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Academic Review of the Doctoral Dissertation by Nataliya Petreshak

entitled "A Critical Evaluation of the Concept of the Person in the Thought of Nikolai Berdyaev and René Guénon"

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The main strength of this dissertation lies in the innovative juxtaposition of two philosophical worldviews from the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries: those of René Guénon and Nikolai Berdyaev. In order to interpret the same, the author studied twenty works by Berdyaev, nine works by Guénon, and numerous other sources within the relevant literature (a total of 100 studies). In her hermeneutic effort, she engages in the ongoing, historically significant debate regarding the central guiding idea contained within these philosophical systems, which is particularly intriguing in the case of Berdyaev's thought that comprised a multitude of ideas. This diversity of the Russian philosopher's work has led researchers to interpret Berdyaev as a Marxist deeply concerned with social issues, a mystical anarchist, a religious existentialist, a mystical realist, or even a transcendental idealist in the Kantian sense. The author, however, focuses on Berdyaev's reflections relevant to the direction in contemporary philosophy known as personalism. She is deeply convinced that the existence of the human person constitutes Berdyaev's most important theoretical discovery. She also believes that the concept of person unifies all other threads of his thought, making it fundamentally personalist. Berdyaev was a personalist even when he was solely engaged with issues of freedom and creativity, particularly between 1911 and 1918, although he clearly articulated this position only during his emigration period, especially in his 1931 work, *The Destiny of Man*. Here, the person becomes the human person oriented towards freedom and creativity (in which he resembles the Divine Person). The author feels compelled to present the personalist ideas of both philosophers against a broader backdrop, specifically concerning the issue of the human person itself. In doing so, she joins the ranks of numerous authors interpreting the personalist tradition, but offers a deeper and more comprehensive treatment of the plurality of concepts related to the human person. The encyclopedic overview of the personalist concept of person is therefore another strength of this work. The multitude of

definitions of the person, including those beyond the Christian tradition through René Guénon, does not diminish the work's coherence, as is fitting for an encyclopedic approach.

Another significant achievement, recognized by scholars interested in Berdyaev's philosophical worldview, is the contribution to existing knowledge about the emigration period of the Russian thinker's life and work, as well as the presentation of the biographical context of the second figure in this dissertation—René Guénon. This scholarly elaboration was aided by the reading of Berdyaev's *Letters*, published in Moscow in 1992, as well as the correspondence of Yakov and Raisa Maritain with Berdyaev, collected and translated into English, published in 2022 in Zielona Góra by Philosopher Teresa Obolevitch.

This positive evaluation of the reviewed doctoral dissertation does not imply that the work is beyond critique in certain important aspects. Several sections should have been expanded, certain theoretical threads that should have been explored or developed further. The text also fails to answer some questions that may be viably raised by a philosophically inclined reader. Therefore, we will now focus on a critical approach to the substantive aspect of the work under review. The first important question that comes to mind, which one expects to be addressed in a dissertation on personalism, is how this philosophical direction deals with different understandings of the human person and what theoretical and practical, theological, and philosophical strategies it adopts. The second question is as follows: How is it possible that, although the person is not a being in the scientific sense nor is it subject to empirical research methods, it still obliges ethicists, psychologists, sociologists, and lawyers today to formulate positions and make judgments from the perspective of dignity, uniqueness, and human freedom? Although these questions are secondary in nature, as the dissertation focuses on a critical historical approach to only two personalist concepts, they should still be addressed, perhaps during the defense of the dissertation.

There are also other key topics that the text fails to sufficiently address. For example, in the first part of the dissertation, the author describes Guénon as an anti-modernist, as he, representing a traditionalist worldview (older than the conservative worldview), criticized the contemporary world of the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries as focused on materialism and rationalism, decisively moving away from spiritual values and metaphysical principles. However, this modernization, the pride of Western civilization, leads "to dehumanization and a spiritual crisis, which can only be overcome by returning to traditional forms of spirituality and values" (p.). Can we say the same about Berdyaev's thinking, claim that he was an anti-modernist? This reflection is missing, as the author merely describes him as a critic of modernism while he could have been characterized as a critic of modernism of a rather unique

kind. Specifically, a critic with a conservative-dynamic orientation, representing an innovative variant of conservatism. On the one hand, he maintained respect for Tradition (spiritual and traditional values, which became the foundation of his philosophy), while on the other, he promoted Change: free and dynamic development. Creativity and freedom became key aspects of human existence for him, capable of spiritual regeneration of humanity and its future development. This position, unfortunately, made his thinking difficult to understand for both his contemporaries and modern readers. Nevertheless, it represented a unique approach to understanding individual human existence, as well as the functioning of societies and entire cultures.

The dissertation's conclusion is also underdeveloped, lacking deep reflection on what could result from this creative confrontation between such different, and at times similar, concepts. The author focuses solely on highlighting the transformation of the material/earthly human into a person, a spiritual human, and on the differences in understanding this transformation, even though other issues addressed by the philosophers—ontological, anthropological, and theological—are also mentioned in the work. Meanwhile, this creative clash between the thoughts of René Guénon and Nikolai Berdyaev could lead to several key conclusions that might enrich our current understanding of spirituality and philosophy alike. Some of these might entail: a) comparing these positions, which would show that there are two opposing, yet complementary aspects in social and cultural phenomena. On the one hand there is tradition, on the other—innovative change. They may clash, be in conflict, but only when taken together do they form an integral cultural whole, which the philosopher Leszek Kołakowski compared to a vehicle that functions only when both propulsion (progress) and brakes (tradition) are in good working order; b) juxtaposing the thoughts of Guénon and Berdyaev must inevitably lead to a creative dialogue among philosophers, historians of philosophy, cultural historians, and theologians. This dialogue could enrich contemporary understanding of spirituality, up to and including a holistic (postmodernist) approach thereto capable of accounting for both the past and the creative future. New forms of spiritual practices may also emerge, combining meditation with active creative action; c) the two philosophers' critique of the social order existing a hundred years ago—namely, the rapidly modernizing Western civilization—can inspire critique of the social and cultural structures of the 21st century. Their alternative models for addressing cultural crisis can also be inspiring today, particularly the model proposed by Berdyaev, which focuses on personal spiritual development through rebirth into spiritual life, creativity, and personal responsibility for oneself and others.

Although said general conclusions are missing, at least the methodological purpose of comparing the philosophies of René Guénon and Nikolai Berdyaev is adequately explored. In the first chapter, the author writes that "the views of both reflect and complement each other. What brings these thinkers together is their similar reaction to the challenges of their time, their understanding of the role of spirituality in human life, their recognition of metaphysics as essential for understanding the visible world, their pursuit of Truth and genuine knowledge, and their similar perception of history as a time of decline, as well as their formulation of concepts concerning the destiny of humanity" (p.). One could add a metaphor illustrating this clash—a literary image of "the meeting of two forces in unity and tension," where each force represents sometimes similar, different but complementary dimensions of human spirituality and existence. This tension arising from the differences in their philosophies is intellectually stimulating, sometimes irritating, but ultimately conducive to deeper reflections. For example, one may be somewhat vexed by the author's failure to address some facts in Guénon's biography. E.g., in the same year of 1912, the future French traditionalist married his fiancée in a Catholic wedding and received his final initiation to a Masonic Lodge. For a Christian philosopher, such a combination of two spiritualities may be perceived as not at all complementary or enriching.

There are also certain minor methodological and interpretative shortcomings. Firstly, in the conclusion, the author asserts that there is Christian personalism and non-Christian personalism, but she does not reiterate the third chapter observation that in the latter type of personalism, the concept of the person refers to the transcendental human being, the spiritual human being, one also found in Hinduism, Taoism, or Jewish Kabbalah. This informational gap may somewhat undermine one's confidence in the author's interpretative intentions and should be corrected before the work goes to print. Second, there is the hasty conclusion that Guénon carefully studied the thought of the Greek Church Fathers. Meanwhile, his was likely only basic knowledge, not derived from any in-depth research. In his works like *The King of the World* (1927) and *The Symbolism of the Cross* (1931), Guénon made only brief references to concepts and symbols present in Eastern Christianity, treating this branch of Christianity as an authentic expression of Tradition, which he understood as the reign of universal and timeless spiritual principles. At the same time, he oversimplified the Western misunderstanding of the Greek Church Fathers, underestimating the influence of different cultures. Thirdly, the author fails to mention an important two-volume work by Berdyaev from his exile period, *The Philosophy of the Free Spirit* (1927-1928) [translated and published into Polish in 2022]. In this work, the Russian philosopher presents an in-depth analysis of human freedom and creativity, explores

the concept of "Godlikeness", further describes the Person, and synthesizes his previous thoughts. Fourthly, the author does not sufficiently acknowledge earlier authors who also identified Berdyaev as a personalist. She only mentions a 2001 article by Olga Volkogonova, who similarly failed to consider and list researchers who had previously interpreted Berdyaev's thought within the context of personalism, mentioning only two Russian historians of philosophy: Vasily Zenkovsky and Nikolai Poltoracky. It seems that researchers have generally been content to accept the assertion made by personalist philosopher Jean Lacroix, who noted in the entry on *Personalism* included in the Moscow dictionary of Russian philosophy that there exists personalist idealism (Kantianism), personalist realism (L. Laberthonnière), personalist existentialism (G. Marcel, M. Berdyaev), and personalist individualism (Ch. Renouvier) [1995]. In the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, under the entry for *Personalism*, there is only a one-sentence mention of a 16-page essay by Berdyaev titled *Personalism and Marxism*, published in the journal *Put'* in 1935.

Regarding the formal aspects, the work meets all the requirements expected of academic authors.

The dissertation prepared by the doctoral candidate is deemed to meet the statutory and academic requirements expected of doctoral dissertations, and it is recommended that it be allowed to proceed to the next stages of the doctoral process.

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