

Personalism of Nikolay Berdyaev's Philosophy and French Personalism

There are many terms in the conceptual structure of philosophy, which, being close to each other in content, allow us to express the subtleties and nuances of philosophical understanding of various aspects of human being—a man, an individual, a personality, I, a person, Ego, public, social, socialization, anthropocentrism, anthropogenesis etc. The concept of “Personalism” has a particular shade and its own characteristic of meaning. It is typically used in two cases: firstly, to emphasize the attention of philosophical ideas to the personality as a spiritual source; and secondly, to denote a separate trend in philosophy, in which the personality is regarded as the highest value, the centre of civilization, that direction which has religious overtones, but in a special way trying to combine religious and secular values.

The purpose of the article is to find similarities and differences in interpretations of personalist ideas by Russian religious philosopher of the first half of the 20th century N. A. Berdyaev (1874–1948) and by the representatives of the French personalist philosophy.

This philosophy took shape as an independent trend in the early 30's of the previous century. Berdyaev's works played a significant role in its formation. What interest do they represent for personalist philosophers, and for the Russian thinker? Let's turn to the works of Nicolay Aleksandrovich. I'll start by saying that the key points of his philosophy are God, identity, freedom and creativity. The theorist was interested not just in a personality, but the personality seeking God, moving to Him, finding its true existence only in union with God. The doctrine of the personality of Berdyaev was called “eschatological personalism”. The thinker was convinced that the salvation of a person and mankind is possible exclusively through sincere faith in God. Thinking of a person much and on different reasons, the philosopher distinguished between what is given to a man by nature, and what in his very nature and behaviour has unnatural, divine essence. Berdyaev used the term “individual” to refer to the former, and the term “personality” to denote the latter. Individual and the per-

sonality are different manifestations of the same phenomenon – a person. Individual lives and creates (carries out its creativity) under the laws of the natural world. Personality is a creature connected with God, as His likeness. Personal creativity is filled with divine meaning. The philosopher believed that every person has a vocation and can become a personality. This idea was also consistently maintained by the representatives of French personalism.

When assessing the philosophical heritage of Berdyaev, it is important to remember that, by his own admission, his worldview was influenced by the Gnostic and mystical traditions of the world and Russian philosophy. Gnostic doctrine emphasized the mystical idea of knowledge which indicates person's path to salvation but is gained only through divine revelation. Berdyaev shared this position entirely. Assessing the role and place of mysticism in his philosophy, he defined it as “mystical” and “anti-hierarchical” personalism. The thesis of the caducity and minor importance of the material world, if compared with the spiritual one, moved to his philosophy from Gnosticism virtually unchanged. Berdyaev and the Gnostics believed that matter is burdened with evil, so they associated salvation with leaving material existence. The mentioned above explains greatly the insatiable desire of Nicolay Alexandrovich to synthesise philosophy and religion in his works. He wrote, “Religion can do without philosophy, its sources are absolute and self-sufficient, but philosophy cannot do without religion, it needs religion as food, as a source of living water. *Religion is the lifeblood of philosophy, religion feeds philosophy with real being*”¹. This approach is not only close to Personalism. It composes a philosophical core of Personalism and largely determines the theoretical strategy of this philosophical trend. It is confirmed by the words of the founder of French personalism E. Mounier: “...The mission of Christianity is to be the keeper of philosophy...”².

In the context of the discussed topic, it is extremely interesting and important for the philosophy of Personalism to have a close look at Berdyaev's judgments of directly personalistic character — the interdependence of God and a man, the role of

¹ Бердяев Н. А. *Философия свободы* // Бердяев Н. А. *Философия свободы. Смысл творчества*. — М.: Изд-во «Правда», 1989. — С. 20.

² Мунье Э. *Экзистенциалистские и христианские перспективы* // Мунье Э. *Надежда отчаявшихся: Мальро. Камю. Сартр. Бернанос / Пер. с фр. и примеч. И. С. Вдовиной*. — М.: Искусство, 1995. — С. 133.

freedom and creativity in the release of the spiritual from prison of the material, the necessity of the struggle between good and evil, etc. Considering God as the source of life and the world of man, the theorist paid much attention to the analysis of the causes and characteristics of the struggle between two basic opposites declaring itself in all the spheres of social life – good and evil. In the opinion of Berdyaev, in this struggle both opposites have equal rights. In other words, each of them has an equal right to win. This thesis is not entirely supported by the representatives of Personalism doctrine. According to them, even at the intermediate stages the good is desired to gain victory.

In philosophical constructs of Berdyaev the interpretation of God is very far from the canonical understanding of His essence in Christianity. As an active supporter and promoter of the so popular idea of God-manhood in the Russian philosophy, he wrote a lot about unity and sometimes even about the identity of God and man. He emphasized that both these entities had the status of initial being. At the same time, he pointed out their differences. God and man are different aspects of initial being and creativity. God embodies creativity in its full manifestation, while man is a specific process of creativity. The freedom precedes both God and man. It is the true source of life. “Man is a child of God and a child of Freedom...”³. Creativity is the instrument, the way of unfolding freedom. According to Berdyaev, “God is immanent to the world and man. World and man are immanent to God...”⁴. These two phenomena are inseparable. The connection between them is one of interdependence. Initially, “eternal humanity” is presented in God, and God-likeness is in a man. Here is what Berdyaev writes, “Humanity is the main attribute of God. Man is rooted in God, as God is rooted in man”; “God need a person, a creative human response to the divine call”; “... not only a man cannot live without God, God cannot live without a man as well. This is a mystery of love, the need of loving in the beloved”⁵. God reveals and manifests Himself in His creations, especially in a man. They are insepara-

³ Бердяев Н. А. О назначении человека. Опыт парадоксальной этики // Бердяев Н. А. О назначении человека. — М.: Республика, 1993. — С. 39.

⁴ Бердяев Н. А. Смысл творчества. Опыт оправдания человека // Бердяев Н. А. Философия свободы. Смысл творчества. — М.: Изд-во «Правда», 1989. — С. 258.

⁵ Бердяев Н. А. Самопознание // Бердяев Н. А. Самопознание (Опыт философской автобиографии). — М.: Книга, 1991. — С. 179.

ble and so united in their being. This position is essentially identical to the position of personalist philosophy. Many researchers of Nicolay Berdyaev's works believe that in his philosophy "... a free man, the creator is actually put on the place of God..."⁶. Berdyaev's philosophy is concerned not just with the man, creativity and God, but with god-like man carrying out godlike creativity.

In every way avoiding the opposition of subject and object, Berdyaev was focused on the creative nature of personal being. Throughout the life a man does not only create the world, but masters it in a rational and sensible way, making himself a part of the world, and the world — a part of himself. This is another point of intersection of Berdyaev's ideas and philosophy of personalism. Indeed, the philosopher exaggerated the role of personal principle in the world beingness. As a philosophical trend, personalism consistently defended the thesis of the uniqueness, oneness of each person and at the same time put an emphasis on the joint lives of people, on their ability with common efforts to solve problems that even a talented, smart and strong individual cannot afford to do alone. Berdyaev's position in the philosophical literature is often called a "radical personalism", because he made status of the personality (personal being) absolute. We must agree with the well-known expert on the history of Russian philosophy V. Zenkovsky, who believed that "...Berdyaev's personalism i s o l a t e s rather than connects people..."; it "...is self-closing, afraid of every touching to the world..."; in it "...a person is "more primary" than being..."⁷. N. Berdyaev always tried to talk about being only in the context and from the point of personality being. Real existence of the world as if dissolved in the personal being, becomes meaningful only when it is related to the needs and interests of the person. "... Personality is a supreme value..." , as Berdyaev said⁸. In fact, he gives it the status of a metaphysical first principle. The logic of Berdyaev's statements on the place and role of the individual in the being of the world provides sufficient grounds to consider his philosophy not only as radical personalism, but as a radical anthropocentrism.

⁶ Бонещкая Н. К. Апофеоз творчества (Н. Бердяев и Ф. Ницше) // Вопросы философии. — М., 2009. — №. 4. — С. 94.

⁷ Прот. Зеньковский В. В. История русской философии: В 2 т. — 2-е изд. — Т. 2. — Париж: YMCA-PRESS, 1989. — С. 317.

⁸ Бердяев Н. А. Самопознание // Бердяев Н. А. Самопознание (Опыт философской автобиографии). — М.: Книга, 1991. — С. 16.

Although the personality was the focus for Berdyaev as well as philosophers of Personalism, they declared very different approaches to understanding the issues of its essence and existence. The Russian theorist constantly said that he was little interested (or rather not interested at all) in the real practical world of the human being, and also the world of material life in general. His attention was focused on the spiritual sphere which was regarded as the only territory of true being enabling true freedom and true creativity. In his philosophical concept Berdyaev consciously alienated personality from the material world (he called it also the world of “objectification of spirit”) and vice versa. For him, “objectification” was inseparable from depersonalization. Berdyaev wrote, “The meaning of the religious life of mankind is a breakthrough beyond the kingdom of objectification, beyond the kingdom of the law, beyond the kingdom of necessity of society and nature”⁹. Making personality a semantic centre of his idea, he remained a personalist only in connection to spirit which he adored. Still he lost interest in the personality beyond its spirit. French personalist philosophy was concerned not only with an abstract personality, but also with a real person with their problems and concerns, a person living in a specific society and being engaged in specific cases.

According to Berdyaev, the creativity, by which people realize their potential, is a manifestation of their love for God. The creativity itself, devoid of any divine support, according to the Russian philosopher, is a way to overcome spiritual crisis that existed in contemporary society. This overcome is realised in the man, without leaving for the objective world, without the objectification of his knowledge and faith. Creativity is a way of gaining freedom, leading to the victory of good over evil. Creativity in Berdyaev’s comprehension was intended to change the reality, still not at the level of its materiality but where the spirit prevails. Such an approach, however in a slightly different interpretation, was supported in the French personalism.

Despite the fact that the philosophy of Berdyaev has an expressed personalistic character, his personalism borders with self-denial. As previously mentioned, accord-

⁹ Бердяев Н. А. Я и мир объектов. Опыт философии одиночества и общения // Бердяев Н. А. Философия свободного духа. — М.: Республика, 1994. — С. 256.

ing to his doctrine, being does not exist apart from a personality, it is always coloured with the personality. However, scorning its material components, the Russian theorist depersonalized being. The contradiction was obvious. It declared itself immediately as a philosopher “placed” identity beyond material reality, and he had to do it almost permanently. Trying to be a consistent personalist, he brought this quality (theoretical position) to negation. And he did it unwittingly.

It is must be kept in mind, that personalism as an essential feature of the philosophical concept of Berdyaev and the trend of French personalism are to some extent close still different phenomena. Having a lot of common points of contact, they differ in methodological and semantic terms, have different social goals and a different degree of reasoning and conclusions of their provisions; in the end, in many respects they have different theoretical and social bases. Although while analyzing philosophy of Berdyaev, V. Zenkovsky conventionally marked out four periods in his creativity and allocated one of them as associated with “... his personalist ideas”¹⁰, it does not mean that Berdyaev was a representative of the same personalist philosophy, which since the 30s of the previous century declared itself as an independent trend in western Europe. The doctrine of Berdyaev played an important role in its formation and development, but the French personalists chose their own path for popularisation and adoption of their ideas in the minds of people and society.

Personalism as a separate trend in philosophy has a relatively short history. First and foremost, they distinguish its Anglo-American and European versions. The former appeared in the late 19th century. Its semantic field was focused primarily on issues of moral education and the problem of freedom. The latter was formed in the early 1930-s. It was popular mainly in France, but was also spread to the other countries. It was a philosophical response of the “left” intellectuals to the critical issues of the day. Its home land was France, and its creator was a philosopher and journalist E. Mounier (1905–1950). Since October 1932 he began publishing the magazine «Esprit» (“Spirit”) in Paris. Some of his supporters — J. Lacroix (1900–1986), P.-L.

¹⁰ Прот. Зеньковский В. В. История русской философии: В 2 т. — 2-е изд. — Т. 2. — Париж: YMCA-PRESS, 1989. — С. 303.

Landsberg (1901–1944), G. Madinier (1895–1958), M. Nedoncelle (1905–1976), P. Ricoeur (1913–2005), D. Rougemont (1906—1985), etc. centred on the magazine. The magazine became a theoretical organ of Personalism, the spiritual centre of intellectual search of the French for many years. The philosophical doctrine of Berdyaev played an important role in magazine creating as well as in the nature and style of published materials. The Russian theorist was personally acquainted with E. Mounier and other representatives of French personalism. He attended the meeting where the decision was made to establish that organ, and published his own works in it. Assessing the extent of his personal involvement in the personalist philosophy at the time of its formation, Berdyaev wrote later, “The fact ‘that this trend was obliged to me was repeatedly stated by its representatives”, “The Youth of “Esprit” had sympathy for the personalist philosophy, which I was the most *radical* (italics is mine —V. P.) representative of, protecting the social projection of Personalism, which is close to socialism not of a Marxist’s type, but of Proudhon’s one”¹¹. The French personalist philosophy was focused on a personality in the variety of its social manifestations. Theoretical and methodological platforms of the doctrine were notable for their significantly eclectic character which expressed itself in attempts to connect, to uniquely synthesise religion and secular forms of knowledge, idealism and materialism, including Christian existentialism and Marxism. Trying to rise above materialism and idealism, Personalism searched its own way to substantiate the role of a human in the functioning of reality. This is particularly evident in its tendency to bring together religious and secular spheres, as well as in the concept of “involved existence”. As a manifestation of world outlook, the French personalism, as well as the Western European one, preferred the values of the Catholic religion. Its central idea was a personality as an incarnation of God.

Although after the Second World War personalist philosophy spread to Italy, Poland, Scandinavia, the East and the Latin America, its basic ideas were still

¹¹ Бердяев Н. А. Самопознание // Бердяев Н. А. Самопознание (Опыт философской автобиографии). — М.: Книга, 1991. — С. 278/

founded and developed mainly in France — in the works of E. Mounier and his associates.

Trying to answer the question what can and should be a basic and fundamental principle to human civilization, the French personalists formulated it clear and unequivocal — a personality. The response suffered a high degree of abstraction. To overcome this shortcoming, Personalism concretised the concept of “personality” by reference to the history of philosophy and to the rich theoretical and practical experience of Christianity, especially Catholicism. “The personality acts as a unity of three main features in personalist interpretation: exteriorization, interiorization and transcendence. Exteriorization is a realization of the personality outwards; interiorization is an internal focus of personality on itself, its inner world. Being deeply co-related, exteriorization and interiorization are passionately involved into the movement of transcendence, aimed at the higher divine values, such as the truth, beauty, blessing”¹². Such a personality was completely different from the one in the philosophy of Berdyaev. It possessed not only spiritual but also material attributes.

The personality in Personalism is a phenomenon, which has an open character. It is not complete, final, having reached the limit of its development. Personality is constantly changing, improving, being in a state of never ending self-creation. “It is growing, making the *shuttle movement*, i.e. the movement of exteriorization, through which it rushes to the other, and the movement of interiorization, which returns it to itself”¹³. Moreover, personality “... is a source which is above all the things and shines all around...”; it “is on the summit of the Universe and endows it with the sense”¹⁴. Some of the Western philosophers who are critical of the conceptual principles of French personalism suggest that “... it turned the personality into the absolute”¹⁵. Such an estimate is more than fair. It is akin to existing in the world of phi-

¹² Вдовина И. С. Персонализм // Новая философская энциклопедия: В 4 т. — Т. 3. — М.: Мысль, 2001. — С. 223/

¹³ Лакруа Ж. Персонализм: истоки — основания — актуальность // Лакруа Ж. Избранное: Персонализм / Пер. с франц. И. С. Вдовиной. — М.: Российская политическая энциклопедия (РОССПЭН), 2004. — С. 136.

¹⁴ Лакруа Ж. Избранное: Персонализм / Пер. с франц. И. С. Вдовиной. — М.: Российская политическая энциклопедия (РОССПЭН), 2004. — С. 34: С. 7.

¹⁵ Лакруа Ж. Персонализм как антиидеология // Лакруа Ж. Избранное: Персонализм / Пер. с франц. И. С. Вдовиной. — М.: Российская политическая энциклопедия (РОССПЭН), 2004. — С. 195.

losophy assessment of the views of Berdyaev on the place and role of the personality in the world that.

One of the essential features of the philosophy of Personalism is a constant correlation of the theoretical aspects of personality with the practice of its existence in the real-life social relations. In this regard, Personalism does what Berdyaev did not do. Though personalists as well as the Russian theorist had a very large share of the abstract human reasoning; simultaneously they paid attention to finding solutions to specific problems in society. This philosophical trend consistently pursued the idea that a man should be fully involved in the life of society, should show himself as an active subject which does not only have its own position but consistently defends it. It is noteworthy that basing its arguments largely on the values of the Christian religion, Personalism was open to the world of secular life of the individual. E. Mounier as a Catholic himself was quite tolerant of other religious beliefs as well as of the atheist worldview. In this regard, the French personalism is a philosophical doctrine that stands on the people uniting positions, regardless of their worldview. Personalist works talk much about “involved existence”, participation, about joint efforts of people in order to achieve human purposes.

The French personalists and N. Berdyaev are similar not only in a common belief in the power and importance of religion and Christian values, but also in increased attention to the moral and aesthetic issues. In their common opinion, the spiritual needs of the individual are always very important. Both personalists and Berdyaev saw the main way of society changing not in the fundamental breaking of its economic and social foundations, but in the spiritual, especially moral and aesthetic, perfection of a man. Naturally, the religion had to play a significant role in this case. The French personalism created its own aesthetic vision which emphasised the importance of the way a person masters the reality, including the art, at the aesthetic level, and changes the world for the better. However, the phenomenon of aesthetic was largely interpreted from religious positions, and human being was regarded first of all as its “artistic being”. Following N. Berdyaev, Personalism tried to find the answer to the question of the relationship between the divine and the human in the aes-

thetic field. Personalist reasoning of it was much simpler, and, I would say, more primitive than the one of the great Russian theorist.

The problem of freedom is another point of contact Berdyaev's philosophy and French personalism. In both cases the freedom precedes the personality. However, in Personalism this idea is expressed not so well-reasoned as by Berdyaev. The trend states a position that "... there is surely an understanding of freedom *at the basis* (italics is mine —V. P.) of the idea of personality"¹⁶. Unlike Berdyaev, personalists dwelt much upon the real freedom of the individual, which was manifested in the individual's ability, to some extent, to be independent from the society in which he was exploited and oppressed. They adequately assessed the role of this phenomenon in existence of a man and society, interpreted it in the spirit of existentialism as the experience of a particular state by the individual. Much attention was paid to the so-called "negative" freedom, i.e. freedom from the external coercion. They rightly emphasized the role of knowledge in the acquisition of freedom by the personality, and the fact that there is no absolute freedom. Personalist philosophy shared the position that the freedom of the individual cannot be possible there, where all other people are not free, "...the sense of freedom begins with a feeling for the liberty of others"¹⁷. Freedom produces freedom and alienation makes a new alienation.

If Berdyaev tried to overcome the distinction between subject and object at all, the French personalists eliminated the importance of the latter and exaggerated the role of the former. They showed little interest in what the activity of the subject is directed at (things, events, public relations, etc.). The main principle was activity itself and its carrier, i.e. personality. According to personalists, changing of the society meant its "humanizing", making a personality presence in it weightier and more important. The idea of personalization runs through all their publications. According to the representatives of this philosophy, it can be achieved when presence of the spiritual principle in the society is increased in both quantity and quality. Following Berdyaev, they ignored determination of the society life and human activity by rea-

¹⁶ Лакруа Ж. Персонализм: истоки — основания — актуальность // Лакруа Ж. Избранное: Персонализм / Пер. с франц. И. С. Вдовиной. — М.: Российская политическая энциклопедия (РОССПЭН), 2004. — С. 159.

¹⁷ Mounier E. Personalism / Translated by Ph. Mairet. — London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1952. — P. 58.

sons of the material order and concentrated on the spiritual factors. As a result, proclaiming the world personalization as the main aim, this philosophy, in fact, “withdrew” personality from the material existence, leaving her only spiritual sphere as the territory of application of their forces. This position was not much different from of Berdyaev’s statements.

French personalism experienced ups and downs in a relatively short time of its existence. In the second half of the 20th century it underwent some transformations. Issues of moral education and artistic creativity actualized within it. There were attempts to connect personalist ideas with the ideology of reformism. Much attention was paid to the analysis of man’s place in the industrial and post-industrial society. Principles and patterns of consumer’s attitudes to the material and spiritual values were greatly criticized. At the edge of the previous and current century, the following issues became urgent: socio-oriented economy, guarantees for the protection of civil rights of the individual, maintenance of the social justice and fairness. From time to time the voices are heard speaking of the need to revive the “true” Personalism which is as relevant as possible to the ideas of its creators. Much attention is paid to the theoretical and practical activities aimed at promoting personalist ideas in the society and introducing them into the consciousness of people. Concerning this, an important role is played by journalistic work of the personalists as well as their creative activity.

After the death of E. Mounier, one of his colleagues on personalistic “guild”, a renowned expert on phenomenology and hermeneutics P. Ricoeur appreciated philosophical credo of this outstanding personality with one concise sentence, “it is an influence on the history with militant thinking”¹⁸. It is manifested through the thought, spirit, mind, but not through sensual and practical transformation of the world. In my view, this phrase can be used also to assess the nature and impact of both the French personalist philosophy and Personalism as a social phenomenon in the whole on the society in Europe and other regions of the world.

¹⁸ Quoted from: Лакруа Ж. Персонализм: истоки — основания — актуальность // Лакруа Ж. Избранное: Персонализм / Пер. с франц. И. С. Вдовиной. — М.: Российская политическая энциклопедия (РОССПЭН), 2004. — С. 157.