
THE VIEW OF CREATION THROUGH THE EYES OF VLADIMIR SOLOVYOV AND NIKOLAI LOSSKY

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Abstract

The study has examined the views of Vladimir Solovyov and Nikolai Lossky on natural events before the coming of man, highlighting the effects of *truth*, *the good* and *beauty* in evolution. The *truth* about natural evolution intuitively sensed by Solovyov and Lossky reveals the goal of the direction of the Universe to the supreme *Good*. To these two principles they added a third ontological principle – *beauty*, which also actively participates in evolution. The legacy of Vladimir Solovyov and Nikolai Lossky, in connection with their empirical and contemplative views of Creation, presupposes the need of uniting an empirical naturalist and mystical naturalist.

Keywords: Creation, evolution, truth, good, beauty

1. Introduction

A classic ‘Darwinian dispute’ is still under way in the United States in connection with the discussion of parallel and alternative teachings of the ‘theory of intelligent design’. At most European universities Darwin’s evolution theory is introduced into academic curricula together with some neo-Darwinian hypotheses. The following text does not aim to be an alternative to these theories but would like to propose a synthetic view of Creation and its evolution as authored by two Russian religious thinkers of the 19th and 20th century, who got to grips with the evolution theories in all seriousness.

The pioneer of a comprehensive view of the universal events was Vladimir Solovyov, who attempted to find in his research a new organic synthesis of Science (empiric knowledge), Philosophy (metaphysical knowledge) and religion (mystic knowledge). Likewise, Nikolai Lossky recognised from a noetic point of view three types of intuition: sensory intuition of real being, that is everything with a spatio-temporal form; intellectual intuition of an ideal being which fulfils itself in concrete reality; mystical

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intuition sensing an all-unifying metalogical being, which imparts a meaning to all events.

As both Solovyov and Lossky sought a new organic synthesis of the sciences, they had no problem with accepting the empirical observations of Darwin, but they interpreted him philosophically, and included him in a wider context of processes taking place in Creation. They intuitively saw in natural evolution a gradual revelation of the interrelated ontological principles of truth, the good and beauty.

The following article will examine the mystical insight of the two thinkers into natural processes, in which they integrated the conclusions of the empirical sciences with rational intuition. Seeing the scope of the theme, the article will not be to discuss in detail the question of the origin of man and evolution of mankind in the historic process. It will highlight the views of the thinkers on evolution and the meaning of natural evolution before the advent of man. The sections are divided according to the three ontological principles and entitled: Divine Wisdom reveals an integral and universal truth about Creation; Ethical view of evolution in the context of the good that is realised; Interpretation of nature through the eyes of beauty – the third moving force of evolution.

2. Divine Wisdom reveals an integral and universal *truth* about Creation

Vladimir Solovyov longed in his early quest for a mystic encounter with Divine Wisdom, which would reveal to him the significance of all events. His prayers were answered and he personally encountered Divine Wisdom – Sophia – in her feminine entirety three times. Later he recounted this mystic experience and cosmic vision of the direction of the Universe in a poem: “Agown in heavenly purple glow you stood, eyes full of azure fire/ of a cosmic and creative day/.../ I saw all, and all was one–/ A single image of womanly beauty/Pregnant with vastnesses!– Before me, in me - only You.”[1] Divine Wisdom revealed to him the truth about the sole organic principle, which is the purpose of all events – cosmic unity. Solovyov always rested his later claims on this mystical experience. In his works *Lectures on Godmanhood* and *La Russie et l’Eglise universelle* he elaborated the truth about the evolution of Creation within the framework of the dialectic relations between the Word (Logos), Wisdom (Sophia) and the world’s soul [2].

What are the characteristics of these principles? We can observe in the Universe a tendency to a perfect form, from which Solovyov infers that this tendency presupposes an autonomous will. According to Solovyov, the responsibility for the evolution of the Universe and the world rests with the organic soul of the world, which evolves towards a form unknown to it. The evolution tendency is therefore blind and may descend at any time into the original chaos and disunity that came into existence immediately after Creation of the world. To be able to perfect oneself, it must encounter the Word (Logos), which forms it in the presence and embodiment of Wisdom (Sophia) to return to the original cosmic universality [3].

In the vegetable kingdom the all-unifying cosmic principle irradiates matter and sets it, internally, in motion towards the light – the Sun. It compels it to grow, to overcome ceaselessly its clumsiness and rigidity. The vegetable kingdom is typified by ‘organisation’ and ‘life’, where an organised structure predominates, being a sleeping soul. Blind natural will – as the elemental foundation of the Universe – in a new, higher phase of evolution, strengthens it and subordinates it to the cosmic principle. Counter-action appears as a counterweight and pressure of primordial chaos. If the cosmic principle was to win the struggle it had to become narrower and concentrate on one species it actively perfected. This tendency brought as a logical consequence new and more numerous deviations in evolution.

Natural evolution, which is characterised by the struggle between Divine Wisdom and Chaos, was unable to create man with its power but only the most perfect ape. A repeated intervention of the Word (Logos) was needed for man’s coming. In a man the soul therefore rediscovers itself but is unable to withstand the novelty and slides back to egoism, so that a historical process had to come to restore the original (paradisiacal) perfection in the Godmanhood of Christ [4].

A similar analysis of universal evolution is offered by Solovyov’s pupil Nikolai Lossky, who also rested his philosophical views on a mystic experience of cosmic universality and like Solovyov suspected the effects of a personal force that restores everything to orderly cosmic universality [5].

Let us now sum up the key theses of this section: The truth about natural evolution intuitively sensed by Solovyov and Lossky reveals the goal of the direction of the Universe to the supreme Good. Against this unifying force it pits the principle of chaos in the form of separation, isolation, distinctiveness, dominance, ultimate descent into chaos and death. Within the framework of the struggle of these principles in nature is created diverse animal and plant species.

3. Ethical view of evolution in the context of *Good* coming into being

The ethical aspect of natural evolution is very much ignored in contemporary theoretic Biology. For followers of Descartes or Kant animals are merely *res extensa*, matter controlled by animal instincts, a ‘living machine’, which has no moral relevance. It is interesting to note here that today’s biologists cannot do without ethical concepts in the interpretation of natural phenomena – they characterise animal behaviour as being selfish, egoistically altruistic and malevolent. The Russian thinkers under discussion recognise the negative principle operating in natural evolution but do not fail to complement it with the effects of an opposed principle – the Good.

Apart from the selective struggle for survival and multiplication in nature a much more important process takes place, that of global unification and perfection. Solovyov examined this process in his book *The Justification of the Good*, where he remarked in the section *The Good Is From God*: “Every preceding kingdom doubtless serves as immediate matter for the subsequent

kingdom. Inorganic matter nourishes the life of plants. Animals live at the expense of the vegetable kingdom. people live at the expense of animals.” [6]

Lossky confirms in his works Solovyov’s intuition of the subservient function of a lower being in relation to a higher one: “Every evolutionary process consists in an agent who has reached a higher stage of development and unites agents subordinated to him in his body by raising them higher, e.g. physical and chemical processes raised to a higher stage, such as an organic process.” [N. Losskij, *Условия абсолютного добра*, [S.I.], 160 (translations from Russian will be used in the text from a typescript from the Slavonic Library in Prague under signature Rb 3765, which is bound without indication of the place and date of publication)]

Lossky (concurring with Solovyov) regarded as the greatest flaw in Darwin’s evolution theory the excessive emphasis placed on the negative principle. “Creative inventiveness is the fundamental evolution factor. As for the life of plants and animals,” says Lossky, “the evolution factors that Charles Darwin discovered, such as the struggle for survival and the ensuing extinction of those which are not adaptable and multiplication of those fit for life also have their importance, but only inferior.”[7]

Lossky examined critically in the book *Absolute Good* the tendentious agnosticism of Spencer’s naturalist evolutionism, who developed his theses before Darwin, and for whom the main driving force of evolution is egoism, the self-preservation instinct and the development of pleasant feelings stemming from it.

“According to Spencer, at the outset of evolution is the pleasure of an active individual and at the outset all activities of the individual have overall an egoistic or at least egocentric character. But in the development phase where ethical deeds appear their ultimate goal is pleasure of the person in whose favour the deed is done. In this manner biological evolution works a miracle: the birth of pure altruism out of sheer egoism or egocentrism.” [N. Losskij, *Условия абсолютного добра*, [S.I.], 1]

According to Spencer, altruism and unselfish behaviour is in the final analysis egoistic, does not go beyond the criterion of seeking one’s own pleasure, so that altruism and egoism actually merge, which is an unacceptable theory to Lossky as it confuses the means (pleasure) with the goal. The goal is in Lossky’s thinking perfect and absolute beauty, good and truth [N. Losskij, *Условия абсолютного добра*, [S.I.], 158]. Altruistic behaviour and mutual help is not in Lossky’s view an egoistic motive as it stems from the affection of love, which is able to sense the suffering of the other and wants to help in a difficult situation. From observations of nature, one can also infer, according to Lossky, its positive ethical behaviour. Here he drew his inspiration from the Russian naturalist and anarchist Peter Kropotkin. “A well-known anarchist, the geographer P. Kropotkin,” wrote Lossky in an article entitled *Precursors of morality in nature before man*, “travelling in East Asia, became convinced on the basis of his observations that a very generalised natural phenomenon is not the struggle between representatives of the same species for existence, but, on

the contrary, mutual assistance; even help of animals of different species is a widespread natural phenomenon.”[8]

Ethical behaviour in nature was evidenced by Lossky on the basis of Kropotkin’s empiric observations, where a crab, for example, that has fallen on its back, is immediately helped by the others to regain its position; it is not rare for lost nestlings to grow in the nest of another species; if some apes are attacked they do not abandon their hurt ones until they see that the hurt ones are no longer alive; some animals die after the death of their master – man.

Lossky then recognised in nature two types of evolution: (1) normal evolution, in which there is ethical evolution from the behaviour of the electron to the gates of the Kingdom of God; (2) satanic evolution, which leads in the opposite direction, to a greater egoism, isolation, domination, and destruction. If Darwinism stresses only the negative tendencies, then Lossky points out a positive possibility of ethical growth. “Normal evolution, rising to ideal absolute perfection, presupposes not only altruism in the form of beauty, friendship, sympathy, community etc., in relation to other beings, but also values that are outside the scope of altruism, such as love of beauty, knowledge, freedom, one’s own dignity, perfect fulfilment of every function, nobility. The striving to attain all these values was in nature before mankind.” [N. Losskij, *Условия абсолютного добра*, [S.I.], 44.]

4. Interpretation of nature through the eyes of *beauty* – the third moving force in evolution

The previous chapters presented the mystical knowledge of Vladimir Solovyov and Nikolai Lossky of the universal and all-unifying truth about Creation. Both thinkers defended the ethical dimension of evolution, where they observed the realisation of the good in natural development. To these two principles they added a third ontological principle – beauty, which also actively participates in evolution.

Vladimir Solovyov opens his book *Beauty in Nature* with a quotation from a Dostoyevsky novel: “Beauty will save the world”, which in itself suggests his opinion of the role of beauty. A natural process tends, according to Solovyov, to embodiment of light and life in phenomena, to which he was led by the deductive conclusion of his classic example of the difference between beauty and ugliness, between a diamond and a piece of coal. Both minerals have essentially the same chemical composition but the beauty of a diamond is enhanced by the effect of light shining through. The knowledge of their beauty must logically take place outside the material. “In the inorganic world beauty is the property of objects and phenomena in which matter becomes directly the bearer of light, or those in which inanimate nature animates and in its movement shows signs of life.”[6, vol. II, p. 364]

In matter the connection is only external, mechanical, but the moment inner penetration occurs, and transformation of light, evolution attains animation, and origin of organic life – realisation of a more perfect beauty. Penetration of light into matter symbolically presages penetration of real (heavenly) light into man's body in the Godmanhood of Christ.

Solovyov then analyses with Darwinian meticulousness the importance of beauty in the exhibitionist mating of different animal species, and thereupon arrives at the conclusion that nature does not make animals beautiful only as its material, but forces them to make themselves beautiful. Solovyov confirms this theory from the empirical observations of Darwin, who claims that, “despite all expectations the male ability to charm in different ways the female is more important in known cases than the ability to defeat other males in open struggle.” [6, vol. II, p. 384]

The objective nature of natural beauty has a deeper ontological foundation in the vegetable kingdom, which must be the incarnation of the universal idea. All evolution of animal species is subjected by Solovyov selectively to the criterion of beauty and ugliness. Likewise, Nikolai Lossky believes that beauty is to raise nature to an ever more perfect and beautiful form, a more perfect stage of its self-expression. In the work Dostoevsky and his Christian Understanding of the World he wrote, “Beauty is a concrete incarnation of positive spirituality in spatial and temporal forms, penetrated by light, colours, sounds, and other sensory qualities. [...] It is through beauty that the value of all the other types of good is revealed in a particularly compelling form.”[9]

5. Conclusions

Russian religious thought of the 19th and the turn of the 20th century focused using the Solovyov method on a search for synthetic knowledge based on the synthesis between inductive/scientific knowledge, deductive/philosophical knowledge and mystical/theological knowledge. The study has examined the views of Vladimir Solovyov and Nikolai Lossky on natural events before the coming of man, highlighting the effects of *truth*, *the good* and *beauty* in evolution.

Egoistic behaviour of nature is accepted as the only possible in contemporary theories of evolution Biology. The development of altruistic behaviour of plants and animals is explained by many as merely hidden egoistic behaviour. Contrary to this reductionist view, the thinkers under review also conceived of ethical improvement and development of the *Good*, which frequently cannot dispense with painful overcoming of the egoism of one's own instincts.

The legacy of Vladimir Solovyov and Nikolai Lossky, in connection with their empirical and contemplative views of Creation, presupposes the need of uniting an empirical naturalist and mystical naturalist, whose employs in addition to inductive analysis of empiric data the method of philosophical

deduction, which perfects contemplation and desire for a real mystic insight into the essence of things.

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