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THE MORAL CONTEXT OF SOLZHENITSYN'S IDEAS

Abstract. Questions regarding the moral end, the meaning of human life, often resonate in the work of Solzhenitsyn. The Russian author has considered them based on his own experience in the gulag. The aim of this paper is to show some of the problems resulting from communism from Solzhenitsyn's point of view. The article does not focus on his arguments about politics, however, but consider his discussion of values, most importantly his view of human values as presented in his novel *Cancer Ward*, which is a suitable resource for the study of his beliefs and perspective.

Keywords: Solzhenitsyn, truth, communism, society, mankind, man, the individual, ideology, suffering

1. Introduction. 2. An overview of selected problems in Solzhenitsyn's critique of communism. 3. Moral vision in *Cancer Ward*. 4. Conclusions.

1. INTRODUCTION

To consider moral ideas which the Russian author Alexander Isayevich Solzhenitsyn (1918–2008) postulated in his work means to position his work also in the context of a particular period. Our effort was to do so, at least partially. Solzhenitsyn's critique is essentially concerned with the totalitarian regime of the former Soviet Union. Of course, it is necessary to add that Solzhenitsyn also harshly criticized the so-called western culture, which he described as consuming in its nature.

We tried to focus especially on his criticism of the totalitarian ideology and the problems caused by it. As one of the phenomena present in Solzhenitsyn's work, we chose the phenomenon of suffering and its analysis in the *Cancer Ward*. This is because the phenomenon of suffering is closely related to mankind's existence and moral experience.

2. AN OVERVIEW OF SELECTED PROBLEMS IN SOLZHENITSYN'S CRITIQUE OF COMMUNISM

In his writings, Solzhenitsyn touches upon a wide spectrum of philosophical and ethical issues, such as questions regarding the meaning of human life and the ever-resonating question of justice and truth. In his work, the Russian author considers the humanist ideas as well as the effort to guarantee human rights, human freedom and dignity. He offers interesting and well-grounded observations on the integration of ethics with human intellect, optimism with a belief in the human being that is not in contradiction with faith in God.

“Over half a century ago”, says the Russian writer, “while I was still a child, I recall hearing a number of old people offering the following explanation for the great disasters that had befallen Russia: »Men have forgotten God; that's why all this has happened.« Since then I have spent well-nigh 50 years working on the history of our revolution; in the process I have read hundreds of books, collected hundreds of personal testimonies, and have already contributed eight volumes of my own toward the effort of clearing away the rubble left by that upheaval. But if I were asked today to formulate as concisely as possible the main cause of the ruinous revolution that swallowed up some 60 million of our people, I could not put it more accurately than to repeat: Men have forgotten God; that's why all this has happened”¹.

Solzhenitsyn follows the tradition of humanist Russian philosophy, mainly the themes of social justice. He dedicated his entire literary work to the question of an individual's role in the society, human nature and dignity. A frequently resonating and recurring theme in Sol-

¹ E.E. Ericson, *Solzhenitsyn – Voice from the Gulag*, Eternity 36(1985)10, 23.

zhenitsyn's work is Marxist ethics, *a priori* based on the principle of the dictatorship of the proletariat. According to Solzhenitsyn, an individual is a moral being and transcends the framework of social classes. "Social class labelling" is just a limitation, imprisoning mankind and hindering individual freedom. Rejection of such determination provides a perspective on life in which an individual is driven by moral strength present in every individual, even though that potential may never be realized.

A basic notion of good and evil is inscribed within every individual. It is a God-given notion which is inherited by every human being in the conscience. The human conscience, understood as a property that is inherent to mankind, constitutes a space in which human values can be discovered and upheld. Solzhenitsyn believes that communism as such is atheistic, and does not see God as the giver of conscience and values. Solzhenitsyn's understanding of the value of human life is rooted in the Christian tradition.

It is necessary to say that Christianity was the essence of Russian culture for over a thousand years. It is not possible to consider Russian people and Russia as a whole without taking this fact into consideration. Solzhenitsyn's Christianity is a reflection of his personal struggle, discussion and dialogue with Christianity. The way he understood it, Christianity is the opposite of scepticism, which provides a solid foundation to build on. God's image is present in everyone and, because of grace, one can cooperate with the Absolute. In the spirit of the Russian tradition, Solzhenitsyn recognizes the unity of truth, goodness and beauty, because the absolute is perfect. Perfection by necessity includes truth, goodness and beauty².

Solzhenitsyn's protest against communist ideology is an expression of human individuality. The author himself is in the position of a pro-humanist. The human being, the human soul, good and evil, all of this belongs to the fundamental moral terms prevalent in his discourse. His critique of communism never deals with the economic theory or politi-

² Cf. A. Braithwaite, *Did Solzhenitsyn Change the World/Russia?*, *The Month* 23(1990)5, 181.

cal aspects. He does not ignore these aspects, but he does not prioritize them either. He prefers to begin by using moral terms. Solzhenitsyn literally referred to communists as “enemies of the human race”³.

The Soviet regime was, according to Solzhenitsyn, built on lies and violence. Human life in the socialist establishment is determined by ideology. This is the horizon of thinking and freedom of every person. And, according to Solzhenitsyn, the way ideology affects one’s life is through lies and violence. Ideology is criticized mostly for replacing morality in the society. No militia can prevent hooliganism in the country if there is no morality. Interestingly, Solzhenitsyn points to the fact that while tsarist Russia supported orthodoxy, the totalitarian regime established by the Bolsheviks rejected religion and sought to be supported by ideology.

This, according to Solzhenitsyn, became a substitute for faith. In his *Letter to the Representatives of the Soviet Union*, he calls for rejection of that ideology. Human life must not be controlled by any ideology, but by truth that is freely given to each individual. “Throw away from you that cracked ideology! Leave it to your opponent, or let it go where it wants, let it withdraw from our land like a cloud, like an epidemic, let them just take care of it, let others confess to it, not us! We will get rid of the obligation to fill our whole life with falsehood by rejecting ideology!”⁴.

Now let us focus on the notion of truth. In his works, Solzhenitsyn often returns to the values that socialism, particularly in its onset phase of bloody terror, has destroyed. The patriotic war and the resulting famine in Russia robbed individuals of their dignity and made them no more than puppets in the hands of others. Along with the social structure, it fundamentally altered and undermined the value of human life. The individual means nothing; one is but a droplet in a huge faceless sea of people. D. M. Thomas, the author of Solzhenitsyn’s biography,

³ A.I. Solzhenitsyn, *The Oak and the Calf*, trans. H.T. Willetts, New York 1979, 298.

⁴ Idem, *Letter to the Representatives of the Soviet Union*, trans. D. Pospelovksy, Zurich 1975, 35.

has rightly asked: "What has happened to the spirit of the 20th century to make it so readily treat people as masses and categories, while man as an individual does not exist to it?"⁵

The dynamic in Solzhenitsyn's understanding of truth consists mainly of standing by and defending it. His challenge to withdraw from the lie is not only to stay passive. Truth needs to be embraced with enthusiasm and commitment, so refusal to participate in the lie equals participation in the truth. "We shall be told: what can literature possibly do against the ruthless onslaught of open violence? But let us not forget that violence does not live alone and is not capable of living alone: it is necessarily interwoven with falsehood. Between them lies the most intimate, the deepest of natural bonds. Violence finds its only refuge in falsehood, falsehood its only support in violence. Any man who has once acclaimed violence as his method must inexorably choose falsehood as his principle. At its birth violence acts openly and even with pride. But no sooner does it become strong, firmly established, than it senses the rarefaction of the air around it and it cannot continue to exist without descending into a fog of lies, clothing them in sweet talk. (...) And the simple step of a simple courageous man is not to partake in falsehood, not to support false actions! Let that enter the world, let it even reign in the world – but not with my help!"⁶

The challenge that Solzhenitsyn puts forward to each individual is personal and individual. He recognizes that falsehood may, as he says, reign over the world, but not with his help. Mankind itself decides whether it will participate in the lie or not. Thus, Solzhenitsyn's understanding of truth is a categorical rejection of participation in falsehood.

Solzhenitsyn grasps truth through literature. According to him, it is the soul of the nation which allows us to learn on the mistakes of others and not just on our own. People die, literature remains. And it is like a mirror of the nation in which the truth can be seen. Solzhenit-

⁵ D.M. Thomas, *Alexander Solzhenitsyn: A Century in His Life*, New York 1998, 79.

⁶ A.I. Solzhenitsyn, *Nobel Lecture*, http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1970/solzhenitsyn-lecture.html [accessed: 30.07.2014].

syn himself praised the role of literature in his lecture delivered at the award of the Nobel Prize for Literature. In fact, Solzhenitsyn goes so far as to consider the writer an accomplice to the evil committed by his countrymen. The palms of the writer bear the bruises from the rope on the hands of the convicted, because it is mostly them who have to point out what personal refusal to participate in a lie means. “Shall we have the temerity to declare that we are not responsible for the sores of the present-day world?”⁷.

Solzhenitsyn follows the *dictum* of F. M. Dostoevsky “Beauty will save the world”. According to him, art and literature are tools that have the ability to show lies and violence in their sheer nudity. Art reveals truth, because a lie is able to hold itself against many things, but not against art. “One word of truth shall outweigh the whole world. And it is here, on an imaginary fantasy, a breach of the principle of the conservation of mass and energy, that I base both my own activity and my appeal to the writers of the whole world”⁸.

Solzhenitsyn’s philosophy of art, as he said in his Nobel lecture, is based, as is Dostoevsky’s, in moral and aesthetic considerations that outweigh political ones. It should be moral consideration, not political agendas, that determine a company’s social measures, depending on the management of personal conscience. In a world of universally applied standards of justice, to be respected, ethical relativism must leave. The role of a writer is primarily to preserve the memory of every nation, its integrity, but also to create something lasting for the human generation⁹.

Solzhenitsyn tries to understand the phenomenon of truth referring to the Gospel – “the truth will set you free”. This liberation is a process leading through pain and suffering, not only physical. The literary characters in Solzhenitsyn’s works suffer as well. Suffering is part of their everyday life, marked by captured ideological truth. “Marxist ideology” does not accept the values of human life defended by Solzhenit-

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ S. Carter, *The politics of Solzhenitsyn*, New York 1977, 94.

syn. He wrote in his *Gulag Archipelago*: “What does the loyalists’ lofty truth consist of? Simply that they do not want to renounce a single one of their former values – nor accept a single new one. Let life gush over them, surge over them, and even roll over them with wheels-still they won’t let it into their heads! They won’t accept it, as though it weren’t happening at all! This reluctance to change anything inside their own brains, this simple inability to make a critical assessment of their life’s experience, is what they pride themselves on! Prison must not influence their world outlook! Camp must not influence it! What they stood upon before, they will continue to stand by now! We ... are Marxists!”¹⁰.

Solzhenitsyn’s characters suffer because they have sinned against truth which is not their truth. In his short story *The Higher Order* Solzhenitsyn pointed out that children had to abandon their dreams because of a higher interest in “truth.” Russian communist ideology captured truth and proclaimed it as absolute. The Absolute, in the transcendental sense, no longer had a place in it. Tolstoy correctly points out that “People have forgotten God, that is to say, they have forgotten their relations to the Infinite Source of Life, forgotten the meaning of life, which is the outcome of those relations, and which consists, first of all, in fulfilling, for one’s own soul’s sake, the law given by this Divine Source”¹¹.

Solzhenitsyn believed that the mission of postmodern moralists was to live and act by truth. He believed the intellectual confusion and chaos was a serious problem facing today’s world, making it very difficult for an individual to determine what truth really is. People trying to gain the whole world forfeit their own souls. Solzhenitsyn called present-day humanism a kind of irreligious anthropocentrism, which could not yield answers to the essential questions of our life. Irreligious anthropocentrism is deeply connected with materialism, nihilism and egotism. In order to return to the values of truth, religion must develop so that it is flexible in its forms, and it must have a correlation with

¹⁰ A.I. Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago 1918–1956. An Experiment in Literary Investigation*, III–IV, trans. Th.P. Whitney, New York 1978, 336.

¹¹ L.N. Tolstoy, *The Russian Revolution*, London 1900, 23.

the cultural forms of the epoch. Religion cannot be static, but must be able to alter its forms in relation to the consciousness of the modern individual¹².

3. MORAL VISION IN *CANCER WARD*

Let us now look at selected moral problems in Solzhenitsyn's *Cancer Ward*. John Clardy in his paper points to the phenomenon of truth in *Cancer Ward*. The book is all about finding truth and the discovery that suffering in the form of cancer is a way to get rid of all human barriers and prejudices. Only when a person has nothing left to lose, just at that moment when they realize that they will no longer live, can they leave behind all that is insignificant and remain only in their bare existence. Thus relieved, mankind can fully understand reality.

Yet, as he points out in his work, there are people who cannot see the truth, or do not want to see it. *Cancer Ward* contrasts two characters with different outlooks on the world. For Kostoglotov and Rusanov there is truth that is undeniable and irrefutable. Each of them, however, is confronted with a different paradigm of truth. Rusanov, the epitome of Marxism, remains unchanged until his death¹³.

In this piece of work, the reader is offered a world of absolute existence and a world of paradoxes. Each character is a representation of the human being as a unique person with a characteristic trait of human uniqueness, with consciousness and the ability to recognize what is just. Human beings are endowed with free will, even though each individual is influenced by their social, economic or class background. Human personality has some kind of eternal value and participates in these kinds of eternal values. The task of the state is supposed to be to preserve and respect the freedom of the individual. It is precisely here, against the background of the conflict of values, that the story of *Cancer Ward* is set.

¹² J. Pearce, *An Interview with Alexander Solzhenitsyn*, <http://www.catholiceducation.org/articles/arts/al0172.html> [accessed: 30.07.2014].

¹³ Cf. J. Clardy, *Alexander Solzhenitsyn and the Impending Event: An Added Dimension to Solve an Old Problem*, Cimarron Review (1970)13, 17.

The author placed the characters of Rusanov, the Russian bureaucrat, and Kostoglotov, in exile and put them in a paradoxical situation. He managed to depict a situation of absolute existence. Each individual, although sick, looks upon their life and end differently. Kostoglotov accepts death and is not afraid of it because it is a part of life. Rusanov is revealed in a completely different mindset because he is a man who was somebody and who has achieved something. All of a sudden, he is in the same room with the deceitful people his regime fights against. Suddenly, they are equal. This is probably the only way in which they are equal: through cancer. Just as the rain falls on everyone, equally on the righteous and the unrighteous, it is a refutation of the idea that only bad people die while the good remain.

Solzhenitsyn managed to show in his novel the absolute nakedness of human existence. This nakedness is shown in the conflict of the characters and the diversity of their values. The main theme of the novel *Cancer Ward*, similar to the novel *In the First Circle*, is the fundamental question: how should people live. It is a philosophical and ethical problem. Despite this, we have to mark the continuing practical problem of the state, the one which touches upon everyday human actions. An answer to this question is found in the actions of characters in the cancer ward. The author created an absurd context in which the life of the dying patients plays out. It is carried out through this obviously extreme situation, which is lived out through the conflicts of the characters and in the fact that each character looks differently on truth. The province of their reasoning is defined by their convictions and by the values they profess.

At the end of *Cancer Ward*, Solzhenitsyn pointed out the real task of the writer. His task is not to defend or criticize any particular ideology of the state, even though the author refrain from doing that in his own work. Something quite different is more important. The task of the writer is to sort out universal and eternal questions, the secrets of human existence and conscience, to confront life with death, to overcome spiritual sadness, to sort out the laws of human history that have been here as long as can be remembered and that will cease to exist only when the sun stops shining.

What is interesting is the point of view from within the phenomenon of suffering which is often portrayed in *Cancer Ward*. Solzhenitsyn, influenced by Dostojevsky, made human suffering the topic of his novels. Solzhenitsyn never considered himself an existentialist or a personalist, although the themes he writes about in his novels are related to topics genuinely existentialist or personalist. Russian personalism is based on the value of each individual and on the dignity of the human person. Even though Solzhenitsyn's individual is often a suffering one, an individual that fights against dishonesty and injustice, we can see in his work compassion for individuals and an interest in the value of human life. It is also important to note that Russian existentialism and personalism developed differently than in the West.

This fact, evident in its own uniqueness, arises from historic and cultural circumstances. The thinking of Solzhenitsyn follows this pattern. In spite of the typical extremism and bipolarity of the Russian soul, which was portrayed mainly by Russian thinkers of the 19th and the first half of the 20th century, Solzhenitsyn also sees in the Russian individual an ethical dimension, which stands out from this extreme of the Russian soul.

It is noteworthy that he also incorporates and reflects Solzhenitsyn's views on Marxism; he is considered a person who significantly contributed to the fall of the totalitarian regime in the Soviet Union. However, he very rarely draws attention to his contribution to ethics and philosophy. In his works, he often tried to highlight and interpret traditional Christian values. He portrayed his characters so that one could experience every page as literary, spiritually, philosophical-ethically and politically. Robert Inchausti offers an interesting view on this subject saying that philosophical and ethical corners of Alexander Solzhenitsyn do not easily yield to analysis because there is no other author who thought or wrote in a similar manner. Inchausti points out in his study the size and importance of the phenomenon of suffering, often present in Solzhenitsyn's works. Solzhenitsyn's suffering does not celebrate but only underscores his cathartic effect.

A personal catharsis is possible only with the suppression of one's egotism. Mankind is taught this catharsis in confrontation with a new presence, which allows it to be bolder and braver against oppression.

Only in the presence of someone new can truth be known that is not the subject of speculation or a servant of ideologies. As Solzhenitsyn stated himself in *The Gulag Archipelago*, his book is compiled from testimonies. Each of them is a specific study of many forms of suffering and oppression and mankind's moral and spiritual resistance to them. Suffering plays an indispensable role only because it reveals the value of an individual and truth as such to everyone¹⁴.

The phenomenon of suffering and catharsis in Russian literature was developed primarily in F. M. Dostoevsky. Dostoevsky leaves his characters to suffer too often. "Dostoevsky saw suffering as symptomatic of free beings. Suffering is the result of evil. The fire is consumed by suffering and evil itself. In his work, he shows the human purgatory and hell. It brings him into the hall of paradise. He is not confronted with such force like hell"¹⁵.

The suffering is not of the common, ordinary kind, however. All of his characters must suffer perforce. Their suffering cannot be avoided, even if the characters can hold it off for a while, it comes back to them. In Dostoevsky's works, suffering purifies and reveals the truth. One can only wonder about how and to what extent Solzhenitsyn was influenced by Dostoevsky's theory of suffering and catharsis. V. D. Mihailovich, however, points out in his study a caution in assessing the influence of Dostoevsky on Solzhenitsyn. "The truth of the matter is," he says, "there is hardly a Russian writer who completely escaped being influenced by Dostoevsky"¹⁶.

With Solzhenitsyn, it can be understood as a formative principle, a similarity he shares with Dostoevsky. The suffering experienced by Kostoglotov in the labour camps taught him to respect the value of life: to eat slowly, to pause, to observe and sense the surroundings.

¹⁴ Cf. R. Inchausti, *Solzhenitsyn: Postmodern Moralist*, <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=1435> [accessed: 30.07.2014].

¹⁵ N.A. Berdyaev, *Dostojevského pojetí světa*, trans. I. Mesnjankina, J. Kranát, Prague 2000, 70.

¹⁶ Cf. V.D. Mihailovich, *Vladimir Krasnov – Solzhenitsyn and Dostoevsky: A Study in the Polyphonic Novel*, Athens 1980.

This attitude stands in stark contrast to Rusanov. Suffering has given Kostoglotov the moral strength to control his desires. Solzhenitsyn's "survivors" are able to celebrate life and thus achieve inner peace. All of them, to a greater or lesser degree, notice the spiritual dimension of life. In *Cancer Ward*, illness and pain are the existential grindstones of character that emphasize the moral content of the actions and words of Kostoglotov, Rusanov and other characters. We can say that it is pain and illness that are the framework of their thinking, the destiny and prism of human morality. This is clearly reflected in the way they express their feelings and thoughts.

Certainly, we can be critical of the proclaimed attitudes and opinions of Solzhenitsyn, mainly of his political nationalism presented in the 1990s. Our task, however, was to discuss the moral background of characters presented in his books, and not Solzhenitsyn's political views and convictions. His message still remains relevant. Therefore a deeper analysis of his ideas is needed, not only from the point of view of literary criticism, but mostly from the philosophical and ethical perspective.

4. CONCLUSIONS

When Solzhenitsyn returned to his homeland in 1994 after almost twenty years, a popular anecdote said that although everyone knew the Russian writer, no one read his books. And this was because of their difficulty and extensiveness. The message of the Russian author is still relevant today, at the time when moral values are despised, which Solzhenitsyn pointed to so many times. Perhaps also because of this, there is a new wave of interest in the works of this Russian and, we take the liberty to say, somewhat controversial author.

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