



Existential and Phenomenological Conceptions of the Relationship Between Philosophy and Theology

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Nikolai Berdyaev's Dialectics of Freedom: In Search for Spiritual Freedom

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Abstract: In Berdyaev's notion of freedom the borders between theology and philosophy seem to fall down. The same existential concern for spiritual freedom is at the heart of both theology and philosophy. From the point of view of existential philosophy as Berdyaev understands it, only a theologically informed account of freedom, could do justice to the concept of freedom. But a freedom determined by God is not what Berdyaev had in mind as representing authentic freedom. It was necessary for him to reinterpret Jakob Boehme's concept of *Ungrund* to arrive at a notion of uncreated freedom that both God and man share. But the articulation of this freedom, and an account of it within our fallen world could only be done as a philosophical pursuit. To arrive at the authentic understanding of spiritual freedom, that is theologically informed, Berdyaev believes that a philosophical rejection of erroneous views of freedom should take place. The articulation of the notion of freedom that does justice to the complexity of the existential situation of both God and man is not for Berdyaev a purpose in itself. The purpose is the arrival at a non-objectified knowledge of freedom that would inform a theologically committed existential attitude.

Keywords: Berdyaev; Freedom; Free Will; Existentialism; Theological Anthropology; Theodicy; Russian Religious Philosophy; Apophatic Theology

1 Introduction

The concept of freedom is the central concept of Russian religious philosopher, Nikolai Berdyaev's (1874-1948) thought, this granting him the nickname: "the philosopher of freedom."¹ All his books and writings are concerned with defending the freedom of the human person against any kind of enslavement or objectification, thus for him freedom is the hallmark of existential authenticity. "Berdyaev referred to the idea of freedom as the *leitmotif* of his life's work and, indeed, there is scarcely a page in any of his many books that does not deal with the question of freedom directly or indirectly. In contrast to many other religious existentialists, Berdyaev seems to affirm the Romantic conception of the self as essentially self-creating."² Although a religious existentialist, he did not consider himself a theologian, as he viewed this title as too constrictive for his creative way of thinking. Nonetheless his thought is representative of a category of thought where the borders between theology and philosophy seem to fade away. It is in his existential concern and quest for spiritual freedom that the unity of theology and philosophy seem to come out the clearest. In his articulation of freedom he aimed at an existentially relevant notion, within the framework of his existential philosophy, while the basic motivation behind it was theological. In this sense, the exploration of his notion of freedom should paint a clear picture of the way in which theology and philosophy are related in view of his existentialism.

His thought is rightfully placed within the existentialist tradition as he himself attested to this, although he qualifies which are the thinkers he would consider as existentialist according to his own understanding of existentialism. Thus he say that: "I regard my type of philosophy as 'existentialist', even though one should

1 Zeldin, "Nicholas Berdyaev: Creative Freedom", 207.

2 Pattison, *Anxious Angels*, 176.

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qualify this by pointing out that true existentialist philosophy is represented by St. Augustine, Pascal, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche rather than by Heidegger, Jaspers or Sartre.”³ He even gives a definition of what existentialism is, and what are the main characteristics of his own existentialism. He says that:

Existentialism may be defined in various ways, but the most important in my opinion is the description of existentialism which regards it as a philosophy which will not accept objectifying knowledge. Existence cannot be the object of knowledge. Objectification means alienation, loss of individuality, loss of freedom, subjection to the common, and cognition by means of the concept.[...] it seeks to express the existentiality of the cognitive mind rather than something abstracted from that existentiality, which is what objectifying philosophy seeks to do.[...] Existence (Existenz) is not essence, it is not substance, it is a free act. Existenz takes supremacy over essentia.⁴

We can see from this that Berdyaev points to the priority of freedom in his understanding of existence, a freedom that is the most fundamental for existence as such. But while reading the works of Berdyaev the reader is confronted with an ambiguity of the usage of the term freedom. Berdyaev himself points to the difficulty of articulating the notion of freedom, in such a way as to do it justice. But he also points out a way of approaching which is revelatory of his own understanding of freedom: “freedom must be looked at dialectically, and in movement, it is full of contradictions, and even a false affirmation of freedom is possible when it is understood in a static way, formally, and represented as easy rather than difficult. The freedom of man is limited on all sides, it is subject to limitation within him also.”⁵

Undoubtedly the theme of freedom has always fascinated human imagination generally, and theological and philosophical imagination especially. In the relationship between God and humanity the theme of freedom always had constituted a central tenant. The central teaching of Christianity on the Incarnation is bound to the concept of freedom, a freedom that is not only presupposed, but also generated. As the incarnation is not bound to a Trinitarian necessity, but is a freely assumed action towards the liberation of humanity. The freely assumed human nature by Christ leads to the increase of freedom for humanity. There seems to be something here that a fairly simple definition cannot grasp due to the divine mystery it entails, but at the same time refers also to a deep human reality that we all experience. The theme of freedom has very wide-reaching implications, but what we aim at here is showing how Berdyaev struggled to articulate a concept of freedom that would do justice to both the human existential situation and also to God’s freedom. Because the concept of freedom has its very own freedom from precise determination, Berdyaev always preferred to talk firstly of what constitutes a wrong understanding of it. As such in order to better grasp how Berdyaev articulated his understanding of freedom, we must first take a look at what Berdyaev deems as an inaccurate description of freedom.

2 The problem with free will

Berdyaev’s understanding of freedom is not the so-called doctrine of free will. He claims that the doctrine of free will originated from the need to make man accountable for the existence of evil in the world: “that doctrine was invented in order to find a culprit, someone who could be held responsible and so vindicate the idea of punishment in this life and in eternity.”⁶ Basically the concept states that there is the good and the evil and that man is free to choose either one, the good being God’s law and the bad being the rejection of the law, thus making man accountable for sin and worthy of punishment. This free will is seen as a created instance given to man for the accountability of his choices. If freedom is a gift of God to man and is determined by God then freedom is a fatal gift because ultimately it condemns man and makes him accountable for the evil in the world. In this view God just wants a response to Himself and does not care for any real freedom for man.

According to Berdyaev the doctrine of the free will not only does not refer to freedom, but leads man into slavery, for “man is enslaved by the necessity to choose between that which is forced upon him and carrying out the law under fear of penalties. He proves to be least free in that which is connected with his free will.”⁷ For Berdyaev necessity and freedom exclude each other reciprocally, necessity always being something that is imposed from outside. Necessity also doesn’t allow creativity, firstly because creativity should be a free act and secondly because necessity only asks for the fulfilment of a given law or norm, leaving no place for any creative act. Thus a utilitarian worldview is created where man is just an instrument in the fulfilment of the law of God,

³ Berdyaev, *Dream and Reality*, 97.

⁴ Berdyaev, *Truth and Revelation*, 13-14.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 74.

⁶ Berdyaev, *The Destiny of Man*, 25.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 25.

losing all his spiritual dynamic. This view of freedom is a complete submission to the cataphatic or positive theology, that is the realm of objectified knowledge. Richard Hughes summarises very well Berdyaev's view on the implications of both cataphatic and apophatic theology:

The concept of being is the product of objectification, and cataphatic theology defines God as being, by assigning priority to being, cataphatic theology asserts the common over the individual and the universal over the particular. Consequently, positing God as being makes God an object known through naturalistic and sociomorphic categories. Apophatically, God is Spirit, not being, and Spirit is numinal and not phenomenal, subjective not objective, inward not outward. As a numinal reality, Spirit is personal and known concretely by individual subjects.⁸

Berdyaev gives a harsh analysis of positive theologies' view of freedom and its consequences. Speaking about freedom in this context he says that "it is impossible to rationalize this idea and to express it in terms of positive theology. It is precisely the traditional theology that leads good men, inspired by moral motives, to atheism."⁹

This worldview created by positive theology also led to the doctrine of predestination, which is more concretely the source of the atheism Berdyaev was previously talking about. It was due to the rationalistic attempt in positive theology to solve the antinomy between freedom and necessity that gave rise to the doctrine of predestination.¹⁰ The doctrine of free will is according to Berdyaev just a failed effort of rationalizing freedom, like all the attempts that were made of rationalizing freedom because "it is impossible to elaborate a logical and positive concept of freedom which is capable of completely elucidating its mystery. Freedom is life which can only be grasped in the experience of life, for in its inner mystery it eludes the categories of reason."¹¹

Any attempt of rationalizing freedom is a failed attempt which ultimately leads to some sort of denial of freedom. "The attempts which have been made to base freedom upon naturalistic metaphysics have always been superficial" says Berdyaev¹². In other words, freedom cannot be viewed as a quality of created nature. In this way nature would exist in a kind of autonomous self-determining manner, which would mean that freedom would be an exterior given between choices. For Berdyaev freedom of choice is viewed as a burden, because until the choice is made there is no freedom, "man is free when he need not choose."¹³

3 Meonic freedom

The concept of meonic freedom is one of the most original and controversial aspect of Berdyaev's thought. The term meonic comes from the Greek το μη ον which means that which is not, or nothingness. However this does not mean that when speaking about freedom, Berdyaev referred to the lack or inexistence of freedom, but it is viewed in connection with the term he borrowed from Jakob Boehme, *Ungrund*. But, Berdyaev's understanding of the *Ungrund* is slightly different than that of Boehme. In one of his articles about Boehme, Berdyaev gives the following statement of his understanding of the concept of *Ungrund*:

The mysterious teaching of Boehme about the *Ungrund*, about the abyss, without foundation, dark and irrational, prior to being, is an attempt to provide an answer to the basic question of all questions, the question concerning the origin of the world and of the arising of evil. The whole teaching of Boehme about the *Ungrund* is so interwoven with the teaching concerning freedom, that it is impossible to separate them, for this is all part and parcel of the same teaching. And I am inclined to interpret the *Ungrund*, as a primordial meonic freedom, indeterminate even by God.¹⁴

As we can see from the paragraph, Berdyaev interprets Boehme's *Ungrund* as corresponding to the meonic freedom that he talks about. A freedom indeterminate by God that is prior to being, and not only prior to the being of the world, but according to Berdyaev, prior to God as Trinity. He formulates this very explicitly in the following way:

⁸ Hughes, "Nikolai Berdyaev's Apophaticism", 444.

⁹ Berdyaev, *The Destiny of Man*, 32.

¹⁰ Ibid., 347.

¹¹ Berdyaev, *Freedom and the Spirit*, 121.

¹² Ibid., 117.

¹³ Berdyaev, *The Destiny of Man*, 102-103.

¹⁴ Berdyaev, *Studies concerning Jacob Boehme. Etude I. The Teaching about the Ungrund and Freedom*.

Out of the Divine Nothing, the Gottheit or the *Ungrund*, the Holy Trinity, God the Creator is born. The creation of the world by God the Creator is a secondary act. From this point of view it may be said that freedom is not created by God: it is rooted in the Nothing, in the *Ungrund* from all eternity.¹⁵

This statement looks extremely controversial and at a first look it could be interpreted as being in opposition to fundamental Christian doctrines, and viewing God as a demiurge within the world, a kind of creator that Plato had in mind. Firstly it would seem to affirm that God had a temporal beginning, being born from the *Ungrund* in time, secondly that God is not infinite or absolute, because he is limited by the *Ungrund* from which God was born, thus making the *Ungrund* the infinite. I believe that Berdyaev would not agree with these interpretations of his understanding of meonic freedom, because he refuses to give to the *Ungrund* any kind of ontological reality. The *Ungrund* is pure nonexistence, neither good nor bad. It is viewed in existential and not in ontological terms, where ontology means for Berdyaev essence ontology, that he opposes to existential philosophy. Thus the first objection brought up, that God had a temporal beginning does not stand because the birth of God as Trinity from the meonic freedom is beyond any concept of time, it is within eternity, within freedom. Otherwise, Berdyaev would be forced to say that God is subjected to necessity and is not truly free, which he completely rejects.

When one interprets Berdyaev's thought on meonic freedom as an ontological reality, one also easily may make objections from a theological perspective. God is not limited by the freedom, but without the freedom God could not realize His being freely by the interpersonal Trinitarian relations. God realizes Himself freely as Trinity in eternity, this is what Berdyaev's argument leads to: to the fact that God is not subjected to any necessity. But because freedom has a priority over being means that it is not created by God and also in relation to God, the meonic freedom is that from which the world is created, the inexistence that accepts existence.

An attempt of appropriating and interpreting this idea is found in the thought of Paul Evdokimov, one of Berdyaev's younger compatriot theologians and fellow member of the Russian Diaspora in Paris. He says that "nothingness and freedom are without reason and without foundation; they are limitless and therefore correlative and related,"¹⁶ It is very likely that he picked up this idea from his older friend, Berdyaev, but he made a slight change from Berdyaev's understanding of the idea. Evdokimov asserts that "liberty is limited only by nothingness."¹⁷ For Berdyaev this would be a contradictory statement because for him freedom, understood as meonic freedom, and nothingness are equated.

Berdyaev's basic anthropological presupposition is that "man is the child of God and of non-being, of meonic freedom."¹⁸ This is in line with the biblical doctrine of creation ex nihilo, where God did not create man out of his being or out of preexistent eternal material. Man owes his existence to God. He was brought from inexistence to existence through God's creativeness. All creative activity, even God's creative activity presupposes the meonic freedom, the freedom that makes possible the creation of new things. Creativity as such is the free act of bringing into existence something that prior to that act was not existing. "Creativeness by its very nature is creation out of nothing, i.e. out of meonic freedom"¹⁹ says Berdyaev as he shows the distinction between creativeness and forms of redistribution of matter or energy like evolution or birth. God's creativity is true creativity for it does not depend on any matter. Human creativeness is always bound with the created world, it must express itself in a material manner, but every work of art is an example of the transcendence of matter in the very material work of art. Fundamentally there is something more profound to creativeness that is not external to the causal condition. That would be for Berdyaev the meonic freedom that permeates every creative act. In artistic creation what is considered as creative is not the actual work of art itself, but the movement of the will towards the creation that comes from the depths of freedom. "This element of freedom springing from the pre-existential abyss is present in every creative act of man, in artistic conception and inspiration."²⁰

Man being created by God in His image, received being that is created in time by the absolute being, but still the other foundation of man is nothingness. "The world is created, man is created, but being is uncreated and is from all eternity. This implies that divine being alone is being in the true sense of the term."²¹ This does not mean that for Berdyaev there is no ontological alterity between God and creation, but means that creation is utterly dependent on God for its being, but this is not a constraining dependency for it must be freely accepted from within. There is a clear distinction here between the God of the philosophers, understood as first cause, and the Trinitarian God of Christianity. Berdyaev also underlines this strongly: "When people speak of God as

¹⁵ Berdyaev, *The Destiny of Man*, 33.

¹⁶ Evdokimov, *The Struggle with God*, 22.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Berdyaev, *The Destiny of Man*, 60.

¹⁹ Ibid., 43.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., 40.

the creator of the world they are speaking of something immeasurably more mysterious than a causal relation. In relation to the world God is freedom and not necessity, not determination. But when men speak of freedom they are speaking of a very great mystery. God has been turned into a determining cause, into power and might, as he has been turned into a master and a king. But God is not like anything of the kind. God is completely beyond the limits of such terms."²²

Creation itself is a risk of freedom that only a free God could have taken in creating free creatures. For man to have dignity and truly reflect the image of the creator it could have not been any other way to be created, but from freedom, within the very same freedom that God himself is. Man would not truly be the image of God if he were not created free, his freedom is a mark of his divine origin and dignity, but also a part of his responsibility for his own authentic existence. Also, contrary to other existentialist thinkers, Berdyaev does not attach a concept of angst to his understanding of non-being. As James McLachlan rightly noticed: "Berdyaev's philosophy is not angst-ridden. Nothingness is the beginning for his thought, not the end. And Berdyaev's conception of nothingness contains not the traditional idea of radical non-being but the presence of endless possibility."²³

Also, the theory according to which man is part of the divinity, does not do justice to the authentic spiritual freedom of man because in this way he is not truly free as a free self-determining existential entity, but a part of a wider notion of divinity. Berdyaev says in this respect that "man is not free if he is merely a manifestation of God, a part of the Deity"²⁴, but also the opposite is also true that "he is not free if he has been endowed with freedom by God the Creator, but has nothing divine in himself."²⁵ There is a strong mystical tendency in Berdyaev's thought, but Berdyaev's mysticism differs from the classical understanding of mysticism where the individual loses himself in the divine. "Berdyaev emphasizes the fact that the goal of mysticism is not merely union with God, but also, and as a result of this union, a turning toward the self and toward every creature.[...] It is in this sense that one can say that the mission of mysticism is to free the human spirit from despondency."²⁶ In this sense the goal of mysticism is the end of objectification, which thus coincides to Berdyaev's view of the aim of existential philosophy. Berdyaev uses this understanding of mysticism particularly as a critique of positive theology, by contrasting it to apophatic theology that is akin to mysticism.

Pantheism is completely rejected by Berdyaev from the point of view of positive theology, but he finds some truth in it from the point of view of apophatic theology. Thus he says that "in apophatic knowledge nothing can be thought of as external to God—neither the created world nor freedom. Pantheism is true in so far as it refers to the God of apophatic theology, but it is false in so far as it translates mystical truth into the language of rationalistic positive theology."²⁷ In this respect I would consider the position of Berdyaev as panentheistic, where God is in everything, having dominion of all being, but not over freedom that is uncreated. A similar concern was also expressed by the German Idealist philosopher Friedrich Schelling. In a certain respect Schelling had a significant influence on Berdyaev's thought. Berdyaev's view of pantheism comes very close to that of Schelling. As we can see, Schelling says that "if pantheism denotes nothing more than the doctrine of the immanence of things in God, every rational viewpoint in some sense must be drawn to this doctrine. But precisely the sense here makes the difference. That the fatalistic sense may be connected with pantheism is undeniable; but that this sense is not essentially connected with it is elucidated by the fact that so many are brought to this viewpoint through the most lively feeling of freedom."²⁸ So for him if pantheism does not denote a fatalistic world view, but the immanence of God in creation, than it is totally acceptable. It is this immanence of God in creation that we previously described as panentheism, a position that Berdyaev also seems to embrace. But this does not yet answer the question of how we should view human freedom and what does this entail existentially for the human being. Thus the notion of spiritual freedom comes forth as Berdyaev's answer to these issues.

4 Spiritual freedom

True freedom has nothing to do with necessity, more precisely it is the opposite. Human freedom is not what is understood by the doctrine of the free will, but for Berdyaev it is the spiritual freedom. Spiritual freedom is one of the highest values, a value that is a witness of the significance of the human person as God's created image. The very possibility of existence, understood in the existentialist sense is only possible for Berdyaev only with

²² Berdyaev, *Truth and Revelation*, 59.

²³ McLachlan, *The Desire to be God*, 114.

²⁴ Berdyaev, *The Destiny of Man*, 45.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 45.

²⁶ Nucho, *Berdyaev's Philosophy*, 126.

²⁷ *The Destiny of Man*, 39.

²⁸ Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom*, 11.

the recognition of spiritual freedom. For Berdyaev, true existentialist philosophy, as he represents it cannot be thoroughly ontological because freedom is more fundamental than being. As he briefly put it: “*Existenz* in its depth is freedom.”²⁹

Freedom of the spirit, understood as the “fundamental principle of being and of life”³⁰ excludes any kind of attempt of understanding it as a natural or even a metaphysical category. “Berdyaev affirms this spiritual element as something that is experienced and beyond the ability of reason and the categories to prove. Thus, he argues that a true existential philosophy cannot be an ontology.”³¹ Authentic life for Berdyaev is primarily seen as spiritual life. Spiritual life cannot be conceived outside of spiritual freedom, because we cannot equate spiritual life with biological life. Biological life is subjected to nature and an evolution that is subjected to necessity and is in no way related to creative freedom. Although biological life is subjected to necessity, Berdyaev does not dismiss it as meaningless, but as meaningful if it is in relation with spiritual life, for “meaning cannot be derived from the mere process of life, from its quantitative maximum; it must lie in that which is beyond and above life [...] life can reach a higher level not through quantitative increase, but through ascending towards something higher than itself. And this means that life may be interpreted spiritually as well as biologically.”³² There is a clear distinction between spiritual and natural life, where the spiritual is the superior one because of its dynamicity which enables man to rise over his natural created state and achieve freedom of the spirit.

Only if man is a free spiritual being he can rise above nature and give witness of his greatness, of his divine image within. We can find a similar idea also in the thought of Nicolai Hartmann, a thinker with which Berdyaev debated much on the notion of freedom. He says that “freedom is the rising of initiative above the blind happenings of the world. As such this is a value, it lifts man out of the connections of nature in which he is rooted, it allows him to tear himself away, to rise into the ‘second realm’. Lack of freedom is total determination from outside, the serfdom of man under the universal course of events. The profound struggle of human thought to attain a metaphysical proof of freedom of the will is a witness to its worth.”³³

In this Hartmann tries to show the necessity of freedom in realizing values that transcend human nature beyond the realm of nature into freedom. Although somewhat similar to Berdyaev’s concerns, Berdyaev believes that Hartmann’s thought on the subject is ultimately unsound. Although Berdyaev appreciates the work of Hartmann on a number of other merits, in the question of freedom Berdyaev says about Hartmann that “he has no explanation to give of the origin of man’s freedom, nor of his power to realize values in the world. Man is for him the mediator between the world of permanent ideal values and the meaningless natural world. Through his freedom man must introduce into the world purpose and value borrowed from the timeless ideal realm. Such a conception of the moral life is utterly unintelligible.”³⁴ Hartmann’s conception of the freedom of moral life is postulated on the acceptance of atheism. For Berdyaev this means a negation of the spiritual dimension of man which for him equals with naturalist determinism.

“To be free is to have entered upon another order of being which is spiritual in character”³⁵ says Berdyaev when talking about the dynamicity of the spirit. He thus understands freedom of the spirit as a self-determination of one’s being, a free self-determination of ever coming closer to the origin of one’s being, which is spirit, because “the conception of being which is not spirit, and is without and not within, results in the tyranny of naturalism.”³⁶ This means that man has primacy over being because of his spiritual freedom. The closer one gets to his being the freer he becomes.

In man there is the continuous struggle between spirit and nature, the spirit corresponding to the notion of freedom and nature to the one of necessity. The place of this struggle is viewed by Berdyaev, following Dostoevsky, as the human soul, that is equated to some degree with the psychical reality in man. As George Pattison points out: “Berdyaev argued that Dostoevsky’s religious teaching was inseparable from his insistence on the freedom of the human spirit.[...] there is no doubt that his advocacy of Dostoevsky helped both to strengthen the perception of Dostoevsky himself as being some kind of Christian proto-existentialist as well as to stir the debate as to whether there could indeed be any such thing as ‘Christian existentialism’. Certainly he provided a significant line of defense for Christians who did not wish to cede the entire territory of human freedom to Sartrean atheism.”³⁷ It was precisely the case for Berdyaev that Dostoevsky’s thought was profoundly Christian, dealing with the

²⁹ Berdyaev, *Truth and Revelation*, 15.

³⁰ Berdyaev, *Freedom and the Spirit*, 119.

³¹ McLachlan, *The Desire to be God*, 114.

³² Berdyaev, *The Destiny of Man*, 29.

³³ Hartmann, *Ethics*, Vol. 2, 144.

³⁴ Berdyaev, *The Destiny of Man*, 22.

³⁵ Berdyaev, *Freedom and the Spirit*, 121.

³⁶ Berdyaev, *The Destiny of Man*, 11.

³⁷ Pattison, *Dostoevsky and the Christian Tradition*, 15.

fundamental question of freedom from a Christian perspective. Berdyaev says that “Dostoevsky found that the road to Christ led through illimitable freedom, but he showed that on it also lurked the lying seductions of Antichrist.”³⁸ Berdyaev in his interpretation of Dostoevsky wants to show that there is an ambivalence of freedom that takes place in the human psyche, but this ambivalence is necessary in order to reach spiritual freedom in Christ.

The psychic is also dynamic and is understood by Berdyaev as also describing the natural side of man as the place of objectification thus alienating it from freedom. The psychic is the locus of both the manifestation of the freedom of the spirit and also of necessity: “When the spiritual is operative within the psychical, the freedom of the spirit is revealed; when it is the natural which is active, then necessity once more asserts its sway.”³⁹ So the psychical becomes the locus of spiritual freedom if it transcends its natural necessity and rises to a more complete spiritual life, that is a more deep freedom, a freedom in God. Out of the meonic freedom that man received while being created, man has to continue co-creating himself with God as a free being in order to come closer to the perfection that the Creator is, thus freedom is a starting point, but also an aim, more precisely understood as freedom of the spirit.

The possibility of freedom of the spirit in the highest degree is attainable only through and in Christ. The human person does not have the power to solely realize his freedom of the spirit because of his ambiguous fallen nature. Only Christ by becoming human, not only restored, but fulfilled the freedom of man's spirit. Berdyaev expresses this very bluntly saying: “Let us face the fact that true freedom is only possible in and through Christ; that Christ, whatever may be said, must be freely accepted and that it is by a free spiritual act that we must come to Him.”⁴⁰ In order to reach the freedom in Christ one has to freely accept Christ. The acceptance of Christ is not just a mental or intellectual disposition of considering Christ as God and Saviour, but an existential assumption of one's complete being of becoming one with Christ, but without losing one's personality. The loss of personality in relation to Christ would mean the subjection of the human to determinism and necessity and thus the loss of freedom. In relation with Christ not only there is not loss of freedom, but the true potentiality of freedom is reached, freedom manifested in one's personality. Personality is only possible if it has freedom of the spirit, of communion with the other. Christ in Berdyaev's view is the deliverer from evil and the deliverer of freedom to humanity. Berdyaev does not only make Christ an instrument for freedom, but sees Christ as freedom itself, freedom that is the ultimate aspiration of human being. Only when man has communion with and through Christ, the incarnate person of the Trinity, with the Trinitarian personal God, he reaches a realization of personality, of freedom, of his divine image within.

The love of God is the love of freedom, and God's love of man's freedom permeates the divine life in the quest for his liberation. We could say that the freedom of the spirit is the divine freedom that God has in His interpersonal Trinitarian relations, that is also realizable for humans when they enter in relation with the Father through the Son in the Holy Spirit. This continuous growth in freedom and communion with God is possible for man because of his underlining origin in meonic freedom, out of which God brought him into being, orienting man's being towards the absolute being that is God, and in Christ the strength for achieving freedom from naturalistic determinations was given. Man had from the beginning the potency of being and spiritual freedom, but in Christ this is actualized. For Berdyaev true freedom is God, and God is man's freedom. It is primarily God that demands from man his spiritual freedom, because “man can get on without freedom, and the demand for spiritual liberty which is the cause of so much tragedy and suffering in life is not a human but a divine claim.”⁴¹ But it is not an external demand of God as an authority over man that makes this demand. It is the demand of the divine element in man, it is the call of the Kingdom of God within, laying potent in the ‘*imago Dei*’. Without the freely assumed adhesion of man to God's love, the Kingdom of God is unrealizable, “It is impossible to build the Kingdom of God by force; it can only be created in freedom.”⁴²

Berdyaev's understanding of the Kingdom of God is not an immaterial spiritual realm thought of in a gnostic sense. He takes very seriously the doctrine of the bodily incarnation and resurrection of Christ, and the consequences of this are reflected in his thought. He does not oppose the body to the spirit. He believes that the body participates already in the spirit, but opposes it to matter, understood as necessity. He says that “the splendour and the beauty of the body for me are contained in its form rather than in its material substance, which is a source of necessity”⁴³ What this means for the body is that although it is a natural element, it has the capacity of transcendence, it has the possibility of transcending its natural character that is bound to necessity.

³⁸ Berdyaev, *Dostoevsky*, 63.

³⁹ Berdyaev, *Freedom and the Spirit*, 123.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 126.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 128.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 154.

⁴³ Berdyaev, *Dream and Reality*, 174.

Berdyaev's dualism is not one between body and soul, but between spirit and necessity. The body is in the middle space between spirit and necessity, and it can participate more or less in spirit. The less it participates in spirit the more objectified it becomes. "The body of man in this sense is not only one of the objects of the natural world, it has also an existential meaning, it belongs to an inner, non-objectivised existence, it belongs to the integrative subject. The realization of the form of the body leads to the realization of person."⁴⁴

Berdyaev shows that the upholding of one's freedom is a constant and perpetual work that needs to be realized. Because of his meonic freedom, man is free to fall away from God in the lower spheres of his existence, to become a slave to his natural dispositions. This enslavement is an alienation of his true being and freedom and a return to the non-being out of which he was created. This is what is meant by death when referring to the death that Christ saved us from. Berdyaev is well aware of the tragic dimension of freedom within man, where one is called to reach the divine or spiritual freedom, but also because of freedom he can alienate and enslave his being. This tragic dimension of freedom is most clearly seen in Berdyaev's account of the primordial fall, and it is fundamental to explore this in order to grasp the complexity of the question of spiritual freedom in his existential thought.

5 The tragic dimension of the fall for man's freedom

The tragic dimension of freedom means for Berdyaev the tragic dimension of man's freedom. The relation between man and meonic freedom according to Berdyaev is a tragic one, because "freedom may lead man to evil."⁴⁵ In the first instance it is precisely because of the meonic freedom that the fall occurred, for "the myth of the fall is bound up with this initial freedom and it could not be explained apart from it."⁴⁶ Meonic freedom in connection to the fall leads to a consequence on the way in which Berdyaev makes sense of the problem of evil. This consequence could be summarized in Berdyaev's statement that "God the Creator cannot be held responsible for freedom which gave rise to evil"⁴⁷. Berdyaev's primary reason of coming up with the idea of meonic freedom was to create a theodicy that would show that God is not responsible for evil.

The myth of the fall for Berdyaev does not humiliate man, but on the contrary it shows the privileged status and dignity of man. Here Berdyaev contrasts his view of the fall with that of positive theology. For "in traditional positive theology there is always a desire to humiliate man"⁴⁸, making him responsible for the evil in the world that also consequently makes God also co-responsible for evil. But for Berdyaev the "idea of the fall is at bottom a proud idea, and through it man escapes from the sense of humiliation. If man fell away from God, he must have been an exalted creature, endowed with great freedom and power."⁴⁹ Berdyaev rejects the portrayal of the fall as being caused by the disobedience of man, because the term disobedience has strong juridical implications. He believes that the juridical language that often permeates theological narratives is rooted in the legalistic functioning of human society, and that "throughout the history of Christianity there has always been a struggle between the principles of grace and spiritual regeneration and the formal, juridical and rationalistic principles."⁵⁰ The term disobedience points to a strong externally imposed factor that has been breached, whereas Berdyaev would stress that the harmony between God and humanity was breached which is more of an internal factor. The image of a God that would ask man for external obedience to his laws is not an image that Berdyaev would consider an authentic view of God, for God calls man to freedom not obedience: "God created man in His own image and likeness, i.e. made him a creator too, calling him to free spontaneous activity and not to formal obedience to His power."⁵¹

Berdyaev understands the fall not as an historical event, but a spiritual pre-cosmic event. He says that "the fall could not have taken place in the natural world, because this world is itself the result of the fall. The fall is an event in the spiritual world, and in this sense it is anterior to the world, for it took place before time began and, in fact, produced time as we know it."⁵² The spiritual realm was created outside time and space and the human souls as well being part of the spiritual reality are not created in the moment of man's conception. Berdyaev seems to share the same idea on the pre-existence of the souls and of the spiritual realm as Origen of Alexandria,

⁴⁴ Berdyaev, *My Philosophic World-Outlook*.

⁴⁵ Berdyaev, *The Destiny of Man*, 26.

⁴⁶ Berdyaev, *Freedom and the Spirit*, 132.

⁴⁷ Berdyaev, *The Destiny of Man*, 34.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 112.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁵² Berdyaev, *Freedom and the Spirit*, 22.

from whom he most probably picked up the idea, but obviously he rejected the determinism of Origen's system. But in the perspective of apophatic theology, Berdyaev claims that "the pre-existence of souls is an absolute metaphysical truth."⁵³ The fall being the reason for the emergence of the natural world also means that it is the reason for the emergence of necessity. If necessity was not prior to the fall this means that the fall also signifies a loss of freedom, it is the objectification of the spirit. But he maintains that that "the idea of creation and creature as such does not imply a fallen state."⁵⁴ Still it seems that man can't be truly man without the fall, at least in its existential condition that we know. But we should keep in mind that for Berdyaev the idea of the fall is exalting to man, even though paradoxically it also means a loss of spiritual freedom. But Berdyaev embraces the paradox and is pleased more with this mystery than with what he calls the over-rationalizing of positive theology.

The pre-lapsarian spiritual state of being, according to Berdyaev was a blissful, but unconscious state where there was not yet any distinction between good and evil. "Paradise appears to us as the blissful life in which the cosmos was in man, and man was in God. The exile of man from paradise means that man fell away from God, and the cosmos fell away from man."⁵⁵ But paradise was just an embryonic state of being and not the fullness, for "man's freedom was not as yet unfolded, it had not expressed itself or taken part in creation."⁵⁶ We could see here the dynamism between the primary meonic freedom out of which man was created and the freedom in God that represents authentic existence. Although for Berdyaev the fall is a tragic event and signifies a loss of freedom, it is also a *felix culpa* because through it the spiritual freedom that was at that point unexpressed, became expressed, making possible a fuller freedom. Thus for Berdyaev "the fall is a manifestation and trial of man's freedom, a way out of the original, pre-conscious, natural paradise in which spiritual freedom was as yet unknown, and at the same time the fall is the loss of freedom and subjection to the lower natural elements. This was when the knot of the cosmic life was tied. The fall proved to be necessary, since freedom was necessary for the realization of the higher meaning of creation."⁵⁷ This realization of the higher meaning for creation is not just the task of God, it is also the task of man. It is a theandric process where man is called within his freedom to be co-creative with God.

6 Conclusion

The complexities of articulating a theologically informed and philosophically coherent notion of existential freedom come forth in the thought of Nikolai Berdyaev. The doctrine of free will does not do justice to a notion of freedom that would account for human dignity and God's love for humanity, but even worse it made God morally responsible for human suffering. That is why Berdyaev had to create the notion of meonic freedom, based on the mystical theology of Jakob Boehme. Berdyaev found that only the language of mysticism can do justice to the depth of freedom, a mysticism that is similar in its concern to existential philosophy. Both existential philosophy and mysticism, as Berdyaev understands them, are permeated by a concern with spiritual freedom both as a prerequisite, and also as a task. At the very depth of existence, even more fundamental than being is freedom, but this freedom also comports a tragic dimension that is revealed in the fallen state of humanity. But the fall receives a positive assessment by Berdyaev because of its role in unfolding the fullness of human freedom. Berdyaev's notion of freedom points to a relationship between philosophy and theology that evades the conventions usually attributed to the two realms, and to their classifications. Although we can still make sense of this relationship, we have to be aware of the relative nature of this endeavour. As such, for Berdyaev freedom is primarily understood as spiritual experience which is more akin to the field of mysticism which finds itself in the realm of theology. But for Berdyaev, mystical theology is not at the same level as conceptual or positive theology, which Berdyaev considers as objectified. Philosophy can also be objectified, but also it can perceive something of the mystical dimension of freedom. This latter form of philosophy is for Berdyaev existential philosophy, which in its true form is theistic, thus recognising the spiritual realm. His notion of freedom points to a continuous dialectic between theology and philosophy which seems to break the borders between them. In this sense Berdyaev reaches a notion of spiritual freedom that is theologically relevant at an existential level. His notion of freedom is also philosophically articulated, but in an existentialist philosophical key where freedom is accounted as a fundamental reality of existence.

⁵³ Berdyaev, *The Meaning of the Creative Act*, 120.

⁵⁴ Berdyaev, *The Destiny of Man*, 36.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 47-48.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 362.

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