
This splendid volume is a collection of essays by Vladimir Soloviev (1853-1900), Russia’s greatest religious philosopher and the pioneering figure in the Russian religious-philosophical renaissance of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The essays are well selected, beautifully translated, and expertly edited with copious annotations and notes. They reveal the integral part aesthetics had in Soloviev’s overall religious philosophy, an elaborate metaphysics of veednistrov or “all-unity” that conceived the cosmos as the manifestation or “other” of the divine absolute in the process of its own self-realization. The key link in this redemptive metaphysics was humanity, or rather the divine-human process of Godmanhood (Bogochelovechestvo), in which human creative work — art, in particular — was imbued with salvific purpose. As Dostoevsky put it, in a phrase Wozniuk chooses as the title for his succinct introduction, “Beauty will save the world.”

The first selection in the volume is “Three Addresses in Memory of Dostoevsky,” which Soloviev delivered between 1881 and 1883. The essay focuses on Dostoevsky’s religious and social ideals. The divine origin and destiny of the human soul was, Soloviev writes, the idea that most inspired Dostoevsky and the one that he cherished above all others. This was the idea of Godmanhood, as Soloviev himself had formulated it in a series of highly successful lectures delivered in this same period (1877-81). The concept refers to humanity’s divine potential and vocation, the ideal of our transformation in and union with God. It is the idea that man is created in the image and likeness of God and is called to return to divine reality. We must actively respond to this call and positively work for the realization of the Kingdom of God and universal transformation in all-unity. Soloviev argues that Dostoevsky shared this vision, and that it illuminated all his creative work. Not only that: Soloviev sees Dostoevsky as a precursor of a new religious art that will serve as an instrument of the earthly incarnation of divine reality. Soloviev rejected pure aestheticism or “art for art’s sake”; for him art had a “theurgic” role in the universal process of reintegration and perfection. He ascribes to Dostoevsky his own trinitarian conception of truth, beauty, and the good as “three inseparable forms of one absolute Idea.” Personhood is the ever more perfect embodiment of this Idea: “The infinity of the human soul — having been revealed in Christ and capable of fitting into itself all the boundlessness of divinity — is at one and the same time both the greatest good, the highest truth, and the most perfect beauty” (p. 16).

Soloviev defines Dostoevsky’s positive social ideal as the Church, or the spiritual brotherhood of humanity that is to be attained through the Christianization of state and society and the moral elevation of everyone. Russia had a special historical mission in the realization of this ideal, a new word to speak to the world. Soloviev tries to soften Dostoevsky’s messianism, his belief that Russia was the chosen nation of God, by stressing that his Russian idea was universalistic, not particularistic, and that Russia’s mission was selfless service to the universal brotherhood of nations in a free all-human unity. All this is very close to Soloviev’s own ideal of “free theocracy,” by
which the unification of humanity is somehow to be at once free, Christian, theocratic, and inspired by Russia. This is the type of vision that, as Soloviev himself wrote, belongs to people who are called dreamers, utopians, and God's fools (p. 14).

The Dostoevsky essay anticipates several major themes developed in the rest of the volume. Three essays — "Beauty in Nature" (1889), "The Universal Meaning of Art" (1890) and "A First Step toward a Positive Aesthetic" (1894) — are devoted to the more theoretical aspects of Soloviev's aesthetics. For Soloviev, beauty is an absolute value and an end in itself; at one point he characterizes it as "pure uselessness." Even in nature beauty is an objective reality that cannot be reduced to utilitarian purposes or subjective human tastes; here Soloviev uses data collected by Darwin to argue that in many species the elaborate beautiful adornments of males (e.g., peacock tails) are not only useless but directly harmful and therefore demonstrate a purely aesthetic factor at work in nature. This valuation might seem to contradict Soloviev's rejection of "art for art's sake," but in fact his overall view is that beauty is both inherent to divine all-unity and one of the means by which it is to be realized. Beauty is the "embodiment of Idea," the realization in sensory forms (or the aesthetic incarnation) of ideal content, which in its other aspects is also true and good. The Idea that is to be progressively embodied or realized is "worthy existence" or "what ought to be"; beauty is part of the transformation of "what is" into "what ought to be." The ideal essence whose beauty becomes manifest in material reality is nothing other than the Solovievian *telos* of all-unity, and the purpose of art is to bring it about. "The highest task of art is the perfected incarnation of this spiritual fullness in our reality, a realization in it of absolute beauty, or the creation of a universal spiritual organism. It is clear that the fulfillment of this task should coincide with the conclusion of the entire universal process" (p. 75). Soloviev's emphasis on beauty as embodiment underlies his deep appreciation of material nature and the purity of the earth; he rejected any reified idealism or arid spiritualism.

As these essays show, Soloviev placed special importance on one aspect of his ideal of positive all-unity: the assumption of full freedom of constituent parts within the unity of the whole. All-unity does not repress or absorb individual elements but gives them freedom and autonomy. Authentic diversity and free development are conditions of genuine unity. Any oppressive or monistic unity, like any exclusive self-affirmation or anarchic particularism, is evil, false, and ugly. The autonomy of parts within (and as essential for) the unity of the whole deserves to be seen as a powerful principle with broad relevance. One sphere of its application is aesthetics (and cultural creativity more generally), where Soloviev uses it to criticize "art for art's sake." He contends that the advocates of this movement regard art not as a special activity of the human spirit with its own sphere (which would be perfectly correct), but as something self-sufficient and removed from other areas of human endeavor. "In place of a legitimate autonomy for the artistic sphere, they propagate aesthetic separatism." They should recognize that "the life of the whole does not exclude, but on the contrary requires and assumes, the relative independence of the parts and their functions — but any particular function in its separateness is not and cannot be absolutely self-sufficient" (p. 137). Indeed Soloviev argues that art, far from being separate and self-sufficient, should be subject to the common aims of humanity and specifically to the
final goal of history, which "we undoubtedly know": progress toward universal unity and solidarity as all of humanity "gathered around an invisible but powerful center of
Christian culture" (p. 139). The extent to which Soloviev's visions of unity compromised his own commitment to autonomy, it is clear from this, has ever since been a
central issue in Soloviev interpretation.

This volume also includes a new translation of Soloviev's classic essay, "The
Meaning of Love" (1892-94). Human sexual love cannot, Soloviev shows, be explained wholly or even primarily as an instrument for expedient procreation. Love has
little or no evolutionary significance for the human species, but it does have absolute
value for individual human persons. To explain how, he elaborates his idea of person- hood; the result is really an essay in philosophical anthropology, which is a large part
of its importance. Soloviev's argument, in essence, is that man, alone among natural
creatures (so far as we know), is capable of infinite self-perfection. This is the distinctiveness of rational consciousness, or the capacity to evaluate all conditions, facts,
and phenomena according to universal ideal norms or a sense of truth. Consciousness
of truth enables us to rise above our given fragmentary existence and aspire to become
more than we at present are, to perfect ourselves infinitely according to ideal, absolute
norms of truth or "what ought to be." Rational consciousness is actually an image in
us of the divine, which is the source of the absolute worth and dignity of every human
person. Everyone can perceive the divine image abstractly and theoretically in reason,
but this type of recognition remains essentially egoistic. Only love enables us to cross
the boundaries of self and concretely recognize the absolute value of another. The result
is a type of mutual recognition: "In perceiving the truth of another not abstractly,
but materially, in love... we by the same token manifest and realize our own truth"
(p. 97). As is well known, Soloviev hoped that love would culminate in the reintegration
of the human essence, which would overcome the division between male and female
principles and restore the mysterious divine image in man. Even this ideal was,
he believed, within the human capacity for self-perfection.

The three remaining essays in the volume are devoted to Pushkin, Mickiewicz, and
Lermontov. "The Fate of Pushkin" (1897) is especially rewarding. There are two appendices (on Dostoevsky and the Russian symbolists), a general index, and a biblical
index. The quality of the translation and editorial work serves Soloviev's philosophical
profundity and rich ambiguity very well. The result is a major contribution to the
study of Russian philosophy.

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