



The Destiny of Man

Nikolai A. Berdyaev, Natalie Duddington (translator)

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In *The Destiny of Man*, Nikolai Berdyaev sketches the plan of a new ethics. This new ethics will be knowledge not only of good & evil, but also of the tragedy which is constantly present in moral experience & complicates all moral judgments. It will emphasize the crucial importance of the personality & of human freedom. The new ethics will interpret moral life as a creative activity; it will be an ethics of free creativeness, an ethics that combines freedom, compassion & creativeness.

The Destiny of Man Details

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From Reader Review *The Destiny of Man* for online ebook

Filip Šlingar says

Upustio sam se ljetos u ovo djelo ne znaju?i ništa o ovome autoru niti pretjerano o krš?anskom egzistencijalizmu. Svako poglavlje je za mene bilo dimenzija više i sve više me je intrigiralo. Jako mi se svidio na?in analiziranja Nikolaja, a osobito usporedbe izme?u totalitarnih sustava 20. stolje?a. Za svakog krš?anina koji želi promišljati svoju sudbinu u našem vremenu, preporu?am ovu knjigu. Ne?ete se razo?arati :)

Erik says

Recommended by James Schall in *Another Sort of Learning*, Chapter 20, as one of Ten Books on the Humanities.

David Withun says

Most books are completely wastes of time; most books, especially in philosophy, are wrong, incomplete, uninformed, or merely repeat in some watered-down form something already better stated by another. Aside from this sad majority, however, there are some books from which one might learn a thing or two, but not much else. And then there are books which, if read with attention and sensitivity by an adequately prepared mind, can change a person's life. This is such a book.

Berdyaev's book, originally written as a piece on ethics, is the fullest and clearest exposition of the philosophy necessary for the modern world that I have yet encountered. He himself would later describe it as his "most perfect" writing. Treated in this book are the full range and depth of modern issues and ideas, from Darwinism to Marxism, from Nietzsche to Lenin, from sexuality to war, all from a viewpoint that is uniquely and purely Christian. It is an introduction to the Gospel's view of the 20th century and beyond.

Plainly stated, this book is my new favorite book. I recommend it for all humans.

Chad says

I discovered Nikolai Berdyaev as a regularly cited source in the works of Terryl Givens (others I have found include Elie Wiesel and Julian of Norwich. Givens has given me a whole bibliography of spiritual writers I have yet to get to!). Berdyaev was officially a Russian Orthodox Christian who wrote both before and after the Communist revolution. He wasn't the church-going type, and his Church sometimes didn't agree with everything he had to say. Givens seems to like him a lot, and points out many of the similarities in his thoughts to Mormon doctrine, particularly surrounding freedom, or agency in Mormon lingo.

I, too, found Berdyaev very engaging as he wrestles with spiritual problems. He is not uncritical of Christianity, and points to some areas where we have gone down the rabbit hole. I am grateful for authors

like Berdyaev that remain firmly in the camp of the saints, but who also seek to re-direct it when it seems to go astray.

There are two central ideas that Berdyaev develops in *The Destiny of Man*:

The ethics of creativity. Unlike a traditional explanation of commandments and sin in which moral decisions are merely a choice to adhere or disobey a pre-defined checklist of rules, Berdyaev argues that every moral decision should be a creative experience, an act to consciously create good. He describes it so:

The ethics of creativeness differ from the ethics of law first of all because every moral task is for it absolutely individual and creative. The moral problems of life cannot be solved by an automatic application of universally binding rules. It is impossible to say that in the same circumstances one ought always and everywhere to act in the same way. It is impossible if only because circumstances are never quite the same. Indeed, the very opposite rule might be formulated. One ought always to act individually and solve every moral problem for oneself, showing creativeness in one's moral activity, and not for a single moment become a moral automaton. A man ought to make moral inventions with regard to problems that life sets him. Hence, for the ethics of creativeness freedom means something very different from what it does for the ethics of law. For the latter the so-called freedom of will has no creative character and means only acceptance or rejection of the law of the good and responsibility for doing one over the other. For the ethics of creativeness freedom means not the acceptance of the law but individual creation of values. Freedom is creative energy, the possibility of building up new realities. The ethics of law knows nothing of that freedom. It does not know that the good is being created, that in every individual and unrepeatable moral act new good that had never existed before is brought into being by the moral agent whose invention it is. There exists no fixed, static moral order subordinated to a single universally binding moral law. Man is not a passive executor of the laws of the world order. Man is a creator and an inventor. His moral conscience must at every moment of his life be energy. Life is based upon energy and not upon law. It may be said, indeed, that energy is the source of law. The ethics of creativeness takes a very different view of the struggle against evil than does the ethics of law. According to it, that struggle consists in the creative realization of the good and the transformation of evil into good, rather than in the mere destruction of evil. The ethics of law is concerned with the finite: the world is for it a self-contained system and there is no way out of it. The ethics of creativeness is concerned with the infinite: the world is for it open and plastic, with boundless horizons and possibilities of breaking through to other worlds. IT overcomes the nightmare of the finite from which there is no escape.

This captures well the contrast between the ethics of law and the ethics of creativity. Some again may cringe or accuse Berdyaev of moral relativism, but he is clear that that is not what this is. I think again to Christ's explanation that he comes not to destroy the law, but to fulfill it. The higher law demands more, not less. But Berdyaev argues that the most difficult moral decisions are not between good and evil, but between varying goods that will ultimately require a sacrifice of one good over another. These will differ for different individuals.

Berdyaev doesn't hold much for what he refers to as normative ethics, the application of a single set of ethical standards on the whole population. He describes it so:

I should like to work out a system of ethics which is not tyrannical i.e. not normative. All normative theories of ethics are tyrannical... Ethics is bound to contain a prophetic element. It must be a revelation of a clear conscience, unclouded by social conventions.

I was thinking of certain Mormon cultural norms that become equated on the same level as eternal principles: certain prescriptions of dress, no tattoos or excess piercings, no swearing, etc. We are very good at normative

ethics, aren't we?

The second idea that also might make some turn their heads is his development of the idea of beyond good and evil. The distinction between "the good" and "the evil" is a direct result of the Fall. "The good" is not the ultimate aim of the gospel, and its pursuit results in Pharisaism and doesn't have saving power. God isn't the ultimate "good" person, but is on the other side of good and evil. Berdyaev, of course, got this concept from Nietzsche, who was a critic of Christianity. I was uncomfortable pulling any ideas from Nietzsche, but Berdyaev believes that Nietzsche had a legitimate qualm with Christianity, or at least Christian tendencies towards legalism. But when Nietzsche criticized traditional morality, he sought to supersede it with evil, rather than moving to something beyond it.

I appreciated how willing Berdyaev was to acknowledge the real quandary posed to religion by the existence of evil, and that he didn't try to explain it away. He writes:

The very distinction between good and evil which is the result of the Fall becomes the source of atheism. Ethics springs from the same source as atheism, and this throws a sinister light upon it. The traditional doctrines of theology do not solve the painful problem of evil. The ordinary theological conception of the creation of the world and the Fall turns it all into a divine comedy, a play that God plays with Himself. One may disagree with Marcion, the Gnostics and the Manichees, but one cannot help respecting them for their being so painfully conscious of the problem of evil. Evil is generally said to be due to the abuse of freedom with which God endowed his creatures. But this explanation is purely superficial. The freedom through which the creature succumbs to evil has been given to it by God i.e. in the last resort is determined by God. Freedom is a fatal gift which dooms man to perdition. 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. The ordinary theological conception of freedom in no way saves the Creator from the responsibility for pain and evil.

Berdyaev takes issue with what he refers to as rationalistic theology, the attempt to explain everything into first principles in a coherent system. This ultimately results in over-simplifications or outright absurdities e.g. Calvinism and predestination. Berdyaev seeks to preserve mystery, the existence of two opposing facts that cannot be reconciled to each other but must exist together e.g. hell and universal salvation. It reminded me of the many discussions I have read recently calling this by a different name: paradox or religious tension, for instance.

Berdyaev has a lot to say about the herd-man, the socially driven individual that relies on external motivators e.g. law to stay in line. He doesn't try to split society into lower and upper strata, but recognizes that we all to some extent have a bit of the herd-man in us.

Berdyaev expects a lot more from "the good"-- more than just looking out for their personal salvation. He believes we can't be satisfied until we have all redeemed the wicked from hell. Hell, to him, is ultimately going to be accounted not by only the wicked, but the good as well. We are responsible for hell by creating it for the wicked and condemning them there. I found this very profound, as it should move us beyond the self-centered doctrines of personal salvation. It reminded me too of Mormonism's doctrine of baptisms for the dead, ultimately seeking to redeem all mankind.

Berdyaev certainly gets you thinking! A great read.

Steve Evans says

This is for me the most difficult of Berdyaev's books. The physical edition is quite hard to read too with small print crowded on to the page. Its best feature is that it is well-indexed and not too much of a rave as many of Berdyaev's books are. When it was released it was given very favourable reviews by theologians, but I would take some of his other books first.

Naum says

For most of the books written throughout history, it would have been better if the text was condensed to an essay or a short essay (or not written at all). Then there are those that are gems, where the first third or half of the material is golden, but then the quality thereafter dips and it seems that it's just filler. Or maybe it's an excellent treatise on some subject, but then the final concluding chapters descent into inanity. Or perhaps an insightful book replete with treasures is annoyingly padded with needless fat. But **The Destiny of Man** doesn't fit any of these qualifiers -- the start and opening chapters were a rough trodden trail and I nearly gave up on the book. But this book, kept getting better and better, all the way to the final sentence.

Books on ethics are hardly compelling reads but I found Berdyaev illuminating and profound. And even though this was penned 80+ years ago by a Russian philosopher, the words are still timely and resonate today. Berdyaev sketches out a manner of which faithful Jesus followers live creatively in a fallen world. And riffs on Dostoyevsky (tries not to show overt adulation for, but it evident), Tolstoy (whom he seems to appreciate but skewers his embrace of legalistic thinking regarding Sermon on the Mount) and other thinkers I am not too familiar with. The final chapters on Hell and paradise are still percolating in my mind, but again, profound stuff that struck my cognitive keys.

Craig says

This Book is **EVERYTHING**!

MuzWot MuzWot says

One of my top 5 underappreciated, scandalously and immensely neglected - crucial classic works of all time.
