



NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY
**STUDIES IN RUSSIAN
PHILOSOPHY, LITERATURE,
AND RELIGIOUS THOUGHT**

Volume 1 (2024)

ISSN 3065-0755

Northwestern

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Afterword

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It is seemly to end the journal's inaugural issue with an essay devoted to Russian personalism, peaking on the philosopher Semyon Frank (1877–1950). He did not have the Romantic dazzle and visionary flair of Nikolai Berdyaev, nor Sergii Bulgakov's theological precision laced with lyricism and pathos. Multi-ethnic, inclusive, ecumenical, averse to millenarianism and utopia, Frank was a transnational thinker. As long as faith was the ground, he preferred intermediate or middle spaces filled with "both-and" rather than exclusive dogmatic binaries.¹ The bigger and more unknowable these mediating spaces, the more mysterious will be the energy that connects us and the more imperative the presence of an Absolute. And also, he concluded, the more crucially individualized all "I-Thou" interactions on this site will become.

Frank's mature personalism was attentive above all to the concrete encounter. Early in his career he had praised Nietzsche for distinguishing between "love for one's neighbor" (the reflex of kinship) and a more abstract or altruistic "love of the distant," which bypassed persons in favor of a love of "things and phantoms."² This latter love had every right and reason to exist; it prods us toward the ideal. But Frank came to acknowledge, by the time of his intricate dissection of the I-Thou relationship in his 1938 masterwork *The Unknowable*, the dangerously simplifying temptation of such distant vision.³ Because compassion happens only in the present, not in the past or future, a fully-realized I-Thou or "love for one's neighbor" is differentiated, time-consuming, and difficult. Frank's insight here recalls Mikhail Bakhtin's early comments on the ethically binding force of our singularity or uniqueness [*edinstvennost'*]; the 'I', Bakhtin insists, has no "alibi in Being," no exit out of answering for

1. See Philip Boobbyer, "Semyon Frank," Chapter 29 of *The Oxford Handbook of Russian Religious Thought*, eds. Caryl Emerson, George Pattison, and Randall A. Poole (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020): 496–509, here 498.

2. See S. L. Frank, "Friedrich Nietzsche and the Ethics of 'Love of the Distant'" [1902] in *Problems of Idealism. Essays in Russian Social Philosophy*, trans., ed. and introduced by Randall A. Poole (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003): 198–241; and Semyon Frank, "The Ethic of Nihilism" [1909], in *Vekhi / Landmarks*, trans. and ed. by Marshall S. Shatz and Judith E. Zimmerman (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1994): 131–155.

3. See S. L. Frank, *The Unknowable. An Ontological Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion* [1938], trans. Boris Jakim (New York: Angelico Press, 1982/2020), chapter 6, "Outward Transcending: the 'I-Thou' Relation," 124–155.

who, at any moment, I am. Over a decade ago, Mikhail Epstein, one of the distinguished contributors to this issue, developed both these Bakhtinian ideas into what he calls the "diamond rule."⁴ Unlike the Golden Rule or the categorical imperative, which presume similarity (do unto others as you would have them do unto you—and this deed is both reciprocal and repeatable), the multi-faceted Diamond Rule is predicated on an ethics of radical particularity. Cleanse yourself of the fantasy that others are merely a mirror of you; as light falls on the subject, each facet creates its own depths. Even though the other is unknowable in the large, however, we can discipline ourselves to access needy parts of others (and expose needy parts of our own erring and incomplete selves) in ways that are more apophatic than duplicative. As Christian humanists, Bakhtin (and Semyon Frank too) would probably have signed on to the Diamond Rule, which Epstein summarizes as: "do unto others what the other needs done and what only you can do right now, from your own time and place."

Diamond-rule optics is a stunningly attractive exemplar of personalism, but not one that lends itself easily to a politics. Political thinking in the modern state tends to depersonalize. It aggregates, organizes parts externally, enters into combat, strives toward social justice and a legal definition of rights. It can be reconciled with determinism and positivism. The radical personalist would insist that a concrete encounter, to be worthy of the eye-to-eye relation, must begin elsewhere, with one's own concrete act of inner spiritual healing. Any reality worth the name begins there for the human subject. Or as Berdyaev put the matter in 1934: "There can be no worse aberration than to identify the *object* with reality. To know and to objectify or to abstract are currently regarded as synonyms. But the very opposite is true: effective knowledge involves familiarity."⁵

The options seemed to be: the objectified distancing of politics versus the familiarity of persons. Russian émigré circles in the 1930s and '40s mercilessly debated these models and the tactics that each required.⁶ What made the debates so excruciating is that these exiled Russian idealists, aristocrats and egalitarians alike, were against *all* reigning ideological systems—communism, fascism, free-market capitalism with its bourgeois complacency and devotion to material profit—and yet they found nihilism, as a politics, abhorrent. As Ana Siljak argues in her editor's Introduction to the English translation of the Berdyaev-Maritain correspondence, for these philosophers an economically unmonitored, spiritually unmoored individualism

4. "Differential ethics: from the golden rule to the diamond rule," Ch. 15 in Mikhail Epstein, *The Transformative Humanities, A Manifesto*, trans. and ed. by Igor Klyukanov (New York/London: Bloomsbury, 2012): 217–224.

5. Nicolas Berdyaev, *Solitude and Society*, trans. by George Reavey (London: Geoffrey Bles: The Centenary Press, 1936), 51, emphasis added. An accurate (and more informative) literal translation of the title of Berdyaev's 1934 Russian original is: *The 'I' in the World of Objects. An Essay on the Philosophy of Aloneness [одиночество] and Communion / Communication [общение]*.

6. For an even-handed survey of these debates (with Struve and Ilyin championing the "political" option and Berdyaev, Frank and Bulgakov arguing for the innerly redemptive), see Stuart Finkel, "Nikolai Berdyaev and the Philosophical Tasks of the Emigration," Ch. 17 in G. M. Hamburg and Randall A. Poole, *A History of Russian Philosophy, 183–930. Faith, Reason, and the Defense of Human Dignity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010): 346–362, especially 356–361.

would invariably drive people to "succumb to a tyranny of one sort or another."⁷ The dignity of human beings lies not with their individuality but with their personality [*lichnost'*], which is relational and must be grounded in an Absolute. In the interwar period, however, no serious poet or philosopher had the luxury to ignore politics.⁸

This maiden issue of the journal is abundantly graced with Christian humanisms from the Parisian Orthodox diaspora. Rowan Williams considers Sergii Bulgakov's quest for a "soul" in socialism and how the Church should respond. Bradley Underwood takes on Berdyaev and Bulgakov as analysts of the metaphysical Underground, that generative site of evil and playground of Nothings. Daniel Adam Lightsey links Vladimir Nabokov, supreme aesthete, with Bulgakov's sophiological hymn to the creative artist. But theologians do not define the agenda. Four contributors discuss Dostoevsky's novels, and the other three interrogate -isms constructed outside the religious realm (Darwinism, Empiricism, Marxism). The Dostoevsky essays, diverse as they are, each challenge us to rethink a received wisdom. Working with the cast of *The Brothers Karamazov*, Gary Saul Morson asks us to reconsider what it means to have—or to adopt—a belief. The novel's narrator assures us that realists are not unnerved by genuine miracles. But why is Alyosha's faith tested by the awfulness of a "reverse miracle," by his Elder's unnaturally rapid bodily decay? (Morson's answer: faith must be freely given, a choice; certainty is the province of the Grand Inquisitor.) Amy Singleton Adams, countering Dostoevsky's reputation for extremity and urban scandal, celebrates his moments of smallness, tenderness, the theophany of contemplative landscapes and icons. Likewise within an Orthodox perspective but with darker implication, the Dostoevsky of Denis Zhernokleyev insists on the impossibility of an autonomous ethics that is graspable by human experience, whether in the bosom of nature or in the nineteenth-century novel. And Peter Winsky cautions us not to dismiss as mere caricature or satire the figure of Father Ferapont, earnest hesychast fanatic and sworn foe of the Elder Zosima—for among Dostoevsky's goals is to make "*finding the good* more difficult for his hero and readers."

The more secular entries and -isms continue this mission of making the good harder to find. Since—depending on the hermeneutics of the thinker—"the good" can mean both the objectively true and the morally defensible, each essay has a fascinating seam where Russian apologists for raw, mechanistic matter come up against the transcendent. Jillian Pignataro is concerned to set right the organicist Strakhov's critique of Darwin: the enemy wasn't Darwin (whom Strakhov respected) as much as Social Darwinism, and in Strakhov's view an "internal teleology" was compatible with natural selection. Julia Berest takes on another vigorous import into Russia of the 1860s, the empiricism and utilitarianism of John Stuart Mill, showing how Mill's recondite *System of Logic*, while alienating Orthodox conservatives, galvanized

7. Ana Siljak, "A New Christian Humanism: Nikolai Berdyaev and Jacques Maritain," introductory essay to Bernard Hubert, *Nikolai Berdiaev and Jacques Maritain: An Exceptional Dialogue (1925–1948)*, edited by Ana Siljak, trans. Christopher Jon Delogu (Montreal: McGill Queen's University Press, 2024), here 22.

8. For an eloquent discussion of key intellectual and literary players in French-Anglophone circles that complement the Russian diaspora, see Alan Jacobs, *The Year of our Lord 1943. Christian Humanism in an Age of Crisis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

Russian academic philosophy (in this process, Strakhov's organic holism and Chicherin's synthesisism play a predominant role). Finally, Daniela Steila gives us a rich, loosened-up and humanized picture of "critical" and "alternative" Marxisms at the century's turn. Is the human subject energized or imprisoned by a consciousness of necessity? Can the Marxist critique, which continued to inspire those who rejected its political expression in Bolshevik policy, be scientific without being fatalistic and blind to persons in the present? If Mikhail Epstein ends his essay on Russian-Jewish identities with the cautious hope that each of those overlapped peoples could now return to a more modest existence, then Steila ends hers on a larger anxiety, the modernist conceit that the "human subject is the mighty conqueror of nature and the ultimate ruler of the universe." The hubris of such a position is as inherent in Marxism as it is in the Book of Genesis or in Berdyaev's numerous attempts at an anthropodicy. Ultimately, what brings the secular and non-secular essays in this issue together, perhaps unexpectedly, is the contested legacy of the European Enlightenment. Reassessing this legacy became an obsession among twentieth-century Russian religious philosophers, and their case has been handsomely continued by American literary humanists with a profound interest in theology, such as Duke University's Thomas Pfau.⁹

In closing, a few words about the origins of Northwestern's Research Initiative RPLRT—"ripple art," as one of our research scholars, Michael Ossorgin, dubbed it. With its well-curated forum (of essays, interviews, posts), international conferences, and now annual journal, this acronym is gaining some traction in the battered world of Russian Studies. The Initiative is appropriately situated in a university whose Press hosts the strongest Slavic book series in the country (SLRT: Studies in Russian Literature and Theory) and whose Slavic Department houses the professor who for decades has taught the biggest in-person classes on Dostoevsky and Tolstoy in the northern hemisphere (Gary Saul Morson). The embryonic stage of this research community was a zoomed reading group spearheaded in July 2021 by Susan McReynolds, Chair of Northwestern's Slavic Department. Several of the contributors to this first issue of the journal—graduate students, junior scholars and senior academic mentors—were pulled in at that time. Susan, Bradley Underwood (an ordained Baptist minister now in the Slavic PhD program at Northwestern), and Paul Contino (of Pepperdine University) resolved on a topic: the human person. According to the collective memory of this original inner circle, Rowan Williams—already targeted as a highly desirable participant for the coalescing group—had mentioned two names as indispensable for understanding contemporary personalism: Robert Spaemann and the Eastern Orthodox theologian Christos Yannaros. We began with Spaemann's 1996 book, *Persons: The Difference between 'Someone' and 'Something.'*

Am I treating you as someone, or as a thing? As a neighbor or as a phantom? The topic proved apt for the first hard-lockdown year of the pandemic, which saw each of us

9. See, for example, Thomas Pfau, "The Failure of Charity and the Loss of Personhood: Beyond the Enlightenment Impasse," *Tradition and Discovery: The Journal of the Polanyi Society*, vol. 43.2 (July 2017): 4–20, and at more length in his *Minding the Modern* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2016).

reified, isolated, but also infinitely more intimately available. As talking squares on a screen, more of us could interact visibly as persons than would ever have been possible to manage geographically or corporeally. From Spaemann (a German Catholic) the group moved on, or better moved outward and back in search of historical ground, to the Eastern Orthodox theologian Christos Yannaras and then to classic thinkers in the Russian religious tradition (Bulgakov, Solovyov, Dostoevsky, Pavel Florensky, with detours into Levinas), all the while gathering members from around the globe. When the world made its "transition to in-person"—a shocking phrase that no one would have dreamed of before 2020—McReynolds gave the group a more stable institutional identity by founding the NU Research Initiative in Russian Philosophy and Religious Thought (Literature was tucked in later). She invited Randall Poole, an intellectual historian at the College of St. Scholastica, to be its co-director, and together they welcomed Brad (an indefatigable facilitator) as associate director. The abomination of Putin's war against Ukraine and the co-option of the Moscow-based Russian Orthodox hierarchy into this re-imperializing mission made the task of the Initiative both trickier, and more necessary. But consider the comment by Rowan Williams in his essay for this issue. Socialism—and every group ideology—has both an anthropology and a soul. Sergii Bulgakov (along with his fellow Russians Berdyaev and Frank, who also began their careers in Marxist economic thought and who also transcended it) insisted on beginning any authentic human economy with the movements of the soul. Define that as you like, but where you'll end up is never with mere things, phantoms, or dead matter. You'll end up with a person in need of an Other. This is probably as close to a compact mission statement as the Initiative will ever come.



Caryl Emerson is A. Watson Armour III University Professor Emerita of Slavic Languages and Literatures at Princeton University. Her scholarship has focused on the Russian classics (Pushkin, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky), Mikhail Bakhtin, and Russian music, opera and theater. Recent projects include the French Neo-Thomist philosopher Jacques Maritain and the interwar Russian diaspora (philosophers and creative artists), the Russian modernist prose writer Sigizmund Krzhizhanovsky (1887–1950), the allegorical-historical novelist Vladimir Sharov (1952–2018), and the co-editing, with George Pattison and Randall A. Poole, of *The Oxford Handbook of Russian Religious Thought* (2020).