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LECTURE

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Pray for Chekhov: Or What Russian Literature Can Teach Conservatives

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Abstract: *American conservatives can learn much from the great literary output of 19th century Russia. Though seemingly distant in time and place, the great Russian novelists faced intellectual and moral circumstances remarkably similar to those we find today in America and in the West generally. Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, and Chekhov all wrote in opposition to the powerful ruling class emerging in Russia and the West, the intelligentsia. The revolutionary doctrines of the intelligentsia pointed toward authoritarianism, sought the destruction of individuality and religion, and the imposition of pseudo-scientific doctrines onto human life. The weapon of choice for Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, and Chekhov to combat this was literature—the best means both to appeal to man's sentiments and reason and to demonstrate their opponents' utopianism and destructiveness.*

"The surest gauge of the greatness of a Russian writer is the extent of his hatred for the intelligentsia."
—Prominent Russian critic and philosopher Mikhail Gershenzon, in the anthology *Landmarks* (1909)

The Argument

I propose to recount a century-long argument that is especially relevant today. As my epigraph suggests, it pits the great Russian writers against the Russian intelligentsia. Think of it as Trotsky vs. Tolstoy, Lenin vs. Dostoevsky, Bakunin vs. Chekhov. We Americans have our own intelligentsia, which increasingly resembles the classic Russian one, but we do not have anything like Russian literature with which to self-consciously oppose it. We need to enrich our

Key Points

- Today, we face a choice between the dangerous theory-based uniformity of the intelligentsia and the wise perspective on life espoused by Russian literature.
- The Russian novel is known, above all, for psychology. What is less often appreciated is that in showing the complexity of the psyche, the novelists were making a polemical point. The intelligentsia denied that people were complex at all. Human complexity was an insight hindering radical action.
- We Americans need to enrich our thinking if we are to avoid the Russian outcome of a century ago.

The Russell Kirk Memorial Lectures

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thinking if we are to avoid the Russian outcome a century ago.

Russia has made two enormous contributions to the modern world. Though never good at physical technology, it devised the world's most influential political technology, which we have come to call totalitarianism. In 1999, *Time* magazine proclaimed Einstein the "man of the century"—the person who "for better or worse most influenced the last 100 years"—but Einstein did not remotely affect so many lives as Lenin. Russia's other enormous contribution was its literature.

Slavery Romantics

Russian appreciation of literature has no rival. I can compare it only to the way the Hebrew Bible must have seemed when books could still be added. For Russians, the canon was and is sacred. Not only did literature represent life, as Westerners presume, but life existed to provide material for literature. When Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* was being serialized, Dostoevsky enthused that at last the existence of the Russian people had been justified. Can anyone imagine a Frenchman supposing that the existence of the French people required justification? And if it did, that it could be justified by a novel?

When the writer Vladimir Korolenko, who was half Ukrainian, was asked his nationality, he replied: "My homeland is Russian literature." In her recent Nobel-prize acceptance speech, Svetlana Alexievich echoed this comment by claiming three homelands: her father's Belarus, her mother's Ukraine, and Russian literature. Like the poet Anna Akhmatova, she thought of literature as a people's equivalent of an individual's memory, without which a person or a culture is demented. "Flaubert called himself a human pen; I would say that I am a human ear. When I walk down the street and catch words, phrases, and exclamations, I always think—how many novels disappear without a trace!" Like the great novelists, Alexievich thought of life as the secret thoughts and feelings of individual souls, which live in literature.

So here is where the argument is joined. Is life a matter of grand politics or individual souls? And can it be captured in a theory, or is there always what Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin called a "surplus" exceeding the grasp of any conceivable theory? The intelligentsia believed in theories and crises, the novelists in the complexities of ordinary, prosaic experience. For the novelists, people were not just abstractions or units to be sacrificed in the name of a theory that promised perfection, and they thought that the intelligentsia had far too much confidence—much more than experience could warrant—that their theories were correct and would have the desired effect.

The intelligentsia was ready to sacrifice or enslave individuals, who did not really matter, to achieve utopia.

In short, the intelligentsia was ready to sacrifice or enslave individuals, who did not really matter, to achieve utopia. Alexievich refers to such overconfident people as "slavery romantics, slaves of utopia."

Alexievich quotes Varlam Shalamov, the Gulag's second most famous chronicler, who declared: "I was a participant in a colossal battle, a battle that was lost, for the genuine renewal of humanity." Alexievich then continues:

> [And] I reconstruct the history of that battle, its victories and its defeats. The history of how people wanted to build the Heavenly Kingdom on earth. Paradise. The City of the Sun. In the end, all that remained was a sea of blood, millions of ruined lives. There was a time, however, when no political idea of the 20th century was comparable to communism (or the October Revolution as its symbol), a time when nothing attracted Western intellectuals and people all around the world more powerfully and emotionally. Raymond Aron called the Russian Revolution the "opium of the intellectuals."

Today that opium calls itself "social justice." This phrase has become a magic word, so that instead of arguing for a specific change by assessing costs, benefits, likeliness of success, and possibility of unintended consequences, one just uses the term "social justice." One then treats all opponents as enemies of justice, the way Marxists treated their opponents. The possibility that people with other views may believe in justice just as sincerely but have different conceptions of what justice is—and the possibility that even opponents who do share the same conception of justice may have different ideas on how best to achieve it—such possibilities are not even imagined or are dismissed out of hand.

Alexievich insists we must not forget what socialism, for all its aspirations, meant in practice "because arguments about socialism have not died down. A new generation has grown up with a different picture of the world, but many young people are reading Marx and Lenin again." On American campuses, there is no need to say "again."

Why Tolstoy Did Not Belong to the Intelligentsia

We get the word *intelligentsia* from Russian, where it was coined about 1860. In its strict sense, the Russian word meant something very different from its English counterpart. It was not synonymous with intellectuals; well-educated people; or, least of all, those who value independent thought. In any given society, well-educated people might or might not resemble an intelligentsia in the Russian sense. My fear is that in America, they increasingly do.

To be an *intelligent*, a member of the intelligentsia, one had to satisfy three criteria, which most educated people, including the great novelists, did not.

First of all, an *intelligent* had to share a set of radical beliefs. There was no such thing as a conservative or moderate *intelligent*. Required beliefs varied from generation to generation, but in the classic period (roughly 1860 to 1905), they always included materialism, atheism, some form of socialism or anarchism, and revolutionism, by which was meant a belief in revolution not as a means but as something valuable in itself.

The terrorist Sergei Nechaev's "Catechism of a Revolutionary" explains that one is not a true revolutionary "if he feels compassion for something in this world." "That is, the revolutionary must be willing to destroy everything and kill anyone." (Nechaev did in fact commit as well as recommend murder.)

Note the language here: "catechism," "this world." Revolutionism was a substitute religion (like environmentalism today). Dostoevsky once observed that Russians do not become atheists; they convert to atheism. The prototypical *intelligent* was in fact often the child of a priest or a former student in a Russian Orthodox seminary, so calling someone a "seminarian" was the equivalent of calling him a Red. Ex-seminarians included the classic age's most influential figure, Nicholas Chernyshevsky, and, later, Joseph Stalin. One reason, for example, that no one would have considered Tolstoy an *intelligent* is that he believed in God.

In her memoirs of life under Stalin, *Hope Against Hope*, Nadezhda Mandelstam observes:

> [T]he decisive part in the subjugation of the intelligentsia was played not by terror and bribery (though, God knows, there was enough of both), but by the word "Revolution," which none of them could bear to give up. It is a word to which whole nations have succumbed, and its force was such that one wonders why our rulers still needed prisons and capital punishment.

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Second, an *intelligent* had to identify primarily *as* an *intelligent*. Leave everything, abandon father and mother, and follow us. As Isaiah Berlin has explained:

> To the old nineteenth-century intelligentsia the very notion of a class of persons involved in intellectual pursuits—such as professors, doctors, engineers, experts, writers, who in other respects live ordinary bourgeois lives and hold conventional views, and who play golf or even cricket—this notion would have been absolutely horrifying.

To the intelligentsia, such a person would have seemed "a traitor, a man who had sold out, a coward or a ninny."

If you thought of yourself as a nobleman, a doctor, or a family man who just happened to be well-educated, you were not an *intelligent*. That is another reason no one would have called Tolstoy, who used his title of "Count," an *intelligent*. Chekhov particularly

hated this "artificial, overwrought solidarity," as he called it, because it entailed not thinking but repeating orthodoxies:

> Yes, our young ladies and political beaux are pure souls, but nine-tenths of their pure souls aren't worth a damn. All their inactive sanctity and purity are based on hazy and naïve sympathies and antipathies to individuals and labels, not to facts. It's easy to be pure when you hate the Devil you don't know and love the God you wouldn't have brains enough to doubt.

Sound familiar?

Third, an *intelligent* embraced a particular lifestyle. In the 1860s and 1870s, this entailed a rigid code of anti-manners prescribing behavior formerly regarded as sordid. Chernyshevsky came by his lower-class manners honestly, but they became a model. Aristocrats needed to acquire anti-refinement. Bad taste, at least the proper bad taste, did not come easily. Women just had to smoke.

When Dostoevsky was looking to get remarried, he had trouble finding a woman who was well-educated but not a radical. Once, to satisfy a deadline for producing a novel, he in desperation hired a graduate of Russia's new stenography school in order to dictate a novel as it occurred to him. At their first meeting, he offered the stenographer a cigarette, but she declined. Dostoevsky thought: If she doesn't smoke, perhaps she believes in God? In fact she did, and that is how Dostoevsky met his second wife. Today, we have our own, ever-changing virtue-signaling.

Little Napoleons

Behind these criteria lay a set of assumptions too obvious to be articulated. One had to argue for one or another theory, but not for *theory*—meaning theory of everything—itself. That was a given.

One reason Marxism proved so appealing was its ambitious claim to resolve all contradictions. Think of Marx's assertion that "communism is the solution of the riddle of history and knows itself to be the solution." No theory claiming much less could appeal to Russians, or if it did, it was habitually transformed into something all-explanatory—a habit that Dostoevsky called "the Russian aspect of their [European] doctrines": "It consists of those inferences from these doctrines which, in the form of unshakeable axioms, are drawn only in Russia, whereas in Europe, the possibility of such deductions is not even suspected." Or, as Dostoevsky remarked elsewhere, a Russian *intelligent* is someone who can read Darwin and promptly resolve to be a pickpocket.

In short, for Dostoevsky, Russians had a tendency to take all ideas to the extreme; act on them in defiance of basic decency or common sense; and, if they wound up doing vile things, celebrate them as contributing to the salvation of the people.

If theory rules, then theorists must rule. The *intelligents* shared what Thomas Sowell has called "the vision of the anointed." This is the key criterion without which a group cannot be an intelligentsia in the Russian sense. Let every other intelligentsia belief change, Dostoevsky insisted, but the belief in themselves as saviors would remain.

Intellectuals are committed to belief in theory for reasons that are anything but disinterested.

Intellectuals are committed to belief in theory for reasons that are anything but disinterested. They are hardly likely to be drawn to the idea that often enough we need not theory but practical intelligence, which, after all, intellectuals have never been celebrated for exhibiting. Theorists may be entirely sincere in believing in theory—and therefore in their own right to wield absolute power—for the same reason that people generally require little persuasion to accept the moral goodness of their own desires.

Raskolnikov, the hero of Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, invokes several theories to justify murdering an old pawnbroker. Strangely enough, they contradict each other. First he invokes utilitarianism. Just calculate, he thinks: On one side is an old woman, sure to die soon anyway, whose life is worth "no more than a cockroach"—less, in fact, since she does positive harm. On the other side are hundreds of lives that might be saved by her money. "One death, and a hundred lives in exchange—it's simple arithmetic!" Not only is it moral to kill her; it would be immoral not to.

But Raskolnikov also invokes radical relativism, which, unlike utilitarianism, denies any foundation for morality. Morality, he muses, is all "prejudice, artificial terrors, and there are no barriers, and it's

all as it should be" because the world understood naturalistically has only "is," not "ought."

Raskolnikov voices still more justifications, but the one underlying them all is his Napoleonic theory. The world is divided into two sorts of people, the many ordinary and the few extraordinary. Ordinary people are conservative. They uphold tradition and the ancient law. They are people of the present, "mere material that serves only to reproduce its kind." Extraordinary people—like Lycurgus, Solon, and Napoleon—are men of the future who bring a new word. They are necessarily criminals because the mere fact that they create a new law makes them violators of the old. They have the right, indeed the obligation, to do whatever their idea requires. "I maintain that if the discoveries of Kepler and Newton could not have been made known except by sacrificing the lives of one, a dozen, a hundred or more men, Newton would have had the right, would indeed have been duty bound...to *eliminate* the dozen or hundred men." The Bolsheviks also regarded murder as not just permitted but morally required.

For Raskolnikov, "even men a little out of the common" must be criminals in this way. This point is crucial, because it allows for a group of special people, not just one a century, like Napoleon: the group called the intelligentsia. To appreciate how long-lived is the idea of most people as mere material, think of the frequent reference among Western intellectuals to "the Soviet experiment," a tacit justification of the Revolution even though it did not turn out as hoped. One experiments on "mere material," not human beings like oneself.

A true social scientist, Raskolnikov maintains that the exact number of extraordinary people is governed by a natural law, which one could presumably determine: "[T]here certainly is and must be a definite law, it cannot be a matter of chance." It cannot be a matter of chance, because for the social scientist nothing is, any more than there can be such a thing as free will. If something is governed by law, then everything is.

To these notions, Raskolnikov's sister replies with horror: "What is really *original* in all this...is that you sanction bloodshed *in the name of conscience*, and, excuse my saying so, with such fanaticism...that sanction of bloodshed *by conscience* is to my mind more terrible than the official, legal sanction of bloodshed." Why more terrible? Bloodshed is bloodshed, isn't it? Look ahead to *The Gulag Archipelago*, where Solzhenitsyn asks why Macbeth killed only a few people while Lenin and Stalin murdered millions? The answer is that Shakespeare's villains "had no ideology":

> Ideology—that is what gives...the evildoer the necessary steadfastness and determination. That is the social theory which helps to make his acts seem good instead of bad in his own and others' eyes, so that he won't hear reproaches and curses and will receive praises and honors.

If ideology applies everywhere, then, to quote Nechaev, "everything that promotes the revolution is moral, everything that hinders it is immoral." Lenin and Trotsky maintained: It is not just that the Party never makes mistakes; rather, whatever the Party does is right because the Party does it. The agent of History itself, the Party's actions are moral by definition.

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It followed that compassion to class enemies must be immoral. We teach children to overcome natural selfishness, but the Soviets taught them to overcome natural compassion, which might stay their hand from killing a class enemy. One valued not the bourgeois notion of "human rights," which includes everyone, but class interest. As the novelist Vassily Grossman explained, what race was to the Nazis, class—the one you were born into—was to the Soviets. To refrain from torture, Trotsky declared, was "the most pathetic and miserable liberal prejudice."

In 1918, the founder of the Soviet secret police, Felix Dzerzhinsky, published an article in the journal *Red Terror*—yes, that was really its title—in which he instructed:

> We are not waging war against individual persons. We are exterminating the bourgeoisie as a class. During the investigation, do not look for evidence that the accused acted in deed or word

> against Soviet power. The first questions that you ought to put are: To what class does he belong? What is his origin? What is his education or profession? And it is these questions that ought to determine the fate of the accused.

Like morality, truth is by definition what the Party says it is. Georgy Pyatakov, who was twice expelled from the Party and eventually shot, wrote that a true Bolshevik is "ready to believe [not just assert] that black is white and white is black, if the Party required it." In *1984*, the character O'Brien proclaims this very doctrine—two plus two is really five if the Party says it is—which he calls "collective solipsism."

There are no limits: This is what the rule of theorists ultimately means. So let me lay my cards on the table: To the extent that a group of intellectuals comes to resemble an intelligentsia, to that extent is totalitarianism on the horizon should that group gain power. I anticipate the real possibility that in the near future, we may live under a Putin-style managed democracy, and not some sort of Swedish-style social democracy, that could soon after morph into a Stalinist state. Or rather, one beyond Stalinism, since Stalin did not have access to today's monitoring technology. That would make *1984* a libertarian paradise.

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Equality

Now for the pessimistic part of my paper. So far as I know, the only 19th century thinker to foresee totalitarianism was Dostoevsky. The reason he could, I think, is that he deeply understood the mentality of the intelligentsia and what it would do with power. Unlike Tolstoy, he had been a radical *intelligent* and recognized what he himself might have been willing to do. In one article, he refuted the idea, common among conservatives, that young radicals are simply "idle and undeveloped" people, as one journal put it. On the contrary, Dostoevsky declares:

> I am myself an old Nechaevist, I myself stood on the scaffold condemned to death, and I assure you that I stood in the company of educated people.... And therein lies the real horror: that in Russia one can commit the foulest and most villainous act without being in the least a villain.... The possibility of considering oneself—and sometimes even being, in fact—an honorable person while committing obvious and undeniable villainy—that is our whole affliction!

And, I might add, it is ours today.

The villain in Dostoevsky's novel *The Possessed*, Pyotr Stepanovich, who was modeled loosely on Nechaev, outlines his plans, which come amazingly close to what actually happened, either in Russia, China, or Cambodia. He endorses the theories of one Shigalyov, who famously declares: "I am perplexed by my own data and my conclusion is a direct contradiction of the original idea with which I start. Starting from unlimited freedom, I arrive at absolute despotism. I will add, however, that there can be no solution of the social problem but mine."

It is thinking we recognize: Deny any limit on individual, especially sexual, morality, and then repress anyone who thinks differently. As in Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, "sex and [the drug] soma" become life's goal and so the substitute for all other values. Far from being incompatible, freedom so understood goes hand in hand with despotism.

Shigalyov demands "the division of mankind into two unequal parts. One-tenth enjoys unbounded power over the other nine-tenths. The others have to give up all individuality and become, so to speak, a herd, and, through boundless submission, will by a series of regenerations attain primeval innocence.... They'll have to work, however." Another revolutionary objects that it would be better to take the nine-tenths and "blow them up into the air instead of putting them in paradise. I'd only leave a handful of educated people who would live happily ever afterwards on scientific principles." At last, Pyotr Stepanovich endorses a proposal to cut off "a hundred million heads."

At the time, that sounded like sheer absurdity, but Stéphane Courtois's anthology of experts, *The Black Book of Communism*, estimates, rather

conservatively, that very total for Communist killings worldwide. Is it any wonder Russian writers are considered prophets?

Pyotr Stepanovich promises "a system of spying. Every member of society spies on every other, and it's his duty to inform against them," just as Stalin was to require. The boy Pavel Morozov was made a national hero for turning in his parents. (We already have campuses where students are encouraged, sometimes required, to turn each other in if they hear expressions of "bias." Honor codes may punish the failure to do so.)

The new society's key principle is absolute equality, which requires a complete suppression of individuality or especially of great talent. "Cicero will have his tongue cut out, Copernicus will have his eyes put out, Shakespeare will be stoned." Did Pol Pot know this novel?

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Even before achieving power, the intelligentsia offended great writers because it restricted art to political propaganda, assuming art should exist at all. "Boots are more important than Pushkin" became a slogan. Art was suspect because it claimed to reveal the human soul, but the very idea of the soul was retrograde. Everyone knew the materialist saying that "the brain secretes thought the way the liver secretes bile."

In the early 1860s, the physiologist Ivan Secehenov (Pavlov's mentor, by the way) published his influential book, *Reflexes of the Brain*, which outlines a neurological explanation of consciousness. Dmitri Karamazov paraphrases the theory: What people used to call "the soul" is really so many neurons with their tails quivering. With the smallest change in wording, that theory is of course prevalent today. "But I'm sorry to lose God," Dmitri concludes.

The Pursuit of Happiness

The Russian novel is known, above all, for psychology. What is less often appreciated is that in showing the complexity of the psyche, the novelists were making a polemical point. The intelligentsia denied that people were complex at all. Human complexity was an idea hindering radical action.

Like Jeremy Bentham and mainstream economists today, Chernyshevsky insisted in *What Is to Be Done?*, the utopian novel that became the intelligentsia's bible, that everyone always does and should act to achieve their greatest advantage. Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* parodies Chernyshevsky's book by renarrating its incidents as they might actually happen to people with real psychology. The underground man appeals to empiricism, which presumably a scientist should respect: No one actually observing human behavior could presume it is simple or rational. What is more, people, unlike molecules, can know the laws that supposedly govern their behavior and act to thwart them, a possibility that forever rules out a Newtonian account of human beings. What a person values most of all is that his actions should be his own, that he is not just a piano key or an organ stop played upon by impersonal laws, that his choices could have differed and therefore matter.

Rather than give up that sense of self, the underground man insists, people will act spitefully, meaning against their self-interest, just to prove that they are not piano keys or organ stops. If a rationalist utopia could ever be achieved, if everything were provided for one without effort, and if the laws of nature and society could show the future in advance, then life would become pointless. As Dostoevsky observes in one of his sketches:

> People would see that they had no more life left, that they had no freedom of spirit, no will, no personality.... People would realize that there is no happiness in inactivity...that it is not possible to love one's neighbor without sacrificing something to him of one's labor...and that *happiness lies not in happiness but only in the attempt to achieve it*.

"A Surplus of Humanness"

All the great realists, not just Russians, were master psychologists. From Jane Austen to Henry James, the genre of the realist novel depicts people as individuals who cannot be reduced to abstract categories. I begin where all categories, social or

even psychological, that could account for me end. Bakhtin, who argued that genres embody implicit philosophical assumptions, concluded that realist novels presuppose the irreducibility of individuals to abstractions. People have "a surplus of humanness":

> An individual cannot be completely incarnated into the flesh of existing sociohistorical categories. There is no mere form that would be able to incarnate once and forever all his human possibilities...no form that he could fill to the very brim and yet at the same time not splash over the brim. There always remains an unrealized surplus of humanness.

The difference between Russian and European novels is that Russian novels so often make this assumption explicit. Russians typically regard novels as another, and superior, form of philosophy. Westerners more often regard novelists as illustrating truths learned from some philosopher or social scientist, and so Proust is read as applied Bergson, Sterne as enlivened Locke, and Jane Austen as illustrated Thomas Reid. But all one has to do is compare the philosopher's psychological theory with a great novelistic heroine like Dorothea Brooke in *Middlemarch*, and it is plain that George Eliot must have known something no philosopher ever did. Otherwise, philosophers would have produced portraits as believable as Dorothea Brooke, but none has ever come close.

Russians view their novelists not as illustrators but as discoverers, with the philosophers hurrying after to provide what Bakhtin calls a partial but always inadequate "transcription" of novelistic wisdom.

When this failure becomes obvious, Westerners typically resort to the idea Freud uses in his essay on Dostoevsky. With condescending indulgence to a brilliant if sloppy mind, he presented the author of *The Brothers Karamazov* as grasping merely intuitively deep truths that only superior thinkers, like Freud himself, could articulate explicitly. But this is even more absurd. Dostoevsky's characters, not just the underground man but even the brawling Dmitri Karamazov, deliver long speeches about the mind, so one could more readily fault Dostoevsky for too much explicit articulation.

For Bakhtin, that is the proper role of the critic, which is one reason so many Russian philosophers, including Bakhtin himself, presented their ideas as explications of great writers. Bakhtin understood that the ideas he transcribed from Dostoevsky continued his argument with intelligentsia ideologues, now represented by the Bolshevik regime.

Jones

So here is one lesson of Russian literature: There can never be a social science if by that term we mean a discipline modeled on the hard sciences. The Russian writers were reviving a tradition in eclipse since the 17th century, when the idea took hold that any respectable discipline must resemble Euclidian geometry or, after Newton, physics. For the great rationalists and their heirs, real knowledge was theoretical, ideally mathematical, and all specific events were the mere consequence of the laws theory discovers. To the extent you need a narrative rather than laws to explain things, to that extent you fall short of scientific status. Real sciences don't tell stories.

By the 19th century, this "moral Newtonianism," as Élie Halévy called it, became a mania, and not just with Marxists and social Darwinists. Before Auguste Comte coined the term "sociology," he planned to call his new discipline "social physics," and Léon Walras, a founder of modern economics, based his idea of equilibrium on the stability of the solar system. He even sought the endorsement of the day's greatest mathematician, Henri Poincaré. Even Freud found himself adopting hydraulic metaphors of the mind and claiming not just that some acts of forgetting are intentional but that *all* are: since what sort of natural law admits of exceptions?

But there is another tradition of thought, extending from Aristotle to Montaigne, Clausewitz, and Tolstoy, which holds that reality demands two types of reasoning. In addition to theoretical reasoning (Aristotle's *episteme*), we need practical reasoning (*phronesis*).

Like geometry, theory offers truths that are universal, precise, without exception, and timeless. One reasons from the theory down to the specific examples it subsumes. For the alternative tradition,

some questions demand reasoning up from particular cases. Aristotle cites clinical disciplines, like medicine. One does not want a physician whose only interest in one's illness is its potential contribution to science. No good doctor is just an applied biologist. He uses everything he knows, theory and untheorized experience, to devise a treatment for this patient at this moment. Timeliness matters—except in the Department of Veterans Affairs—as it doesn't in geometry.

The same holds for ethical issues. If one reasons down from general rules, one will often wind up with monstrous answers, Aristotle notes, because rules are formulated with a paradigm case in mind, but real situations may differ in significant ways that cannot be foreseen. Then one must use judgment, which, by definition, cannot be formalized. Good judgment grows out of experience, mistakes, and reflection upon mistakes, a process yielding not theoretical knowledge but practical wisdom. That is why, as Aristotle observes, young men can be good mathematicians but not good ethicists, which requires long experience.

Practical wisdom yields answers that are true, as Aristotle liked to say, "on the whole and for the most part." Now, anyone who described the Pythagorean theorem as true "on the whole and for the most part" would demonstrate he did not grasp what mathematical reasoning is, but anyone who sought quasi-mathematical solutions to ethical problems would be just as wrongheaded. Marx's enemy, the Russian socialist Alexander Herzen, argued that there are no definitive solutions to social problems, that history has no aim, and that "there is no libretto.... In history all is improvisation, all is will, all is *ex tempore*." The answers given by practical reasoning are always tentative, open to revision depending on circumstances. That is why one never gives all power to anyone committed to a single answer, but allows for critics to point out failures—if not at Yale then at least at the University of Chicago.

In ethics, reasoning up from cases is called casuistry, and the fact that the term is now pejorative suggests how thoroughly the theoretical view triumphed. Casuists use rules in the sense of rules-of-thumb, which serve as mere reminders of particular sorts of cases—the beginning, not the end, of an argument. When the theoretical tradition triumphed, casuistry was banished from philosophy but found a home in the novel. Daniel Defoe began his career writing casuistical advice columns, and the cases he invented gradually grew in length to become novels like *Moll Flanders*. As a genre, the realist novel is casuistical: It teaches how to derive wisdom from careful consideration of particular, richly described cases.

Philosophers still present ethical problems by briefly sketching a dilemma that occurs to "Jones," who is given no biography, lives in no society, and chooses at no particular time. Contrast that with the dilemmas facing Anna Karenina or Dorothea Brooke. Take this as a novelistic dictum: No one is ever Jones.

Again, the difference between the Russians and other realist novelists is that the Russians, especially Tolstoy, make the genre's casuistical assumptions explicit. At the end of *Anna Karenina*, Levin learns to make wise ethical choices not by applying rules but by acquiring wisdom from particular cases sensitively observed. Bakhtin's early treatises on ethics also explore the ethical limitations of what he calls "theoretism."

A Good Night's Sleep

Tolstoy's heroes begin believing in theory but learn its limitations. In *War and Peace*, Prince Andrei at first admires the German generals who have purportedly discovered a hard science of warfare, which in this novel stands for any conceivable social science.

Before the battle of Austerlitz, the generals claim that it is a mathematical certainty that Napoleon will be defeated and that "every contingency has been foreseen." But whenever the generals lose, as they do so spectacularly at Austerlitz, they explain that their instructions were not precisely carried out, which in battle is always the case. They behave just like economists today, who, when predictions fail, say either that their recommendations were applied too cautiously or that even though they were proven wrong, they have adjusted their theory so that it now accounts for what happened. Like Paul Krugman, they are never wrong. Of course, even astrologers can adjust a theory to predict what already happened.

Prince Andrei learns that a science of human affairs is impossible. He asks: "What science can there be in a matter, as in every practical matter, nothing can be determined and everything depends on innumerable conditions, the significance of

which becomes manifest at a particular moment, and no one can tell when that moment will come?" We face "a hundred million chances, which will be determined on the instant by whether we run or they run, whether this man or that man will be killed." Irreducible chance matters—no one can tell whether a bullet will hit a brave man or a coward capable of infecting others—and timeliness matters: Things are decided "on the instant," an instant that is not just the automatic derivative of earlier instants. And what is true of battle is true "in every practical matter."

Tolstoy's wise general, Kutuzov, who falls asleep in the council of war before Austerlitz, at last calls a halt to the discussion: "Gentlemen, the disposition for tomorrow cannot be changed. And the most important thing before a battle is—a good night's sleep." Why a good night's sleep? Because in a world of radical contingency, where unforeseeable situations arise and opportunities must be seized instantly or lost, what matters is not theoretical knowledge but alertness.

Prosaics and Indoor Socialism

What Andrei fails to learn, but his friend Pierre does, is the insight for which three decades ago I coined the term "prosaics"—an insight central to numerous writers, most obviously Tolstoy and Chekhov. Radicals and romantics picture life in terms of dramatic events. The ordinary incidents between crises are viewed as trivial or despised as bourgeois. Tolstoy and Chekhov believed the opposite: Life is lived at ordinary moments, and what is most real is what is barely noticeable, like the tiniest movements of consciousness.

Tolstoy explains with an anecdote: The painter Bryullov once corrected a student's sketch. "Why you only touched a tiny bit," the student remarked, "but it is quite a different thing." Bryullov replied: "Art begins where that *tiny bit* begins." Tolstoy concludes:

> That saying is strikingly true not only of art but of all of life. One may say that true life begins where the tiny bit begins—where what seem to us minute and infinitely small alterations take place. True life is not lived where great external changes take place—where people move about, clash, fight, and slay one another. It is lived only where these tiny, tiny infinitesimally small changes occur.

Tolstoy's novels describe the infinitesimal movements of consciousness, our smallest choices, and the mistakes we instantaneously forget but which the novel records: and that is one reason his novels are so long. In our brief lives, every instant matters. The Russian novel is so long because life is so short.

Tolstoy's wisest heroes learn to see the richness right in front of them hidden in plain view. Learning this truth, Pierre comes to resemble "a man who, after straining his eyes to peer into the remote distance, finds what he was seeking at his very feet...."

> In everything near and comprehensible he had seen only what was limited, petty, and meaningless...[but] now...he discarded the [mental] telescope through which he had been gazing over the heads of men, and joyfully surveyed the ever-changing, eternally great, unfathomable, and infinite life around him.

In Chekhov, ignoring the ordinary experiences is what wastes lives, and such waste is his constant theme. In *Uncle Vanya*, one character observes: "[T]he world is being destroyed not by crime and fire, but by all these petty squabbles." Shockingly, Chekhov praised what no intellectual is supposed to respect: bourgeois virtues like cleanliness, ordinary decency, and paying one's debts.

In this spirit, Svetlana Aleksievich's books orchestrate the voices of countless ordinary people responding microscopically to events historians treat macroscopically. She seeks to capture what she describes as the "history of 'domestic,' 'indoor' socialism.... The history of how it played out in the human soul. I am drawn to that small space called a human being...a single individual. In reality, that is where everything happens." She is keenly aware of her debt to the great novelists and their dislike of grand theoretical systems.

> It always troubled me that the truth doesn't fit into...one mind, that truth is splintered. There is a lot of it, it is varied, and it is strewn about the world. Dostoevsky thought that humanity knows much, much more about itself than it has recorded in literature. So what is it that I do? I collect the everyday life of feelings, thoughts, and words.... The everyday life of the soul, the things that the big picture of history usually omits, or disdains.

These novelistic insights—the existence of sheer contingency, true life as lived in "the tiny bit," the openness of time, meaning that what we choose really matters—and the importance of the individual soul: All these insights are closely linked. The ideologues, who look down on ordinary people as boors and rednecks and who put their faith in the abstractions they alone master, will never understand them. They see the world, if viewed through the right lens, as ultimately simple, unlike Tolstoy's Pierre, who comes to appreciate "the endless variety of men's minds, which prevents a truth from ever appearing exactly the same to any two persons." By the novel's end, "the legitimate individuality of each person's views...now became the basis of the sympathy Pierre felt for other people and the interest that he took in them."

Conclusion

My conclusion is brief: We face a choice between the dangerous theory-based uniformity of the intelligentsia and the wise perspective on life espoused by Russian literature.

Pray for Chekhov.

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