-existential philosophy, insists that the former is by itself something which is a manifestation of being, of existence, whereas the latter treats of something, of an object ; the object, during the process by which it is produced, loses the mystery of existence, of concrete being. It is considered generally, Berdyaev remarks, that to know is to objectivize, otherwise said, to render something foreign, while, on the contrary, to know effectively is to make something close, in other words, to subjectivize, i.e., to relate to existence that which is revealed in the subject.<sup>4</sup> For Berdyaev, the importance

---

1. *Cinq Méditations . . .*, p.42.

2. *Ibid.*, p.45.

3. *Ibid.*, pp.47-53.

4. *Ibid.*, pp.55-56.



of Kierkegaard is that he wished philosophy to be existence, and not only to treat of existence;<sup>1</sup> Berdyaev's criticism of Heidegger and Jaspers is that they philosophize on or about existence, and for this reason their philosophies remain scholastic.<sup>2</sup> Berdyaev considers that we can have a logical system of existence, but no strict system is possible, for existence is interior to itself, more profound than the general, and does not reside in abstract thought. Since the knowing subject is itself an existing subject, subjective thought has for its aim to manifest its existential character. An existential philosophy, according to Berdyaev, cannot be built on concepts and ordinary categories, for concepts are always about something : they are never something ; existence has disappeared.<sup>3</sup> But we may ask him what does it mean to exist. Berdyaev answers that to exist is to live ontologically within oneself, in one's own authentic world, and not to be thrown into the biological and social world.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, Berdyaev's concept of the subjectivity of the person leads him to make use of Feuerbach's and Marx's doctrine of alienation ; the former, according to Berdyaev, considered man's alienation in religion, the latter in economic life.<sup>5</sup> In Berdyaev's personalism, alienation receives an even wider application, and becomes the subordination of the person to anything, to any object other than itself ; things belong to the world of objectivation, and are thus products of the person's activity.<sup>6</sup> But let us look at objectivation.

For Berdyaev, to objectivize is to rationalize, in this sense, that man mistakes the products of thought, for example, universals, for realities ; the irrational, the existent and existence thus are eliminated.<sup>7</sup> Often, rationalization is mistaken for knowing, because rationalization enters into such a large part of knowledge, but rationalization objectivizes and alienates, and leads to the general, whereas knowing, identical with being and existence, attains the irrational and the individual. The meaning of existence is not given to us by things, objects, for the meaning is homogeneous with the subject, and resides in existence.<sup>8</sup> The exterior world as presented to our senses is fragmentary, partial, and the cosmic whole to which man wishes to subordinate himself is an intelligible image, the result of the subjects'

---

1. E. MUNZER, *Nicolas Berdyaev*, in *The University of Toronto Quarterly*, Toronto, January, 1945, p.192.

2. *Cinq Méditations . . .*, p.58.

3. *Ibid.*, pp.58-60.

4. *Ibid.*, p.64.

5. *Truth and Revelation*, Harper and Brothers, New York, 1954, p.101.

6. I. KANT, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, in *Ethical Theories : A Book of Readings*, Prentice-Hall, Inc., New-York, 1950, p.227.

7. *Cinq Méditations . . .*, p.71.

8. *Ibid.*, p.73.

activity ; man exteriorizes himself, and projects his own servitude which he, then, represents to himself as a restriction imposed from exterior reality.<sup>1</sup>

According to Berdyaev, it is not correct to say that Kant destroyed the basis for a metaphysics, but rather he brought to an end a naturalist and rationalist kind of metaphysics based on the object, on the world ;<sup>2</sup> his distinction between the order of nature and freedom contains an eternal verity, and makes possible an existential philosophy, since the order of freedom is the order of existence.<sup>3</sup> But what exactly is the order of freedom ? To understand this we must consider Berdyaev's distinction between spirit and nature.

#### SPIRIT AND NATURE

Berdyaev's personalism is a philosophy of the spirit as opposed to a naturalist philosophy : the antinomies between spirit and nature parallel the opposition he sees between freedom and necessity ; freedom pertains to the world of the spirit, and necessity to the world of nature.<sup>4</sup> In terms we have already mentioned, we may say that spirit pertains to the subject, nature to the object, to objectivation : in terms of existence, the spirit pertains to the existential centre which is singular and concrete, but nature pertains to the intelligible whole produced by the subject for cognitive purposes. Nevertheless, to describe the spirit in terms of singular, concrete existence, does not necessarily show the reality of the spirit, and for this reason Berdyaev is concerned to show, firstly, the reality of the spirit, then, its characteristics and objectivation.

According to Berdyaev, the world has the tendency to deny the reality of the spirit while accepting implicitly certain of its characteristics which, however, are recognized only as epiphenomena of matter. Such are the materialists who attribute to matter all the faculties of the spirit ; reason, liberty, action. Other philosophical schools consider that the spirit is not so much an epiphenomenon of matter as of life ; thus, we have the vitalist conception of the spirit.<sup>5</sup> Still, others who defend the reality of the spirit consider it as a substance, a reality qualitatively distinct from other objects in the natural world, but of the same kind. In this latter conception, Berdyaev sees a naturalization of the spirit.<sup>6</sup> But is it possible, Ber-

1. *Essai de Métaphysique . . .*, pp.14-15.

2. *Ibid.*, p.17.

3. *Cinq Méditations . . .*, p.68.

4. *Esprit et Réalité*, p.244 ; *De l'Esclavage . . .*, p.103.

5. *Esprit et Réalité*, p.5.

6. *Ibid.*, p.6.

dyaev asks, to grasp and to show the reality of the spirit while considering it as a cosmic reality of the same kind as other realities? <sup>1</sup>

For Berdyaev, the answer to this question depends on our notion of being ; for a critique of knowledge asks itself to what extent are the products of our thought added to what we generally call being, and to what extent does the activity of the subject construct this being which we eventually consider original.<sup>2</sup> Further, Metaphysics had led itself to hypostatize concepts too easily ; the concept is taken for being, and thus a concept of being is created which corresponds to thought. Ontology seeks a being which would be objective, but the being it discovers is only the objectivation of its own concepts ; objective being which is offered to it is itself the result of an elaboration of its own concepts. Thus, ontology only reaches being which is the product of thought, and the fruit of a rational process. For Berdyaev, any Metaphysics, then, using ontological categories, and considering being as an object, a nature, be it spiritual or otherwise, is tainted by naturalism.<sup>3</sup>

Berdyaev considers that the German idealism of the nineteenth century, which was strongly impregnated by Kant, prevents Metaphysics from returning to a naturalistic, dogmatic kind ; its point of departure was the subject, and it presumed to discover the mystery of being through the subject.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, he considers that German Metaphysics, owing to monistic and evolutionary tendencies, was led to identify spirit and nature, and in the case of Hegel, affirm the existence of an objective spirit. The problems of man and of personality were sacrificed to the universal, impersonal spirit ; this was done in Greek Philosophy, but in another way, by giving priority to the universal, the general over the singular, the individual, the authentic existent. Thus, the philosophy of the spirit became objective. Berdyaev claims that Schopenhauer was on the right track to an existentialist philosophy in his opposition to objective and naturalist conceptions, for the mystery of reality cannot be revealed by considering the object, the thing, but by the subject reflecting on its own act.<sup>5</sup>

Berdyaev insists that the spirit is not an objective reality, does not belong to being as a rational category, is not part of, nor ever, a real object. The philosophy of the spirit is not a philosophy of being, an ontology, but a philosophy of existence. The spirit is a reality, but is other than the natural world, the world of objects. No object that exists, and no reality in the objective world, has the right to be called spirit. This explains, for Berdyaev, why it is so easy to deny

---

1. *Esprit et Réalité*, p.6.

2. *De l'Esclavage . . .*, p.80

3. *Esprit et Réalité*, p.7.

4. *Ibid.*, p.10.

5. *Ibid.*, pp.8-10.

the reality of the spirit ; the spirit does not exist in the object, it only exists in the subject, and only the subject is existential and has its proper existence, whereas the object is itself the product of the subject. For Berdyaev, the reality of the spirit is of a different kind than that of the object, and is infinitely superior to, and more primitive than, the world of objects and things.<sup>1</sup>

But what then is the reality of the spirit? Berdyaev answers that it is a quality of existence different from, and superior to, that of the body and soul. He considers that there are three principles in man : the spiritual, the psychical, and the corporeal. The spiritual, however, should not be considered as a nature distinct from the body and the soul, rather the body and soul should be considered as capable of being raised to a higher level which is the existence of the spirit ; man goes from the level of nature to that of spirit which is freedom. The reality of the spirit does not proceed from the object but from God ; to be an object is to be for the subject.<sup>2</sup> Berdyaev prefers the terminology of Kant in stating that the reality of spirit is that of freedom, and not of nature.

Spirit gives meaning and value to man, and has thus an axiological character, conferring on man his supreme dignity, his supreme quality of existence in independence and interior unity. To answer the question whether our spiritual states conform to another reality, or whether our states are only of the subject, Berdyaev replies that, firstly, this is an incorrect way to present the problem, and secondly, our spiritual states do not conform to anything, they exist ; they are the fundamental reality, and have more existence than any reflection of the objective world.<sup>3</sup>

To show further the fundamental reality of the spirit, Berdyaev proposes a third way to solve the problem of the relation between thought and being. The two classical solutions of realism and of idealism<sup>4</sup> in which, on the one hand, knowledge and perception are entirely defined by the object as the authentic reality, and on the other hand, knowledge becomes a creation of the subject, allow a third solution in considering simply that the subject itself is existential ; thus, authentic reality can be known through the subject itself. The object, then, which penetrates the subject from outside does not have to be accepted, nor does the reality which can be decomposed into sensations and concepts have to be denied. For Berdyaev, the subject itself is being, and he insists that the strict use of the term being is only applicable to authentic being which is that of the subject. Thus, the spirit is a reality which is discovered in, and by the existential

---

1. *Esprit et Réalité*, pp.8-10.

2. *Ibid.*, pp.10-11.

3. *Ibid.*

4. *Ibid.*, p.12.

subject, a reality which proceeds from the interior, and not from the exterior, from the objectivized world.<sup>1</sup>

Again, Berdyaev makes use of the problem of universals to explain the reality of the spirit. For him, both nominalism and realism are two extremes of abstractions, and for this reason cannot arrive at the singular existent. He makes a distinction between the general and the universal ; the universals are product of objectivations, and thus are not existential, whereas the general is spirit, and in the subject, and, in a true sense, is the universal. Thus, the true universality which man wishes to attain is in the subject.<sup>2</sup>

Berdyaev, following German idealism, introduces a further characteristic into the subject, that of irrationality. The spirit is not only universal, concrete, but also irrational. The subject contains not only thought which is abstract, but also the will, and existence, which play a role in knowing.<sup>3</sup> But is it possible, asks Berdyaev, to obtain a rational knowledge of that which is irrational? <sup>4</sup> He answers that there is a knowledge which does not grasp the objects by concepts based upon universal principles, but which, participating in existence, penetrates into existence, into concrete reality, thus illuminating life. This is the only way to come to a knowledge of the spirit, and this knowledge is different in quality from that which considers the objective world ; it transcends the opposition between the universal and the particular, the generic and the individual, thought and being.<sup>5</sup>

However, the reality of the spirit cannot be proved, but can be shown to those who are sensitive to qualitative difference ; in fact, human experience, the whole superior life of man, testify to the spirit's existence. We cannot define the spirit, for this would be to objectivize it, but we can describe certain of its characteristics : liberty, meaning, creativity, love, value, and the tendency to a superior and divine world.<sup>6</sup> To understand the spirit, according to Berdyaev, we must consider it from a personalist point of view ; personality, existentially viewed, belongs to another sphere than the general, which is opposed to the individual. The person is unique, singular, different from the rest of the world, but the person is equally universal by its content which is capable of embracing the entire world by love and knowledge.<sup>7</sup>

For Berdyaev, in so far as the spirit is freedom, its primary characteristic is manifested by independence in regard to determina-

1. *Esprit et Réalité*, pp.13-14.

2. *Ibid.*, pp.16-17.

3. *Ibid.*, p.13.

4. *Ibid.*, p.21.

5. *Ibid.*, p.17.

6. *Ibid.*, pp.40-41.

7. *Ibid.*, p.18.

tions of nature and of society ; the spirit primarily is opposed to any determinism.<sup>1</sup> The spirit is also interior, and can be considered, using spacial symbols, to be infinitely deep and celestially high ; spirit represents the evasion out of this world, the dynamic creative element, a kind of flight. The spirit cannot be determined by the natural world, and presents a promethean aspect in its revolt against the gods of nature, against the determinism of human destiny.<sup>2</sup>

Berdyaeff further states that the spirit acts everywhere, and in every thing ; it illuminates, transfigures, liberates but never constrains. The spirit is an energy, active and immanent in all realities : even though this energy comes from a superior sphere, it is concrete and complete ; it does not divide nor abstract anything. This description of spirit makes Berdyaeff think of St. Thomas's definition of grace : that far from denying nature, grace transfigures it. The victory of the spirit is different from the reign of nature ; determinism and the impersonal, are supreme in the order of nature, whereas freedom dominates in the order of the spirit where everything is based on the person and personal relations. The victory of the spirit does not signify the destruction of the cosmos, but rather its liberation and transfiguration. The spirit always means that man is not a slave, but the master of cosmic forces.<sup>3</sup> The spirit is not being, but the meaning, the truth of being ; it is equally intelligence, but an integral intelligence including the complete subject. Further, it is the spirit that makes a man to the image of God ; the spirit is the divine element in man.<sup>4</sup>

Yet, Berdyaeff considers that the term of spirit is commonly used in a very broad and general sense, namely, as applied to collectivities. We speak of the spirit of a people, of a class, of a profession, of an army, of a family or of a period, of an age, and even the spirit of materialism which denies the spirit. For Berdyaeff, to speak of the spirit in such general terms loses the specific characteristics of the spirit. In the case of collectivities, spirit signifies simply an energy which gives a form, and unifies a certain group which may even be anti-spiritual. The axiological meaning of spirit is not applicable to collectivities as such, for strictly speaking, the spirit is always personal and subjective ; collectivities may be considered as individualities, but not as personalities.<sup>5</sup>

The universality of the spirit, insists Berdyaeff, does not suppress the individual to the advantage of the general, of the abstract, of the impersonal, but rather concretizes personality as an unique being.

---

1. *Esprit et Réalité*, p.41.

2. *Ibid.*, pp.41-44.

3. *Ibid.*, pp.44-47.

4. *Ibid.*, p.42.

5. *Ibid.*, pp.47-48.

Berdyaev rejects what he considers to be St. Thomas's opinion, namely, that the form (spirit) is something universal, and that individualization is attributed to the matter, for he considers that this conception falsifies the relations between the spirit and personality. Berdyaev insists that spirit signifies universality and personality, and represents the divine element in man, but is inseparable from the human element which acts conjointly with it.<sup>1</sup>

Berdyaev considers that, in the history of thought, the spirit often has been considered as intelligence, or as attached to the soul, but these conceptions run the risk of eliminating integrity from spirituality. Again, the spirit has been considered in too abstract a manner, and thus a false antithesis is set up between spirit and body, intellectual and physical work.<sup>2</sup> Likewise, the subjective spirit has been considered psychologically, whereas the objective spirit and the universal, ontologically. Berdyaev contests even the expression "objective spirit," since that which is or becomes an object lacks interior existence. It is the "I," "You" or "We" which has interior existence, and cannot be thought of as objects. The objective spirit does not exist; there is only an objectivation of the spirit.<sup>3</sup> But how can the spirit be actualized in the world without objectivation and alienation?<sup>4</sup> This raises the question of the creative act; for the spirit is the integral creative act of man, the freedom which looses itself in the preontological depths of the world.<sup>5</sup>

To summarize, we may say that the universal content of the person is the spirit, but this does not completely solve our problem. Again, to say that the origin of the spirit is God, and that the spirit is the breath of God in man, leaves something to be desired.<sup>6</sup> Further, the spirit is other than the body and soul, and although always present, is developed and seemingly increased, by giving more and more quality and a higher level of existence to man. Berdyaev considers that his conception of spirit is similar to that of Hegel in so far as oppositions are resolved in it, but different in so far as the spirit is concretized, put into the singular existent, thus giving a dignity and value to the singular; the spirit is axiological. Including a characteristic of German mysticism and philosophy, Berdyaev puts the notion of the irrational into the person, into knowing; the whole subject is concerned in knowing, according to Berdyaev, and in this he wishes to distinguish his thought from that of the scholastic tradition and St. Thomas, which, he states, insists upon the supremacy of the abstract

---

1. *Esprit et Réalité*, pp.52-53.

2. *Ibid.*, pp.53-54.

3. *Ibid.*, p.56.

4. *Ibid.*, p.72.

5. *Ibid.*, p.42.

6. *Ibid.*, p.57.

to the concrete, and does not consider sufficiently the role of the will and the emotions in knowing. We have here a voluntarism which Berdyaev claims to have affinity to the Scotist school.<sup>1</sup> In opposition to the claims of scientism, and of a naturalist philosophical conception of the person, Berdyaev places freedom or liberty at the heart of reality, which is the person, and relegates necessity of any kind to the world of objectivation ; freedom itself does not consist in the traditional doctrine of free will, but in a complete lack of any determination, in indetermination. We may add that this indetermination is universal ; this brings us back to the universal content of the person,<sup>2</sup> and the act therein which it is creative.

#### THE CREATIVE ACT

The creative act was one of Berdyaev's first enduring philosophical notions. The intuition, as Berdyaev describes it, that man replies creatively to God, and that creation justifies man rather than redemption,<sup>3</sup> led him to elaborate this principle in showing the nature of the person. This, in turn, led him to a conception of the spirit based on freedom ; freedom becomes the first principle whereby man can reply creatively to God. But how does the person reply to God ? This question brings us to the creative act of Berdyaev, and it is in understanding his concept of creativity that we appreciate the role of freedom in man's reply to God.

Berdyaev insists that his philosophy of freedom is not teleological ; man's subordination to an end in view of which he is compelled to apply the less adequate means is opposed to the freedom of man. The end is not important. What is important is the creative energy, the nobility of beings who create life, and the emission of light which comes from the depths to illuminate the life of men.<sup>4</sup>

Berdyaev had set down his basic philosophy in *The Meaning of Creativity*,<sup>5</sup> and in his later days regretted that he did not develop it further rather than treat other subjects less characteristic of his thought. It also depressed him that his philosophy was not always understood, and that the uniformity of his thought was ignored. His theme of creation was misunderstood ; it was generally taken in the sense of artistic and cultural creations. But, perhaps the greatest

1. *Esprit et Réalité*, p.25 ; *Essai de Métaphysique . . .*, pp.20 et 71.

2. *Esprit et Réalité*, p.50.

3. *Le Sens de l'Acte Créateur*, in *Review Esprit*, Paris, n° 8, pp.179-194.

4. *Essai de Métaphysique . . .*, p.179.

5. First published in Russian in 1916. The English and French translations appeared in 1955, published respectively by Harper & Son, New York, and Desclée de Brouwer, Bruges.



opposition was to his solution of the basic problem of man replying to God, namely, his doctrine of uncreated preexistential freedom.<sup>1</sup>

The problem presented to Berdyaev is to explain the relation between creation and sin, between creation and redemption. On the one hand man is exalted, and on the other hand man is depressed ; the exaltation comes from a purifying grace on high, from God, and the depression comes from below, from man and human misery. But can a force, equally beneficial, come from man to overcome the oppression of sin? Thus man would justify himself not only by his docility to a supreme power, but also by his own creative exaltation.<sup>2</sup>

Berdyaev answers that the creative act is not a need, nor a right of man, but is an obligation of man to the exigency of God ; God awaits the creative act of man in reply to His own creative act. Human creation continues the creation and the perfection of the world, and is a human-divine work ; God working with man, and man working with God. God is the highest human idea, but the idea of man is the highest divine idea ; man awaits the birth of God in him, and God awaits the birth of man in Him. Berdyaev recognizes that the conception of God needing man is audacious, and has not been revealed explicitly but implicitly ; Berdyaev considers that without man's own interior discovery of creativity, the revelation of the Human-Divinity would be meaningless.<sup>3</sup>

To express the problem in more philosophical terms, Berdyaev states that he had been interested in the coming forth of being from nothing, and in the way which the non-existent became existent. Since the transition from non-being to being could not be expressed in starting from already determined existence — Berdyaev does not believe in the possibility of a rational ontology, but does in a phenomenology of a spiritual experience described in a symbolic way —, the perfection of a creative work in this world can only be symbolical, namely, the sign of another perfection in another world, and on another level of existence. Berdyaev considers that a monistic ontology has difficulty in solving not only the problem of evil, but also that of the coming-to-be of something new : how does that which does not exist, come into being, become existent? <sup>4</sup>

The problem, Berdyaev considers, was not easy to resolve for the Greek philosophers. Aristotle tried to solve it by his doctrine of potency and act, but this doctrine has a fundamental obscurity : what is the source of movement, of change : the potency or the act? Pure act is immobile and immutable, since it is in a perfect state ;

---

1. Review *Esprit*.

2. *Ibid.*

3. *Ibid.*

4. *Essai de Métaphysique . . .*, p.181.

movement and change indicate imperfection. Thomists also insist that there is more perfection in immobility than movement, since that which is immoveable already has that which, in movement, is only becoming. For this reason, they affirm the primacy of being over freedom ; freedom and creative action are considered to be imperfections.<sup>1</sup>

But for Berdyaev, the spiritual world is revealed in creative genius, in movement, in freedom, and not in congealed, closed, immobile being. He considers that if we admit that reality is an achieved and closed being in which no modification, movement, would be possible, then the possibility of a creative act must be denied ; in fact, he adds, official theology, which considers itself orthodox, denies that man is a being capable of creating, and affirms that only the creator who is pure act can create.<sup>2</sup>

But if we deny potency, and also movement, of God, then we are forced to deny of God the possibility of creating, for the creation of something new is interdependent on potency. In the case of man, we find that he is capable of creating, since he has potency which is not sufficiently actualized to lose the possibility of movement and change ; the possibility of accomplishing a creative act, of manifesting a change and something new, would seem to be interdependent on imperfection. For Berdyaev, this is the paradox : that which is revealed in man as the image and likeness of God, and which is the most perfect in him, would be the fruit of an imperfection, of potentiality, and the presence in him of non-being.<sup>3</sup>

For Berdyaev, then, the doctrine of God as pure act, as lacking potentiality, makes the creation of the world absurd, and deprived of meaning, since the creation of the world and man would be fortuitous, and perfectly useless to God. Thus, the creature, brought about by a chance event and not by the interior life of the Divinity, would only be called to a blind submission, and not to a creative reply to the Divine appeal. In consequence, ontology should deny the possibility of something new, of the creative potency, of freedom, of everything that signifies an opening in the closed system of being. Berdyaev qualifies the attribution of a creative potency, and of movement, to God, by insisting that they do not start in time as we generally understand it, for the primordial creative act does not flow in any way from the past, and is not accomplished in cosmic or historical time, but is accomplished in existential time which has no causal links.<sup>4</sup>

---

1. *Essai de Métaphysique . . .*, pp.181-182.

2. *Ibid.*, p.183.

3. *Ibid.*

4. *Ibid.*, pp.184-186.

Berdyayev considers that his understanding of potency is different from that of Aristotelians. For him, becoming, the dialectic of cosmic development, is only possible owing to the existence of non-being, for if we only admit of being, then there is no becoming, no development. But, in becoming, something new comes forth from the womb of non-being, and without non-being it would be impossible to create something new, something which is not ; the creation of something new presupposes that that which is created did not exist previously. Thus, for Berdyayev, becoming, creation, presupposes something other than being, namely non-being. Berdyayev reasons further that if the creation of the world is terminated, then something new would not be possible. But, reality is neither achieved, nor closed, and it can be enlarged for us, for our existence is immersed not only in the reality which is realized under the forms of objectivity, but also in the potential reality which is profounder and larger than it ; it is for this reason that change, creative potency, newness, are possible.<sup>1</sup> But what is this potential reality? Berdyayev answers that potential reality is the primary freedom prior to being, and is rooted at the very bottom of non-being. In this, Berdyayev considers, he differs from an Aristotelian concept of potency, and for him, the problem of newness is not solved in terms of being but of freedom.

To throw some light on the experiential basis of the creative act, Berdyayev describes creativity. For him, creation is the immersion in another world, free from the weight and hold of the detestable routine of every day. The creative act is outside of time ; only the products of creation, of objectivation, belong to time, and cannot satisfy the creator. The transcendence of the creative act consists in a sort of flight outside the limits of immanent reality ; a free breaking-through of necessity. The love of creation results in a lack of love for the world, in the impossibility to remain in the limits of this world. Thus, there is an eschatological moment in creation ; the end of the world is indicated, and the beginning of another world starts. But the tragedy of creation is the disproportion between the creative flight and its effects ; between the creative act and the products of culture and society.<sup>2</sup> Berdyayev, however, does not deny cultural creation ; he considers that man ought to pass through the creation of culture and civilization.<sup>3</sup>

But what is the relation between the person and the creative act? Berdyayev answers that man creates his person, and expresses it in the creative potency. In the self-development of the "I," of the person, the human spirit accomplishes a creative act of synthesis. Man is not only called to the creative potency as an activity in and on the world,

---

1. *Essai de Métaphysique . . .*, pp.187-188.

2. Review *Esprit*.

3. *Ibid.*

but he is himself a creative potency, and without it, would not have personality. Man is a microcosm and a microtheos ; he is a person only when he does not wish to be a part of something, or a being composed of parts.<sup>1</sup> The subject, the "I," is revealed in creative experiences as primordial, and superior to the non-self, to the object.<sup>2</sup> Berdyaev considers that the creator is solitary, and the creative act is not general and collective, but individual and personal ; nevertheless, it is not a concern with oneself, but a going out of oneself. Man has need of matter : the creative act is not produced in a vacuum, but it is not entirely determined by the materiality of the world ; there is in the creative act a new element which is not determined from the outside. The new element which is inherent in every authentic creative act is freedom. In this sense, we can say that the creative act is *ex nihilo* ; it is not determined entirely by the world. But to recognize that freedom is rooted in non-being is to recognize the irrationality of freedom ; the non-existential or pre-existential cannot be represented by a concept.<sup>3</sup>

But where does freedom come from, and what is its origin ? Man receives his creative gifts from God, but the element of freedom inherent in creative acts is not determined neither by the world, nor by God. The creative act of man surging in the world cannot be understood in starting from a closed system of being. For Berdyaev, the creative act is only possible in admitting that freedom is neither determined, nor comes from being, but is rooted in "Nothingness" ; freedom is bottomless, undetermined, and is situated outside of causal relations to which being is subjected, and without which being would be unconceivable.<sup>4</sup> But to understand more fully the origin of freedom, we must consider Berdyaev's doctrine of the *Ungrund*, namely, the groundlessness of freedom.

#### FREEDOM : THE *UNGRUND*

The first principle of Berdyaev's personalism is his conception of freedom. Some have found his defence of freedom praiseworthy, but have criticized both his concept of the nature of spiritual freedom, and its application to the church ; the expression "spiritual freedom" and the term "spiritual" lead to both confusion and equivocation.<sup>5</sup>

---

1. *Essai de Métaphysique . . .*, p.198.

2. Review *Esprit*.

3. *Ibid.*

4. *Ibid.*

5. Jean DANIELOU, *Sainteté et Action temporelle*, Desclée et Cie, Tournai, 1955, pp.55-59.

Others have considered that Berdyaev's concept of freedom has led him to the most disastrous conclusion of his whole philosophy in taking over the doctrine of the *Ungrund* from Jacob Boehme;<sup>1</sup> the conclusion, however, is deemed unwarranted by his own fundamental presuppositions.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, Berdyaev's conception of freedom is considered to be consonant with the Christian world view.<sup>3</sup> Further, some have seen a similarity in the *Ungrund* of Boehme, recently revived by Berdyaev, to the non-being, to the "Nothing" of Sartre and of Heidegger.<sup>4</sup> The problem of the "Naughting" function in the philosophies of Berdyaev's contemporaries does not concern us, but the preoccupation of certain philosophers with this concept can perhaps impress us with its relevancy in contemporary philosophical thought, and suggest to us the necessity of treating this problem in Berdyaev's conception of freedom.

Berdyaev remarks on the significance of a doctrine of non-being, and considers that all the wisdom of the world is expressed in the expression of Heidegger: "Nichts Nichtet." He insists on the role of naught in his own philosophy: a naught which is not a passive, inert non-being, but a non-being from which proceeds, and which produces, personal existence.<sup>5</sup> For Berdyaev, it is significant that the last of the ontologies should be based on the naughting function; it means that we must reject an ontological philosophy, and accept an existential philosophy of the spirit which is neither of being nor of non-being.<sup>6</sup> Berdyaev's rejection of ontology results in the recognition of the primacy of freedom over being; man is not free in terms of being, but of spirit. Freedom of the spirit consists in the fact that man is not determined by anything but himself; being is arrested and congealed freedom.<sup>7</sup>

The only conception of freedom which Berdyaev found satisfactory was Jacob Boehme's teaching on the *Ungrund*. However, Berdyaev interprets it in his own way; he identifies the *Ungrund* with primordial freedom which precedes all ontological determination,

1. E. LAMPERT, *Nicolas Berdyaev*, in *Modern Christian Revolutionaries*, Devin-Adair Co., New York, 1947, p.346, note 4.

2. Matthew SPINKA, *Nicolas Berdyaev: Capture of Freedom*, The Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1950, p.120.

3. *Ibid.*, p.123; O. L. CLARK, *Introduction to Berdyaev*, Geoffrey Blas, London, 1950, p.87.

4. Arland USSHER, *Journey Through Dread*, The Devin-Adair Co., New York, 1955, pp.53-54; James COLLINS, *The Existentialists*, Henry Regnery Co., Chicago, 1949, p.57; Helmut KUHN, *Encounter With Nothingness*, Henry Regnery Co., Chicago, 1949, pp. XII-XIII.

5. Will HERBERG, *Four Existentialist Theologians*, Doubleday and Co., New York, 1958, pp.6-7; see *Essai de Métaphysique . . .*, pp.136-137.

6. *Essai de Métaphysique . . .*, p.137.

7. *Dream and Reality*, MacMillan, London, 1951, p.99.

and considers it outside of God, whereas Boehme has placed it in God and had considered it as the inmost mysterious principle of divine life.<sup>1</sup> Berdyaev considers that the concept of primordial freedom is bound up with personalism, with the supreme importance of the human person in opposition to all forms of objectivation. However, he has been attacked by Roman Catholic, and Protestant critics, who see in this concept an un-Christian dualism, and a presumptuous limitation of Divine Providence.<sup>2</sup> Yet, another critic considers that the manifestation of primal freedom is the fundamental choice of the Existentialists, and concludes that Berdyaev is right in regarding this fundamental act as man's prerogative : man although created by God, is not constrained by his nature, and in this sense, may be said to have no nature ; man is granted an option.<sup>3</sup> The truth of Berdyaev's teaching of the *Ungrund* according to one writer, will have to be acknowledged by theologians.<sup>4</sup>

Berdyaev considers that Boehme was one of the first to break with the intellectualism of Greek and Scholastic philosophy, and that his doctrine of the will provided the possibility for a philosophy of liberty. Boehme's discovery of an interior life and process in the Divinity, which is the beginning of every thing, brings out the primacy of the will, of liberty, in a more profound sense than even the voluntarism of Scotus.<sup>5</sup> One source for Berdyaev's understanding of Boehme is the nineteenth century religious thinker, Franz von Baader, who makes use of the concept of the *Ungrund* in treating of the Trinity and creation.<sup>6</sup> As in Boehme, certain obscurities remain in Baader, who apparently did not distinguish clearly between God and the *Ungrund*.<sup>7</sup> It has been claimed that the presence of Baader is discernible in almost every page of Berdyaev, but Berdyaev's interest in Baader is not to develop the concept of *Ungrund* in terms of the interior life of God, of the Trinity, but in terms of human creativity, and of the introduction of newness into the world.<sup>8</sup>

Further, the problem of freedom in Berdyaev is intimately linked to that of good and evil. To reconcile the existence of God with the existence of man and evil, Berdyaev insists on a freedom which cannot be attributed to God, is not created by Him.<sup>9</sup> The problem of Ivan

---

1. M. SPINKA, *op. cit.*, pp.119-120 and 178.

2. *Dream and Reality*, p.288.

3. H. KUHN, *op. cit.*, p.120.

4. O. L. CLARKE, *op. cit.*, p.88.

5. *Essai de Métaphysique . . .*, p.130 ; *Deux Études sur Jacob Boehme*, Aubier, Paris, 1950, pp.18-25.

6. *Deux Études . . .*, p.23.

7. Eugène SUSINI, *Franz von Baader et le Romantisme Mystique*, Vrin, Paris, 1942, vol. I, p.16 et p.289.

8. *Deux Études . . .*, p.26.

9. Dostoïevsky, Sheed and Ward, London, 1934, p.89 ; *Dream and Reality*, p.288.

Karamazov that happiness in the world would be based on the tears of an infant is likewise unacceptable to Berdyaev.<sup>1</sup> Berdyaev attempts to solve this by his concept of meontic freedom which is independent of God, and thus good is the reply to God, whereas evil is the turning back to the original freedom, to nothingness ; this is possible owing to man containing this irrational freedom.<sup>2</sup> Berdyaev considers that if Dostoïevsky had developed his teaching about God and the Absolute to its necessary conclusion, he would have had to acknowledge a chasm of darkness approximating to Boehme's theory of the *Ungrund*.<sup>3</sup>

Boehme's notion of the *Ungrund* is beyond our purpose here ; yet, we have to mention certain doctrines of his, not as historically held by him, but as Berdyaev understood and accepted them. Berdyaev seems to hold certain reserves on Boehme's concept of the *Ungrund*, and in an exposition of Boehme by Berdyaev, it is sometimes difficult to determine just who is speaking, Berdyaev or Boehme. The notion of the *Ungrund* in Boehme is not as simple as certain thinkers have understood it.<sup>4</sup> The two-fold meaning of the term *Grund* as used by the German mystics, and by a contemporary philosopher, Martin Heidegger, suggests caution to us in dealing with this basic concept.<sup>5</sup> *Grund* can mean either "ground" or "reason" ; thus *Ungrund* can mean either "groundless" or "irrationality." The term *Ungrund* was not a verbal creation of Boehme, but existed previously with the meaning of absence of reason, pseudo-reason, pseudo-proof ; Boehme enlarged it by inserting an ontological value into its meaning. The *Ungrund* is something which has no cause, basis, or reason : given that it is different to, and separate from, every thing, the *Ungrund* is the "Absolute."<sup>6</sup>

An understanding of Boehme is obscured further by his symbolism ; fire is one of the symbols used to describe the ineffable, and unfortunately, Boehme then goes on to explain it.<sup>7</sup> In the words of Dr. Johnson, "If Jacob Boehme saw the unutterable, Jacob should not have attempted to utter it."<sup>8</sup> Berdyaev, however, attempts to present Boehme's concept of the *Ungrund*, yet is aware of the limitations and the difficulties of determining his thought.<sup>9</sup>

1. *Dostoïevsky*, p.107.

2. *Ibid.*, p.85.

3. *Ibid.*, p.58.

4. A. KOYRÉ, *La philosophie de Jacob Boehme*, Vrin, Paris, 1929, p.281, foot-note.

5. *Ibid.*, p.280 ; see M. HEIDEGGER, *Von Wesen des Grundes*, p.109 ; H. KUHN, *op. cit.*, p.91.

6. A. KOYRÉ, *op.cit.*, pp.280, note 2 and p.281.

7. A. KOYRÉ, *op. cit.*, p.393.

8. Quoted by D. C. Broad, in *Contemporary British Philosophy*, 1925, vol. I, p.81.

9. *Deux Études . . .*, p.24.

The doctrine of "Ungrund" or the "Indeterminate" did not take its definite form in Boehme's first writings, but was developed in later ones, principally in *Signatura Rerum* and the *Mysterium Magnum*. The theory of the "Indeterminate" replies to Boehme's need to grasp the mystery of liberty, and the origin of evil. The "Indeterminate" is the "Nothingness", the unfathomable eye of eternity, and is at the same time a will, groundless, unfathomable, and undetermined. It is a nothingness which is a desire for something. "Ein Hunger zum Etwas." It is liberty. In the darkness of the "Indeterminate," a flame bursts forth, and this signifies the potential, meontic liberty. According to Boehme, liberty is the part opposite to nature, but nature originates in liberty. Liberty is similar to nothingness, but from it something comes forth. The desire for something, which is liberty, the unfathomable will, has to be satisfied, but the liberty of the "Indeterminate" transcends good and evil.<sup>1</sup>

Further, the "Indeterminate" is considered to be without any essence, namely, a chaos which precedes all things, and is the foundation of being; the "Indeterminate" is more profound than anything, even God. Nature is a secondary and derived phenomenon, but the "Indeterminate" is primary and uncreated. The first principle of being, according to Boehme, is that the "Indeterminate," the "Nothingness" seeks something.<sup>2</sup> But, according to Berdyaev, Boehme's doctrine of the "Indeterminate" is interlaced to such an extent with liberty that it is impossible to separate them; we should not expect too much of Boehme, since his doctrine is a vision and treats a domain which surpasses the limits of rational concepts. Berdyaev prefers to interpret the *Ungrund* as the absolutely original meontic liberty which is not determined by God.<sup>3</sup>

Thus, the doctrine of the "Indeterminate," according to Berdyaev, does not only enable us to explain the origin of evil, but also the creative potency of newness in cosmic life. The creative potency by its nature surges forth from the meontic liberty of the "Nothingness," of the "Indeterminate"; it presupposes that being has this unfathomable source.<sup>4</sup> The creative potency has its origin in God; the spirit proceeds from God, but something escapes God, is not subject to God, and this is the *Ungrund*.<sup>5</sup> The dignity of the concrete human person does not come from an ideal universe to which the person would be subordinated, but from his own interior universe, from the universe which penetrates him, and on which he impresses his personal form; the concrete human person is not subordinated to

---

1. *Deux Études* . . . , pp. 15-23.

2. *Ibid.*, pp.17-18; *Essai de Métaphysique* . . . , p.129.

3. *Deux Études* . . . , p.12; *Esprit et Réalité*, p.182.

4. *Deux Études* . . . , p.26.

5. *Esprit et Réalité*, p.43.



any being.<sup>1</sup> The human person is totally free in his creation, and it is in this freedom which comes from his divine resemblance, that all his dignity resides.<sup>2</sup>

It remained for Berdyaev to insist upon a personalism in whose name the value and freedom of the concrete person was extolled, and from which opposition to all forms of obligation and necessity logically followed.

#### CONCLUSION

The personalism of Berdyaev can be said to have been formulated for the first time in *The Meaning of Creativity*, and to have been confirmed and clarified in his last publication, *Le Sens de l'Acte Créateur*. His writings in the intervening years between these two works show his intellectual activity on contemporary problems; he absorbed much of European contemporary thought, but in turn influenced many thinkers.

We must not be misled by the similarities of expression in Berdyaev, and in others of even conflicting schools; Berdyaev at least knew of what he held, and ideas taken from other schools were simply grist for the berdyaevian mill. The distinction between the person and the individual is one example of an unfortunate distinction<sup>3</sup> fitting well into Berdyaev's noetic system. The attraction exercised by Berdyaev's conception of spiritual liberty and alienation on certain members of the "Esprit" movement<sup>4</sup> is one unfortunate example of his influence.

But what characterizes the personalism of Nicolas Berdyaev? Peter Wust describes it as "a glorification of man's creative genius in the spirit of Lucifer,"<sup>5</sup> and certainly Berdyaev describes the fundamental theme of personalism as a conflict, and a defiance of the cosmic harmony;<sup>6</sup> indeed, the promethean aspect of his philosophy is quite evident.<sup>7</sup> We may see here a Marxian influence,<sup>8</sup> and Berdyaev considers that he agrees with Marx in this, that the philosopher should not only know the world, but should modify, change, and regenerate it.<sup>9</sup> But, according to Berdyaev, this idea has been monstrously carica-

1. *De l'Esclavage . . .*, p.85.

2. *Le sens de la création*, Desclée de Brouwer, Bruges, 1955, p.142; *Dostoïevsky*, p.85.

3. Jacques CROTEAU, O.M.I., *Les fondements thomistes du Personnalisme de Maritain*, Ottawa, 1955, pp.166-167.

4. E. MOUNIER, review *Esprit*, 1948, avril, pp.159-160.

5. Karl PFLEGER, *Wrestlers with Christ*, Sheed and Ward, London, 1936, p.269.

6. *Essai de Métaphysique . . .*, pp.159-160.

7. *Le sens de la création*, p.324; *De l'Esclavage . . .*, pp.65-67.

8. Reinhold NIEBUHR, in *Religion in Life*, 1949, Spring, p.239.

9. *Essai de Métaphysique . . .*, p.12.

tured by the communists in a materialist philosophy.<sup>1</sup> Yet, Marx, in his *Theses on Feuerbach*, had criticized materialists, because they had considered reality under the form of an object, and not as a human activity, as "praxis." Berdyaev considers that Marx had here an element of existential philosophy, but that he did not reach the concept of person.<sup>2</sup> It remained for Berdyaev to insist upon the "praxis," which issued forth into the creative act.

The creative act is the core of the personalism of Nicolas Berdyaev. His idea of man's perfection, final achievement, consists in the creative activity of man replying to God ; it is in this that man realizes his own person. We may say that, for Berdyaev, man makes his own nature in imitating God creatively, and this is God's implicit will that the perfection of man would not come from a subordination of man to God, but that man would reply to Him from his own pre-ontic freedom, from the *Ungrund*.

The concept of the *Ungrund* in Berdyaev has been attributed to his misunderstanding of the nature of subjectivity, and he has been criticized for a simple-minded error in believing that the subject has no intelligible structure owing to its inexhaustible depth ; for this reason, he made the subject an absurd abyss of pure and formless liberty.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the creative act in Berdyaev demands an abyss of indetermination, of pure and formless liberty, something which, he considers, belongs to the creature and is independent of God ; his concept of the human person cannot be detached from his conception of liberty and the *Ungrund*. Rather, the doctrine of the *Ungrund* in Berdyaev shows the same characteristics to what in Aristotelian terms is simply prime matter, pure and uninformed subject ; indeed, the human person has an infinity, a universal content, *ex parte materiae*,<sup>4</sup> and Berdyaev has rediscovered it. We may terminate our brief treatment of the basic notions of Berdyaev's personalism by commenting that his personalism provides us with an example of a philosophy in which man exalts his own weakness. The human person turns to himself, to his own subjectivity, to his non-being, and sees there a good in itself, in virtue of which he would be considered worthy of dignity in proportion to the debasement of God.<sup>5</sup> To quote Léon Chestov : " Dans la Philosophie de Berdyaev, plus l'homme grandit, plus Dieu s'abaisse et s'appauvrit." <sup>6</sup>

VINCENT J. McNAMARA

- 
1. *Cinq Méditations . . .*, p.36.
  2. *Personne humaine et Marxisme*, p.185 ; also *Royaume de l'Esprit et Royaume de César*, Delachaux et Niestlé, Neuchâtel, 1951, p.126.
  3. J. MARITAIN, *Court Traité de l'Existence et de l'Existant*, Hartmann, Paris, 1947, p.134.
  4. S. THOMAS, *Ia*, q.50, a.2, ad 4.
  5. Charles De KONINCK, *Ego Sapientia . . . La Sagesse qui est Marie*, Fides, Montréal, 1943, pp.141-142.
  6. Léon CHESTOV, in *Annales Contemporaines*, no.67, p.98.