

# “Theurgic creativity” in philosophical conceptions of F. Nietzsche, Vl. Solovyov, and N. Berdyaev

Yevgeniya S. Buzhor<sup>1\*</sup>, Vadim I. Buzhor<sup>2</sup>, and Larisa V. Milyaeva<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Financial University under the Government of the Russian Federation, Department of Humanities, Moscow, Russia

<sup>2</sup>Financial University under the Government of the Russian Federation, Department of Political Studies, Moscow, Russia

<sup>3</sup>Financial University under the Government of the Russian Federation, Department of English and Professional Communication, Moscow, Russia

**Abstract.** The article presents a comparative analysis of theurgic activity in the works of three thinkers from the point of the generic understanding of theurgy as a “complete transformation of reality”. Despite the literal meaning of the term “theurgy”, according to all three thinkers, the indicated transforming influence is carried out by man and not by God. Although F. Nietzsche himself does not utilize the concept of theurgy, his theory of the *Übermensch* does fit into the framework of radical theurgic creativity since it presupposes a complete transformation of man carried out by himself, a change in his ontological nature. What is noted as a substantial similarity of the understanding of the transforming human activity by V. Solovyov and F. Nietzsche is that both thinkers view man as a product and the highest link of nature from which it follows that the highest calling of man is the transformation of not only himself but also nature. The difference lies in the fact that in Nietzsche’s view, the theurgic transformation is carried out by a person alone, through heroic effort. According to Solovyov, the main path of transformation of man and the world – the path of love – begins with a combination of two individuals and leads to conciliarity. In contrast, N. Berdyaev’s conception of theurgic creativity is distinguished by its radical transcendence, opposition to nature.

**Keywords:** Vladimir Solovyov, Nikolai Berdyaev, Friedrich Nietzsche, theurgy, *Übermensch*, total unity.

## 1 Introduction

The common feature of such different philosophers as Vl. Solovyov and F. Nietzsche is that both of them strived to renew philosophical knowledge and add a function of the generation of meaning for human life to it. Nietzsche believed that philosophy has to have an existential function and be a guiding force for man and not a mere system of abstract concepts. Similarly, Solovyov argued that philosophy should not be the philosophy of the school, that is, deal

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\* Corresponding author: [esbuzhor@fa.ru](mailto:esbuzhor@fa.ru)

exclusively with theoretical issues, but should “strive to become a forming and governing force ... of life” [1: 179]. This practical part of Solovyov’s philosophy was developed in the doctrine of theurgy understood as “a complete reformation of the world heading towards its final transformation” [2: 102]. Although the term “theurgy” literally means “God’s activity” or “the work of the gods”, according to Solovyov, this “complete transformation of the world” is carried out not by God but by man. The philosopher understands theurgy as the realization of “the divine by man in all empirical and natural reality, the realization of divine forces by man in the very real existence of nature” [3: 743]. Solovyov interprets theurgy as the god-like creativity of man aimed at the transformation of the world. According to V.V. Bychkov, in Solovyov’s view, man “must freely and consciously, based on his own knowledge, reason, and faith, come to the understanding that he was created precisely to realize with his own hands the ultimate idea of cosmic creation – to finally organize reality in accordance with the divine plan” [4]. This organization of reality following the divine plan is more precisely understood as restoring the total unity, that is, the transformation of empirical reality into the divine one. Solovyov proposed two ways for the transformation of reality – love and artistic creation<sup>†</sup>. Both of them can be traced back to a fundamental Platonic principle: birth in beauty. In creating beauty in the world through love and art, man contributes to the ontological transformation of not only his own self and other people but the entire universe.

Nietzsche’s philosophy also operates with the concept of radical creativity which is close to the concept of theurgy – after all, he is examining neither more nor less than the transformation of man into the *Übermensch*. A crucial meaning of Nietzsche’s revaluation of values was the understanding of man not as a means (for example, for the implementation of the plans of the world-mind) but as an end. Therefore, a person is called upon to reveal their inner unique content, their originality. *Übermensch* is a state of a person in which they arrive at complete disclosure. The ideal of human life is formulated in “Thus Spoke Zarathustra” as follows: “I love those who do not first seek a reason beyond the stars for going down and being sacrifices, but sacrifice themselves to the earth, that the earth of the Superman may hereafter arrive” [7: 24]. Therefore, a person must strive to become a superman or do everything possible so that such a superman manifests in another person. Since a person is an integral part of nature, the transformation of a person also entails a transformation of nature. Moreover, the birth of a superman is, according to Nietzsche, the goal of nature that strives to give birth to a superman by all means possible to reach self-knowledge through him, to have in him “a clear and sharp picture of what she only saw dimly in the troubled period of transition” [8: 361].

## 2 Methods

The features of Solovyov’s and Nietzsche’s theories of theurgic creativity can be conveniently explored in comparison with a thinker whose philosophy deserves the name of the philosophy of creativity par excellence – N. Berdyaev, a philosopher representative in the sense that he had absorbed a variety of directions. He was able to get used to someone else’s thoughts, assimilate them, and express them.

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<sup>†</sup> V. Solovyov’s theories of love and artistic creation are examined in greater detail in our works “The meaning of love in Vl. Solovyov’s philosophy of total unity” [5] and “The concept of theurgic creativity as interpreted by Vl. Solovyov and Viach. Ivanov” [6].

### 3 Results

Berdyayev's own philosophical quests were based on the peculiarly refracted impulses of the teachings of both Nietzsche and Solovyov. On the one hand, the philosopher fully embraced Nietzsche's doctrine of the revaluation of values including the famous thesis that "God is dead" and that an *Übermensch* must now take his place. On the other hand, in his understanding of man, Berdyayev relied on Solovyov's doctrine of Godmanhood, that is, the idea of the original divinity of man by his nature. In "Self-knowledge", Berdyayev stated: "I could only accept and experience Christianity as a religion of Godmanhood" [9, 10]. However, he understood the divinity of man much more radically compared to the founder of the Russian philosophy of total unity. In Solovyov's view, man is divine in the sense that he is eternally present in the divine essence but Solovyov does not replace God with man or man with God while Berdyayev understands the eternal divinity of man as being godlike. Since the understanding of God as a creator is predominant in the Christian tradition, Berdyayev accordingly perceives man as a creator possessing supernatural potencies. The possibility of such godlike creativity was substantiated by Berdyayev through the fact that God left the world to free the creative initiative of man himself. God leaves the world at the complete disposal of man and the creativity of the new man absolutely and there is no divine providence – the fate of the world is not predetermined and lacks certainty\* [11].

Since the days of romantics, genius has served as the ultimate expression of man's creative power. Thus, Berdyayev's self-realized superman or Godman is a creative genius. Similar to how the anthropological ideal of the era of the Second Testament was a saint, the new ideal of the era of the Third Testament, according to Berdyayev, is becoming a genius. Genius is a different ontology of a human being, a genius is alien to the visible world [11: 394]. In essence, in his anthropology, Berdyayev carries out Nietzsche's behest to surpass man. In his work "The meaning of creativity", he formulates this requirement extremely firmly: "not only man needs God but God also needs man". "Man must go from a religiously passive and receptive state to a religiously active and creative state" [11: 338] – that is the "new, yet unprecedented religious consciousness" [11: 384] and the goal of life for this new man – "not salvation but creative ascension" [11: 335–336]. This sheds light on why Berdyayev defined his philosophy as an anthropodicy – the justification of man. This is the justification of not an ordinary person but a godlike person, a man-creator who takes the place of God and gets the privileges of godlike creativity. P.P. Gaidenko states that, according to Berdyayev, "divine dignity is inherent in man" [12: 476], "man as a creator of values is put by Berdyayev in the place of God" [13: 457]. Berdyayev seeks to substantiate and justify the unlimited creative power of man capable of not only re-creating what already exists but also of creating anew from nothing. This sort of creativity is what Berdyayev calls *theurgy*§ [14]. Human freedom is divine – it is not the freedom to choose between good and evil but to do

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\* Berdyayev considers the retreat of God from the world in the name of human creativity to be the esoteric mystery of Christianity which will become apparent in the era of the Holy Spirit. Like many other Russian philosophers, Berdyayev believed in the coming of the Third Testament the meaning of which he saw in the transition from the exhausted path of repentance to the path of creativity. Berdyayev wrote that the third revelation is the revelation of creativity, the divine nature of man – "divine power becomes human power" [11: 519].

§ In Berdyayev's view, "in theurgy, art becomes power" – power over the "different world, different existence, different life, beauty as the essential" created by it [11: 457]. Berdyayev's theurgy "is an action higher than magic, for it is an action joint with God, the continuation of creation together with God" [11: 458]. "In conjunction with God, a theurgist creates space, beauty as the essential" [11: 458]. Berdyayev's man is similar to God the Creator in the sense that he has the power to create the existence and not the values of culture alone, for he is the son of God, continuing the work of the Father [11: 309].

good and evil. Freedom, as Berdyaev argues, “is ... not a choice between good and evil but my creation of good and evil” [9].

On the other hand, Berdyaev also discusses the tragedy of creativity manifesting in the fact that the created art pieces and values descend into the world of objects. Creativity results in objectification, a certain product that suppresses creative will and creates obstacles for its further activity. The product of creativity ends up being inevitably alienated from the very process of creativity. Therefore, creativity involves not only creating an object but also overcoming it. Berdyaev highlights the negative nature of endless creativity which gives his concept a touch of nihilism\*\*[6] that his teachers, Nietzsche and Solovyov, lack. In this regard, Berdyaev’s position is formally close to that of A. Schopenhauer with his concept of world-mind which the German thinker understood as an impersonal element, constant and endless striving and lust, passion that can never receive final satisfaction. The world is an unwanted product or rather the objectification of the endless striving of the will which fetters and limits it, causes it to suffer. Desiring to transcend the boundaries that hinder it, the will breaks them but inevitably generates new frames for objectification. What Schopenhauer saw as a way out of this vicious circle is the extinction of the will, that is, the cessation of its productive activity and, therefore, the abolition of the world which Schopenhauer always considered an inescapable vale of sorrow and suffering. This presents a striking difference between Schopenhauer and Nietzsche who also accepts the inevitable limits of the will but, on the contrary, insists on its potentiation recognizing it as an invariable given that the will is destined to set limitations for itself and overcome them. What Schopenhauer sees as a vicious circle (creativity – objectification – new creativity overcoming the previous objectification but creating a new one) Nietzsche views as a circle of virtue. Unlike Schopenhauer, Nietzsche does not postulate the presence of a metaphysical will existing before the world and giving rise to it. In Nietzsche’s view, the will is always individualized. Therefore, it is not the will that gives rise to the world but rather the world and life give rise to the will or rather the collision of the wills of different beings which is the very way of the existence of the world. Nietzsche has the prospect of not abolishing the world but accepting it as that universal environment where an endless struggle of the wills of living beings takes place resulting in the world not being destroyed or created anew but being constantly transformed, reshaped. The will to power is unstoppable and indestructible, it is inherent in all beings. It is impossible to enter this circle and annihilate the will – Nietzsche has an idea about the eternal return of the equal meaning that life, a key category for Nietzsche, is always equal to itself in the sense that it is constantly in a state of impulse and action. Will cannot strive for extinction, for, in this case, it is no longer will. The essence of will is the will to power which is essentially a tautology: the will to will, that is, will is an instrument of life that can only exist while growing. Extinction is not a sign of will but a lack of it. While Schopenhauer laments seeing the objective world as the cause of the suffering of the will, Nietzsche favors it on the same grounds. Amor fati, love for the existing state of affairs, is expressed in Nietzsche’s position in the fact that creativity invariably confines itself, sets limits for itself but, at the same time, overcomes them with creative effort and tension.

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\*\* It seems that nihilism, the rejection of the world triumphs in Berdyaev’s works because he rejects the mediating essence of man, as was the case with Nietzsche and Solovyov. When Berdyaev writes that man is a child of God and the meonic nothing, that is, two abysses, he completely removes man from the middle kingdom – nature, the world. Thus, he deprives man of being embedded in the existence, of the status of an intermediary actor. This distinguishes Berdyaev’s philosophy from the philosophy of, for example, M. Heidegger who, nevertheless, understood man as existence, although of a special nature, which allowed Heidegger’s individual to both be a part of the world and nature and go beyond it, to transcend. Ultimately, this allowed Heidegger to understand man as the curator of existence and, accordingly, view the inner-world essential as a manifestation of this existence.

Berdyayev has a middle-ground position. On the one hand, he accepts Schopenhauer's thesis on the objectification of the will being what constraints and opposes it. On the other, he disaccords with him in that the way out of this situation is giving up the will. On the contrary, similar to Nietzsche, he proposes the potentiation of the will. However, while Nietzsche assumes that the will always acts exclusively within the world and is impossible outside of it, Berdyayev assumes that at higher levels, creativity is possible without objectification, apart from the world and outside of it. Berdyayev believes that it is possible to abolish the world and that creativity will not stop there, moreover, it is then that it will manifest itself in full, perfect form. Creativity as a pure act, the *actus purus* of the nominalists, without everything this act can barge into and what can be an obstacle to it – this is a possible result of the absolutization of creativity as an infinite power. Berdyayev assumes that if substance based on which creativity unfolds is removed, creativity will not stop but will manifest itself even better. This can be compared to the image of a fire that burns fueled by a combustible material that it consumes while burning and when the material is gone, the fire will go out. Berdyayev, on the other hand, boldly believes that once this material is gone, the fire will not only not extinguish but will shine in all its full power for the first time. The nihilism Berdyayev demonstrates here is a sort of paradoxical creativity without creative products, pure creativity emanating from the meonic nothing and returning into it directly without any mediating link in the form of the world, objective reality. Thus, despite the similarity in the intentions (postulation of the superman-creator) of the two philosophers, an essential difference between Berdyayev's creative person, a genius and Nietzsche's superman is that the latter is an earthly being whose calling is to remain loyal to the earth, to contribute to its transformation, while Berdyayev's man is a being of a different ontological order comparable to a transcendental deity, self-sufficient in his creative activity, and not needing an external object for its manifestation.

Equally striking are the differences between Berdyayev's apotheosis of creativity and the understanding of theurgy in the philosophy of total unity. At the basis of Solovyov's total unity, there is no spontaneous, impersonal will. His world is composed of individual substances, living monads endowed with the will. Will is always subjective and never impersonal. Solovyov also acknowledges constraint and suffering but according to him, they appear not necessarily but accidentally, as a result of erroneous, selfish use of will leading the world to disunity. According to Nietzsche who takes this disunited world as a given, transcendence is based on a lonely subject asserting themselves as a superman through individual strenuous efforts. Other people with their average and compromising lifestyle are rather a hindrance on this path. On the contrary, Solovyov believes that the godman becoming cannot be accomplished alone, it definitely takes others into account, ultimately all others. Thus, in Solovyov's practical philosophy, the philosophy of love, a person's self-transcendence begins with a loving union with a chosen other. The perfect total unity allows for positive creativity without any negative moments of objectification and constraint. In essence, the perfect total union lacks objects for the application of creativity, everything is subjective, and each subject applies their creative activity to all other subjects and perceives their responding impact. Creativity is not a pure emanation of will from oneself outside but a mutual process of giving and receiving, it is always active and passive yet passivity in perfect total unity is not suffering but rather blissful. According to the definition from a different total unity philosopher, S. Bulgakov, the border – the classic expression of limitation-suffering in empirical reality – in perfect total-unity is no longer what limits a subject but rather what expresses, realizes them [14: 207].

The deplorable state of this world, according to Solovyov's theory of total unity, is due to the misuse of the will. Thus, the restoration of perfection calls for different, unselfish use of the will and, in turn, this change of will involves not overcoming and abolishing the world but correcting it, transferring it from the state of improper existence to the proper one. What

lies at the basis of Solovyov's position is the classical Kantian understanding of the will as a practical mind that is within the limits of good and evil and not on the other side contrary to Berdyaev's view suggesting that creativity as freedom is not the freedom to choose between good and evil but rather to do good and evil, that is, the divine arbitrariness, unrestrained creative power.

## 4 Conclusion

Philosophical anthropology postulated by Nietzsche in the doctrine of the *Übermensch* as a perfect being and in Solovyov's doctrine of artistic creativity and love as practical ways to Godmanhood emphasized the creative potential of man and revealed the possibility of him carrying out an ontological transformation of the empirical reality<sup>††</sup> [5].

Both thinkers consider man an organic, higher-order part of the world. Therefore, the reason and goal of human existence is to bring the whole world to its perfect state. At this point the teachings of Nietzsche and Solovyov demonstrate selective affinity despite the drastic differences in their fundamental assumptions and provisions. In Nietzsche's view, nature has a "teleology without a goal" (without a transcendental goal). It strives for perfection, the generation of perfect beings and man being a loyal "son of the earth" is its ally and assistant in this matter. Similarly, Solovyov argues that "if everything that exists (in nature or the world soul) must unite with the Divine – and this is the goal of the entire existence – in order to be a real unity, this unity obviously must be reciprocal, that is, it must come not only from God but also from nature, be its personal business, too" [16: 137]. Moreover, it should also be the personal business of man who Solovyov defines as "the center of the universal consciousness of nature" [17: 504], that is, "a natural mediator between God and material existence, a conductor of the all-unifying divine principle into the elemental plurality, – the host and organizer of the universe" [16: 140]. The final chord in this hymn for man as the son of the earth is Solovyov's argument that since man is part of the world, "our rebirth is inextricably linked with the rebirth of the universe, with the transformation of its forms of space and time ... Our personal business, since it is true, is the common business of the whole world – the realization and individualization of the all-united idea and the spiritualization of matter" [17: 540].

As for Berdyaev, in his position, man is opposed to the world and the justification of man occurs outside and apart from justifying the world to which Berdyaev ultimately has a negative, gnostic attitude. Like Nietzsche, he believes that a person must become someone who does not yet exist. However, the radicalism of Berdyaev's thinking leads him to the fact that a person must become a superman outside and apart from the world which is the product of the objectification of the creative subject's activity. Thus, according to Berdyaev, anthropodicy unfolds outside and apart from cosmodicy which is not present in his conception at all. Berdyaev's view does not involve fidelity to the earth and, consequently, space and nature. Berdyaev's thought realizes the most radical potential of the Christian teaching suggesting that man is a being above nature. The objective of man and his justification, as claimed by Berdyaev, is to realize his supernatural principle, to free himself from the natural that has grown on him, to burn it out with the transcendental flame, to become a pure spirit. In its form, man's task to take the place of God in Berdyaev's conception is identical to what was claimed by Nietzsche. However, the difference is that Nietzsche does not have transcendence outside nature, of which man is a part. Therefore, Nietzsche's *Übermensch* is a product of joint efforts of nature and man as its child. For

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<sup>††</sup> As indicated by a modern Russian philosopher V.V. Varava, Western and Russian philosophies, being fundamentally different in their history and structure, converge, meet in the topic of man [15: 24].

Berdyayev, man is a prisoner of nature, the mother-matter from which he needs to break away and which he needs to overcome to realize his higher purpose.

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