

Dr. hab. Roman Sapeńko, Prof. UZ

Institute of Philosophy

Review of the doctoral dissertation of Ms Nataliya Petershak titled "A Critical Assessment of the Concept of Person in the Thought of Nikolai Berdyaev and Rene Guenon."

Formal Issue

Written under the supervision of Dr. hab. Teresa Obolevich, Prof. UPIPII, the thesis by Nataliya Petershak is titled "A Critical Assessment of the Concept of Person in the Thought of Nikolai Berdyaev and Rene Guenon".

The overall structure of the work corresponds to the logical exposition of the issue, as it includes all the essential elements that allow the author, on the one hand, to present the discussed concepts and, on the other, to analyze, confront, and compare them, leading to the conclusion. The dissertation comprises a General Introduction (7 pages), 3 Chapters, a General Conclusion, and a Bibliography. The thesis consists of 162 pages of standardised typescript, including 153 pages of text, categorising it as a medium-sized thesis. The bibliography spans 9 pages, but determining the number of sources is difficult initially because of the lack of numbering.

Unfortunately, the author did not prepare an index of terms and names, which would have facilitated navigating the dissertation's text.

The doctoral candidate also did not show sufficient care regarding the formal editing of the text. For instance, page numbering is different in the Table of Contents than in the text itself. In the Table of Contents, Chapter III starts on page 90, while in reality, it starts on page 85. These discrepancies affect the entire work: the Conclusions listed in the Table of Contents on page 156 are found on page 148, and the Bibliography formally listed on page 161 starts on page 154. Overall, the text seems disjointed; for example, Chapter III starts in the middle of page 85, right after the text of the previous chapter.

Another example of lack of care is on page 42: the title of paragraph I.3.2 in the Table of Contents - Guénon's Works and Leading Ideas... (p. 44); and in the text itself - Gueonon's Ouvres and Leading Ideas (plus a typo in the word Oeuvres).

Another significant shortcoming is the small amount of Polish literature on this topic, even though the presence of N. Berdyaev's works in the Polish academic circuit has been and still is significant. His works have been explored by J. Dobieszewski, J. Krasicki, P. Mrzygłód, G. Przebinda, H. Rarot, and much earlier by M. Zdziechowski. The same applies to Ukrainian

authors; it would be interesting to learn the perspective of researchers such as Є.В. Козлов, О.Ю. Білянська, В.І. Муляр, and others.

General Overview of the Dissertation

On page 9 of the Introduction (second paragraph), the author states that one of the main objectives of the dissertation is to determine the similarity of both concepts of person and explain the differences between the concepts of N. Berdyaev and R. Guenon. The author believes this is possible precisely by analysing similarities and reconstructing both authors' approaches to the issue of the person, which is also an essential subject of the dissertation. According to the author, this constitutes the principal value of the original contribution of the presented dissertation. Paradoxically, as noted by Ms Petershak, although these works are constantly commented on and explained, they remain unanalysed in the context of the concept of person and are still full of ambiguities.

Given the above, the most appropriate methods, or rather techniques, according to the author, are the following: comparative analysis, historical research, the systematic method, and the hermeneutic method (interpretation according to the author). It is unfortunate that in this part of the dissertation (and it turned out, nowhere else), this methodology needed to be presented about the studied material more comprehensively. The author limited herself to one paragraph on page 10.

The lack of precise outlining of the methodology and the initial discussion of the concepts and terminology used in the dissertation leaves a sense of incompleteness, as contemporary reflection on person, identity, etc., is of fundamental importance in the face of processes of human disintegration, the blurring of definitions, and the recognition of the role and function of the human person. The considerations of both authors in this respect could have been fruitful; unfortunately, the author did not address these issues because the overall theme announces such exciting issues of the concept of person in a broader dimension. This would require addressing these issues in a more extensive introduction or a separate methodological paragraph. Given the significant, fundamental, and principal title, the whole work leaves a sense of incompleteness, as it promises much more than it ultimately delivers.

It appears that the Introduction, which simultaneously attempts to present the methodology chosen by the doctoral candidate, needs to be longer. This prevents the doctoral candidate from rationally and adequately presenting the research method she has chosen. Therefore, in the Introduction, one gets the impression that it is a sort of essayistic, subjective presentation of the material. Such words on pages 6-7 may testify to this: "This research does not aim to provide a definitive answer to who humans are, as this would entail solving existential human problems. Rather, this work aims to offer an essential perspective on these questions, which may resonate within the reader's heart." On one hand, there is a lack of discussion of the research method, on the other hand, there are simple philosophical reflections.

Chapter I, titled "Berdayev's and Guenon's Personalities Shaped by Challenging Centuries", consists of 45 pages and is dedicated to presenting the intellectual biographies of both thinkers and showing how they transformed as a result of the socio-political changes of their times, the significance of their fates, and their geographical peregrinations. This chapter also outlines the main themes on which researchers focused and the resulting publications, with a particular emphasis on personalist issues and the convergence of the problems addressed.

When the author in Chapter I, subsection 2, and subsequent sections characterises the central themes and reflections of N. Berdyaev, she allocates only ten and a half pages to it. For the part dedicated to R. Guenon, she allocates 13 pages. Thus, in this context, it may not have been necessary to separate a particular part of the work to characterise "central themes," as they are subjected to theoretical analysis in subsequent chapters.

Paragraph 4 of Chapter I seems out of place because it is essentially a summary akin to a conclusion, even though the main discussions still need to be completed. Even if it is a summary of Chapter I, what significant material could be in it if both creators were together allotted 37 pages? It would have been more appropriate to place it in the conclusion section, which is modest anyway.

Chapter II – „On The Development of The Concept of Person”, comprises 29 pages and is a rather brief presentation of the origin and formation of the discussion about the definition of person in the Greek and Roman traditions and its subsequent function in Trinitarian and Christological reflection. The doctoral candidate also shows how Christian thought and the Church Fathers' teachings have been the basis for interpreting the concept of person in personalist philosophy up to the present day. In this context, the dissertation attempts to confront Berdyaev's and Guenon's ideas with the patristic perspective concerning the concept of person.

Chapter III, titled "Transfiguration of The Human According to Berdyaev and Guenon", consists of 62 pages and contains a fundamental substantive attempt to argue the implicit theses of the dissertation. Here, the author focuses on a detailed analysis of Berdyaev's and Guénon's works from the perspective of personalistic implications, as she believes this has far-reaching consequences for understanding personalism itself. Various interpretative contexts of the concept of person are examined here to reveal similarities between the two thinkers. This part of the discussion intends to convince that the thoughts of both Russian and French creators can provide an excellent platform for a deeper theoretical and practical understanding of the person.

Inevitably, the question arises whether 62 pages of text dedicated to explaining and analysing the main task of the dissertation, namely the critical analysis and philosophical-theological assessment of the concept of personhood by both philosophers, is sufficient. This accounts for about 41% of the text's volume, and actually, it is even less because the dissertation's text ends with six pages of conclusions.

Generally, there is often an impression that the author avoids a broader view, a more comprehensive research perspective, and too often aligns with the views of the analysed

authors. She does not always adopt the perspective of a critical and detached researcher. For example, her reflections on pages 16 - 17 are indicative. On page 16, when the author describes the biographical peregrinations of N. Berdyaev, she cannot distance herself from his subjective vision. For instance, when performing a vivisection of the historical conditions of the philosopher's intellectual maturation, she repeats after him the diagnosis related to the functioning of the Tsarist regime. It is suggested that the old monarchist regime collapsed due to the emergence of socialism and communism. The lack of distance causes this vision to be ahistorical at times because, as is known, it was not communism that contributed to the fall of the Russian monarchy but the geopolitical and economic upheavals of that era. In another instance, she relies more on Berdyaev's own words than on the constitutive opinions of other researchers in trying to determine who this philosopher was, both in his own eyes and in the opinion of his apologists and critics. He is sometimes a mystic, at other times, not an Apostle but an exegete, or perhaps a prophet, a Messiah, or a creative interpreter of Christianity. Perhaps an ideologue of the new Middle Ages and a Gnostic, but not a builder of the Church. Here, we follow more of the intricate and unclear thought trails of Berdyaev himself than the path of the philosopher's critics or commentators. One of the few references is the words of L. Shestov, who says that, above all, Berdyaev is a writer and preacher (p.28). The lack of a clear stance, the adoption of a specific position on the analysed material, and the argumentation of how to classify the work of the Russian philosopher means that, like the doctoral candidate, we find ourselves in a certain suspension. And even if this was Ms Petershak's intention, there has yet to be a final declaration from the doctoral candidate herself.

The doctoral candidate rarely reveals her point of view, often adopting a referential stance regarding the studied material. For example, when attempting to classify or categorize Berdyaev's work, she does not cite the sources she relies on and often follows the thought paths of the Russian philosopher she is dissecting. From pages 32 to 35, while discussing the phases of Berdyaev's work, she presents few sources and does not discuss with other studies and researchers but adheres to Berdyaev's opinion. Unfortunately, this was not supported by significant sources that debated various positions. Emblematic in this context is what Ms. Petershak says on page 35: "(...) when evaluating the main ideas of Berdyaev's works, it becomes obvious that he simultaneously considers ideas characteristic of his time and universal questions that are important for people of every era. Berdyaev responds to the events he encounters and delves into the hidden causes of these events."

A similar issue arises regarding Rene Guenon. On page 17, she reports the views of the French thinker on the significance of tradition in practice and the cultivation of religious rituals in the East and West (which prompted the creation of his renowned book titled "Crisis of the Modern World"). According to R. Guenon, she emphasises the differences that, in the case of Western culture, lead to its crisis. She writes: "(...) Guénon highlights the disparities in the evolution of Western and Eastern civilisations. He addresses utilitarian, industry-focused, individualistic, and secular tendencies and other values centred on material and self-centred gains prevalent in Western civilisation's global landscape. Recognising that this crisis is not confined to a specific geographic location but rather spreads like an affliction in various directions, Guénon observes that against the backdrop of a global shift and the decline of

tradition, the Oriental world manages to preserve its distinctive identity (...)." It seems that the current state of the modern world in general, and the West-East relations in particular, necessitates a different perspective on the conclusions of the French thinker. Today, it is clear that the premises on which R. Guenon (and seemingly N. Berdyaev) based their views require verification. This is not the place to discuss this complex issue. The above reflections have been cited to show how easily the doctoral candidate is seduced by the arguments of the thinkers she analyses.

Another overstated statement, unsupported by solid material, concerns considering R. Guenon as a precursor to later postmodernist ideas. On page 42, the doctoral candidate asserts that the legacy of the French thinker can be seen as an unsuccessful anticipation of this trend. This would undoubtedly be an exciting issue, but the author needs to pursue this path, leaving us with a mere judgment based solely on the assumption of one researcher mentioned in a press interview.

The Conclusions are too short, and the author could have summarised and addressed the questions regarding the Introduction and the lack of classification of concepts, terms, and references to personalist threads in the thoughts of the studied philosophers. Here, too, the author shows that the theoretical perspectives of N. Berdyaev and R. Guenon, in many aspects similar, possessing many similar moments and paths, and at the same time distinct and divergent, can be considered very important in the process of a deeper analysis of personalism as such. As previously mentioned, this concept appears many times in the work. Still, the author should have tried to delineate the line between the personalistic vision of the person more clearly in both the author and personalistic reflection. Not without reason, in such short Conclusions, she did not fail to mention the possible influence of J. Maritain on their work, but in this context, there is no attempt at any analysis of these issues. When she later states: "By examining the authors' familiarity with Christian patristic thought, I was able to trace the roots of personalistic concepts, which have had a lasting impact even into the 20th century," she only confirms these controversies.

Another theoretical insufficiency stems from the presentation of the original contributions of the dissertation. On page 152, it is announced that an important discovery of the dissertation was proving that R. Guenon overlooked a significant similarity between the Christian idea of spiritual development and the concept of initiation - an essential element in the considerations of the French thinker. There needs to be a more conclusive and essential characterisation of this phenomenon here, yet we are talking about the final part of the work titled Conclusions.

Similarly, when it comes to the presentation of the next crucial contributions of the dissertation, the author states that the dissertation analysed the philosophical and religious interpretations of N. Berdyaev and R. Guenon regarding the potential of man to become a higher being and then, by enumeration, presents them. Firstly, the determination that both philosophers believed in the ability of man to transform; secondly, that this process of transformation is an inseparable goal of human existence; thirdly, both perspectives emphasize the importance of spirituality in this transformation; and fourthly, that spiritual renewal involves bringing man closer to God/Creator and simultaneously means the

transformation of the visible world as well. Again, it is a pity that the author did not attempt a brief summarizing explanation of these significant research achievements.

Conclusion

However, considering the entirety of the dissertation, it must be admitted that the inconsistencies and formal and structural errors do not diminish the weight of the argumentation and the significance of the analyses conducted. The author has proposed an unaddressed problem concerning the theoretical references of both creators and presented rich material. The work had to be descriptive in this context, yet the doctoral candidate showed similarities and differences and achieved its intended goals.

Therefore, Ms. Nataliya Petershak's doctoral dissertation meets the requirements for such dissertations. Therefore, I request the Honorable Scientific Council of the Faculty of Philosophy to allow Ms Nataliya Petershak to proceed to the following stages of the doctoral process.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, reading "Roman Spenko". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'R' and 'S'.