

Romilo Aleksandar Knežević

Nikolai Berdyaev and the Binary Ontology of Uncreated Freedom

For Nikolai Berdyaev, the renowned Russian philosopher, the problem of the one and the many remains unexplained in our epoch and it torments contemporary philosophy as much as it tormented the Greek thought.

The problem of the one and the many tormented Greek thought. How is the transition from the one to the many to be made? How is the one accessible to the many? *Is there an other which exists for the one?*¹

The one or the Absolute, as conceived by traditional metaphysics, does not leave room for the other, claims Berdyaev.

The one, as absolute, would seem not to permit the existence of an other.²

Berdyaev, thus, tackles the issue of monism or 'ontological totalitarianism',³ claiming that 'slavery to being is, indeed, the primary slavery of man.'⁴ The Russian thinker proposes a major paradigm shift, arguing that our investigation needs to start not from the level of being, but the level of the person. Why the Absolute, as a product of metaphysics that gives priority to being over person—to *essence* over *existence*—does not permit the existence of the other?

Firstly, the Absolute is perfect in the sense of finished completeness. It is fully actualised and therefore lacks potency that waits to be actualised. In the jargon of

¹ Nikolai Berdyaev, *Slavery and Freedom*, trans. R. M. French (Semntron Press, San Rafael CA, 2009), pp. 49-50. Emphasis mine.

² Ibid. pp. 49-50.

³ Ibid. 51.

⁴ Ibid. 78

traditional metaphysics, the Absolute is *actus purus* or pure actuality. It is a completely fulfilled *esse* without *a posse*.

Consequently, the Absolute's ontological structure is monolithic. In the Absolute, there is no dialectical tension between potency and actualization. So, not only that the Absolute does not *need* to move; being completed, it *cannot* move. This is why it is difficult not only to identify the Absolute's ontological motive to create the world but also to explain its capacity to do so.⁵

The Absolute is not a being, is not a personality, *which always presupposes a going out from itself and a meeting with the other.*⁶

Since in the Absolute, there are no signs of movement, neither are there signs of life. The abstract Absolute shares the fate of abstract being, which is in no way distinguished from non-being. The God of the Bible is characterized by a dramatic life and movement, while from the Absolute, according to the precepts of Aristotelian philosophy, all inward motion and every tragic principle are excluded.⁷

In Berdyaev's view, nonetheless, it is not enough to switch from the level of ontology to the level of the person. Berdyaev introduces another important paradigm shift, but this time it pertains his theory of personality. Berdyaev's initial claim, shared today by a few other thinkers is that 'personality is a union of the one and the many.'⁸

⁵ SF. 84.

⁶ SF, 84. Emphasis mine.

⁷ SF, 84.

⁸ SF. pp. 49-50.

Berdyaev argues that it is only the person that permits simultaneous communion and otherness.⁹ However, what is the property of the person that make possible a harmonious relationship between the one and the many? How can we avoid pantheism—in which God is ‘all in all’ and the creature cannot appear as differentiated—or absolute dualistic transcendentalism—in which the creature, created out of ‘nothingness’, does not have a full ontological identity?

The monolithic structure of the Absolute, as we have seen, does not permit the other. To create an other, the Absolute would need a *binary* structure, a potency that stands in dialectic relation to it. This potency cannot be created by the Absolute since this would imply that its potential for ‘otherness’ is domesticated and exhausted. Concurrently, however, this potency must not create a bifurcation in being. It cannot be a second God.

A potency *in* God, a ‘space’ of freedom that God leaves for his creature, was envisioned long before Berdyaev, in the work of the German mystic Jacob Böhme. Berdyaev, however, deemed that if freedom were *in* God this would imply that it is also created by God. And if it is created by God, it loses all its potency for ‘otherness’. This is why Berdyaev makes a bold paradigm shift, arguing that freedom is *outside* of God.¹⁰ He calls it – *uncreated* freedom. According to Berdyaev’s new ontology, being is structured as a binary dialectic union of potency and actualization. What creates the maximum tension between potency and actualization and secures the

⁹ John Zizioulas agrees with this idea: ‘Substance is *a monistic* category by definition (there can only be *one* substance and no other in God)’ *Communion & Otherness*, ed. Paul McPartlan (New York: T&T Clark, 2006), 35. ‘It is only a person that can express communion and otherness simultaneously...’ CO, 29.

¹⁰ N. Berdyaev, *Dream and Reality* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1950), 99. *Samopoznanie* (Moskva: Hranitel, 2007), 124.

ever-new life of God and the world is the uncreated and external character of freedom. Still, despite its uncreated character, the external freedom does not cause a split in being since, as Berdyaev believed, it is God's nature.

Hence, according to Berdyaev, the person is preconditioned by uncreated freedom. The person's character is antinomical. The person is created but created from the uncreated. Uncreated freedom is divine nature. The origin of the person, therefore, is God's nature. There is only *one* origin of God and the world. Should one argue that the creature originates from nothingness, this would create a division in being, because it would introduce a non-being of a vague ontological status alongside God.

Berdyaev maintains that rationalizing orthodox theological systems have always exposed and persecuted pantheistic tendencies. However, the only thing they do not understand, in Berdyaev's view, is that if pantheism is heresy, then this heresy is in the first place concerned with the human being and human freedom, and not with God.¹¹

God is all in all. God holds everything in his hands and directs everything. Only God is real being; man and the world are nothing. Only God is free. Man does not possess real freedom. Only God creates; man is not capable of creating. Everything is of God. All this is constantly said by the orthodox. Extreme forms of abasing man, the acknowledgement of his nothingness, are just as much pantheism as the affirmation of the divinity of man... At the same time, it is monism. To avoid both monism and pantheism it is necessary to recognize the independence of man, of freedom in him, which is *uncreated, not determined by God*, and to recognize his capacity for creativeness. *But rationalizing orthodox theological systems fear this above everything.*¹²

¹¹ SF, 89.

¹² SF, 90. Emphasis mine. Zizioulas concludes that the person must be 'uncreated' but his consequent reasoning is different from Berdyaev's. See Romilo Aleksandar Knežević, *Homo Theurgos: Freedom According to John Zizioulas and Nikolai Berdyaev*, (Les Editions du Cerf, Paris, 2020), 53.

