

Ethics and politics on the eve of the twenty-first century

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We can experience true spiritual satisfaction
not in seizing, but only in refusing to
seize. In other words: in self-limitation.

Each time I arrive in the principality of Liechtenstein, I recall with emotion that outstanding lesson in courage which this tiny country and its esteemed Prince, the late Franz Joseph II, presented to the world in 1945: standing up to the relentless menace of the Soviet military machine, they did not hesitate to shelter a detachment of Russian anti-communists seeking refuge from Stalin's tyranny.

This example is all the more instructive, because in those same months the mighty democratic powers, authors of the Atlantic Charter, with its ringing promise of freedom for all the oppressed of the earth, sought to ingratiate themselves with the victorious Stalin by yielding up into slavery all of Eastern Europe, and turning over—from the West's own territory—hundreds upon hundreds of thousands of Soviet citizens, against their expressed will, disregarding the suicides of some right there on the spot. With base force, these people were literally prodded with bayonets into Stalin's murderous reach, toward the torments of concentration camps and death. It was appropriate that the Soviet people lay down their lives in the millions for the common victory with the West, but, it turned out, they did not themselves have the right to freedom. (And it is astonishing that the free Western press helped cover up this crime for twenty-five years. No one, either at the time or later,

has called those British and American generals and administrators *war criminals* for their deeds, much less brought them to trial.)

Politics and ethics

This contrast between the courageous act of little Liechtenstein and the act of betrayal at the heights of the Great Powers naturally leads us further: what is the role, the justifiable and necessary share of morality in politics?

Erasmus believed politics to be an ethical category and called on it to manifest ethical impulses. But of course that was in the sixteenth century. And then came our Enlightenment, and by the eighteenth century we had learned from John Locke that it is inconceivable to apply moral terms to the state and its actions. And politicians, who throughout history were so often free of burdensome moral constraints, had thus obtained something of an added theoretical justification. Moral impulses among statesmen had always been weaker than political ones, but in our time the consequences of their decisions have grown in scale.

Moral criteria applicable to the behavior of individuals, families and small circles can certainly not be transferred on a one-to-one basis to the behavior of states and politicians; there is not exact equivalence, as the scale, the momentum and the tasks of governmental structures introduce a certain deformation. States, however, are led by politicians, and politicians are ordinary people, whose actions have an impact on other ordinary people. Moreover, the fluctuations of political behavior are often quite removed from the imperatives of state. Therefore, any moral demands imposed by us on individuals, such as understanding the difference between honesty, baseness and deception, between magnanimity, goodness, avarice, and evil, must to a large degree be applied to the politics of countries, governments, parliaments, and parties.

In fact, if state, party and social policy will not be based on morality, then mankind has no future to speak of. The converse is true: if the politics of a state or the conduct of an individual is guided by a moral compass, this turns out to be not only the most humane, but in the long run the most prudent behavior for one's own future.

Among the Russian people, for one, this concept, understood as an ideal to be aimed for and expressed by the term *truth (pravda)* and the phrase *to live by the truth (zhit' po*

pravde) has never been extinguished. And even at the murky end of the nineteenth century, the Russian philosopher Vladimir Solovyov insisted that from a Christian point of view moral and political activity are tightly linked, that political activity must not be anything but *moral service*, whereas a politics motivated by the mere pursuit of *interests* lacks any Christian content whatsoever.

Alas, in my homeland today these moral axes have fallen into even greater disuse than in the West, and I recognize the present vulnerability of my position in passing such judgments. When, in what had been the USSR, seven decades of appalling pressure were followed by the sudden and wide-open unchecked freedom to act, in circumstances of all-around poverty, the result was that many were swept down the path of shamelessness, with the unbridled adoption of the worst features of human behavior. It must be noted in this connection that annihilation was not visited upon people in our country in a purely random fashion, but was directed at those with outstanding mental and moral qualities. And so the picture in Russia today is bleaker and more savage than if it were simply the result of the general shortcomings of our human nature.

But let us not partition the misfortune between countries and nations—the misfortune is for all of us to share, as we stand at the end of Christianity's second millennium. Moreover, should we so lightly fling about this term—morality?

Bentham's behest

The eighteenth century left us the precept of Jeremy Bentham: morality is that which gives pleasure to the greatest number of persons; man can never desire anything except that which favors the preservation of his own existence. And the eagerness with which the civilized world took up so convenient and precious an advice was astonishing! Cold calculation holds sway in business relations and has even become accepted as normal behavior. To yield in some way to an opponent or competitor is considered an unforgivable blunder for the party having an advantage in position, power, or wealth. The ultimate measure of every event, action, or intention is a purely legalistic one. This was designed as an obstacle to immoral behavior, and it is often successful, but sometimes, in the form of "legal realism," it facilitates precisely such behavior.

We can only be grateful that human nature resists this legalistic hypnosis, that it does not allow itself to be lulled into spiritual lethargy and apathy toward the misfortunes of others. For great numbers of well-to-do Westerners respond with spirit and warmth to far-off pain and suffering by donating goods, money, and not infrequently expending significant personal efforts.

Infinite progress

Human knowledge and human abilities continue to be perfected; they cannot, and must not, be brought to a halt. By the eighteenth century this process began to accelerate and grew more apparent. Anne-Robert Turgot gave it the sonorous title of Progress, meaning that progress based on economic development would inevitably and directly lead to a general mollification of the human temperament.

This resonant label was widely adopted and grew into something of a universal and proud philosophy of life: we are *progressing*! Educated mankind readily put its faith into this Progress. And yet somehow no one pressed the issue: progress yes, but *in what?* And *of what?* And might we not lose something in the course of this Progress? It was enthusiastically assumed that Progress would engulf all aspects of existence and mankind in its entirety. It was from this intense optimism of Progress that Marx, for one, concluded that history will lead us to justice without the help of God.

Time passed, and it turned out the Progress is *indeed* marching on and is even stunningly surpassing expectations, but it is doing so only in the field of technological civilization (with special success in creature comforts and military innovations). Progress has indeed proceeded magnificently, but has led to consequences which the previous generations could not have foreseen.

Progress in crisis

The first trifle which we overlooked and only recently discovered is that unlimited Progress cannot occur within the limited resources of our planet; that nature needs to be supported rather than conquered; that we are successfully *eating up* the environment allotted to us. (Thank heavens the alarm has been sounded, especially in developed countries, and rescue operations have begun, although on much too small a scale.

And one of the most positive consequences of communism's collapse is the disintegration of the world's most senseless, recklessly wasteful economy, a model tempting for so many nations.)

The second misjudgment turned out to be that human nature did not become gentler with Progress, as was promised. All we had forgotten was the human soul. We have allowed our wants to grow unchecked and are now at a loss where to direct them. And with the obliging assistance of commercial enterprises, newer and yet newer wants are concocted, some of them wholly artificial; and we chase after them *en masse*, but find no fulfillment. And we never shall.

The endless accumulation of possessions? That will not bring fulfillment either. (Discerning individuals have long since understood that possessions must be subordinated to other, higher principles, that they must have a spiritual justification, a mission; otherwise, as Nikolai Berdyayev put it, they bring ruin into human life, becoming the tools of avarice and oppression.)

Modern transportation has flung the world wide open to people in the West. Even without it, modern man can all but leap out beyond the confines of his being; through the eyes of television he is present throughout the whole planet all at the same time. Yet it turns out that from this spasmodic pace of technocentric Progress, from the oceans of superficial information and cheap spectacles, the human soul does not grow, but instead grows more shallow, and spiritual life is only reduced. Our culture, accordingly, grows poorer and dimmer no matter how it tries to drown out its decline by the din of empty novelties. As creaturely comforts continue to improve for the average person, so spiritual development grows stagnant. Surfeit brings with it a nagging sadness of the heart, as we sense that the whirlpool of pleasures does not bring satisfaction and that, before long, it may suffocate us.

No, all hope cannot be pinned on science, technology, economic growth. The victory of technological civilization has also instilled a spiritual insecurity in us. Its gifts enrich, but enslave us as well. All is—*interests*—we must not neglect our *interests*, all is a struggle for material things; but an inner voice tells us that we have lost something pure, elevated and fragile. We have ceased to see *the purpose*. Let us admit, even if in a whisper and only to ourselves: in this bustle of life at breakneck speed—*what* are we living for?

The eternal questions remain

It is up to us to stop seeing Progress (which cannot be stopped by anyone or anything) as a stream of unlimited blessings and to view it rather as a gift from on high, sent down for an extremely intricate trial of our free will. The gifts of the telephone and the television, for instance, when used without moderation, have fragmented the wholeness of our time, jerking us from the natural flow of our life. The gift of lengthened life expectancy has, as one of its consequences, made the elder generation into a burden for its children, while dooming the former to a lingering loneliness, to abandonment in old age by loved ones, and to an irreparable rift from the joy of passing on their experience to the young.

Horizontal ties between people are being severed as well. With all the seeming effervescence of political and social life, alienation and apathy toward others have grown stronger in human relations. Consumed in their pursuit of material interests, people find only an overwhelming loneliness. (It is this that gave rise to the howl of existentialism.) We must not simply lose ourselves in the mechanical flow of Progress, but strive to harness it in the interests of the human spirit; not to become the mere playthings of Progress, but rather to seek or expand ways of directing its might toward the perpetration of good.

Progress was understood to be a shining and unswerving vector, but it turned out to be a complex and twisted curve, which has once more brought us back to the very same eternal questions which had loomed in earlier times, except that facing these questions then was easier for a less distracted, less disconnected mankind.

We have lost the harmony with which we were created, the internal harmony between our spiritual and physical being. We have lost that clarity of spirit which was ours when the concepts of Good and Evil had yet to become a subject of ridicule, shoved aside by the principle of fifty-fifty.

And nothing speaks more of the current helplessness of our spirit, of our intellectual disarray, than the loss of a clear and calm attitude toward *death*. The greater his well-being, the deeper cuts the chilling fear of death into the soul of modern man. This mass fear, a fear the ancients did not know, was born of our insatiable, loud and bustling life. Man has lost the sense of himself as a limited point in the Universe, albeit one possessing free will. He began to think himself the center of his

surroundings, not adapting himself to the world, but the world to himself. And then, of course, the thought of death becomes unbearable: it is the extinction of the entire universe at a stroke. Having refused to recognize the unchanging Higher Power above us, we have filled that space with personal imperatives, and suddenly life becomes a harrowing prospect indeed.

After the cold war

The middle of the twentieth century passed for all of us under the cloud of the nuclear threat, a menace fierce beyond the limits of all imagination. It seemed to blot out all the vices of life. All else seemed insignificant: we are lost anyway, so why not live as we please? And this great threat served also both to halt the development of the human spirit, and to postpone our reflection on the meaning of our life.

Paradoxically, however, this same danger temporarily gave Western society something of a unifying purpose of existence: to withstand the lethal menace of communism. By no means did all fully understand this threat, and in no sense was this firmness equally held by all in the West; there were not a few faint hearts thoughtlessly undermining the West's stand. But the preponderance of responsible people in government preserved the West and allowed for victory in the struggles for Berlin, Korea, for the survival of Greece and Portugal. (Yet there was a time when the communist chieftains could have delivered a lightning blow, probably without receiving a nuclear one in return. It may be that only the hedonism of those decrepit chieftains served to postpone their scheme, until President Reagan derailed them with a new, spiralling, and ultimately unbearable arms race.)

And so, at the end of the twentieth century there burst forth a sequence of events, expected by many of my countrymen but catching many in the West by surprise: communism collapsed due to its inherent lack of viability and from the weight of the accumulated rot within. It collapsed with incredible speed, and in a dozen countries at once. The nuclear threat was suddenly no more. And then? For a few short months joyful relief swept over the world (while some bemoaned the death of the earthly Utopia, of the Socialist paradise on Earth). It passed, but somehow the planet did not grow calmer; it seems instead that with an even greater frequency something flares up

here or explodes there; even scraping together enough U.N. forces for pacification has become no easy task.

Besides, communism is far from dead on the territory of the former U.S.S.R. In some republics, its institutional structures have survived in their entirety—while in all of them, millions of communist cadres remain in reserve, and its roots remain embedded in the consciousness and the daily life of the people. At the same time, ugly new ulcers have surfaced from years of torment; for instance: the current nascent capitalism, fraught with unproductive, savage and repulsive forms of behavior, the plunder of the nation's wealth, the likes of which the West has not known. This, in turn, has even brought an unprepared and unprotected populace to a nostalgia for the "equality in poverty" of the past.

Although the earthly ideal of socialism-communism has collapsed, the problems, which it purported to solve, remain: the brazen use of social advantage and inordinate power of money, which often direct the very course of events. And if the global lesson of the twentieth century does not serve as a healing inoculation, then the vast red whirlwind may repeat itself in entirety. The cold war is over, but the problems of modern life have been laid bare as immensely more complex than what had hitherto seemed to fit into the two dimensions of the political plane. The former crisis of the meaning of life and the former spiritual vacuum (which during the nuclear decades had even deepened from neglect) stand out all the more. In the era of the balance of nuclear terror this vacuum was somehow obscured by the illusion of attained stability on the planet, a stability which has proved to be only transitory. But now the former implacable question looms all the clearer: what is our destination?

On the eve of the twenty-first century

Today we are approaching a symbolic boundary between centuries, and even millennia: less than eight years separate us from this momentous juncture. (Which, in the restless spirit of modern times will be proclaimed a year early, not waiting until the year 2001.) Who among us does not wish to meet this solemn divide with exultation and in a ferment of hope? Many thus greeted the twentieth, as a century of elevated reason, in no way imagining the cannibalistic horrors

that it would bring. Only Dostoyevsky, it seems, foresaw the coming of totalitarianism.

The twentieth century did not witness a growth of morality in mankind. Exterminations, on the other hand, were carried out on an unprecedented scale, culture fell sharply, the human spirit declined. (Although the nineteenth century, of course, did much to prepare this outcome.) So what reason have we to expect that the twenty-first century, one bristling with first-class weaponry on all sides, will be kinder to us?

And then there is environmental ruin, and the global population explosion. And the colossal problem of the Third World, still called that in quite and inadequate generalization. It constitutes four-fifths of modern mankind and soon will make up five-sixths, thus becoming the most important component of the twenty-first century. Drowning in poverty and misery, it will, no doubt, soon step forward with an ever-growing list of demands to the advanced nations. (Such thoughts were in the air as far back as the dawn of Soviet communism. It is little known, for example, that in 1921 the Tatar nationalist and communist Sultan Galiev called for the creation of an International of colonial and semi-colonial nations, and for the establishment of its dictatorship over the advanced industrial states.) Today, looking at the growing storm of refugees bursting through all the European borders, it is difficult for the West not to see itself as something of a fortress: a secure one for the time being, but clearly one besieged. And in the future, the growing ecological crisis may alter the climatic zones, leading to shortages of fresh water and suitable land in places where they were once plentiful. This, in turn, may give rise to new and menacing conflicts on the planet, wars for survival.

A complex balancing act thus arises before the West: while maintaining a full respect for the entire precious pluralism of world cultures and for their search for distinct social solutions, at the same time not to lose sight of its own values, its historically unique stability of civic life under the rule of law—a hard-won stability which grants independence and space to every private citizen.

Self-limitation

The time is urgently upon us to limit our wants. It is difficult to bring ourselves to sacrifice and self-denial because in political, public, and private life we have long since dropped

the golden key of self-restraint to the ocean floor. But self-limitation is the fundamental and wisest step of a man who has obtained his freedom. It is also the surest path toward its attainment. We must not wait for external events to press harshly upon us or even topple us; we must take a conciliatory stance and through prudent self-restraint learn to accept the inevitable course of events. Only our conscience, and those close to us, know how we deviate from this rule in our personal lives. Examples of deviations from this course by parties and governments are in full view of all.

When a conference of the alarmed peoples of the earth convenes in the face of the unquestionable and imminent threat to the planet's environment and atmosphere, a mighty power—one consuming not much less than half of the earth's currently available resources and emitting half of its pollution—insists, because of its present-day internal interests, on lowering the demands of a sensible international agreement, as though it does not itself live on the same earth. Then other leading countries shirk from fulfilling even these reduced demands. Thus, in an economic race, we are poisoning ourselves. Similarly, the breakup of the U.S.S.R. along the fallacious Lenin-drawn borders has provided striking examples of newborn formations, which, in the pursuit of great power imagery, rush to occupy extensive territories that are historically and ethnically alien to them—territories containing tens of thousands, or in some cases millions, of ethnically different people, giving no thought to the future, imprudently forgetting that *taking* never brings one to any good.

It goes without saying that in applying the principle of self-restraint to groups, professions, parties, or entire countries, the ensuing difficult questions outnumber the answers already found. On this scale, all commitments to sacrifice and self-denial will have repercussions for multitudes of people who are perhaps unprepared for, or opposed to them. (And even the personal self-restraint of a consumer will have an effect on producers somewhere.) And yet, if we do not learn to limit firmly our desires and demands, to subordinate our interests to moral criteria, we, humankind, will simply be torn apart, as the worst aspects of human nature bare their teeth.

It has been pointed out by various thinkers many times (and I quote here the words of the twentieth century Russian philosopher Nikolai Lossky): if a personality is not directed at values higher than the self, corruption and decay

inevitably take hold. Or, if you will permit me to share a personal observation: we can experience true spiritual satisfaction not in seizing, but only in refusing to seize. In other words: in self-limitation.

Today it appears to us as something wholly unacceptable, constraining, even repulsive, because we have over the centuries grown unaccustomed to what for our ancestors had been a habit born of necessity. They lived with far greater external constraints, and had far fewer opportunities. The paramount importance of *self-restraint* has only in this century arisen in its pressing entirety before mankind. Yet taking into account even the various mutual links running through contemporary life, it is nonetheless only through self-restraint that we can, albeit with much difficulty, gradually cure both our economic and our political life. Today, not many will readily accept this principle for themselves. However, in the increasingly complex circumstances of our modernity, to limit ourselves is the only true path of preservation for us all.

And it helps bring back the awareness of a Whole and Higher Authority above us—and the altogether forgotten sense of humility before this entity. There can be only one true Progress: the sum total of the spiritual progresses of individuals, of the degree of self-perfection in the course of their lives.

We were recently entertained by a naive fable of the happy arrival at the "end of history," of the overflowing triumph of an all-democratic bliss; that, supposedly, the ultimate global arrangement had been realized. But we all see and sense that something very different is coming, something new, and perhaps quite stern. No, tranquility does not promise to descend upon our planet, and will not be granted us so easily.

And yet, surely, we have not experienced the trials of the twentieth century in vain. Let us hope: we have, after all, been tempered by these trials, and our hard-won firmness will in some fashion be passed on to the following generations.*—*Translated by Yermolai Solzhenitsyn* □

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